Harry Potter
AND THE SORCERER'S STONE

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ختم نبوت ﷺ زندہ باد **عظمت صحابہ زندہ باد**

السلام علیکم ورحمۃ اللہ وبرکاتہ:

معزز ممبران: آپ کا وٹس ایپ گروپ ایڈمن "**اردو بکس**" آپ سے مخاطب ہے۔

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- کوئی بھی ممبر کسی بھی ممبر کو انباکس میں میسیج، مس کال، کال نہیں کرے گا۔ رپورٹ پر فوری ریموو کرکے کاروائی عمل میں لائے جائے گی۔
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- اگر کسی کو بھی گروپ کے متعلق کسی قسم کی شکایت یا تجویز کی صورت میں ایڈمن سے رابطہ کیجئے۔
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گروپ میں کسی بھی قادیانی، مرزائی، احمدی، گستاخِ رسول، گستاخِ امہات المؤمنین، گستاخِ صحابہ و خلفائے راشدین حضرت ابو بکر صدیق، حضرت عمر فاروق، حضرت عثمان غنی، حضرت علی المرتضیٰ، حضرت حسنین کریمین رضوان اللہ تعالیٰ اجمعین، گستاخ اہلبیت یا ایسے غیر مسلم جو اسلام اور پاکستان کے خلاف پراپیگنڈا میں مصروف ہیں یا ان کے روحانی وذہنی سپورٹرز کے لئے کوئی گنجائش نہیں ہے لہذا ایسے اشخاص بالکل بھی گروپ جوائن کرنے کی زحمت نہ کریں۔ معلوم ہونے پر فوراً ریموو کر دیا جائے گا۔

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اللہ تبارک تعالیٰ ہم سب کا حامی وناصر ہو

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone

CHAPTER ONE

THE BOY WHO LIVED

Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much. They were the last people you'd expect to be involved in anything strange or mysterious, because they just didn't hold with such nonsense.

Mr. Dursley was the director of a firm called Grunnings, which made drills. He was a big, beefy man with hardly any neck, although he did have a very large mustache. Mrs. Dursley was thin and blonde and had nearly twice the usual amount of neck, which came in very useful as she spent so much of her time craning over garden fences, spying on the neighbors. The Dursleys had a small son called Dudley and in their opinion there was no finer boy anywhere.

The Dursleys had everything they wanted, but they also had a secret, and their greatest fear was that somebody would discover it. They didn't think they could bear it if anyone found out about the Potters. Mrs. Potter was Mrs. Dursley's sister, but they hadn't met for several years; in fact, Mrs. Dursley pretended she didn't have a sister, because her sister and her good-for-nothing husband were as unDursleyish as it was possible to be. The Dursleys shuddered to think what the neighbors would say if the Potters arrived in the street. The Dursleys knew that the Potters had a small son, too, but they had never even seen him. This boy was another good reason for keeping the Potters away; they didn't want Dudley mixing with a child like that.

When Mr. and Mrs. Dursley woke up on the dull, gray Tuesday our story starts, there was nothing about the cloudy sky outside to suggest that strange and mysterious things would soon be happening all over the country. Mr. Dursley hummed as he picked out his most boring tie for work, and Mrs. Dursley gossiped away happily as she wrestled a screaming Dudley into his high chair.

None of them noticed a large, tawny owl flutter past the window.

At half past eight, Mr. Dursley picked up his briefcase, pecked Mrs. Dursley on the cheek, and tried to kiss Dudley good-bye but missed,

because Dudley was now having a tantrum and throwing his cereal at the walls. "Little tyke," chortled Mr. Dursley as he left the house. He got into his car and backed out of number four's drive.

It was on the corner of the street that he noticed the first sign of something peculiar -- a cat reading a map. For a second, Mr. Dursley didn't realize what he had seen -- then he jerked his head around to look again. There was a tabby cat standing on the corner of Privet Drive, but there wasn't a map in sight. What could he have been thinking of? It must have been a trick of the light. Mr. Dursley blinked and stared at the cat. It stared back. As Mr. Dursley drove around the corner and up the road, he watched the cat in his mirror. It was now reading the sign that said Privet Drive -- no, looking at the sign; cats couldn't read maps or signs. Mr. Dursley gave himself a little shake and put the cat out of his mind. As he drove toward town he thought of nothing except a large order of drills he was hoping to get that day.

But on the edge of town, drills were driven out of his mind by something else. As he sat in the usual morning traffic jam, he couldn't help noticing that there seemed to be a lot of strangely dressed people about. People in cloaks. Mr. Dursley couldn't bear people who dressed in funny clothes -- the getups you saw on young people! He supposed this was some stupid new fashion. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel and his eyes fell on a huddle of these weirdos standing quite close by. They were whispering excitedly together. Mr. Dursley was enraged to see that a couple of them weren't young at all; why, that man had to be older than he was, and wearing an emerald-green cloak! The nerve of him! But then it struck Mr. Dursley that this was probably some silly stunt -- these people were obviously collecting for something... yes, that would be it. The traffic moved on and a few minutes later, Mr. Dursley arrived in the Grunnings parking lot, his mind back on drills.

Mr. Dursley always sat with his back to the window in his office on the ninth floor. If he hadn't, he might have found it harder to concentrate on drills that morning. He didn't see the owls swoop ing past in broad daylight, though people down in the street did; they pointed and gazed open- mouthed as owl after owl sped overhead. Most of them had never seen an owl even at nighttime. Mr. Dursley, however, had a perfectly normal, owl-free morning. He yelled at five different people. He made several important telephone calls and shouted a bit more. He was in a very good mood until lunchtime, when he thought he'd stretch his legs and walk across the road to buy himself a bun from the bakery.

He'd forgotten all about the people in cloaks until he passed a group of them next to the baker's. He eyed them angrily as he passed. He didn't know why, but they made him uneasy. This bunch were whispering excitedly, too, and he couldn't see a single collecting tin. It was on his way back past them, clutching a large doughnut in a bag, that he caught a few words of what they were saying.

"The Potters, that's right, that's what I heard yes, their son, Harry"

Mr. Dursley stopped dead. Fear flooded him. He looked back at the whisperers as if he wanted to say something to them, but thought better of it.

He dashed back across the road, hurried up to his office, snapped at his secretary not to disturb him, seized his telephone, and had almost finished dialing his home number when he changed his mind. He put the receiver back down and stroked his mustache, thinking... no, he was being stupid. Potter wasn't such an unusual name. He was sure there were lots of people called Potter who had a son called Harry. Come to think of it, he wasn't even sure his nephew was called Harry. He'd never even seen the boy. It might have been Harvey. Or Harold. There was no point in worrying Mrs. Dursley; she always got so upset at any mention of her sister. He didn't blame her -- if he'd had a sister like that... but all the same, those people in cloaks...

He found it a lot harder to concentrate on drills that afternoon and when he left the building at five o'clock, he was still so worried that he walked straight into someone just outside the door.

"Sorry," he grunted, as the tiny old man stumbled and almost fell. It was a few seconds before Mr. Dursley realized that the man was wearing a violet cloak. He didn't seem at all upset at being almost knocked to the ground. On the contrary, his face split into a wide smile and he said in a squeaky voice that made passersby stare, "Don't be sorry, my dear sir, for nothing could upset me today! Rejoice, for You-Know-Who has gone at last! Even Muggles like yourself should be celebrating, this happy, happy day!"

And the old man hugged Mr. Dursley around the middle and walked off.

Mr. Dursley stood rooted to the spot. He had been hugged by a complete stranger. He also thought he had been called a Muggle, whatever that was. He was rattled. He hurried to his car and set off for home, hoping

he was imagining things, which he had never hoped before, because he didn't approve of imagination.

As he pulled into the driveway of number four, the first thing he saw -- and it didn't improve his mood -- was the tabby cat he'd spotted that morning. It was now sitting on his garden wall. He was sure it was the same one; it had the same markings around its eyes.

"Shoo!" said Mr. Dursley loudly. The cat didn't move. It just gave him a stern look. Was this normal cat behavior? Mr. Dursley wondered. Trying to pull himself together, he let himself into the house. He was still determined not to mention anything to his wife.

Mrs. Dursley had had a nice, normal day. She told him over dinner all about Mrs. Next Door's problems with her daughter and how Dudley had learned a new word ("Won't!"). Mr. Dursley tried to act normally. When Dudley had been put to bed, he went into the living room in time to catch the last report on the evening news:

"And finally, bird-watchers everywhere have reported that the nation's owls have been behaving very unusually today. Although owls normally hunt at night and are hardly ever seen in daylight, there have been hundreds of sightings of these birds flying in every direction since sunrise. Experts are unable to explain why the owls have suddenly changed their sleeping pattern." The newscaster allowed himself a grin. "Most mysterious. And now, over to Jim McGuffin with the weather. Going to be any more showers of owls tonight, Jim?"

"Well, Ted," said the weatherman, "I don't know about that, but it's not only the owls that have been acting oddly today. Viewers as far apart as Kent, Yorkshire, and Dundee have been phoning in to tell me that instead of the rain I promised yesterday, they've had a downpour of shooting stars! Perhaps people have been celebrating Bonfire Night early -- it's not until next week, folks! But I can promise a wet night tonight."

Mr. Dursley sat frozen in his armchair. Shooting stars all over Britain? Owls flying by daylight? Mysterious people in cloaks all over the place? And a whisper, a whisper about the Potters...

Mrs. Dursley came into the living room carrying two cups of tea. It was no good. He'd have to say something to her. He cleared his throat nervously. "Er -- Petunia, dear -- you haven't heard from your sister lately, have you?"

As he had expected, Mrs. Dursley looked shocked and angry. After all, they normally pretended she didn't have a sister.

"No," she said sharply. "Why?"

"Funny stuff on the news," Mr. Dursley mumbled. "Owls... shooting stars... and there were a lot of funny-looking people in town today..."

"So?" snapped Mrs. Dursley.

"Well, I just thought... maybe... it was something to do with... you know... her crowd."

Mrs. Dursley sipped her tea through pursed lips. Mr. Dursley wondered whether he dared tell her he'd heard the name "Potter." He decided he didn't dare. Instead he said, as casually as he could, "Their son -- he'd be about Dudley's age now, wouldn't he?"

"I suppose so," said Mrs. Dursley stiffly.

"What's his name again? Howard, isn't it?"

"Harry. Nasty, common name, if you ask me."

"Oh, yes," said Mr. Dursley, his heart sinking horribly. "Yes, I quite agree."

He didn't say another word on the subject as they went upstairs to bed. While Mrs. Dursley was in the bathroom, Mr. Dursley crept to the bedroom window and peered down into the front garden. The cat was still there. It was staring down Privet Drive as though it were waiting for something.

Was he imagining things? Could all this have anything to do with the Potters? If it did... if it got out that they were related to a pair of -- well, he didn't think he could bear it.

The Dursleys got into bed. Mrs. Dursley fell asleep quickly but Mr. Dursley lay awake, turning it all over in his mind. His last, comforting thought before he fell asleep was that even if the Potters were involved, there was no reason for them to come near him and Mrs. Dursley. The Potters knew very well what he and Petunia thought about

them and their kind.... He couldn't see how he and Petunia could get mixed up in anything that might be going on -- he yawned and turned over -- it couldn't affect them....

How very wrong he was.

Mr. Dursley might have been drifting into an uneasy sleep, but the cat on the wall outside was showing no sign of sleepiness. It was sitting as still as a statue, its eyes fixed unblinkingly on the far corner of Privet Drive. It didn't so much as quiver when a car door slammed on the next street, nor when two owls swooped overhead. In fact, it was nearly midnight before the cat moved at all.

A man appeared on the corner the cat had been watching, appeared so suddenly and silently you'd have thought he'd just popped out of the ground. The cat's tail twitched and its eyes narrowed.

Nothing like this man had ever been seen on Privet Drive. He was tall, thin, and very old, judging by the silver of his hair and beard, which were both long enough to tuck into his belt. He was wearing long robes, a purple cloak that swept the ground, and high-heeled, buckled boots. His blue eyes were light, bright, and sparkling behind half-moon spectacles and his nose was very long and crooked, as though it had been broken at least twice. This man's name was Albus Dumbledore.

Albus Dumbledore didn't seem to realize that he had just arrived in a street where everything from his name to his boots was unwelcome. He was busy rummaging in his cloak, looking for something. But he did seem to realize he was being watched, because he looked up suddenly at the cat, which was still staring at him from the other end of the street. For some reason, the sight of the cat seemed to amuse him. He chuckled and muttered, "I should have known."

He found what he was looking for in his inside pocket. It seemed to be a silver cigarette lighter. He flicked it open, held it up in the air, and clicked it. The nearest street lamp went out with a little pop. He clicked it again -- the next lamp flickered into darkness. Twelve times he clicked the Put-Outer, until the only lights left on the whole street were two tiny pinpricks in the distance, which were the eyes of the cat watching him. If anyone looked out of their window now, even beady-eyed Mrs. Dursley, they wouldn't be able to see anything that was happening down on the pavement. Dumbledore slipped the Put-Outer back inside his cloak and set off down the street toward number four, where he sat down

on the wall next to the cat. He didn't look at it, but after a moment he spoke to it.

"Fancy seeing you here, Professor McGonagall."

He turned to smile at the tabby, but it had gone. Instead he was smiling at a rather severe-looking woman who was wearing square glasses exactly the shape of the markings the cat had had around its eyes. She, too, was wearing a cloak, an emerald one. Her black hair was drawn into a tight bun. She looked distinctly ruffled.

"How did you know it was me?" she asked.

"My dear Professor, I 've never seen a cat sit so stiffly."

"You'd be stiff if you'd been sitting on a brick wall all day," said Professor McGonagall.

"All day? When you could have been celebrating? I must have passed a dozen feasts and parties on my way here."

Professor McGonagall sniffed angrily.

"Oh yes, everyone's celebrating, all right," she said impatiently. "You'd think they'd be a bit more careful, but no -- even the Muggles have noticed something's going on. It was on their news." She jerked her head back at the Dursleys' dark living-room window. "I heard it. Flocks of owls... shooting stars.... Well, they're not completely stupid. They were bound to notice something. Shooting stars down in Kent -- I'll bet that was Dedalus Diggle. He never had much sense."

"You can't blame them," said Dumbledore gently. "We've had precious little to celebrate for eleven years."

"I know that," said Professor McGonagall irritably. "But that's no reason to lose our heads. People are being downright careless, out on the streets in broad daylight, not even dressed in Muggle clothes, swapping rumors."

She threw a sharp, sideways glance at Dumbledore here, as though hoping he was going to tell her something, but he didn't, so she went on. "A fine thing it would be if, on the very day YouKnow-Who seems to have disappeared at last, the Muggles found out about us all. I suppose he

really has gone, Dumbledore?"

"It certainly seems so," said Dumbledore. "We have much to be thankful for. Would you care for a lemon drop?"

"A what?"

"A lemon drop. They're a kind of Muggle sweet I'm rather fond of"

"No, thank you," said Professor McGonagall coldly, as though she didn't think this was the moment for lemon drops. "As I say, even if You-Know-Who has gone -"

"My dear Professor, surely a sensible person like yourself can call him by his name? All this 'You- Know-Who' nonsense -- for eleven years I have been trying to persuade people to call him by his proper name: Voldemort." Professor McGonagall flinched, but Dumbledore, who was unsticking two lemon drops, seemed not to notice. "It all gets so confusing if we keep saying 'You-Know-Who.' I have never seen any reason to be frightened of saying Voldemort's name.

"I know you haven 't, said Professor McGonagall, sounding half exasperated, half admiring. "But you're different. Everyone knows you're the only one You-Know- oh, all right, Voldemort, was frightened of."

"You flatter me," said Dumbledore calmly. "Voldemort had powers I will never have."

"Only because you're too -- well -- noble to use them."

"It's lucky it's dark. I haven't blushed so much since Madam Pomfrey told me she liked my new earmuffs."

Professor McGonagall shot a sharp look at Dumbledore and said, "The owls are nothing next to the rumors that are flying around. You know what everyone's saying? About why he's disappeared? About what finally stopped him?"

It seemed that Professor McGonagall had reached the point she was most anxious to discuss, the real reason she had been waiting on a cold, hard wall all day, for neither as a cat nor as a woman had she fixed Dumbledore with such a piercing stare as she did now. It was plain that whatever "everyone" was saying, she was not going to believe it until

Dumbledore told her it was true. Dumbledore, however, was choosing another lemon drop and did not answer.

"What they're saying," she pressed on, "is that last night Voldemort turned up in Godric's Hollow. He went to find the Potters. The rumor is that Lily and James Potter are -- are -- that they're -- dead. "

Dumbledore bowed his head. Professor McGonagall gasped.

"Lily and James... I can't believe it... I didn't want to believe it... Oh, Albus..."

Dumbledore reached out and patted her on the shoulder. "I know... I know..." he said heavily.

Professor McGonagall's voice trembled as she went on. "That's not all. They're saying he tried to kill the Potter's son, Harry. But -- he couldn't. He couldn't kill that little boy. No one knows why, or how, but they're saying that when he couldn't kill Harry Potter, Voldemort's power somehow broke -- and that's why he's gone.

Dumbledore nodded glumly.

"It's -- it's true?" faltered Professor McGonagall. "After all he's done... all the people he's killed... he couldn't kill a little boy? It's just astounding... of all the things to stop him... but how in the name of heaven did Harry survive?"

"We can only guess," said Dumbledore. "We may never know."

Professor McGonagall pulled out a lace handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes beneath her spectacles. Dumbledore gave a great sniff as he took a golden watch from his pocket and examined it. It was a very odd watch. It had twelve hands but no numbers; instead, little planets were moving around the edge. It must have made sense to Dumbledore, though, because he put it back in his pocket and said, "Hagrid's late. I suppose it was he who told you I'd be here, by the way?"

"Yes," said Professor McGonagall. "And I don't suppose you're going to tell me why you're here, of all places?"

"I've come to bring Harry to his aunt and uncle. They're the only family he has left now."

"You don't mean -- you can't mean the people who live here?" cried Professor McGonagall, jumping to her feet and pointing at number four. "Dumbledore -- you can't. I've been watching them all day. You couldn't find two people who are less like us. And they've got this son -- I saw him kicking his mother all the way up the street, screaming for sweets. Harry Potter come and live here!"

"It's the best place for him," said Dumbledore firmly. "His aunt and uncle will be able to explain everything to him when he's older. I've written them a letter."

"A letter?" repeated Professor McGonagall faintly, sitting back down on the wall. "Really, Dumbledore, you think you can explain all this in a letter? These people will never understand him! He'll be famous -- a legend -- I wouldn't be surprised if today was known as Harry Potter day in the future -- there will be books written about Harry -- every child in our world will know his name!"

"Exactly," said Dumbledore, looking very seriously over the top of his half-moon glasses. "It would be enough to turn any boy's head. Famous before he can walk and talk! Famous for something he won't even remember! CarA you see how much better off he'll be, growing up away from all that until he's ready to take it?"

Professor McGonagall opened her mouth, changed her mind, swallowed, and then said, "Yes -- yes, you're right, of course. But how is the boy getting here, Dumbledore?" She eyed his cloak suddenly as though she thought he might be hiding Harry underneath it.

"Hagrid's bringing him."

"You think it -- wise -- to trust Hagrid with something as important as this?"

I would trust Hagrid with my life," said Dumbledore.

"I'm not saying his heart isn't in the right place," said Professor McGonagall grudgingly, "but you can't pretend he's not careless. He does tend to -- what was that?"

A low rumbling sound had broken the silence around them. It grew steadily louder as they looked up and down the street for some sign of a

headlight; it swelled to a roar as they both looked up at the sky -- and a huge motorcycle fell out of the air and landed on the road in front of them.

If the motorcycle was huge, it was nothing to the man sitting astride it. He was almost twice as tall as a normal man and at least five times as wide. He looked simply too big to be allowed, and so wild - long tangles of bushy black hair and beard hid most of his face, he had hands the size of trash can lids, and his feet in their leather boots were like baby dolphins. In his vast, muscular arms he was holding a bundle of blankets.

"Hagrid," said Dumbledore, sounding relieved. "At last. And where did you get that motorcycle?"

"Borrowed it, Professor Dumbledore, sit," said the giant, climbing carefully off the motorcycle as he spoke. "Young Sirius Black lent it to me. I've got him, sir."

"No problems, were there?"

"No, sir -- house was almost destroyed, but I got him out all right before the Muggles started swarmin' around. He fell asleep as we was flyin' over Bristol."

Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall bent forward over the bundle of blankets. Inside, just visible, was a baby boy, fast asleep. Under a tuft of jet-black hair over his forehead they could see a curiously shaped cut, like a bolt of lightning.

"Is that where -?" whispered Professor McGonagall.

"Yes," said Dumbledore. "He'll have that scar forever."

"Couldn't you do something about it, Dumbledore?"

"Even if I could, I wouldn't. Scars can come in handy. I have one myself above my left knee that is a perfect map of the London Underground. Well -- give him here, Hagrid -- we'd better get this over with."

Dumbledore took Harry in his arms and turned toward the Dursleys' house.

"Could I -- could I say good-bye to him, sir?" asked Hagrid. He bent his

great, shaggy head over Harry and gave him what must have been a very scratchy, whiskery kiss. Then, suddenly, Hagrid let out a howl like a wounded dog.

"Shhh!" hissed Professor McGonagall, "you'll wake the Muggles!"

"S-s-sorry," sobbed Hagrid, taking out a large, spotted handkerchief and burying his face in it. "But I c-c-can't stand it -- Lily an' James dead -- an' poor little Harry off ter live with Muggles -"

"Yes, yes, it's all very sad, but get a grip on yourself, Hagrid, or we'll be found," Professor McGonagall whispered, patting Hagrid gingerly on the arm as Dumbledore stepped over the low garden wall and walked to the front door. He laid Harry gently on the doorstep, took a letter out of his cloak, tucked it inside Harry's blankets, and then came back to the other two. For a full minute the three of them stood and looked at the little bundle; Hagrid's shoulders shook, Professor McGonagall blinked furiously, and the twinkling light that usually shone from Dumbledore's eyes seemed to have gone out.

"Well," said Dumbledore finally, "that's that. We've no business staying here. We may as well go and join the celebrations."

"Yeah," said Hagrid in a very muffled voice, "I'll be takin' Sirius his bike back. G'night, Professor McGonagall -- Professor Dumbledore, sir."

Wiping his streaming eyes on his jacket sleeve, Hagrid swung himself onto the motorcycle and kicked the engine into life; with a roar it rose into the air and off into the night.

"I shall see you soon, I expect, Professor McGonagall," said Dumbledore, nodding to her. Professor McGonagall blew her nose in reply.

Dumbledore turned and walked back down the street. On the corner he stopped and took out the silver Put-Outer. He clicked it once, and twelve balls of light sped back to their street lamps so that Privet Drive glowed suddenly orange and he could make out a tabby cat slinking around the corner at the other end of the street. He could just see the bundle of blankets on the step of number four.

"Good luck, Harry," he murmured. He turned on his heel and with a swish of his cloak, he was gone.

A breeze ruffled the neat hedges of Privet Drive, which lay silent and tidy under the inky sky, the very last place you would expect astonishing things to happen. Harry Potter rolled over inside his blankets without waking up. One small hand closed on the letter beside him and he slept on, not knowing he was special, not knowing he was famous, not knowing he would be woken in a few hours' time by Mrs. Dursley's scream as she opened the front door to put out the milk bottles, nor that he would spend the next few weeks being prodded and pinched by his cousin Dudley... He couldn't know that at this very moment, people meeting in secret all over the country were holding up their glasses and saying in hushed voices: "To Harry Potter -- the boy who lived!"

CHAPTER TWO

THE VANISHING GLASS

Nearly ten years had passed since the Dursleys had woken up to find their nephew on the front step, but Privet Drive had hardly changed at all. The sun rose on the same tidy front gardens and lit up the brass number four on the Dursleys' front door; it crept into their living room, which was almost exactly the same as it had been on the night when Mr. Dursley had seen that fateful news report about the owls. Only the photographs on the mantelpiece really showed how much time had passed. Ten years ago, there had been lots of pictures of what looked like a large pink beach ball wearing different-colored bonnets -- but Dudley Dursley was no longer a baby, and now the photographs showed a large blond boy riding his first bicycle, on a carousel at the fair, playing a computer game with his father, being hugged and kissed by his mother. The room held no sign at all that another boy lived in the house, too.

Yet Harry Potter was still there, asleep at the moment, but not for long. His Aunt Petunia was awake and it was her shrill voice that made the first noise of the day.

"Up! Get up! Now!"

Harry woke with a start. His aunt rapped on the door again.

"Up!" she screeched. Harry heard her walking toward the kitchen and then the sound of the frying pan being put on the stove. He rolled onto his back and tried to remember the dream he had been having. It had been a

good one. There had been a flying motorcycle in it. He had a funny feeling he'd had the same dream before.

His aunt was back outside the door.

"Are you up yet?" she demanded.

"Nearly," said Harry.

"Well, get a move on, I want you to look after the bacon. And don't you dare let it burn, I want everything perfect on Duddy's birthday."

Harry groaned.

"What did you say?" his aunt snapped through the door.

"Nothing, nothing..."

Dudley's birthday -- how could he have forgotten? Harry got slowly out of bed and started looking for socks. He found a pair under his bed and, after pulling a spider off one of them, put them on. Harry was used to spiders, because the cupboard under the stairs was full of them, and that was where he slept.

When he was dressed he went down the hall into the kitchen. The table was almost hidden beneath all Dudley's birthday presents. It looked as though Dudley had gotten the new computer he wanted, not to mention the second television and the racing bike. Exactly why Dudley wanted a racing bike was a mystery to Harry, as Dudley was very fat and hated exercise -- unless of course it involved punching somebody. Dudley's favorite punching bag was Harry, but he couldn't often catch him. Harry didn't look it, but he was very fast.

Perhaps it had something to do with living in a dark cupboard, but Harry had always been small and skinny for his age. He looked even smaller and skinnier than he really was because all he had to wear were old clothes of Dudley's, and Dudley was about four times bigger than he was. Harry had a thin face, knobbly knees, black hair, and bright green eyes. He wore round glasses held together with a lot of Scotch tape because of all the times Dudley had punched him on the nose. The only thing Harry liked about his own appearance was a very thin scar on his forehead that was shaped like a bolt of lightning. He had had it as long as he could remember, and the first question he could ever remember asking his Aunt

Petunia was how he had gotten it.

"In the car crash when your parents died," she had said. "And don't ask questions."

Don't ask questions -- that was the first rule for a quiet life with the Dursleys.

Uncle Vernon entered the kitchen as Harry was turning over the bacon.

"Comb your hair!" he barked, by way of a morning greeting.

About once a week, Uncle Vernon looked over the top of his newspaper and shouted that Harry needed a haircut. Harry must have had more haircuts than the rest of the boys in his class put

together, but it made no difference, his hair simply grew that way -- all over the place.

Harry was frying eggs by the time Dudley arrived in the kitchen with his mother. Dudley looked a lot like Uncle Vernon. He had a large pink face, not much neck, small, watery blue eyes, and thick blond hair that lay smoothly on his thick, fat head. Aunt Petunia often said that Dudley looked like a baby angel -- Harry often said that Dudley looked like a pig in a wig.

Harry put the plates of egg and bacon on the table, which was difficult as there wasn't much room. Dudley, meanwhile, was counting his presents. His face fell.

"Thirty-six," he said, looking up at his mother and father. "That's two less than last year."

"Darling, you haven't counted Auntie Marge's present, see, it's here under this big one from Mommy and Daddy."

"All right, thirty-seven then," said Dudley, going red in the face.
Harry, who could see a huge Dudley tantrum coming on, began wolfing down his bacon as fast as possible in case Dudley turned the table over.

Aunt Petunia obviously scented danger, too, because she said quickly, "And we'll buy you another two presents while we're out today. How's that, popkin? Two more presents. Is that all right"

Dudley thought for a moment. It looked like hard work. Finally he said slowly, "So I'll have thirty ... thirty..."

"Thirty-nine, sweetums," said Aunt Petunia.

"Oh." Dudley sat down heavily and grabbed the nearest parcel. "All right then."

Uncle Vernon chuckled. "Little tyke wants his money's worth, just like his father. 'Atta boy, Dudley!" He ruffled Dudley's hair.

At that moment the telephone rang and Aunt Petunia went to answer it while Harry and Uncle Vernon watched Dudley unwrap the racing bike, a video camera, a remote control airplane, sixteen new computer games, and a VCR. He was ripping the paper off a gold wristwatch when Aunt Petunia came back from the telephone looking both angry and worried.

"Bad news, Vernon," she said. "Mrs. Figg's broken her leg. She can't take him." She jerked her head in Harry's direction.

Dudley's mouth fell open in horror, but Harry's heart gave a leap. Every year on Dudley's birthday, his parents took him and a friend out for the day, to adventure parks, hamburger restaurants, or the movies. Every year, Harry was left behind with Mrs. Figg, a mad old lady who lived two streets away. Harry hated it there. The whole house smelled of cabbage and Mrs. Figg made him look at photographs of all the cats she'd ever owned.

"Now what?" said Aunt Petunia, looking furiously at Harry as though he'd planned this. Harry knew he ought to feel sorry that Mrs. Figg had broken her leg, but it wasn't easy when he reminded himself it would be a whole year before he had to look at Tibbles, Snowy, Mr. Paws, and Tufty again.

"We could phone Marge," Uncle Vernon suggested.

"Don't be silly, Vernon, she hates the boy."

The Dursleys often spoke about Harry like this, as though he wasn't there -- or rather, as though he was something very nasty that couldn't understand them, like a slug.

"What about what's-her-name, your friend -- Yvonne?"

"On vacation in Majorca," snapped Aunt Petunia.

"You could just leave me here," Harry put in hopefully (he'd be able to watch what he wanted on television for a change and maybe even have a go on Dudley's computer).

Aunt Petunia looked as though she'd just swallowed a lemon.

"And come back and find the house in ruins?" she snarled.

"I won't blow up the house," said Harry, but they weren't listening.

"I suppose we could take him to the zoo," said Aunt Petunia slowly, "... and leave him in the car...."

"That car's new, he's not sitting in it alone...."

Dudley began to cry loudly. In fact, he wasn't really crying -- it had been years since he'd really cried -- but he knew that if he screwed up his face and wailed, his mother would give him anything he wanted.

"Dinky Duddydums, don't cry, Mummy won't let him spoil your special day!" she cried, flinging her arms around him.

"I... don't... want... him... t-t-to come!" Dudley yelled between huge, pretend sobs. "He always sp- spoils everything!" He shot Harry a nasty grin through the gap in his mother's arms.

Just then, the doorbell rang -- "Oh, good Lord, they're here!" said Aunt Petunia frantically -- and a moment later, Dudley's best friend, Piers Polkiss, walked in with his mother. Piers was a scrawny boy with a face like a rat. He was usually the one who held people's arms behind their backs while Dudley hit them. Dudley stopped pretending to cry at once.

Half an hour later, Harry, who couldn't believe his luck, was sitting in the back of the Dursleys' car with Piers and Dudley, on the way to the zoo for the first time in his life. His aunt and uncle hadn't been able to think of anything else to do with him, but before they'd left, Uncle Vernon had taken Harry aside.

"I'm warning you," he had said, putting his large purple face right up

close to Harry's, "I'm warning you now, boy -- any funny business, anything at all -- and you'll be in that cupboard from now until Christmas."

"I'm not going to do anything," said Harry, "honestly..

But Uncle Vernon didn't believe him. No one ever did.

The problem was, strange things often happened around Harry and it was just no good telling the Dursleys he didn't make them happen.

Once, Aunt Petunia, tired of Harry coming back from the barbers looking as though he hadn't been at all, had taken a pair of kitchen scissors and cut his hair so short he was almost bald except for his bangs, which she left "to hide that horrible scar." Dudley had laughed himself silly at Harry, who spent a sleepless night imagining school the next day, where he was already laughed at for his baggy clothes and taped glasses. Next morning, however, he had gotten up to find his hair exactly as it had been before Aunt Petunia had sheared it off He had been given a week in his cupboard for this, even though he had tried to explain that he couldn't explain how it had grown back so quickly.

Another time, Aunt Petunia had been trying to force him into a revolting old sweater of Dudley's (brown with orange puff balls) -- The harder she tried to pull it over his head, the smaller it seemed to become, until finally it might have fitted a hand puppet, but certainly wouldn't fit Harry. Aunt Petunia had decided it must have shrunk in the wash and, to his great relief, Harry wasn't punished.

On the other hand, he'd gotten into terrible trouble for being found on the roof of the school kitchens. Dudley's gang had been chasing him as usual when, as much to Harry's surprise as anyone else's, there he was sitting on the chimney. The Dursleys had received a very angry letter from Harry's headmistress telling them Harry had been climbing school buildings. But all he'd tried to do (as he shouted at Uncle Vernon through the locked door of his cupboard) was jump behind the big trash cans outside the kitchen doors. Harry supposed that the wind must have caught him in mid- jump.

But today, nothing was going to go wrong. It was even worth being with Dudley and Piers to be spending the day somewhere that wasn't school, his cupboard, or Mrs. Figg's cabbage-smelling living room.

While he drove, Uncle Vernon complained to Aunt Petunia. He liked to complain about things: people at work, Harry, the council, Harry, the bank, and Harry were just a few of his favorite subjects. This morning, it was motorcycles.

"... roaring along like maniacs, the young hoodlums," he said, as a motorcycle overtook them.

I had a dream about a motorcycle," said Harry, remembering suddenly. "It was flying."

Uncle Vernon nearly crashed into the car in front. He turned right around in his seat and yelled at Harry, his face like a gigantic beet with a mustache: "MOTORCYCLES DON'T FLY!"

Dudley and Piers sniggered.

I know they don't," said Harry. "It was only a dream."

But he wished he hadn't said anything. If there was one thing the Dursleys hated even more than his asking questions, it was his talking about anything acting in a way it shouldn't, no matter if it was in a dream or even a cartoon -- they seemed to think he might get dangerous ideas.

It was a very sunny Saturday and the zoo was crowded with families. The Dursleys bought Dudley and Piers large chocolate ice creams at the entrance and then, because the smiling lady in the van had asked Harry what he wanted before they could hurry him away, they bought him a cheap lemon ice pop. It wasn't bad, either, Harry thought, licking it as they watched a gorilla scratching its head who looked remarkably like Dudley, except that it wasn't blond.

Harry had the best morning he'd had in a long time. He was careful to walk a little way apart from the Dursleys so that Dudley and Piers, who were starting to get bored with the animals by lunchtime, wouldn't fall back on their favorite hobby of hitting him. They ate in the zoo restaurant, and when Dudley had a tantrum because his knickerbocker glory didn't have enough ice cream on top, Uncle Vernon bought him another one and Harry was allowed to finish the first.

Harry felt, afterward, that he should have known it was all too good to last.

After lunch they went to the reptile house. It was cool and dark in there, with lit windows all along the walls. Behind the glass, all sorts of lizards and snakes were crawling and slithering over bits of wood and stone. Dudley and Piers wanted to see huge, poisonous cobras and thick, man-crushing pythons. Dudley quickly found the largest snake in the place. It could have wrapped its body twice around Uncle Vernon's car and crushed it into a trash can -- but at the moment it didn't look in the mood. In fact, it was fast asleep.

Dudley stood with his nose pressed against the glass, staring at the glistening brown coils.

"Make it move," he whined at his father. Uncle Vernon tapped on the glass, but the snake didn't budge.

"Do it again," Dudley ordered. Uncle Vernon rapped the glass smartly with his knuckles, but the snake just snoozed on.

"This is boring," Dudley moaned. He shuffled away.

Harry moved in front of the tank and looked intently at the snake. He wouldn't have been surprised if it had died of boredom itself -- no company except stupid people drumming their fingers on the glass trying to disturb it all day long. It was worse than having a cupboard as a bedroom, where the only visitor was Aunt Petunia hammering on the door to wake you up; at least he got to visit the rest of the house.

The snake suddenly opened its beady eyes. Slowly, very slowly, it raised its head until its eyes were on a level with Harry's.

It winked.

Harry stared. Then he looked quickly around to see if anyone was watching. They weren't. He looked back at the snake and winked, too.

The snake jerked its head toward Uncle Vernon and Dudley, then raised its eyes to the ceiling. It gave Harry a look that said quite plainly:

"I get that all the time.

"I know," Harry murmured through the glass, though he wasn't sure the snake could hear him. "It must be really annoying."

The snake nodded vigorously.

"Where do you come from, anyway?" Harry asked.

The snake jabbed its tail at a little sign next to the glass. Harry
peered at it.

Boa Constrictor, Brazil.

"Was it nice there?"

The boa constrictor jabbed its tail at the sign again and Harry read on:
This specimen was bred in the zoo. "Oh, I see -- so you've never been to
Brazil?"

As the snake shook its head, a deafening shout behind Harry made both of
them jump.

"DUDLEY! MR. DURSLEY! COME AND LOOK AT THIS SNAKE! YOU
WON'T BELIEVE
WHAT IT'S DOING!"

Dudley came waddling toward them as fast as he could.

"Out of the way, you," he said, punching Harry in the ribs. Caught by
surprise, Harry fell hard on the concrete floor. What came next happened
so fast no one saw how it happened -- one second, Piers and Dudley were
leaning right up close to the glass, the next, they had leapt back with
howls of horror.

Harry sat up and gasped; the glass front of the boa constrictor's tank
had vanished. The great snake was uncoiling itself rapidly, slithering
out onto the floor. People throughout the reptile house screamed and
started running for the exits.

As the snake slid swiftly past him, Harry could have sworn a low,
hissing voice said, "Brazil, here I come.... Thanksss, amigo."

The keeper of the reptile house was in shock.

"But the glass," he kept saying, "where did the glass go?"

The zoo director himself made Aunt Petunia a cup of strong, sweet tea while he apologized over and over again. Piers and Dudley could only gibber. As far as Harry had seen, the snake hadn't done anything except snap playfully at their heels as it passed, but by the time they were all back in Uncle Vernon's car, Dudley was telling them how it had nearly bitten off his leg, while Piers was swearing it had tried to squeeze him to death. But worst of all, for Harry at least, was Piers calming down enough to say, "Harry was talking to it, weren't you, Harry?"

Uncle Vernon waited until Piers was safely out of the house before starting on Harry. He was so angry he could hardly speak. He managed to say, "Go -- cupboard -- stay -- no meals," before he collapsed into a chair, and Aunt Petunia had to run and get him a large brandy.

Harry lay in his dark cupboard much later, wishing he had a watch. He didn't know what time it was and he couldn't be sure the Dursleys were asleep yet. Until they were, he couldn't risk sneaking to the kitchen for some food.

He'd lived with the Dursleys almost ten years, ten miserable years, as long as he could remember, ever since he'd been a baby and his parents had died in that car crash. He couldn't remember being in the car when his parents had died. Sometimes, when he strained his memory during long hours in his cupboard, he came up with a strange vision: a blinding flash of green light and a burn- ing pain on his forehead. This, he supposed, was the crash, though he couldn't imagine where all the green light came from. He couldn't remember his parents at all. His aunt and uncle never spoke about them, and of course he was forbidden to ask questions. There were no photographs of them in the house.

When he had been younger, Harry had dreamed and dreamed of some unknown relation coming to take him away, but it had never happened; the Dursleys were his only family. Yet sometimes he thought (or maybe hoped) that strangers in the street seemed to know him. Very strange strangers they were, too. A tiny man in a violet top hat had bowed to him once while out shopping with Aunt Petunia and Dudley. After asking Harry furiously if he knew the man, Aunt Petunia had rushed them out of the shop without buying anything. A wild-looking old woman dressed all in green had waved merrily at him once on a bus. A bald man in a very long purple coat had actually shaken his hand in the street the other day and then walked away without a word. The weirdest thing about all these people was the way they seemed to vanish the second Harry tried to get a

closer look.

At school, Harry had no one. Everybody knew that Dudley's gang hated that odd Harry Potter in his baggy old clothes and broken glasses, and nobody liked to disagree with Dudley's gang.

CHAPTER THREE

THE LETTERS FROM NO ONE

The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.

Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.

This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.

"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"

"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick." Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.

One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn 't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats,

and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.

That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.

As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.

"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.

"Your new school uniform," she said.

Harry looked in the bowl again.

"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet."

"DotA be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished."

Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.

Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere,

on the table.

They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.

"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.

"Make Harry get it."

"Get the mail, Harry."

"Make Dudley get it."

"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley."

Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.

Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter

The Cupboard under the Stairs

4 Privet Drive

Little Whinging

Surrey

The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.

Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.

"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.

Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.

Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.

"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. --."

"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"

Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.

"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.

"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.

"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.

Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.

"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"

They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.

"I want to read that letter," he said loudly. want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine."

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.

Harry didn't move.

I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.

"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.

"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.

"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"

"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.

"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want --"

Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.

"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer... Yes, that's best... we won't do anything....

"But --"

"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"

That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.

"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"

"No one. it was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it."

"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it."

"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.

"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking... you're really getting a bit big for it... we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.

"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now."

The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.

From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there... I need that room... make him get out...."

Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.

Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was

thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.

When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive --'"

With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go."

Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.

The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.

He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --

Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!

Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap.

Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.

I want --" he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes. Uncle Vernon didnt go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.

"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up."

"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon."

"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.

Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.

On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.

"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.

On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.

"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today --"

Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty

letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one.

"Out! OUT!"

Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.

"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"

He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while. "Shake'em off... shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.

They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.

Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering....

They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.

"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred

of these at the front desk."

She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:

Mr. H. Potter

Room 17

Railview Hotel

Cokeworth

Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.

"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.

Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.

"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dud ley sniveled.

"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "

Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.

Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.

"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"

It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.

"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"

A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.

"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"

It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.

The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.

Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.

"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.

He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second

room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.

The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.

Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.

Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?

One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds... twenty ... ten... nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three... two... one...

BOOM.

The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE KEEPER OF THE KEYS

BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake. "Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.

There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands -- now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.

"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"

There was a pause. Then --

SMASH!

The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.

A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.

The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.

"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey..."

He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.

"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.

Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.

"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.

Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.

"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yet dad, but yeh've got yet mom's eyes."

Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.

I demand that you leave at once, sit!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"

"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.

Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.

"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right."

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.

Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"

The giant chuckled.

"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts."

He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.

"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind."

His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.

The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt

sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley."

The giant chuckled darkly.

"Yet great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry."

He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are."

The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.

Hagrid looked shocked.

"Sorry," Harry said quickly.

"Sony?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It' s them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yet parents learned it all?"

"All what?" asked Harry.

"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"

He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.

"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"

Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.

"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff." But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world."

"What world?"

Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.

"DURSLEY!" he boomed.

Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble." Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.

"But yeh must know about yet mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous."

"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"

"Yeh don' know... yeh don' know..." Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.

"Yeh don' know what yeh are?" he said finally.

Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.

"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sit! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"

A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.

"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.

"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.

Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.

"Ah, go boil yet heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yet a wizard."

There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.

"-- a what?" gasped Harry.

"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter."

Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:

HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY

Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE

(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc., Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)

Dear Mr. Potter,

We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.

Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31. Yours sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall,

Deputy Headmistress

Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"

"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet

another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:

Dear Professor Dumbledore,

Given Harry his letter.

Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're Well.

Hagrid

Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.

Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.

"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.

"He's not going," he said.

Hagrid grunted.

"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.

"A what?" said Harry, interested.

"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like thern. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on."

"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"

"You knew?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"

"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How

could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that-that school-and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"

She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.

"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"

Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"

"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!" "But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.

The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.

"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone 3 s gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'."

He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.

"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it...."

He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows --"

"Who? "

"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does."

"Why not?"

"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went... bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was..."

Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.

"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.

"Nah -can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches... terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.

"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before... probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em... maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an' --"

Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.

"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway..."

"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't

do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a Powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived."

Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.

Hagrid was watching him sadly.

"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot..."

"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.

"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdos, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end --"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -I'm warning you -- one more word... "

In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.

"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.

Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.

"But what happened to Vol--, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"

"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see... he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?

"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don~ reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.

"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right."

Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard."

To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.

"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"

Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it... every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry... chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach... dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back... and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his

revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?

Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.

"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts."

But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.

"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and --"

"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter' s son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"

"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL To TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!"
yelled Uncle Vernon.

But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER," he thundered, "- INSULT- ALBUS- DUMBLEDORE- IN- FRONT- OF- ME!"

He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.

Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.

"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do."

He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.

"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job

"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.

"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore." "Why were you expelled?"

"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that."

He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.

"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' dormice in one o' the pockets."

CHAPTER FIVE

DIAGON ALLEY

Harry woke early the next morning. Although he could tell it was daylight, he kept his eyes shut tight.

"It was a dream, he told himself firmly. "I dreamed a giant called Hagrid came to tell me I was going to a school for wizards. When I open my eyes I'll be at home in my cupboard."

There was suddenly a loud tapping noise.

And there's Aunt Petunia knocking on the door, Harry thought, his heart sinking. But he still didn't open his eyes. It had been such a good

dream.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

"All right," Harry mumbled, "I'm getting up."

He sat up and Hagrid's heavy coat fell off him. The hut was full of sunlight, the storm was over, Hagrid himself was asleep on the collapsed sofa, and there was an owl rapping its claw on the window, a newspaper held in its beak.

Harry scrambled to his feet, so happy he felt as though a large balloon was swelling inside him. He went straight to the window and jerked it open. The owl swooped in and dropped the newspaper on top of Hagrid, who didn't wake up. The owl then fluttered onto the floor and began to attack Hagrid's coat.

"Don't do that."

Harry tried to wave the owl out of the way, but it snapped its beak fiercely at him and carried on savaging the coat.

"Hagrid!" said Harry loudly. "There's an owl

"Pay him," Hagrid grunted into the sofa.

"What?"

"He wants payin' fer deliverin' the paper. Look in the pockets."
Hagrid's coat seemed to be made of nothing but pockets -- bunches of keys, slug pellets, balls of string, peppermint humbugs, teabags... finally, Harry pulled out a handful of strange-looking coins.

"Give him five Knuts," said Hagrid sleepily.

"Knuts?"

"The little bronze ones."

Harry counted out five little bronze coins, and the owl held out his leg so Harry could put the money into a small leather pouch tied to it. Then he flew off through the open window.

Hagrid yawned loudly, sat up, and stretched.

"Best be Off, Harry, lots ter do today, gotta get up ter London an' buy all yer stuff fer school."

Harry was turning over the wizard coins and looking at them. He had just thought of something that made him feel as though the happy balloon inside him had got a puncture.

"Um -- Hagrid?"

"Mm?" said Hagrid, who was pulling on his huge boots.

"I haven't got any money -- and you heard Uncle Vernon last night ... he won't pay for me to go and learn magic."

"Don't worry about that," said Hagrid, standing up and scratching his head. "D'yeh think yer parents didn't leave yeh anything?"

"But if their house was destroyed --"

"They didn' keep their gold in the house, boy! Nah, first stop fer us is Gringotts. Wizards' bank. Have a sausage, they're not bad cold -- an' I wouldn' say no teh a bit o' yer birthday cake, neither."

"Wizards have banks?"

"Just the one. Gringotts. Run by goblins."

Harry dropped the bit of sausage he was holding.

"Goblins?"

"Yeah -- so yeh'd be mad ter try an' rob it, I'll tell yeh that. Never mess with goblins, Harry. Gringotts is the safest place in the world fer anything yeh want ter keep safe -- 'cept maybe Hogwarts. As a matter o' fact, I gotta visit Gringotts anyway. Fer Dumbledore. Hogwarts business." Hagrid drew himself up proudly. "He usually gets me ter do important stuff fer him. Fetchin' you gettin' things from Gringotts -- knows he can trust me, see.

"Got everythin'? Come on, then."

Harry followed Hagrid out onto the rock. The sky was quite clear now and the sea gleamed in the sunlight. The boat Uncle Vernon had hired was still there, with a lot of water in the bottom after the storm.

"How did you get here?" Harry asked, looking around for another boat.
"Flew," said Hagrid.

"Flew?"

"Yeah -- but we'll go back in this. Not s'pposed ter use magic now I've got yeh."

They settled down in the boat, Harry still staring at Hagrid, trying to imagine him flying.

"Seems a shame ter row, though," said Hagrid, giving Harry another of his sideways looks. "If I was ter -- er -- speed things up a bit, would yeh mind not mentionin' it at Hogwarts?"

"Of course not," said Harry, eager to see more magic. Hagrid pulled out the pink umbrella again, tapped it twice on the side of the boat, and they sped off toward land.

"Why would you be mad to try and rob Gringotts?" Harry asked.

"Spells -- enchantments," said Hagrid, unfolding his newspaper as he spoke. "They say there's dragons guardin' the highsecurity vaults. And then yeh gotta find yer way -- Gringotts is hundreds of miles under London, see. Deep under the Underground. Yeh'd die of hunger tryin' ter get out, even if yeh did manage ter get yer hands on summat."

Harry sat and thought about this while Hagrid read his newspaper, the Daily Prophet. Harry had learned from Uncle Vernon that people liked to be left alone while they did this, but it was very difficult, he'd never had so many questions in his life.

"Ministry o' Magic messin' things up as usual," Hagrid muttered, turning the page.

"There's a Ministry of Magic?" Harry asked, before he could stop himself.

"'Course," said Hagrid. "They wanted Dumbledore fer Minister, 0 '

course, but he'd never leave Hogwarts, so old Cornelius Fudge got the job. Bungler if ever there was one. So he pelts Dumbledore with owls every morning, askin' fer advice."

"But what does a Ministry of Magic do?"

"Well, their main job is to keep it from the Muggles that there's still witches an' wizards up an' down the country."

"Why?"

"Why? Blimey, Harry, everyone'd be wantin' magic solutions to their problems. Nah, we're best left alone."

At this moment the boat bumped gently into the harbor wall. Hagrid folded up his newspaper, and they clambered up the stone steps onto the street.

Passersby stared a lot at Hagrid as they walked through the little town to the station. Harry couldn't blame them. Not only was Hagrid twice as tall as anyone else, he kept pointing at perfectly ordinary things like parking meters and saying loudly, "See that, Harry? Things these Muggles dream up, eh?"

"Hagrid," said Harry, panting a bit as he ran to keep up, "did you say there are dragons at Gringotts?"

"Well, so they say," said Hagrid. "Crikey, I'd like a dragon."

"You'd like one?"

"Wanted one ever since I was a kid -- here we go."

They had reached the station. There was a train to London in five minutes' time. Hagrid, who didn't understand "Muggle money," as he called it, gave the bills to Harry so he could buy their tickets.

People stared more than ever on the train. Hagrid took up two seats and sat knitting what looked like a canary-yellow circus tent.

"Still got yer letter, Harry?" he asked as he counted stitches. Harry took the parchment envelope out of his pocket.

"Good," said Hagrid. "There's a list there of everything yeh need."

Harry unfolded a second piece of paper he hadn't noticed the night before, and read:

HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY

UNIFORM

First-year students will require:

1. Three sets of plain work robes (black)

2. One plain pointed hat (black) for day wear

3. One pair of protective gloves (dragon hide or similar)

4. One winter cloak (black, silver fastenings)

Please note that all pupils' clothes should carry name tags

COURSE BOOKS

All students should have a copy of each of the following:

The Standard Book of Spells (Grade 1) by Miranda Goshawk

A History of Magic by Bathilda Bagshot

Magical Theory by Adalbert Waffling

A Beginners' Guide to Transfiguration by Emetic Switch

One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi by Phyllida Spore

Magical Drafts and Potions by Arsenius Jigger

Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them by Newt Scamander

The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protection by Quentin Trimble

OTHER EQUIPMENT

wand cauldron (pewter, standard size 2) set

glass or crystal phials

telescope set

brass scales

Students may also bring an owl OR a cat OR a toad

PARENTS ARE REMINDED THAT FIRST YEARS ARE NOT ALLOWED THEIR OWN
BROOMSTICKS

"Can we buy all this in London?" Harry wondered aloud.

"If yeh know where to go," said Hagrid.

Harry had never been to London before. Although Hagrid seemed to know where he was going, he was obviously not used to getting there in an ordinary way. He got stuck in the ticket barrier on the Underground, and complained loudly that the seats were too small and the trains too slow.

"I don't know how the Muggles manage without magic," he said as they climbed a broken-down escalator that led up to a bustling road lined with shops.

Hagrid was so huge that he parted the crowd easily; all Harry had to do was keep close behind him. They passed book shops and music stores, hamburger restaurants and cinemas, but nowhere that looked as if it could sell you a magic wand. This was just an ordinary street full of ordinary people. Could there really be piles of wizard gold buried miles beneath them? Were there really shops that sold spell books and broomsticks? Might this not all be some huge joke that the Dursleys had cooked up? If Harry hadn't known that the Dursleys had no sense of humor, he might have thought so; yet somehow, even though everything Hagrid had told him so far was unbelievable, Harry couldn't help trusting him.

"This is it," said Hagrid, coming to a halt, "the Leaky Cauldron. It's a famous place."

It was a tiny, grubby-looking pub. If Hagrid hadn't pointed it out,

Harry wouldn't have noticed it was there. The people hurrying by didn't glance at it. Their eyes slid from the big book shop on one side to the record shop on the other as if they couldn't see the Leaky Cauldron at all. In fact, Harry had the most peculiar feeling that only he and Hagrid could see it. Before he could mention this, Hagrid had steered him inside.

For a famous place, it was very dark and shabby. A few old women were sitting in a corner, drinking tiny glasses of sherry. One of them was smoking a long pipe. A little man in a top hat was talking to the old bartender, who was quite bald and looked like a toothless walnut. The low buzz of chatter stopped when they walked in. Everyone seemed to know Hagrid; they waved and smiled at him, and the bartender reached for a glass, saying, "The usual, Hagrid?"

"Can't, Tom, I'm on Hogwarts business," said Hagrid, clapping his great hand on Harry's shoulder and making Harry's knees buckle.

"Good Lord," said the bartender, peering at Harry, "is this -- can this be --?"

The Leaky Cauldron had suddenly gone completely still and silent.

"Bless my soul," whispered the old bartender, "Harry Potter... what an honor."

He hurried out from behind the bar, rushed toward Harry and seized his hand, tears in his eyes.

"Welcome back, Mr. Potter, welcome back."

Harry didn't know what to say. Everyone was looking at him. The old woman with the pipe was puffing on it without realizing it had gone out. Hagrid was beaming.

Then there was a great scraping of chairs and the next moment, Harry found himself shaking hands with everyone in the Leaky Cauldron.

"Doris Crockford, Mr. Potter, can't believe I'm meeting you at last."

"So proud, Mr. Potter, I'm just so proud."

"Always wanted to shake your hand -- I'm all of a flutter."

"Delighted, Mr. Potter, just can't tell you, Diggle's the name, Dedalus Diggle."

"I've seen you before!" said Harry, as Dedalus Diggle's top hat fell off in his excitement. "You bowed to me once in a shop."

"He remembers!" cried Dedalus Diggle, looking around at everyone. "Did you hear that? He remembers me!" Harry shook hands again and again -- Doris Crockford kept coming back for more.

A pale young man made his way forward, very nervously. One of his eyes was twitching.

"Professor Quirrell!" said Hagrid. "Harry, Professor Quirrell will be one of your teachers at Hogwarts."

"P-P-Potter," stammered Professor Quirrell, grasping Harry's hand, "c-can't t-tell you how p- pleased I am to meet you."

"What sort of magic do you teach, Professor Quirrell?"

"D-Defense Against the D-D-Dark Arts," muttered Professor Quirrell, as though he'd rather not think about it. "N-not that you n-need it, eh, P-P-Potter?" He laughed nervously. "You'll be g-getting all your equipment, I suppose? I've g-got to p-pick up a new b-book on vampires, m-myself." He looked terrified at the very thought.

But the others wouldn't let Professor Quirrell keep Harry to himself. It took almost ten minutes to get away from them all. At last, Hagrid managed to make himself heard over the babble.

"Must get on -- lots ter buy. Come on, Harry."

Doris Crockford shook Harry's hand one last time, and Hagrid led them through the bar and out into a small, walled courtyard, where there was nothing but a trash can and a few weeds.

Hagrid grinned at Harry.

"Told yeh, didn't I? Told yeh you was famous. Even Professor Quirrell

was tremblin' ter meet yeh -- mind you, he's usually tremblin'."

"Is he always that nervous?"

"Oh, yeah. Poor bloke. Brilliant mind. He was fine while he was

studyin' outta books but then he took a year off ter get some firsthand experience.... They say he met vampires in the Black Forest, and there was a nasty bit o' trouble with a hag -- never been the same since. Scared of the students, scared of his own subject now, where's me umbrella?"

Vampires? Hags? Harry's head was swimming. Hagrid, meanwhile, was counting bricks in the wall above the trash can.

"Three up... two across he muttered. "Right, stand back, Harry."

He tapped the wall three times with the point of his umbrella.

The brick he had touched quivered -- it wriggled -- in the middle, a small hole appeared -- it grew wider and wider -- a second later they were facing an archway large enough even for Hagrid, an archway onto a cobbled street that twisted and turned out of sight.

"Welcome," said Hagrid, "to Diagon Alley."

He grinned at Harry's amazement. They stepped through the archway. Harry looked quickly over his shoulder and saw the archway shrink instantly back into solid wall.

The sun shone brightly on a stack of cauldrons outside the nearest shop. Cauldrons -- All Sizes - Copper, Brass, Pewter, Silver -- Self-Stirring -- Collapsible, said a sign hanging over them.

"Yeah, you'll be needin' one," said Hagrid, "but we gotta get yer money first."

Harry wished he had about eight more eyes. He turned his head in every direction as they walked up the street, trying to look at everything at once: the shops, the things outside them, the people doing their shopping. A plump woman outside an Apothecary was shaking her head as they passed, saying, "Dragon liver, seventeen Sickles an ounce, they're mad...."

A low, soft hooting came from a dark shop with a sign saying Eeylops Owl Emporium -- Tawny, Screech, Barn, Brown, and Snowy. Several boys of about Harry's age had their noses pressed against a window with broomsticks in it. "Look," Harry heard one of them say, "the new Nimbus Two Thousand -- fastest ever --" There were shops selling robes, shops selling telescopes and strange silver instruments Harry had never seen before, windows stacked with barrels of bat spleens and eels' eyes, tottering piles of spell books, quills, and rolls of parchment, potion bottles, globes of the moon....

"Gringotts," said Hagrid.

They had reached a snowy white building that towered over the other little shops. Standing beside its burnished bronze doors, wearing a uniform of scarlet and gold, was -

"Yeah, that's a goblin," said Hagrid quietly as they walked up the white stone steps toward him. The goblin was about a head shorter than Harry. He had a swarthy, clever face, a pointed beard and, Harry noticed, very long fingers and feet. He bowed as they walked inside. Now they were facing a second pair of doors, silver this time, with words engraved upon them:

Enter, stranger, but take heed

Of what awaits the sin of greed,

For those who take, but do not earn,

Must pay most dearly in their turn.

So if you seek beneath our floors

A treasure that was never yours,

Thief, you have been warned, beware

Of finding more than treasure there.

"Like I said, Yeh'd be mad ter try an' rob it," said Hagrid.

A pair of goblins bowed them through the silver doors and they were in a

vast marble hall. About a hundred more goblins were sitting on high stools behind a long counter, scribbling in large ledgers, weighing coins in brass scales, examining precious stones through eyeglasses. There were too many doors to count leading off the hall, and yet more goblins were showing people in and out of these. Hagrid and Harry made for the counter.

"Morning," said Hagrid to a free goblin. "We've come ter take some money outta Mr. Harry Potter's safe."

"You have his key, Sir?"

"Got it here somewhere," said Hagrid, and he started emptying his pockets onto the counter, scattering a handful of moldy dog biscuits over the goblin's book of numbers. The goblin wrinkled his nose. Harry watched the goblin on their right weighing a pile of rubies as big as glowing coals.

"Got it," said Hagrid at last, holding up a tiny golden key.

The goblin looked at it closely.

"That seems to be in order."

"An' I've also got a letter here from Professor Dumbledore," said Hagrid importantly, throwing out his chest. "It's about the YouKnow-What in vault seven hundred and thirteen."

The goblin read the letter carefully.

"Very well," he said, handing it back to Hagrid, "I will have Someone take you down to both vaults. Griphook!"

Griphook was yet another goblin. Once Hagrid had crammed all the dog biscuits back inside his pockets, he and Harry followed Griphook toward one of the doors leading off the hall.

"What's the You-Know-What in vault seven hundred and thirteen?" Harry asked.

"Can't tell yeh that," said Hagrid mysteriously. "Very secret. Hogwarts business. Dumbledore's trusted me. More'n my job's worth ter tell yeh that."

Griphook held the door open for them. Harry, who had expected more marble, was surprised. They were in a narrow stone passageway lit with flaming torches. It sloped steeply downward and there were little railway tracks on the floor. Griphook whistled and a small cart came hurtling up the tracks toward them. They climbed in -- Hagrid with some difficulty -- and were off.

At first they just hurtled through a maze of twisting passages. Harry tried to remember, left, right, right, left, middle fork, right, left, but it was impossible. The rattling cart seemed to know its own way, because Griphook wasn't steering.

Harry's eyes stung as the cold air rushed past them, but he kept them wide open. Once, he thought he saw a burst of fire at the end of a passage and twisted around to see if it was a dragon, but too late - - they plunged even deeper, passing an underground lake where huge stalactites and stalagmites grew from the ceiling and floor.

I never know," Harry called to Hagrid over the noise of the cart, "what's the difference between a stalagmite and a stalactite?"

"Stalagmite's got an 'm' in it," said Hagrid. "An' don' ask me questions just now, I think I'm gonna be sick."

He did look very green, and when the cart stopped at last beside a small door in the passage wall, Hagrid got out and had to lean against the wall to stop his knees from trembling.

Griphook unlocked the door. A lot of green smoke came billowing out, and as it cleared, Harry gasped. Inside were mounds of gold coins. Columns of silver. Heaps of little bronze Knuts.

"All yours," smiled Hagrid.

All Harry's -- it was incredible. The Dursleys couldn't have known about this or they'd have had it from him faster than blinking. How often had they complained how much Harry cost them to keep? And all the time there had been a small fortune belonging to him, buried deep under London.

Hagrid helped Harry pile some of it into a bag.

"The gold ones are Galleons," he explained. "Seventeen silver Sickles to

a Galleon and twenty-nine Knuts to a Sickle, it's easy enough. Right, that should be enough fer a couple o' terms, we'll keep the rest safe for yeh." He turned to Griphook. "Vault seven hundred and thirteen now, please, and can we go more slowly?"

"One speed only," said Griphook.

They were going even deeper now and gathering speed. The air became colder and colder as they hurtled round tight corners. They went rattling over an underground ravine, and Harry leaned over the side to try to see what was down at the dark bottom, but Hagrid groaned and pulled him back by the scruff of his neck.

Vault seven hundred and thirteen had no keyhole.

"Stand back," said Griphook importantly. He stroked the door gently with one of his long fingers and it simply melted away.

"If anyone but a Gringotts goblin tried that, they'd be sucked through the door and trapped in there," said Griphook.

"How often do you check to see if anyone's inside?" Harry asked.

"About once every ten years," said Griphook with a rather nasty grin.

Something really extraordinary had to be inside this top security vault, Harry was sure, and he leaned forward eagerly, expecting to see fabulous jewels at the very least -- but at first he thought it was empty. Then he noticed a grubby little package wrapped up in brown paper lying on the floor. Hagrid picked it up and tucked it deep inside his coat. Harry longed to know what it was, but knew better than to ask.

"Come on, back in this infernal cart, and don't talk to me on the way back, it's best if I keep me mouth shut," said Hagrid.

One wild cart ride later they stood blinking in the sunlight outside Gringotts. Harry didn't know where to run first now that he had a bag full of money. He didn't have to know how many Galleons there were to a pound to know that he was holding more money than he'd had in his whole life -- more money than even Dudley had ever had.

"Might as well get yer uniform," said Hagrid, nodding toward Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions. "Listen, Harry, would yeh mind if I

slipped off fer a pick-me-up in the Leaky Cauldron? I hate them Gringotts carts." He did still look a bit sick, so Harry entered Madam Malkin's shop alone, feeling nervous.

Madam Malkin was a squat, smiling witch dressed all in mauve.

"Hogwarts, clear?" she said, when Harry started to speak. "Got the lot here -- another young man being fitted up just now, in fact. "

In the back of the shop, a boy with a pale, pointed face was standing on a footstool while a second witch pinned up his long black robes. Madam Malkin stood Harry on a stool next to him) slipped a long robe over his head, and began to pin it to the right length.

"Hello," said the boy, "Hogwarts, too?"

"Yes," said Harry.

"My father's next door buying my books and mother's up the street looking at wands," said the boy. He had a bored, drawling voice. "Then I'm going to drag them off to took at racing brooms. I don't see why first years can't have their own. I think I'll bully father into getting me one and I'll smuggle it in somehow."

Harry was strongly reminded of Dudley.

"Have you got your own broom?" the boy went on.

"No," said Harry.

"Play Quidditch at all?"

"No," Harry said again, wondering what on earth Quidditch could be.

"I do -- Father says it's a crime if I'm not picked to play for my house, and I must say, I agree. Know what house you'll be in yet?"

"No," said Harry, feeling more stupid by the minute.

"Well, no one really knows until they get there, do they, but I know I'll be in Slytherin, all our family have been -- imagine being in Hufflepuff, I think I'd leave, wouldn't you?" "Mmm," said Harry, wishing he could say something a bit more interesting.

"I say, look at that man!" said the boy suddenly, nodding toward the front window. Hagrid was standing there, grinning at Harry and pointing at two large ice creams to show he couldn't come in.

"That's Hagrid," said Harry, pleased to know something the boy didn't. "He works at Hogwarts."

"Oh," said the boy, "I've heard of him. He's a sort of servant, isn't he?"

"He's the gamekeeper," said Harry. He was liking the boy less and less every second.

"Yes, exactly. I heard he's a sort of savage -- lives in a hut on the school grounds and every now and then he gets drunk, tries to do magic, and ends up setting fire to his bed."

"I think he's brilliant," said Harry coldly.

"Do you?" said the boy, with a slight sneer. "Why is he with you? Where are your parents?"

"They're dead," said Harry shortly. He didn't feel much like going into the matter with this boy.

"Oh, sorry," said the other,. not sounding sorry at all. "But they were our kind, weren't they?"

"They were a witch and wizard, if that's what you mean."

"I really don't think they should let the other sort in, do you? They're just not the same, they've never been brought up to know our ways. Some of them have never even heard of Hogwarts until they get the letter, imagine. I think they should keep it in the old wizarding families. What's your surname, anyway?"

But before Harry could answer, Madam Malkin said, "That's you done, my dear," and Harry, not sorry for an excuse to stop talking to the boy, hopped down from the footstool.

"Well, I'll see you at Hogwarts, I suppose," said the drawling boy.

Harry was rather quiet as he ate the ice cream Hagrid had bought him (chocolate and raspberry with chopped nuts).

"What's up?" said Hagrid.

"Nothing," Harry lied. They stopped to buy parchment and quills. Harry cheered up a bit when he found a bottle of ink that changed color as you wrote. When they had left the shop, he said, "Hagrid, what's Quidditch?"

"Blimey, Harry, I keep forgettin' how little yeh know -- not knowin' about Quidditch!"

"Don't make me feel worse," said Harry. He told Hagrid about the pate boy in Madam Malkin's.

"--and he said people from Muggle families shouldn't even be allowed in."

"Yer not from a Muggle family. If he'd known who yeh were -- he's grown up knowin' yer name if his parents are wizardin' folk. You saw what everyone in the Leaky Cauldron was like when they saw yeh. Anyway, what does he know about it, some o' the best I ever saw were the only ones with magic in 'em in a long line 0' Muggles -- look at yer mum! Look what she had fer a sister!"

"So what is Quidditch?"

"It's our sport. Wizard sport. It's like -- like soccer in the Muggle world -- everyone follows Quidditch -- played up in the air on broomsticks and there's four balls -- sorta hard ter explain the rules."
"And what are Slytherin and Hufflepuff?"

"School houses. There's four. Everyone says Hufflepuff are a lot o' duffers, but --"

"I bet I'm in Hufflepuff" said Harry gloomily.

"Better Hufflepuff than Slytherin," said Hagrid darkly. "There's not a single witch or wizard who went bad who wasn't in Slytherin. You-Know-Who was one."

"Vol-, sorry - You-Know-Who was at Hogwarts?"

"Years an' years ago," said Hagrid.

They bought Harry's school books in a shop called Flourish and Blotts where the shelves were stacked to the ceiling with books as large as paving stones bound in leather; books the size of postage stamps in covers of silk; books full of peculiar symbols and a few books with nothing in them at all. Even Dudley, who never read anything, would have been wild to get his hands on some of these. Hagrid almost had to drag Harry away from Curses and Countercurses (Bewitch Your Friends and Befuddle Your Enemies with the Latest Revenges: Hair Loss, Jelly-Legs, Tongue- Tying and Much, Much More) by Professor Vindictus Viridian.

"I was trying to find out how to curse Dudley."

"I'm not sayin' that's not a good idea, but yer not ter use magic in the Muggle world except in very special circumstances," said Hagrid. "An' anyway, yeh couldn' work any of them curses yet, yeh'll need a lot more study before yeh get ter that level."

Hagrid wouldn't let Harry buy a solid gold cauldron, either ("It says pewter on yer list"), but they got a nice set of scales for weighing potion ingredients and a collapsible brass telescope. Then they visited the Apothecary, which was fascinating enough to make up for its horrible smell, a mixture of bad eggs and rotted cabbages. Barrels of slimy stuff stood on the floor; jars of herbs, dried roots, and bright powders lined the walls; bundles of feathers, strings of fangs, and snarled claws hung from the ceiling. While Hagrid asked the man behind the counter for a supply of some basic potion ingredients for Harry, Harry himself examined silver unicorn horns at twenty-one Galleons each and minuscule, glittery-black beetle eyes (five Knuts a scoop).

Outside the Apothecary, Hagrid checked Harry's list again.

"Just yer wand left - A yeah, an' I still haven't got yeh a birthday present."

Harry felt himself go red.

"You don't have to --"

"I know I don't have to. Tell yeh what, I'll get yer animal. Not a toad, toads went outta fashion years ago, yeh'd be laughed at - an' I don' like cats, they make me sneeze. I'll get yer an owl. All the kids want

owls, they're dead useful, carry yer mail an' everythin'."

Twenty minutes later, they left Eeylops Owl Emporium, which had been dark and full of rustling and flickering, jewel-bright eyes. Harry now carried a large cage that held a beautiful snowy owl, fast asleep with her head under her wing. He couldn't stop stammering his thanks, sounding just like Professor Quirrell.

"Don' mention it," said Hagrid gruffly. "Don' expect you've had a lotta presents from them Dursleys. Just Ollivanders left now - only place fer wands, Ollivanders, and yeh gotta have the best wand."

A magic wand... this was what Harry had been really looking forward to.

The last shop was narrow and shabby. Peeling gold letters over the door read Ollivanders: Makers of Fine Wands since 382 B.C. A single wand lay on a faded purple cushion in the dusty window.

A tinkling bell rang somewhere in the depths of the shop as they stepped inside. It was a tiny place, empty except for a single, spindly chair that Hagrid sat on to wait. Harry felt strangely as though he had entered a very strict library; he swallowed a lot of new questions that had just occurred to him and looked instead at the thousands of narrow boxes piled neatly right up to the ceiling. For some reason, the back of his neck prickled. The very dust and silence in here seemed to tingle with some secret magic.

"Good afternoon," said a soft voice. Harry jumped. Hagrid must have jumped, too, because there was a loud crunching noise and he got quickly off the spindly chair.

An old man was standing before them, his wide, pale eyes shining like moons through the gloom of the shop.

"Hello," said Harry awkwardly.

"Ah yes," said the man. "Yes, yes. I thought I'd be seeing you soon. Harry Potter." It wasn't a question. "You have your mother's eyes. It seems only yesterday she was in here herself, buying her first wand. Ten and a quarter inches long, swishy, made of willow. Nice wand for charm work."

Mr. Ollivander moved closer to Harry. Harry wished he would blink. Those

silvery eyes were a bit creepy.

"Your father, on the other hand, favored a mahogany wand. Eleven inches. Pliable. A little more power and excellent for transfiguration. Well, I say your father favored it -- it's really the wand that chooses the wizard, of course."

Mr. Ollivander had come so close that he and Harry were almost nose to nose. Harry could see himself reflected in those misty eyes.

"And that's where..."

Mr. Ollivander touched the lightning scar on Harry's forehead with a long, white finger.

"I'm sorry to say I sold the wand that did it," he said softly. "Thirteen-and-a-half inches. Yew. Powerful wand, very powerful, and in the wrong hands... well, if I'd known what that wand was going out into the world to do...."

He shook his head and then, to Harry's relief, spotted Hagrid.

"Rubeus! Rubeus Hagrid! How nice to see you again.... Oak, sixteen inches, rather bendy, wasn't it?"

"It was, sir, yes," said Hagrid.

"Good wand, that one. But I suppose they snapped it in half when you got expelled?" said Mr. Ollivander, suddenly stern.

"Er -- yes, they did, yes," said Hagrid, shuffling his feet. "I've still got the pieces, though," he added brightly.

"But you don't use them?" said Mr. Ollivander sharply.

"Oh, no, sit," said Hagrid quickly. Harry noticed he gripped his pink umbrella very tightly as he spoke.

"Hmmm," said Mr. Ollivander, giving Hagrid a piercing look. "Well, now -- Mr. Potter. Let me see." He pulled a long tape measure with silver markings out of his pocket. "Which is your wand arm?"

"Er -- well, I'm right-handed," said Harry.

"Hold out your arm. That's it." He measured Harry from shoulder to finger, then wrist to elbow, shoulder to floor, knee to armpit and round his head. As he measured, he said, "Every Ollivander wand has a core of a powerful magical substance, Mr. Potter. We use unicorn hairs, phoenix tail feathers, and the heartstrings of dragons. No two Ollivander wands are the same, just as no two unicorns, dragons, or phoenixes are quite the same. And of course, you will never get such good results with another wizard's wand."

Harry suddenly realized that the tape measure, which was measuring between his nostrils, was doing this on its own. Mr. Ollivander was flitting around the shelves, taking down boxes.

"That will do," he said, and the tape measure crumpled into a heap on the floor. "Right then, Mr. Potter. Try this one. Beechwood and dragon heartstring. Nine inches. Nice and flexible. just take it and give it a wave."

Harry took the wand and (feeling foolish) waved it around a bit, but Mr. Ollivander snatched it out of his hand almost at once.

"Maple and phoenix feather. Seven inches. Quite whippy. Try --"

Harry tried -- but he had hardly raised the wand when it, too, was snatched back by Mr. Ollivander.

"No, no -here, ebony and unicorn hair, eight and a half inches, springy. Go on, go on, try it out."

Harry tried. And tried. He had no idea what Mr. Ollivander was waiting for. The pile of tried wands was mounting higher and higher on the spindly chair, but the more wands Mr. Ollivander pulled from the shelves, the happier he seemed to become.

"Tricky customer, eh? Not to worry, we'll find the perfect match here somewhere -- I wonder, now - - yes, why not -- unusual combination -- holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches, nice and supple."

Harry took the wand. He felt a sudden warmth in his fingers. He raised the wand above his head, brought it swishing down through the dusty air and a stream of red and gold sparks shot from the end like a firework, throwing dancing spots of light on to the walls. Hagrid whooped and

clapped and Mr. Ollivander cried, "Oh, bravo! Yes, indeed, oh, very good. Well, well, well... how curious... how very curious... "

He put Harry's wand back into its box and wrapped it in brown paper, still muttering, "Curious... curious..

"Sorry," said Harry, "but what's curious?"

Mr. Ollivander fixed Harry with his pale stare.

"I remember every wand I've ever sold, Mr. Potter. Every single wand. It so happens that the phoenix whose tail feather is in your wand, gave another feather -- just one other. It is very curious indeed that you should be destined for this wand when its brother why, its brother gave you that scar."

Harry swallowed.

"Yes, thirteen-and-a-half inches. Yew. Curious indeed how these things happen. The wand chooses the wizard, remember.... I think we must expect great things from you, Mr. Potter.... After all, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named did great things -- terrible, yes, but great."

Harry shivered. He wasn't sure he liked Mr. Ollivander too much. He paid seven gold Galleons for his wand, and Mr. Ollivander bowed them from his shop.

The late afternoon sun hung low in the sky as Harry and Hagrid made their way back down Diagon Alley, back through the wall, back through the Leaky Cauldron, now empty. Harry didn't speak at all as they walked down the road; he didn't even notice how much people were gawking at them on the Underground, laden as they were with all their funny-shaped packages, with the snowy owl asleep in its cage on Harry's lap. Up another escalator, out into Paddington station; Harry only realized where they were when Hagrid tapped him on the shoulder.

"Got time fer a bite to eat before yer train leaves," he said.

He bought Harry a hamburger and they sat down on plastic seats to eat them. Harry kept looking around. Everything looked so strange, somehow.

"You all right, Harry? Yer very quiet," said Hagrid.

Harry wasn't sure he could explain. He'd just had the best birthday of his life -- and yet -- he chewed his hamburger, trying to find the words.

"Everyone thinks I'm special," he said at last. "All those people in the Leaky Cauldron, Professor Quirrell, Mr. Ollivander... but I don't know anything about magic at all. How can they expect great things? I'm famous and I can't even remember what I'm famous for. I don't know what happened when Vol-, sorry -- I mean, the night my parents died."

Hagrid leaned across the table. Behind the wild beard and eyebrows he wore a very kind smile.

"Don' you worry, Harry. You'll learn fast enough. Everyone starts at the beginning at Hogwarts, you'll be just fine. just be yerself. I know it's hard. Yeh've been singled out, an' that's always hard. But yeh'll have a great time at Hogwarts -- I did -- still do, 'smatter of fact."

Hagrid helped Harry on to the train that would take him back to the Dursleys, then handed him an envelope.

"Yer ticket fer Hogwarts, " he said. "First o' September -- King's Cross -- it's all on yer ticket. Any problems with the Dursleys, send me a letter with yer owl, she'll know where to find me.... See yeh soon, Harry."

The train pulled out of the station. Harry wanted to watch Hagrid until he was out of sight; he rose in his seat and pressed his nose against the window, but he blinked and Hagrid had gone.

CHAPTER SIX

THE JOURNEY FROM PLATFORM NINE AND THREE-QUARTERS

Harry's last month with the Dursleys wasn't fun. True, Dudley was now so scared of Harry he wouldn't stay in the same room, while Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon didn't shut Harry in his cupboard, force him to do anything, or shout at him -- in fact, they didn't speak to him at all. Half terrified, half furious, they acted as though any chair with Harry in it were empty. Although this was an improvement in many ways, it did become a bit depressing after a while.

Harry kept to his room, with his new owl for company. He had decided to call her Hedwig, a name he had found in A History of Magic. His school books were very interesting. He lay on his bed reading late into the night, Hedwig swooping in and out of the open window as she pleased. It was lucky that Aunt Petunia didn't come in to vacuum anymore, because Hedwig kept bringing back dead mice. Every night before he went to sleep, Harry ticked off another day on the piece of paper he had pinned to the wall, counting down to September the first.

On the last day of August he thought he'd better speak to his aunt and uncle about getting to King's Cross station the next day, so he went down to the living room where they were watching a quiz show on television. He cleared his throat to let them know he was there, and Dudley screamed and ran from the room.

"Er -- Uncle Vernon?"

Uncle Vernon grunted to show he was listening.

"Er -- I need to be at King's Cross tomorrow to -- to go to Hogwarts."

Uncle Vernon grunted again.

"Would it be all right if you gave me a lift?"

Grunt. Harry supposed that meant yes.

"Thank you."

He was about to go back upstairs when Uncle Vernon actually spoke.

"Funny way to get to a wizards' school, the train. Magic carpets all got punctures, have they?"

Harry didn't say anything.

"Where is this school, anyway?"

"I don't know," said Harry, realizing this for the first time. He pulled the ticket Hagrid had given him out of his pocket.

"I just take the train from platform nine and three-quarters at eleven o'clock," he read.

His aunt and uncle stared.

"Platform what?"

"Nine and three-quarters."

"Don't talk rubbish," said Uncle Vernon. "There is no platform nine and three-quarters."

"It's on my ticket."

"Barking," said Uncle Vernon, "howling mad, the lot of them. You'll see. You just wait. All right, we'll take you to King's Cross. We're going up to London tomorrow anyway, or I wouldn't bother."

"Why are you going to London?" Harry asked, trying to keep things friendly.

"Taking Dudley to the hospital," growled Uncle Vernon. "Got to have that ruddy tail removed before he goes to Smeltings."

Harry woke at five o'clock the next morning and was too excited and nervous to go back to sleep. He got up and pulled on his jeans because he didn't want to walk into the station in his wizard's robes -- he'd change on the train. He checked his Hogwarts list yet again to make sure he had everything he needed, saw that Hedwig was shut safely in her cage, and then paced the room, waiting for the Dursleys to get up. Two hours later, Harry's huge, heavy trunk had been loaded into the Dursleys' car, Aunt Petunia had talked Dudley into sitting next to Harry, and they had set off.

They reached King's Cross at half past ten. Uncle Vernon dumped Harry's trunk onto a cart and wheeled it into the station for him. Harry thought this was strangely kind until Uncle Vernon stopped dead, facing the platforms with a nasty grin on his face.

"Well, there you are, boy. Platform nine -- platform ten. Your platform should be somewhere in the middle, but they don't seem to have built it yet, do they?"

He was quite right, of course. There was a big plastic number nine over one platform and a big plastic number ten over the one next to it, and

in the middle, nothing at all.

"Have a good term," said Uncle Vernon with an even nastier smile. He left without another word. Harry turned and saw the Dursleys drive away. All three of them were laughing. Harry's mouth went rather dry. What on earth was he going to do? He was starting to attract a lot of funny looks, because of Hedwig. He'd have to ask someone.

He stopped a passing guard, but didn't dare mention platform nine and three-quarters. The guard had never heard of Hogwarts and when Harry couldn't even tell him what part of the country it was in, he started to get annoyed, as though Harry was being stupid on purpose. Getting desperate, Harry asked for the train that left at eleven o'clock, but the guard said there wasn't one. In the end the guard strode away, muttering about time wasters. Harry was now trying hard not to panic. According to the large clock over the arrivals board, he had ten minutes left to get on the train to Hogwarts and he had no idea how to do it; he was stranded in the middle of a station with a trunk he could hardly lift, a pocket full of wizard money, and a large owl.

Hagrid must have forgotten to tell him something you had to do, like tapping the third brick on the left to get into Diagon Alley. He wondered if he should get out his wand and start tapping the ticket inspector's stand between platforms nine and ten.

At that moment a group of people passed just behind him and he caught a few words of what they were saying.

"-- packed with Muggles, of course --"

Harry swung round. The speaker was a plump woman who was talking to four boys, all with flaming red hair. Each of them was pushing a trunk like Harry's in front of him -- and they had an owl.

Heart hammering, Harry pushed his cart after them. They stopped and so did he, just near enough to hear what they were saying.

"Now, what's the platform number?" said the boys' mother.

"Nine and three-quarters!" piped a small girl, also red-headed, who was holding her hand, "Mom, can't I go... "

"You're not old enough, Ginny, now be quiet. All right, Percy, you go

first."

What looked like the oldest boy marched toward platforms nine and ten. Harry watched, careful not to blink in case he missed it -- but just as the boy reached the dividing barrier between the two platforms, a large crowd of tourists came swarming in front of him and by the time the last backpack had cleared away, the boy had vanished.

"Fred, you next," the plump woman said.

"I'm not Fred, I'm George," said the boy. "Honestly, woman, you call yourself our mother? CarA you tell I'm George?"

"Sorry, George, dear."

"Only joking, I am Fred," said the boy, and off he went. His twin called after him to hurry up, and he must have done so, because a second later, he had gone -- but how had he done it?

Now the third brother was walking briskly toward the barrier he was almost there -- and then, quite suddenly, he wasn't anywhere.

There was nothing else for it.

"Excuse me," Harry said to the plump woman.

"Hello, dear," she said. "First time at Hogwarts? Ron's new, too."

She pointed at the last and youngest of her sons. He was tall, thin, and gangling, with freckles, big hands and feet, and a long nose.

"Yes," said Harry. "The thing is -- the thing is, I don't know how to --"

"How to get onto the platform?" she said kindly, and Harry nodded.

"Not to worry," she said. "All you have to do is walk straight at the barrier between platforms nine and ten. Don't stop and don't be scared you'll crash into it, that's very important. Best do it at a bit of a run if you're nervous. Go on, go now before Ron."

"Er -- okay," said Harry.

He pushed his trolley around and stared at the barrier. It looked very solid.

He started to walk toward it. People jostled him on their way to platforms nine and ten. Harry walked more quickly. He was going to smash right into that barrier and then he'd be in trouble -- leaning forward on his cart, he broke into a heavy run -- the barrier was coming nearer and nearer -- he wouldn't be able to stop -- the cart was out of control -- he was a foot away -- he closed his eyes ready for the crash --

It didn't come... he kept on running... he opened his eyes. A scarlet steam engine was waiting next to a platform packed with people. A sign overhead said Hogwarts Express, eleven O'clock. Harry looked behind him and saw a wrought-iron archway where the barrier had been, with the words Platform Nine and Three-Quarters on it, He had done it.

Smoke from the engine drifted over the heads of the chattering crowd, while cats of every color wound here and there between their legs. Owls hooted to one another in a disgruntled sort of way over the babble and the scraping of heavy trunks.

The first few carriages were already packed with students, some hanging out of the window to talk to their families, some fighting over seats. Harry pushed his cart off down the platform in search of an empty seat. He passed a round-faced boy who was saying, "Gran, I've lost my toad again."

"Oh, Neville," he heard the old woman sigh.

A boy with dreadlocks was surrounded by a small crowd.

"Give us a look, Lee, go on."

The boy lifted the lid of a box in his arms, and the people around him shrieked and yelled as something inside poked out a long, hairy leg.

Harry pressed on through the crowd until he found an empty compartment near the end of the train. He put Hedwig inside first and then started to shove and heave his trunk toward the train door. He tried to lift it up the steps but could hardly raise one end and twice he dropped it painfully on his foot.

"Want a hand?" It was one of the red-haired twins he'd followed through

the barrier.

"Yes, please," Harry panted.

"Oy, Fred! C'mere and help!"

With the twins' help, Harry's trunk was at last tucked away in a corner of the compartment.

"Thanks," said Harry, pushing his sweaty hair out of his eyes.

"What's that?" said one of the twins suddenly, pointing at Harry's lightning scar.

"Blimey," said the other twin. "Are you

"He is," said the first twin. "Aren't you?" he added to Harry.

"What?" said Harry.

"Harry Potter, "chorused the twins.

"Oh, him," said Harry. "I mean, yes, I am."

The two boys gawked at him, and Harry felt himself turning red. Then, to his relief, a voice came floating in through the train's open door.

"Fred? George? Are you there?"

"Coming, Mom."

With a last look at Harry, the twins hopped off the train.

Harry sat down next to the window where, half hidden, he could watch the red-haired family on the platform and hear what they were saying. Their mother had just taken out her handkerchief.

"Ron, you've got something on your nose."

The youngest boy tried to jerk out of the way, but she grabbed him and began rubbing the end of his nose.

"Mom -- geroff" He wriggled free.

"Aaah, has ickle Ronnie got somefink on his nosie?" said one of the twins.

"Shut up," said Ron.

"Where's Percy?" said their mother.

"He's coming now."

The oldest boy came striding into sight. He had already changed into his billowing black Hogwarts robes, and Harry noticed a shiny silver badge on his chest with the letter P on it.

"Can't stay long, Mother," he said. "I'm up front, the prefects have got two compartments to themselves --"

"Oh, are you a prefect, Percy?" said one of the twins, with an air of great surprise. "You should have said something, we had no idea."

"Hang on, I think I remember him saying something about it," said the other twin. "Once --"

"Or twice --"

"A minute --"

"All summer --"

"Oh, shut up," said Percy the Prefect.

"How come Percy gets new robes, anyway?" said one of the twins.

"Because he's a prefect," said their mother fondly. "All right, dear, well, have a good term -- send me an owl when you get there."

She kissed Percy on the cheek and he left. Then she turned to the twins.

"Now, you two -- this year, you behave yourselves. If I get one more owl telling me you've -- you've blown up a toilet or --"

"Blown up a toilet? We've never blown up a toilet."

"Great idea though, thanks, Mom."

"It's not funny. And look after Ron."

"Don't worry, ickle Ronniekins is safe with us."

"Shut up," said Ron again. He was almost as tall as the twins already and his nose was still pink where his mother had rubbed it.

"Hey, Mom, guess what? Guess who we just met on the train?"

Harry leaned back quickly so they couldn't see him looking.

"You know that black-haired boy who was near us in the station? Know who he is?"

"Who?"

"Harry Potter!"

Harry heard the little girl's voice.

"Oh, Mom, can I go on the train and see him, Mom, eh please...."

"You've already seen him, Ginny, and the poor boy isn't something you goggle at in a zoo. Is he really, Fred? How do you know?"

"Asked him. Saw his scar. It's really there - like lightning."

"Poor dear - no wonder he was alone, I wondered. He was ever so polite when he asked how to get onto the platform."

"Never mind that, do you think he remembers what You-Know-Who looks like?"

Their mother suddenly became very stern.

"I forbid you to ask him, Fred. No, don't you dare. As though he needs reminding of that on his first day at school."

"All right, keep your hair on."

A whistle sounded.

"Hurry up!" their mother said, and the three boys clambered onto the train. They leaned out of the window for her to kiss them good-bye, and their younger sister began to cry.

"Don't, Ginny, we'll send you loads of owls."

"We'll send you a Hogwarts toilet seat."

"George!"

"Only joking, Mom."

The train began to move. Harry saw the boys' mother waving and their sister, half laughing, half crying, running to keep up with the train until it gathered too much speed, then she fell back and waved.

Harry watched the girl and her mother disappear as the train rounded the corner. Houses flashed past the window. Harry felt a great leap of excitement. He didn't know what he was going to but it had to be better than what he was leaving behind.

The door of the compartment slid open and the youngest redheaded boy came in.

"Anyone sitting there?" he asked, pointing at the seat opposite Harry. "Everywhere else is full."

Harry shook his head and the boy sat down. He glanced at Harry and then looked quickly out of the window, pretending he hadn't looked. Harry saw he still had a black mark on his nose.

"Hey, Ron."

The twins were back.

"Listen, we're going down the middle of the train -- Lee Jordan's got a giant tarantula down there."

"Right," mumbled Ron.

"Harry," said the other twin, "did we introduce ourselves? Fred and George Weasley. And this is Ron, our brother. See you later, then.

"Bye," said Harry and Ron. The twins slid the compartment door shut behind them.

"Are you really Harry Potter?" Ron blurted out.

Harry nodded.

"Oh -well, I thought it might be one of Fred and George's jokes," said Ron. "And have you really got -- you know..."

He pointed at Harry's forehead.

Harry pulled back his bangs to show the lightning scar. Ron stared.

"So that's where You-Know-Who

"Yes," said Harry, "but I can't remember it."

"Nothing?" said Ron eagerly.

"Well -- I remember a lot of green light, but nothing else."

"Wow," said Ron. He sat and stared at Harry for a few moments, then, as though he had suddenly realized what he was doing, he looked quickly out of the window again.

"Are all your family wizards?" asked Harry, who found Ron just as interesting as Ron found him.

"Er -- Yes, I think so," said Ron. "I think Mom's got a second cousin who's an accountant, but we never talk about him."

"So you must know loads of magic already."

The Weasleys were clearly one of those old wizarding families the pale boy in Diagon Alley had talked about.

"I heard you went to live with Muggles," said Ron. "What are they like?"

"Horrible -well, not all of them. My aunt and uncle and cousin are, though. Wish I'd had three wizard brothers."

"Five," said Ron. For some reason, he was looking gloomy. "I'm the sixth in our family to go to Hogwarts. You could say I've got a lot to live up to. Bill and Charlie have already left -- Bill was head boy and Charlie was captain of Quidditch. Now Percy's a prefect. Fred and George mess around a lot, but they still get really good marks and everyone thinks they're really funny. Everyone expects me to do as well as the others, but if I do, it's no big deal, because they did it first. You never get anything new, either, with five brothers. I've got Bill's old robes, Charlie's old wand, and Percy's old rat."

Ron reached inside his jacket and pulled out a fat gray rat, which was asleep.

"His name's Scabbers and he's useless, he hardly ever wakes up. Percy got an owl from my dad for being made a prefect, but they couldn't aff -- I mean, I got Scabbers instead."

Ron's ears went pink. He seemed to think he'd said too much, because he went back to staring out of the window.

Harry didn't think there was anything wrong with not being able to afford an owl. After all, he'd never had any money in his life until a month ago, and he told Ron so, all about having to wear Dudley's old clothes and never getting proper birthday presents. This seemed to cheer Ron up.

"... and until Hagrid told me, I didn't know anything about be ing a wizard or about my parents or Voldemort"

Ron gasped.

"What?" said Harry.

"You said You-Know-Who's name!" said Ron, sounding both shocked and impressed. "I'd have thought you, of all people --"

"I'm not trying to be brave or anything, saying the name," said Harry, I just never knew you shouldn't. See what I mean? I've got loads to learn.... I bet," he added, voicing for the first time something that had been worrying him a lot lately, "I bet I'm the worst in the class."

"You won't be. There's loads of people who come from Muggle families and they learn quick enough."

While they had been talking, the train had carried them out of London. Now they were speeding past fields full of cows and sheep. They were quiet for a time, watching the fields and lanes flick past.

Around half past twelve there was a great clattering outside in the corridor and a smiling, dimpled woman slid back their door and said, "Anything off the cart, dears?"

Harry, who hadn't had any breakfast, leapt to his feet, but Ron's ears went pink again and he muttered that he'd brought sandwiches. Harry went out into the corridor.

He had never had any money for candy with the Dursleys, and now that he had pockets rattling with gold and silver he was ready to buy as many Mars Bars as he could carry -- but the woman didn't have Mars Bars. What she did have were Bettie Bott's Every Flavor Beans, Drooble's Best Blowing Gum, Chocolate Frogs. Pumpkin Pasties, Cauldron Cakes, Licorice Wands, and a number of other strange things Harry had never seen in his life. Not wanting to miss anything, he got some of everything and paid the woman eleven silver Sickles and seven bronze Knuts.

Ron stared as Harry brought it all back in to the compartment and tipped it onto an empty seat.

"Hungry, are you?"

"Starving," said Harry, taking a large bite out of a pumpkin pasty.

Ron had taken out a lumpy package and unwrapped it. There were four sandwiches inside. He pulled one of them apart and said, "She always forgets I don't like corned beef."

"Swap you for one of these," said Harry, holding up a pasty. "Go on --"

"You don't want this, it's all dry," said Ron. "She hasn't got much time," he added quickly, "you know, with five of us."

"Go on, have a pasty," said Harry, who had never had anything to share before or, indeed, anyone to share it with. It was a nice feeling, sitting there with Ron, eating their way through all Harry's pasties, cakes, and candies (the sandwiches lay forgotten).

"What are these?" Harry asked Ron, holding up a pack of Chocolate Frogs. "They're not really frogs, are they?" He was starting to feel that nothing would surprise him.

"No," said Ron. "But see what the card is. I'm missing Agrippa."

"What?"

"Oh, of course, you wouldn't know -- Chocolate Frogs have cards, inside them, you know, to collect -- famous witches and wizards. I've got about five hundred, but I haven't got Agrippa or Ptolemy."

Harry unwrapped his Chocolate Frog and picked up the card. It showed a man's face. He wore half- moon glasses, had a long, crooked nose, and flowing silver hair, beard, and mustache. Underneath the picture was the name Albus Dumbledore.

"So this is Dumbledore!" said Harry.

"Don't tell me you'd never heard of Dumbledore!" said Ron. "Can I have a frog? I might get Agrippa -- thanks

Harry turned over his card and read:

ALBUS DUMBLEDORE

CURRENTLY HEADMASTER OF HOGWARTS

Considered by many the greatest wizard of modern times, Dumbledore is particularly famous for his defeat of the dark wizard Grindelwald in 1945, for the discovery of the twelve uses of dragon's blood, and his work on alchemy with his partner, Nicolas Flamel. Professor Dumbledore enjoys chamber music and tenpin bowling.

Harry turned the card back over and saw, to his astonishment, that Dumbledore's face had disappeared.

"He's gone!"

"Well, you can't expect him to hang around all day," said Ron. "He'll be back. No, I've got Morgana again and I've got about six of her... do you want it? You can start collecting."

Ron's eyes strayed to the pile of Chocolate Frogs waiting to be unwrapped.

"Help yourself," said Harry. "But in, you know, the Muggle world, people just stay put in photos."

"Do they? What, they don't move at all?" Ron sounded amazed. "weird!"

Harry stared as Dumbledore sidled back into the picture on his card and gave him a small smile. Ron was more interested in eating the frogs than looking at the Famous Witches and Wizards cards, but Harry couldn't keep his eyes off them. Soon he had not only Dumbledore and Morgana, but Hengist of Woodcroft, Alberic Grunnion, Circe, Paracelsus, and Merlin. He finally tore his eyes away from the druidess Cliodna, who was scratching her nose, to open a bag of Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans.

"You want to be careful with those," Ron warned Harry. "When they say every flavor, they mean every flavor -- you know, you get all the ordinary ones like chocolate and peppermint and mar- malade, but then you can get spinach and liver and tripe. George reckons he had a booger-flavored one once."

Ron picked up a green bean, looked at it carefully, and bit into a corner.

"Bleaaargh -- see? Sprouts."

They had a good time eating the Every Flavor Beans. Harry got toast, coconut, baked bean, strawberry, curry, grass, coffee, sardine, and was even brave enough to nibble the end off a funny gray one Ron wouldn't touch, which turned out to be pepper.

The countryside now flying past the window was becoming wilder. The neat fields had gone. Now there were woods, twisting rivers, and dark green hills.

There was a knock on the door of their compartment and the round-faced boy Harry had passed on platform nine and threequarters came in. He looked tearful.

"Sorry," he said, "but have you seen a toad at all?"

When they shook their heads, he wailed, "I've lost him! He keeps getting

away from me!"

"He'll turn up," said Harry.

"Yes," said the boy miserably. "Well, if you see him..."

He left.

"Don't know why he's so bothered," said Ron. "If I'd brought a toad I'd lose it as quick as I could. Mind you, I brought Scabbers, so I can't talk."

The rat was still snoozing on Ron's lap.

"He might have died and you wouldn't know the difference," said Ron in disgust. "I tried to turn him yellow yesterday to make him more interesting, but the spell didn't work. I'll show you, look..."

He rummaged around in his trunk and pulled out a very battered-looking wand. It was chipped in places and something white was glinting at the end.

"Unicorn hair's nearly poking out. Anyway

He had just raised his 'wand when the compartment door slid open again. The toadless boy was back, but this time he had a girl with him. She was already wearing her new Hogwarts robes.

"Has anyone seen a toad? Neville's lost one," she said. She had a bossy sort of voice, lots of bushy brown hair, and rather large front teeth.

"We've already told him we haven't seen it," said Ron, but the girl wasn't listening, she was looking at the wand in his hand.

"Oh, are you doing magic? Let's see it, then."

She sat down. Ron looked taken aback.

"Er -- all right."

He cleared his throat.

"Sunshine, daisies, butter mellow, Turn this stupid, fat rat yellow."

He waved his wand, but nothing happened. Scabbers stayed gray and fast asleep.

"Are you sure that's a real spell?" said the girl. "Well, it's not very good, is it? I've tried a few simple spells just for practice and it's all worked for me. Nobody in my family's magic at all, it was ever such a surprise when I got my letter, but I was ever so pleased, of course, I mean, it's the very best school of witchcraft there is, I've heard -- I've learned all our course books by heart, of course, I just hope it will be enough -- I'm Hermione Granger, by the way, who are you.

She said all this very fast.

Harry looked at Ron, and was relieved to see by his stunned face that he hadn't learned all the course books by heart either.

"I'm Ron Weasley," Ron muttered.

"Harry Potter," said Harry.

"Are you really?" said Hermione. "I know all about you, of course -- I got a few extra books. for background reading, and you're in Modern Magical History and The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts and Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century.

"Am I?" said Harry, feeling dazed.

"Goodness, didn't you know, I'd have found out everything I could if it was me," said Hermione. "Do either of you know what house you'll be in? I've been asking around, and I hope I'm in Gryffindor, it sounds by far the best; I hear Dumbledore himself was in it, but I suppose Ravenclaw wouldn't be too bad.... Anyway, we'd better go and look for Neville's toad. You two had better change, you know, I expect we'll be there soon."

And she left, taking the toadless boy with her.

"Whatever house I'm in, I hope she's not in it," said Ron. He threw his wand back into his trunk. "Stupid spell -- George gave it to me, bet he knew it was a dud."

"What house are your brothers in?" asked Harry.

"Gryffindor," said Ron. Gloom seemed to be settling on him again. "Mom and Dad were in it, too. I don't know what they'll say if I'm not. I don't suppose Ravenclaw would be too bad, but imagine if they put me in Slytherin."

"That's the house Vol-, I mean, You-Know-Who was in?"

"Yeah," said Ron. He flopped back into his seat, looking depressed.

"You know, I think the ends of Scabbers' whiskers are a bit lighter," said Harry, trying to take Ron's mind off houses. "So what do your oldest brothers do now that they've left, anyway?"

Harry was wondering what a wizard did once he'd finished school.

"Charlie's in Romania studying dragons, and Bill's in Africa doing something for Gringotts," said Ron. "Did you hear about

Gringotts? It's been all over the Daily Prophet, but I don't suppose you get that with the Muggles -- someone tried to rob a high security vault."

Harry stared.

"Really? What happened to them?"

"Nothing, that's why it's such big news. They haven't been caught. My dad says it must've been a powerful Dark wizard to get round Gringotts, but they don't think they took anything, that's what's odd. 'Course, everyone gets scared when something like this happens in case You-Know-Who's behind it."

Harry turned this news over in his mind. He was starting to get a prickle of fear every time You- Know-Who was mentioned. He supposed this was all part of entering the magical world, but it had been a lot more comfortable saying "Voldemort" without worrying.

"What's your Quidditch team?" Ron asked.

"Er -- I don't know any," Harry confessed.

"What!" Ron looked dumbfounded. "Oh, you wait, it's the best game in the

world --" And he was off, explaining all about the four balls and the positions of the seven players, describing famous games he'd been to with his brothers and the broomstick he'd like to get if he had the money. He was just taking Harry through the finer points of the game when the compartment door slid open yet again, but it wasn't Neville the toadless boy, or Hermione Granger this time.

Three boys entered, and Harry recognized the middle one at once: it was the pale boy from Madam Malkin's robe shop. He was looking at Harry with a lot more interest than he'd shown back in Diagon Alley.

"Is it true?" he said. "They're saying all down the train that Harry Potter's in this compartment. So it's you, is it?"

"Yes," said Harry. He was looking at the other boys. Both of them were thickset and looked extremely mean. Standing on either side of the pale boy, they looked like bodyguards.

"Oh, this is Crabbe and this is Goyle," said the pale boy carelessly, noticing where Harry was looking. "And my name's Malfoy, Draco Malfoy."

Ron gave a slight cough, which might have been hiding a snigget. Draco Malfoy looked at him.

"Think my name's funny, do you? No need to ask who you are. My father told me all the Weasleys have red hair, freckles, and more children than they can afford."

He turned back to Harry. "You'll soon find out some wizarding families are much better than others, Potter. You don't want to go making friends with the wrong sort. I can help you there."

He held out his hand to shake Harry's, but Harry didn't take it.

"I think I can tell who the wrong sort are for myself, thanks," he said coolly.

Draco Malfoy didn't go red, but a pink tinge appeared in his pale cheeks.

"I'd be careful if I were you, Potter," he said slowly. "Unless you're a bit politer you'll go the same way as your parents. They didn't know what was good for them, either. You hang around with riffraff like the

Weasleys and that Hagrid, and it'll rub off on you."

Both Harry and Ron stood up.

"Say that again," Ron said, his face as red as his hair.

"Oh, you're going to fight us, are you?" Malfoy sneered.

"Unless you get out now," said Harry, more bravely than he felt, because Crabbe and Goyle were a lot bigger than him or Ron.

"But we don't feet like leaving, do we, boys? We've eaten all our food and you still seem to have some."

Goyle reached toward the Chocolate Frogs next to Ron - Ron leapt forward, but before he'd so much as touched Goyle, Goyle let out a horrible yell.

Scabbers the rat was hanging off his finger, sharp little teeth sunk deep into Goyle's knuckle - Crabbe and Malfoy backed away as Goyle swung Scabbers round and round, howling, and when Scabbets finally flew off and hit the window, all three of them disappeared at once. Perhaps they thought there were more rats lurking among the sweets, or perhaps they'd heard footsteps, because a second later, Hermione Granger had come in.

"What has been going on?" she said, looking at the sweets all over the floor and Ron picking up Scabbers by his tail.

I think he's been knocked out," Ron said to Harry. He looked closer at Scabbers. "No -- I don't believe it -- he's gone back to sleep-"

And so he had.

"You've met Malfoy before?"

Harry explained about their meeting in Diagon Alley.

"I've heard of his family," said Ron darkly. "They were some of the first to come back to our side after You-Know-Who disappeared. Said they'd been bewitched. My dad doesn't believe it. He says Malfoy's father didn't need an excuse to go over to the Dark Side." He turned to Hermione. "Can we help you with something?"

"You'd better hurry up and put your robes on, I've just been up to the front to ask the conductor, and he says we're nearly there. You haven't been fighting, have you? You'll be in trouble before we even get there!"

"Scabbers has been fighting, not us," said Ron, scowling at her. "Would you mind leaving while we change?"

"All right -- I only came in here because people outside are behaving very childishly, racing up and down the corridors," said Hermione in a sniffy voice. "And you've got dirt on your nose, by the way, did you know?"

Ron glared at her as she left. Harry peered out of the window. It was getting dark. He could see mountains and forests under a deep purple sky. The train did seem to be slowing down.

He and Ron took off their jackets and pulled on their long black robes. Ron's were a bit short for him, you could see his sneakers underneath them.

A voice echoed through the train: "We will be reaching Hogwarts in five minutes' time. Please leave your luggage on the train, it will be taken to the school separately."

Harry's stomach lurched with nerves and Ron, he saw, looked pale under his freckles. They crammed their pockets with the last of the sweets and joined the crowd thronging the corridor.

The train slowed right down and finally stopped. People pushed their way toward the door and out on to a tiny, dark platform. Harry shivered in the cold night air. Then a lamp came bobbing over the heads of the students, and Harry heard a familiar voice: "Firs' years! Firs' years over here! All right there, Harry?"

Hagrid's big hairy face beamed over the sea of heads.

"C'mon, follow me -- any more firs' years? Mind yer step, now! Firs' years follow me!"

Slipping and stumbling, they followed Hagrid down what seemed to be a steep, narrow path. It was so dark on either side of them that Harry thought there must be thick trees there. Nobody spoke much. Neville, the boy who kept losing his toad, sniffed once or twice.

"Ye' all get yer firs' sight o' Hogwarts in a sec," Hagrid called over
his shoulder, "jus' round this bend here."

There was a loud "Oooooh!"

The narrow path had opened suddenly onto the edge of a great black take. Perched atop a high mountain on the other side, its windows sparkling in the starry sky, was a vast castle with many turrets and towers.

"No more'n four to a boat!" Hagrid called, pointing to a fleet of little boats sitting in the water by the shore. Harry and Ron were followed into their boat by Neville and Hermione. "Everyone in?" shouted Hagrid, who had a boat to himself. "Right then -- FORWARD!"

And the fleet of little boats moved off all at once, gliding across the lake, which was as smooth as glass. Everyone was silent, staring up at the great castle overhead. It towered over them as they sailed nearer and nearer to the cliff on which it stood.

"Heads down!" yelled Hagrid as the first boats reached the cliff; they all bent their heads and the little boats carried them through a curtain of ivy that hid a wide opening in the cliff face. They were carried along a dark tunnel, which seemed to be taking them right underneath the castle, until they reached a kind of underground harbor, where they clambered out onto rocks and pebbles.

"Oy, you there! Is this your toad?" said Hagrid, who was checking the boats as people climbed out of them.

"Trevor!" cried Neville blissfully, holding out his hands. Then they clambered up a passageway in the rock after Hagrid's lamp, coming out at last onto smooth, damp grass right in the shadow of the castle.

They walked up a flight of stone steps and crowded around the huge, Oak front door.

"Everyone here? You there, still got yer toad?"

Hagrid raised a gigantic fist and knocked three times on the castle door.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE SORTING HAT

The door swung open at once. A tall, black-haired witch in emerald-green robes stood there. She had a very stern face and Harry's first thought was that this was not someone to cross.

"The firs' years, Professor McGonagall," said Hagrid.

"Thank you, Hagrid. I will take them from here."

She pulled the door wide. The entrance hall was so big you could have fit the whole of the Dursleys' house in it. The stone walls were lit with flaming torches like the ones at Gringotts, the ceiling was too high to make out, and a magnificent marble staircase facing them led to the upper floors.

They followed Professor McGonagall across the flagged stone floor. Harry could hear the drone of hundreds of voices from a doorway to the right -the rest of the school must already be here -- but Professor McGonagall showed the first years into a small, empty chamber off the hall. They crowded in, standing rather closer together than they would usually have done, peering about nervously.

"Welcome to Hogwarts," said Professor McGonagall. "The start-of-term banquet will begin shortly, but before you take your seats in the Great Hall, you will be sorted into your houses. The Sorting is a very important ceremony because, while you are here, your house will be something like your family within Hogwarts. You will have classes with the rest of your house, sleep in your house dormitory, and spend free time in your house common room.

"The four houses are called Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin. Each house has its own noble history and each has produced outstanding witches and wizards. While you are at Hogwarts, your triumphs will earn your house points, while any rulebreaking will lose house points. At the end of the year, the house with the most points is awarded the house cup, a great honor. I hope each of you will be a credit to whichever house becomes yours.

"The Sorting Ceremony will take place in a few minutes in front of the rest of the school. I suggest you all smarten yourselves up as much as

you can while you are waiting."

Her eyes lingered for a moment on Neville's cloak, which was fastened under his left ear, and on Ron's smudged nose. Harry nervously tried to flatten his hair.

"I shall return when we are ready for you," said Professor McGonagall. "Please wait quietly."

She left the chamber. Harry swallowed.

"How exactly do they sort us into houses?" he asked Ron.

"Some sort of test, I think. Fred said it hurts a lot, but I think he was joking."

Harry's heart gave a horrible jolt. A test? In front of the whole school? But he didn't know any magic yet -- what on earth would he have to do? He hadn't expected something like this the moment they arrived. He looked around anxiously and saw that everyone else looked terrified, too. No one was talking much except Hermione Granger, who was whispering very fast about all the spells she'd learned and wondering which one she'd need. Harry tried hard not to listen to her. He'd never been more nervous, never, not even when he'd had to take a school report home to the Dursleys saying that he'd somehow turned his teacher's wig blue. He kept his eyes fixed on the door. Any second now, Professor McGonagall would come back and lead him to his doom.

Then something happened that made him jump about a foot in the air -- several people behind him screamed.

"What the --?"

He gasped. So did the people around him. About twenty ghosts had just streamed through the back wall. Pearly-white and slightly transparent, they glided across the room talking to one another and hardly glancing at the first years. They seemed to be arguing. What looked like a fat little monk was saying: "Forgive and forget, I say, we ought to give him a second chance --"

"My dear Friar, haven't we given Peeves all the chances he deserves? He gives us all a bad name and you know, he's not really even a ghost -- I say, what are you all doing here?"

A ghost wearing a ruff and tights had suddenly noticed the first years.

Nobody answered.

"New students!" said the Fat Friar, smiling around at them. "About to be Sorted, I suppose?"

A few people nodded mutely.

"Hope to see you in Hufflepuff!" said the Friar. "My old house, you know."

"Move along now," said a sharp voice. "The Sorting Ceremony's about to start."

Professor McGonagall had returned. One by one, the ghosts floated away through the opposite wall.

"Now, form a line," Professor McGonagall told the first years, "and follow me."

Feeling oddly as though his legs had turned to lead, Harry got into line behind a boy with sandy hair, with Ron behind him, and they walked out of the chamber, back across the hall, and through a pair of double doors into the Great Hall.

Harry had never even imagined such a strange and splendid place. It was lit by thousands and thousands of candles that were floating in midair over four long tables, where the rest of the students were sitting. These tables were laid with glittering golden plates and goblets. At the top of the hall was another long table where the teachers were sitting. Professor McGonagall led the first years up here, so that they came to a halt in a line facing the other students, with the teachers behind them. The hundreds of faces staring at them looked like pale lanterns in the flickering candlelight. Dotted here and there among the students, the ghosts shone misty silver. Mainly to avoid all the staring eyes, Harry looked upward and saw a velvety black ceiling dotted with stars. He heard

Hermione whisper, "Its bewitched to look like the sky outside. I read about it in Hogwarts, A History."

It was hard to believe there was a ceiling there at all, and that the Great Hall didn't simply open on to the heavens.

Harry quickly looked down again as Professor McGonagall silently placed a four-legged stool in front of the first years. On top of the stool she put a pointed wizard's hat. This hat was patched and frayed and extremely dirty. Aunt Petunia wouldn't have let it in the house.

Maybe they had to try and get a rabbit out of it, Harry thought wildly, that seemed the sort of thing -- noticing that everyone in the hall was now staring at the hat, he stared at it, too. For a few seconds, there was complete silence. Then the hat twitched. A rip near the brim opened wide like a mouth -- and the hat began to sing:

"Oh, you may not think I'm pretty,

But don't judge on what you see,

I'll eat myself if you can find

A smarter hat than me.

You can keep your bowlers black,

Your top hats sleek and tall,

For I'm the Hogwarts Sorting Hat

And I can cap them all.

There's nothing hidden in your head

The Sorting Hat can't see,

So try me on and I will tell you

Where you ought to be.

You might belong in Gryffindor,

Where dwell the brave at heart,

Their daring, nerve, and chivalry Set Gryffindors apart;

You might belong in Hufflepuff,

Where they are just and loyal,

Those patient Hufflepuffis are true And unafraid of toil;

Or yet in wise old Ravenclaw,

if you've a ready mind,

Where those of wit and learning,

Will always find their kind;

Or perhaps in Slytherin

You'll make your real friends,

Those cunning folk use any means

To achieve their ends.

So put me on! Don't be afraid!

And don't get in a flap!

You're in safe hands (though I have none)

For I'm a Thinking Cap!"

The whole hall burst into applause as the hat finished its song. It bowed to each of the four tables and then became quite still again.

"So we've just got to try on the hat!" Ron whispered to Harry. "I'll kill Fred, he was going on about wrestling a troll."

Harry. smiled weakly. Yes, trying on the hat was a lot better than having to do a spell, but he did wish they could have tried it on without everyone watching. The hat seemed to be asking rather alot; Harry didn't feel brave or quick-witted or any of it at the moment. If only the hat had mentioned a house for people who felt a bit queasy, that would have been the one for him.

Professor McGonagall now stepped forward holding a long roll of parchment.

"When I call your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool to be sorted," she said. "Abbott, Hannah!"

A pink-faced girl with blonde pigtails stumbled out of line, put on the hat, which fell right down over her eyes, and sat down. A moments pause --

"HUFFLEPUFF!" shouted the hat.

The table on the right cheered and clapped as Hannah went to sit down at the Hufflepuff table. Harry saw the ghost of the Fat Friar waving merrily at her.

"Bones, Susan!"

"HUFFLEPUFF!" shouted the hat again, and Susan scuttled off to sit next to Hannah.

"Boot, Terry!"

"RAVENCLAW!"

The table second from the left clapped this time; several Ravenclaws stood up to shake hands with Terry as he joined them.

" Brocklehurst, Mandy" went to Ravenclaw too, but "Brown, Lavender" became the first new Gryffindor, and the table on the far left exploded with cheers; Harry could see Ron's twin brothers catcalling.

"Bulstrode, Millicent" then became a Slytherin. Perhaps it was Harry's imagination, after all he'd heard about Slytherin, but he thought they looked like an unpleasant lot. He was starting to feel definitely sick now. He remembered being picked for teams during gym at his old school. He had always been last to be chosen, not because he was no good, but because no one wanted Dudley to think they liked him.

"Finch-Fletchley, Justin!"

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

Sometimes, Harry noticed, the hat shouted out the house at once, but at
others it took a little while to decide. "Finnigan, Seamus," the
sandy-haired boy next to Harry in the line, sat on the stool for almost
a whole minute before the hat declared him a Gryffindor.

"Granger, Hermione!"

Hermione almost ran to the stool and jammed the hat eagerly on her head.

"GRYFFINDOR!" shouted the hat. Ron groaned.

A horrible thought struck Harry, as horrible thoughts always do when
you're very nervous. What if he wasn't chosen at all? What if he just
sat there with the hat over his eyes for ages, until Professor
McGonagall jerked it off his head and said there had obviously been a
mistake and he'd better get back on the train?

When Neville Longbottom, the boy who kept losing his toad, was called,
he fell over on his way to the stool. The hat took a long time to decide
with Neville. When it finally shouted, "GRYFFINDOR," Neville ran off
still wearing it, and had to jog back amid gales of laughter to give it
to "MacDougal, Morag."

Malfoy swaggered forward when his name was called and got his wish at
once: the hat had barely touched his head when it screamed, "SLYTHERIN!"

Malfoy went to join his friends Crabbe and Goyle, looking pleased with
himself.

There weren't many people left now. "Moon" "Nott" "Parkinson" then a
pair of twin girls, "Patil" and "Patil" then "Perks, Sally-Anne" and
then, at last -- "Potter, Harry!"

As Harry stepped forward, whispers suddenly broke out like little
hissing fires all over the hall.

"Potter, did she say?"

The Harry Potter?"

The last thing Harry saw before the hat dropped over his eyes was the
hall full of people craning to get a good look at him. Next second he

was looking at the black inside of the hat. He waited.

Hmm," said a small voice in his ear. "Difficult. Very difficult. Plenty of courage, I see. Not a bad mind either. There's talent, A my goodness, yes -- and a nice thirst to prove yourself, now that's interesting.... So where shall I put you?"

Harry gripped the edges of the stool and thought, Not Slytherin, not Slytherin.

"Not Slytherin, eh?" said the small voice. "Are you sure? You could be great, you know, it's all here in your head, and Slytherin will help you on the way to greatness, no doubt about that -- no? Well, if you're sure -- better be GRYFFINDOR!"

Harry heard the hat shout the last word to the whole hall. He took off the hat and walked shakily toward the Gryffindor table. He was so relieved to have been chosen and not put in Slytherin, he hardly noticed that he was getting the loudest cheer yet. Percy the Prefect got up and shook his hand vigorously, while the Weasley twins yelled, "We got Potter! We got Potter!" Harry sat down opposite the ghost in the ruff he'd seen earlier. The ghost patted his arm, giving Harry the sudden, horrible feeling he'd just plunged it into a bucket of ice-cold water.

He could see the High Table properly now. At the end nearest him sat Hagrid, who caught his eye and gave him the thumbs up. Harry grinned back. And there, in the center of the High Table, in a large gold chair, sat Albus Dumbledore. Harry recognized him at once from the card he'd gotten out of the Chocolate Frog on the train. Dumbledore's silver hair was the only thing in the whole hall that shone as brightly as the ghosts. Harry spotted Professor Quirtell, too, the nervous young man from the Leaky Cauldron. He was looking very peculiar in a large purple turban.

And now there were only three people left to be sorted. "Thomas, Dean," a Black boy even taller than Ron, joined Harry at the Gryffindor table. "Turpin, Lisa," became a Ravenclaw and then it was Ron's turn. He was pale green by now. Harry crossed his fingers under the table and a second later the hat had shouted, "GRYFFINDOR!"

Harry clapped loudly with the rest as Ron collapsed into the chair next to him.

"Well done, Ron, excellent," said Percy Weasley Pompously across Harry as "Zabini, Blaise," was made a Slytherin. Professor McGonagall rolled up her scroll and took the Sorting Hat away.

Harry looked down at his empty gold plate. He had only just realized how hungry he was. The pumpkin pasties seemed ages ago.

Albus Dumbledore had gotten to his feet. He was beaming at the students, his arms opened wide, as if nothing could have pleased him more than to see them all there.

"Welcome," he said. "Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts! Before we begin our banquet, I would like to say a few words. And here they are: Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak!

"Thank you!"

He sat back down. Everybody clapped and cheered. Harry didn't know whether to laugh or not.

"Is he -- a bit mad?" he asked Percy uncertainly.

"Mad?" said Percy airily. "He's a genius! Best wizard in the world! But he is a bit mad, yes. Potatoes, Harry?"

Harry's mouth fell open. The dishes in front of him were now piled with food. He had never seen so many things he liked to eat on one table: roast beef, roast chicken, pork chops and lamb chops, sausages, bacon and steak, boiled potatoes, roast potatoes, fries, Yorkshire pudding, peas, carrots, gravy, ketchup, and, for some strange reason, peppermint humbugs.

The Dursleys had never exactly starved Harry, but he'd never been allowed to eat as much as he liked. Dudley had always taken anything that Harry really wanted, even if It made him sick. Harry piled his plate with a bit of everything except the peppermints and began to eat. It was all delicious.

"That does look good," said the ghost in the ruff sadly, watching Harry cut up his steak,

"Can't you --?"

I haven't eaten for nearly four hundred years," said the ghost. "I don't need to, of course, but one does miss it. I don't think I've in troduced myself? Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington at your service. Resident ghost of Gryffindor Tower."

"I know who you are!" said Ron suddenly. "My brothers told me about you -- you're Nearly Headless Nick!"

"I would prefer you to call me Sir Nicholas de Mimsy --" the ghost began stiffly, but sandy-haired Seamus Finnigan interrupted.

"Nearly Headless? How can you be nearly headless?"

Sir Nicholas looked extremely miffed, as if their little chat wasn't going at all the way he wanted.

"Like this," he said irritably. He seized his left ear and pulled. His whole head swung off his neck and fell onto his shoulder as if it was on a hinge. Someone had obviously tried to behead him, but not done it properly. Looking pleased at the stunned looks on their faces, Nearly Headless Nick flipped his head back onto his neck, coughed, and said, "So -- new Gryffindors! I hope you're going to help us win the house championship this year? Gryffindors have never gone so long without winning. Slytherins have got the cup six years in a row! The Bloody Baron's becoming almost unbearable -- he's the Slytherin ghost."

Harry looked over at the Slytherin table and saw a horrible ghost sitting there, with blank staring eyes, a gaunt face, and robes stained with silver blood. He was right next to Malfoy who, Harry was pleased to see, didn't look too pleased with the seating arrangements.

"How did he get covered in blood?" asked Seamus with great interest.

"I've never asked," said Nearly Headless Nick delicately.

When everyone had eaten as much as they could, the remains of the food faded from the plates, leaving them sparkling clean as before. A moment later the desserts appeared. Blocks of ice cream in every flavor you could think of, apple pies, treacle tarts, chocolate eclairs and jam doughnuts, trifle, strawberries, Jell-O, rice pudding -- "

As Harry helped himself to a treacle tart, the talk turned to their families.

"I'm half-and-half," said Seamus. "Me dad's a Muggle. Mom didn't tell him she was a witch 'til after they were married. Bit of a nasty shock for him."

The others laughed.

"What about you, Neville?" said Ron.

"Well, my gran brought me up and she's a witch," said Neville, "but the family thought I was all- Muggle for ages. My Great Uncle Algie kept trying to catch me off my guard and force some magic out of me -- he pushed me off the end of Blackpool pier once, I nearly drowned -- but nothing happened until I was eight. Great Uncle Algie came round for dinner, and he was hanging me out of an upstairs window by the ankles when my Great Auntie Enid offered him a meringue and he accidentally let go. But I bounced -- all the way down the garden and into the road. They were all really pleased, Gran was crying, she was so happy. And you should have seen their faces when I got in here -- they thought I might not be magic enough to come, you see. Great Uncle Algie was so pleased he bought me my toad."

On Harry's other side, Percy Weasley and Hermione were talking about lessons ("I do hope they start right away, there's so much to learn, I'm particularly interested in Transfiguration, you know, turning something into something else, of course, it's supposed to be very difficult-"; "You'll be starting small, just matches into needles and that sort of thing -- ").

Harry, who was starting to feel warm and sleepy, looked up at

the High Table again. Hagrid was drinking deeply from his goblet. Professor McGonagall was talking to Professor Dumbledore. Professor Quirrell, in his absurd turban, was talking to a teacher with greasy black hair, a hooked nose, and sallow skin.

It happened very suddenly. The hook-nosed teacher looked past Quirrell's turban straight into Harry's eyes -- and a sharp, hot pain shot across the scar on Harry's forehead.

"Ouch!" Harry clapped a hand to his head.

"What is it?" asked Percy.

"N-nothing."

The pain had gone as quickly as it had come. Harder to shake off was the feeling Harry had gotten from the teacher's look -- a feeling that he didn't like Harry at all.

"Who's that teacher talking to Professor Quirrell?" he asked Percy.

"Oh, you know Quirrell already, do you? No wonder he's looking so nervous, that's Professor Snape. He teaches Potions, but he doesn't want to -- everyone knows he's after Quirrell's job. Knows an awful lot about the Dark Arts, Snape."

Harry watched Snape for a while, but Snape didn't look at him again.

At last, the desserts too disappeared, and Professor Dumbledore got to his feet again. The hall fell silent.

"Ahern -- just a few more words now that we are all fed and watered. I have a few start-of-term notices to give you.

"First years should note that the forest on the grounds is forbidden to all pupils. And a few of our older students would do well to remember that as well."

Dumbledore's twinkling eyes flashed in the direction of the Weasley twins.

"I have also been asked by Mr. Filch, the caretaker, to remind you all that no magic should be used between classes in the corridors.

"Quidditch trials will be held in the second week of the term. Anyone interested in playing for their house teams should contact Madam Hooch.

"And finally, I must tell you that this year, the third-floor corridor on the right-hand side is out of bounds to everyone who does not wish to die a very painful death."

Harry laughed, but he was one of the few who did.

"He's not serious?" he muttered to Percy.

"Must be," said Percy, frowning at Dumbledore. "It's odd, because he usually gives us a reason why we're not allowed to go somewhere -- the forest's full of dangerous beasts, everyone knows that. I do think he might have told us prefects, at least."

"And now, before we go to bed, let us sing the school song!" cried Dumbledore. Harry noticed that the other teachers' smiles had become rather fixed.

Dumbledore gave his wand a little flick, as if he was trying to get a fly off the end, and a long golden ribbon flew out of it, which rose high above the tables and twisted itself, snakelike, into words.

"Everyone pick their favorite tune," said Dumbledore, "and off we go!" And the school bellowed:

"Hogwarts, Hogwarts, Hoggy Warty Hogwarts,

Teach us something please,

Whether we be old and bald

Or young with scabby knees,

Our heads could do with filling

With some interesting stuff,

For now they're bare and full of air,

Dead flies and bits of fluff,

So teach us things worth knowing,

Bring back what we've forgot,

just do your best, we'll do the rest,

And learn until our brains all rot.

Everybody finished the song at different times. At last, only the Weasley twins were left singing along to a very slow funeral march. Dumbledore conducted their last few lines with his wand and when they

had finished, he was one of those who clapped loudest.

"Ah, music," he said, wiping his eyes. "A magic beyond all we do here! And now, bedtime. Off you trot!"

The Gryffindor first years followed Percy through the chattering crowds, out of the Great Hall, and up the marble staircase. Harry's legs were like lead again, but only because he was so tired and full of food. He was too sleepy even to be surprised that the people in the portraits along the corridors whispered and pointed as they passed, or that twice Percy led them through doorways hidden behind sliding panels and hanging tapestries. They climbed more staircases, yawning and dragging their feet, and Harry was just wondering how much farther they had to go when they came to a sudden halt.

A bundle of walking sticks was floating in midair ahead of them, and as Percy took a step toward them they started throwing themselves at him.

"Peeves," Percy whispered to the first years. "A poltergeist." He raised his voice, "Peeves -- show yourself"

A loud, rude sound, like the air being let out of a balloon, answered.

"Do you want me to go to the Bloody Baron?"

There was a pop, and a little man with wicked, dark eyes and a wide mouth appeared, floating cross- legged in the air, clutching the walking sticks.

"Oooooooh!" he said, with an evil cackle. "Ickle Firsties! What fun!"

He swooped suddenly at them. They all ducked.

"Go away, Peeves, or the Baron'll hear about this, I mean it!" barked Percy.

Peeves stuck out his tongue and vanished, dropping the walking sticks on Neville's head. They heard him zooming away, rattling coats of armor as he passed.

"You want to watch out for Peeves," said Percy, as they set off again. "The Bloody Baron's the only one who can control him, he won't even listen to us prefects. Here we are."

At the very end of the corridor hung a portrait of a very fat woman in a pink silk dress.

"Password?" she said. "Caput Draconis," said Percy, and the portrait swung forward to reveal a round hole in the wall. They all scrambled through it -- Neville needed a leg up -- and found themselves in the Gryffindor common room, a cozy, round room full of squashy armchairs.

Percy directed the girls through one door to their dormitory and the boys through another. At the top of a spiral staircase -- they were obviously in one of the towers -- they found their beds at last: five four-posters hung with deep red, velvet curtains. Their trunks had already been brought up. Too tired to talk much, they pulled on their pajamas and fell into bed.

" Great food, isn't it?" Ron muttered to Harry through the hangings. "Get off, Scabbers! He's chewing my sheets."

Harry was going to ask Ron if he'd had any of the treacle tart, but he fell asleep almost at once.

Perhaps Harry had eaten a bit too much, because he had a very strange dream. He was wearing Professor Quirrell's turban, which kept talking to him, telling him he must transfer to Slytherin at once, because it was his destiny. Harry told the turban he didn't want to be in Slytherin; it got heavier and heavier; he tried to pull it off but it tightened painfully -- and there was Malfoy, laughing at him as he struggled with it -then Malfoy turned into the hook-nosed teacher, Snape, whose laugh became high and cold -- there was a burst of green light and Harry woke, sweating and shaking.

He rolled over and fell asleep again, and when he woke next day, he didn't remember the dream at all.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE POTIONS MASTER

There, look."

"Where?"

"Next to the tall kid with the red hair."

"Wearing the glasses?"

"Did you see his face?"

"Did you see his scar?"

Whispers followed Harry from the moment he left his dormitory the next day. People lining up outside classrooms stood on tiptoe to get a look at him, or doubled back to pass him in the corridors again, staring. Harry wished they wouldn't, because he was trying to concentrate on finding his way to classes.

There were a hundred and forty-two staircases at Hogwarts: wide, sweeping ones; narrow, rickety ones; some that led somewhere different on a Friday; some with a vanishing step halfway up that you had to remember to jump. Then there were doors that wouldn't open unless you asked politely, or tickled them in exactly the right place, and doors that weren't really doors at all, but solid walls just pretending. It was also very hard to remember where anything was, because it all seemed to move around a lot. The people in the portraits kept going to visit each other, and Harry was sure the coats of armor could walk.

The ghosts didn't help, either. It was always a nasty shock when one of them glided suddenly through a door you were trying to open. Nearly Headless Nick was always happy to point new Gryffindors in the right direction, but Peeves the Poltergeist was worth two locked doors and a trick staircase if you met him when you were late for class. He would drop wastepaper baskets on your head, pull rugs from under your feet, pelt you with bits of chalk, or sneak up behind you, invisible, grab your nose, and screech, "GOT YOUR CONK!"

Even worse than Peeves, if that was possible, was the caretaker, Argus Filch. Harry and Ron managed to get on the wrong side of him on their very first morning. Filch found them trying to force their way through a door that unluckily turned out to be the entrance to the out-of-bounds corridor on the third floor. He wouldn't believe they were lost, was sure they were trying to break into it on purpose, and was threatening to lock them in the dungeons when they were rescued by Professor Quirrell, who was passing.

Filch owned a cat called Mrs. Norris, a scrawny, dust-colored creature with bulging, lamp like eyes just like Filch's. She patrolled the corridors alone. Break a rule in front of her, put just one toe out of line, and she'd whisk off for Filch, who'd appear, wheezing, two seconds later. Filch knew the secret passageways of the school better than anyone (except perhaps the Weasley twins) and could pop up as suddenly as any of the ghosts. The students all hated him, and it was the dearest ambition of many to give Mrs. Norris a good kick.

And then, once you had managed to find them, there were the classes themselves. There was a lot more to magic, as Harry quickly found out, than waving your wand and saying a few funny words.

They had to study the night skies through their telescopes every Wednesday at midnight and learn the names of different stars and the movements of the planets. Three times a week they went out to the greenhouses behind the castle to study Herbology, with a dumpy little witch called Professor Sprout, where they learned how to take care of all the strange plants and fungi, and found out what they were used for.

Easily the most boring class was History of Magic, which was the only one taught by a ghost. Professor Binns had been very old

indeed when he had fallen asleep in front of the staff room fire and got up next morning to teach, leaving his body behind him. Binns droned on and on while they scribbled down names and dates, and got Emetic the Evil and Uric the Oddball mixed up.

Professor Flitwick, the Charms teacher, was a tiny little wizard who had to stand on a pile of books to see over his desk. At the start of their first class he took the roll call, and when he reached Harry's name he gave an excited squeak and toppled out of sight.

Professor McGonagall was again different. Harry had been quite right to think she wasn't a teacher to cross. Strict and clever, she gave them a talking-to the moment they sat down in her first class.

"Transfiguration is some of the most complex and dangerous magic you will learn at Hogwarts," she said. "Anyone messing around in my class will leave and not come back. You have been warned."

Then she changed her desk into a pig and back again. They were all very impressed and couldn't wait to get started, but soon realized they

weren't going to be changing the furniture into animals for a long time. After taking a lot of complicated notes, they were each given a match and started trying to turn it into a needle. By the end of the lesson, only Hermione Granger had made any difference to her match; Professor McGonagall showed the class how it had gone all silver and pointy and gave Hermione a rare smile.

The class everyone had really been looking forward to was Defense Against the Dark Arts, but Quirrell's lessons turned out to be a bit of a joke. His classroom smelled strongly of garlic, which everyone said was to ward off a vampire he'd met in Romania and was afraid would be coming back to get him one of these days. His turban, he told them, had been given to him by an African prince as a thank-you for getting rid of a troublesome zombie, but they weren't sure they believed this story. For one thing, when Seamus Finnigan asked eagerly to hear how Quirrell had fought off the zombie, Quirrell went pink and started talking about the weather; for another, they had noticed that a funny smell hung around the turban, and the Weasley twins insisted that it was stuffed full of garlic as well, so that Quirrell was protected wherever he went.

Harry was very relieved to find out that he wasn't miles behind everyone else. Lots of people had come from Muggle families and, like him, hadn't had any idea that they were witches and wizards. There was so much to learn that even people like Ron didn't have much of a head start.

Friday was an important day for Harry and Ron. They finally managed to find their way down to the Great Hall for breakfast without getting lost once.

"What have we got today?" Harry asked Ron as he poured sugar on his porridge.

"Double Potions with the Slytherins," said Ron. "Snape's Head of Slytherin House. They say he always favors them -- we'll be able to see if it's true."

"Wish McGonagall favored us, " said Harry. Professor McGonagall was head of Gryffindor House, but it hadn't stopped her from giving them a huge pile of homework the day before.

Just then, the mail arrived. Harry had gotten used to this by now, but it had given him a bit of a shock on the first morning, when about a hundred owls had suddenly streamed into the Great Hall during breakfast,

circling the tables until they saw their owners, and dropping letters and packages onto their laps.

Hedwig hadn't brought Harry anything so far. She sometimes flew in to nibble his ear and have a bit of toast before going off to sleep in the owlery with the other school owls. This morning, however, she fluttered down between the marmalade and the sugar bowl and dropped a note onto Harry's plate. Harry tore it open at once. It said, in a very untidy scrawl:

Dear Harry,

I know you get Friday afternoons off, so would you like to come and have a cup of tea with me around three?

I want to hear all about your first week. Send us an answer back with Hedwig.

Hagrid

Harry borrowed Ron's quill, scribbled Yes, please, see you later on the back of the note, and sent Hedwig off again.

It was lucky that Harry had tea with Hagrid to look forward to, because the Potions lesson turned out to be the worst thing that had happened to him so far.

At the start-of-term banquet, Harry had gotten the idea that Professor Snape disliked him. By the end of the first Potions lesson, he knew he'd been wrong. Snape didn't dislike Harry -- he hated him.

Potions lessons took place down in one of the dungeons. It was colder here than up in the main castle, and would have been quite creepy enough without the pickled animals floating in glass jars all around the walls.

Snape, like Flitwick, started the class by taking the roll call, and like Flitwick, he paused at Harry's name.

"Ah, Yes," he said softly, "Harry Potter. Our new -- celebrity."

Draco Malfoy and his friends Crabbe and Goyle sniggered behind their

hands. Snape finished calling the names and looked up at the class. His eyes were black like Hagrid's, but they had none of Hagrid's warmth. They were cold and empty and made you think of dark tunnels.

"You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potionmaking," he began. He spoke in barely more than a whisper, but they caught every word -- like Professor McGonagall, Snape had y caught every word -- like Professor McGonagall, Snape had the gift of keeping a class silent without effort. "As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don't expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses.... I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death -- if you aren't as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach."

More silence followed this little speech. Harry and Ron exchanged looks with raised eyebrows. Hermione Granger was on the edge of her seat and looked desperate to start proving that she wasn't a dunderhead.

"Potter!" said Snape suddenly. "What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

Powdered root of what to an infusion of what? Harry glanced at Ron, who looked as stumped as he was; Hermione's hand had shot into the air.

"I don't know, sit," said Harry.

Snape's lips curled into a sneer.

"Tut, tut -- fame clearly isn't everything."

He ignored Hermione's hand.

"Let's try again. Potter, where would you look if I told you to find me a bezoar?"

Hermione stretched her hand as high into the air as it would go without her leaving her seat, but Harry didn't have the faintest idea what a bezoar was. He tried not to look at Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, who were shaking with laughter.

"I don't know, sit." "Thought you wouldn't open a book before coming,

eh, Potter?" Harry forced himself to keep looking straight into those cold eyes. He had looked through his books at the Dursleys', but did Snape expect him to remember everything in One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi?

Snape was still ignoring Hermione's quivering hand.

"What is the difference, Potter, between monkshood and wolfsbane?"

At this, Hermione stood up, her hand stretching toward the dungeon ceiling.

"I don't know," said Harry quietly. "I think Hermione does, though, why don't you try her?"

A few people laughed; Harry caught Seamus's eye, and Seamus winked. Snape, however, was not pleased.

"Sit down," he snapped at Hermione. "For your information, Potter, asphodel and wormwood make a sleeping potion so powerful it is known as the Draught of Living Death. A bezoar is a stone taken from the stomach of a goat and it will save you from most poisons. As for monkshood and wolfsbane, they are the same plant, which also goes by the name of aconite. Well? Why aren't you all copying that down?"

There was a sudden rummaging for quills and parchment. Over the noise, Snape said, "And a point will be taken from Gryffindor House for your cheek, Potter."

Things didn't improve for the Gryffindors as the Potions lesson continued. Snape put them all into pairs and set them to mixing up a simple potion to cure boils. He swept around in his long black cloak, watching them weigh dried nettles and crush snake fangs, criticizing almost everyone except Malfoy, whom he seemed to like. He was just telling everyone to look at the perfect way Malfoy had stewed his horned slugs when clouds of acid green smoke and a loud hissing filled the dungeon. Neville had somehow managed to melt Seamus's cauldron into a twisted blob, and their potion was seeping across the stone floor, burning holes in people's shoes. Within seconds, the whole class was standing on their stools while Neville, who had been drenched in the potion when the cauldron collapsed, moaned in pain as angry red boils sprang up all over his arms and legs.

"Idiot boy!" snarled Snape, clearing the spilled potion away with one wave of his wand. "I suppose you added the porcupine quills before taking the cauldron off the fire?"

Neville whimpered as boils started to pop up all over his nose.

"Take him up to the hospital wing," Snape spat at Seamus. Then he rounded on Harry and Ron, who had been working next to Neville.

"You -- Potter -- why didn't you tell him not to add the quills? Thought he'd make you look good if he got it wrong, did you? That's another point you've lost for Gryffindor."

This was so unfair that Harry opened his mouth to argue, but Ron kicked him behind their cauldron.

"Doi* push it," he muttered, "I've heard Snape can turn very nasty."

As they climbed the steps out of the dungeon an hour later, Harry's mind was racing and his spirits were low. He'd lost two points for Gryffindor in his very first week -- why did Snape hate him so much? "Cheer up," said Ron, "Snape's always taking points off Fred and George. Can I come and meet Hagrid with you?"

At five to three they left the castle and made their way across the grounds. Hagrid lived in a small wooden house on the edge of the forbidden forest. A crossbow and a pair of galoshes were outside the front door.

When Harry knocked they heard a frantic scrabbling from inside and several booming barks. Then Hagrid's voice rang out, saying, "Back, Fang -- back."

Hagrid's big, hairy face appeared in the crack as he pulled the door open.

"Hang on," he said. "Back, Fang."

He let them in, struggling to keep a hold on the collar of an enormous black boarhound.

There was only one room inside. Hams and pheasants were hanging from the ceiling, a copper kettle was boiling on the open fire, and in the corner

stood a massive bed with a patchwork quilt over it.

"Make yerselves at home," said Hagrid, letting go of Fang, who bounded straight at Ron and started licking his ears. Like Hagrid, Fang was clearly not as fierce as he looked.

"This is Ron," Harry told Hagrid, who was pouring boiling water into a large teapot and putting rock cakes onto a plate.

"Another Weasley, eh?" said Hagrid, glancing at Ron's freckles. I spent half me life chasin' yer twin brothers away from the forest."

The rock cakes were shapeless lumps with raisins that almost broke their teeth, but Harry and Ron pretended to be enjoying them as they told Hagrid all about their first -lessons. Fang rested his head on Harry's knee and drooled all over his robes.

Harry and Ron were delighted to hear Hagrid call Fitch "that old git."

"An' as fer that cat, Mrs. Norris, I'd like ter introduce her to Fang sometime. D'yeh know, every time I go up ter the school, she follows me everywhere? Can't get rid of her -- Fitch puts her up to it."

Harry told Hagrid about Snape's lesson. Hagrid, like Ron, told Harry not to worry about it, that Snape liked hardly any of the students.

"But he seemed to really hate me."

"Rubbish!" said Hagrid. "Why should he?"

Yet Harry couldn't help thinking that Hagrid didn't quite meet his eyes when he said that.

"How's yer brother Charlie?" Hagrid asked Ron. "I liked him a lot -- great with animals."

Harry wondered if Hagrid had changed the subject on purpose. While Ron told Hagrid all about Charlie's work with dragons, Harry picked up a piece of paper that was lying on the table under the tea cozy. It was a cutting from the Daily Prophet:

GRINGOTTS BREAK-IN LATEST

Investigations continue into the break-in at Gringotts on 31 July, widely believed to be the work of Dark wizards or witches unknown.

Gringotts goblins today insisted that nothing had been taken. The vault that was searched had in fact been emptied the same day.

"But we're not telling you what was in there, so keep your noses out if you know what's good for you," said a Gringotts spokesgoblin this afternoon.

Harry remembered Ron telling him on the train that someone had tried to rob Gringotts, but Ron hadn't mentioned the date.

"Hagrid!" said Harry, "that Gringotts break-in happened on my birthday! It might've been happening while we were there!"

There was no doubt about it, Hagrid definitely didn't meet Harry's eyes this time. He grunted and offered him another rock cake. Harry read the story again. The vault that was searched had in fact been emptied earlier that same day. Hagrid had emptied vault seven hundred and thirteen, if you could call it emptying, taking out that grubby little package. Had that been what the thieves were looking for?

As Harry and Ron walked back to the castle for dinner, their pockets weighed down with rock cakes they'd been too polite to refuse, Harry thought that none of the lessons he'd had so far had given him as much to think about as tea with Hagrid. Had Hagrid collected that package just in time? Where was it now? And did Hagrid know something about Snape that he didn't want to tell Harry?

CHAPTER NINE

THE MIDNIGHT DUEL

Harry had never believed he would meet a boy he hated more than Dudley, but that was before he met Draco Malfoy. Still, first-year Gryffindors only had Potions with the Slytherins, so they didn't have to put up with Malfoy much. Or at least, they didn't until they spotted a notice pinned up in the Gryffindor common room that made them all groan. Flying lessons would be starting on Thursday -- and Gryffindor and Slytherin would be learning together.

"Typical," said Harry darkly. "Just what I always wanted. To make a fool of myself on a broomstick in front of Malfoy."

He had been looking forward to learning to fly more than anything else.

"You don't know that you'll make a fool of yourself," said Ron reasonably. "Anyway, I know Malfoy's always going on about how good he is at Quidditch, but I bet that's all talk."

Malfay certainly did talk about flying a lot. He complained loudly about first years never getting on the house Quidditch teams and told long, boastful stories that always seemed to end with him narrowly escaping Muggles in helicopters. He wasn't the only one, though: the way Seamus Finnigan told it, he'd spent most of his childhood zooming around the countryside on his broomstick. Even Ron would tell anyone who'd listen about the time he'd almost hit a hang glider on Charlie's old broom. Everyone from wizarding families talked about Quidditch constantly. Ron had already had a big argument with Dean Thomas, who shared their dormitory, about soccer. Ron couldn't see what was exciting about a game with only one ball where no one was allowed to fly. Harry had caught Ron prodding Dean's poster of West Ham soccer team, trying to make the players move.

Neville had never been on a broomstick in his life, because his grandmother had never let him near one. Privately, Harry felt she'd had good reason, because Neville managed to have an extraordinary number of accidents even with both feet on the ground.

Hermione Granger was almost as nervous about flying as Neville was. This was something you couldn't learn by heart out of a book -- not that she hadn't tried. At breakfast on Thursday she bored them all stupid with flying tips she'd gotten out of a library book called Quidditch Through the Ages. Neville was hanging on to her every word, desperate for anything that might help him hang on to his broomstick later, but everybody else was very pleased when Hermione's lecture was interrupted by the arrival of the mail.

Harry hadn't had a single letter since Hagrid's note, something that Malfoy had been quick to notice, of course. Malfoy's eagle owl was always bringing him packages of sweets from home, which he opened gloatingly at the Slytherin table.

A barn owl brought Neville a small package from his grandmother. He

opened it excitedly and showed them a glass ball the size of a large marble, which seemed to be full of white smoke.

"It's a Remembrall!" he explained. "Gran knows I forget things -- this tells you if there's something you've forgotten to do. Look, you hold it tight like this and if it turns red -- oh..." His face fell, because the Remembrall had suddenly glowed scarlet,

"You've forgotten something..."

Neville was trying to remember what he'd forgotten when Draco Malfoy, who was passing the Gryffindor table, snatched the Remembrall out of his hand.

Harry and Ron jumped to their feet. They were half hoping for a reason to fight Malfay, but Professor McGonagall, who could spot trouble quicker than any teacher in the school, was there in a flash.

"What's going on?"

"Malfoy's got my Remembrall, Professor."

Scowling, Malfoy quickly dropped the Remembrall back on the table.

"Just looking," he said, and he sloped away with Crabbe and Goyle behind him.

At three-thirty that afternoon, Harry, Ron, and the other Gryffindors hurried down the front steps onto the grounds for their first flying lesson. It was a clear, breezy day, and the grass rippled under their feet as they marched down the sloping lawns toward a smooth, flat lawn on the opposite side of the grounds to the forbidden forest, whose trees were swaying darkly in the distance.

The Slytherins were already there, and so were twenty broomsticks lying in neat lines on the ground. Harry had heard Fred and George Weasley complain about the school brooms, saying that some of them started to vibrate if you flew too high, or always flew slightly to the left.

Their teacher, Madam Hooch, arrived. She had short, gray hair, and yellow eyes like a hawk.

"Well, what are you all waiting for?" she barked. "Everyone stand by a

broomstick. Come on, hurry up."

Harry glanced down at his broom. It was old and some of the twigs stuck out at odd angles.

"Stick out your right hand over your broom," called Madam Hooch at the front, "and say 'Up!'"

"UPF everyone shouted.

Harry's broom jumped into his hand at once, but it was one of the few that did. Hermione Granger's had simply rolled over on the ground, and Neville's hadn't moved at all. Perhaps brooms, like horses, could tell when you were afraid, thought Harry; there was a quaver in Neville's voice that said only too clearly that he wanted to keep his feet on the ground.

Madam Hooch then showed them how to mount their brooms without sliding off the end, and walked up and down the rows correcting their grips. Harry and Ron were delighted when she told Malfoy he'd been doing it wrong for years.

"Now, when I blow my whistle, you kick off from the ground, hard," said Madam Hooch. "Keep your brooms steady, rise a few feet, and then come straight back down by leaning forward slightly. On my whistle -- three -- two --"

But Neville, nervous and jumpy and frightened of being left on the ground, pushed off hard before the whistle had touched Madam Hooch's lips.

"Come back, boy!" she shouted, but Neville was rising straight up like a cork shot out of a bottle -- twelve feet -- twenty feet. Harry saw his scared white face look down at the ground falling away, saw him gasp, slip sideways off the broom and --

WHAM -- a thud and a nasty crack and Neville lay facedown on the grass in a heap. His broomstick was still rising higher and higher, and started to drift lazily toward the forbidden forest and out of sight.

Madam Hooch was bending over Neville, her face as white as his.

"Broken wrist," Harry heard her mutter. "Come on, boy -- it's all right,

up you get.".

She turned to the rest of the class.

"None of you is to move while I take this boy to the hospital wing! You leave those brooms where they are or you'll be out of Hogwarts before you can say 'Quidditch.' Come on, dear."

Neville, his face tear-streaked, clutching his wrist, hobbled off with Madam Hooch, who had her arm around him.

No sooner were they out of earshot than Malfoy burst into laughter.

"Did you see his face, the great lump?"

The other Slytherins joined in.

"Shut up, Malfoy," snapped Parvati Patil.

"Ooh, sticking up for Longbottom?" said Pansy Parkinson, a hard-faced Slytherin girl. "Never thought you'd like fat little crybabies, Parvati."

"Look!" said Malfoy, darting forward and snatching something out of the grass. "It's that stupid thing Longbottom's gran sent him."

The Remembrall glittered in the sun as he held it up.

"Give that here, Malfoy," said Harry quietly. Everyone stopped talking to watch.

Malfoy smiled nastily.

"I think I'll leave it somewhere for Longbottom to find -- how about -- up a tree?"

"Give it here!" Harry yelled, but Malfoy had leapt onto his broomstick and taken off. He hadn't been lying, he could fly well. Hovering level with the topmost branches of an oak he called, "Come and get it, Potter!"

Harry grabbed his broom.

"No!" shouted Hermione Granger. "Madam Hooch told us not to move -- you'll get us all into trouble."

Harry ignored her. Blood was pounding in his ears. He mounted the broom and kicked hard against the ground and up, up he soared; air rushed through his hair, and his robes whipped out behind him -and in a rush of fierce joy he realized he'd found something he could do without being taught -- this was easy, this was wonderful. He pulled his broomstick up a little to take it even higher, and heard screams and gasps of girls back on the ground and an admiring whoop from Ron.

He turned his broomstick sharply to face Malfoy in midair. Malfoy looked stunned.

"Give it here," Harry called, "or I'll knock you off that broom!" "Oh, yeah?" said Malfoy, trying to sneer, but looking worried.

Harry knew, somehow, what to do. He leaned forward and grasped the broom tightly in both hands, and it shot toward Malfay like a javelin. Malfoy only just got out of the way in time; Harry made a sharp about-face and held the broom steady. A few people below were clapping.

"No Crabbe and Goyle up here to save your neck, Malfoy," Harry called.

The same thought seemed to have struck Malfoy.

"Catch it if you can, then!" he shouted, and he threw the glass ball high into the air and streaked back toward the ground.

Harry saw, as though in slow motion, the ball rise up in the air and then start to fall. He leaned forward and pointed his broom handle down -- next second he was gathering speed in a steep dive, racing the ball -- wind whistled in his ears, mingled with the screams of people watching -- he stretched out his hand -- a foot from the ground he caught it, just in time to pull his broom straight, and he toppled gently onto the grass with the Remembrall clutched safely in his fist.

"HARRY POTTER!"

His heart sank faster than he'd just dived. Professor McGonagall was running toward them. He got to his feet, trembling.

"Never -- in all my time at Hogwarts --"

Professor McGonagall was almost speechless with shock, and her glasses flashed furiously, "-- how dare you -- might have broken your neck --"

"It wasn't his fault, Professor --"

"Be quiet, Miss Patil

"But Malfoy --"

"That's enough, Mr. Weasley. Potter, follow me, now."

Harry caught sight of Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle's triumphant faces as he left, walking numbly in Professor McGonagall's wake as she strode toward the castle. He was going to be expelled, he just knew it. He wanted to say something to defend himself, but there seemed to be something wrong with his voice. Professor McGonagall was sweeping along without even looking at him; he had to jog to keep up. Now he'd done it. He hadn't even lasted two weeks. He'd be packing his bags in ten minutes. What would the Dursleys say when he turned up on the doorstep?

Up the front steps, up the marble staircase inside, and still Professor McGonagall didn't say a word to him. She wrenched open doors and marched along corridors with Harry trotting miserably behind her. Maybe she was taking him to Dumbledore. He thought of Hagrid, expelled but allowed to stay on as gamekeeper. Perhaps he could be Hagrid's assistant. His stomach twisted as he imagined it, watching Ron and the others becoming wizards, while he stumped around the grounds carrying Hagrid's bag.

Professor McGonagall stopped outside a classroom. She opened the door and poked her head inside.

"Excuse me, Professor Flitwick, could I borrow Wood for a moment?"

Wood? thought Harry, bewildered; was Wood a cane she was going to use on him?

But Wood turned out to be a person, a burly fifth-year boy who came out of Flitwicles class looking confused.

"Follow me, you two," said Professor McGonagall, and they marched on up the corridor, Wood looking curiously at Harry.

"In here."

Professor McGonagall pointed them into a classroom that was empty except for Peeves, who was busy writing rude words on the blackboard.

"Out, Peeves!" she barked. Peeves threw the chalk into a bin, which clanged loudly, and he swooped out cursing. Professor McGonagall slammed the door behind him and turned to face the two boys.

"Potter, this is Oliver Wood. Wood -- I've found you a Seeker."

Wood's expression changed from puzzlement to delight.

"Are you serious, Professor?"

"Absolutely," said Professor McGonagall crisply. "The boy's a natural. I've never seen anything like it. Was that your first time on a broomstick, Potter?"

Harry nodded silently. He didn't have a clue what was going on, but he didn't seem to be being expelled, and some of the feeling started coming back to his legs.

"He caught that thing in his hand after a fifty-foot dive," Professor McGonagall told Wood. "Didn't even scratch himself. Charlie Weasley couldn't have done it."

Wood was now looking as though all his dreams had come true at once.

"Ever seen a game of Quidditch, Potter?" he asked excitedly.

"Wood's captain of the Gryffindor team," Professor McGonagall explained.

"He's just the build for a Seeker, too," said Wood, now walking around Harry and staring at him. "Light -- speedy -- we'll have to get him a decent broom, Professor -- a Nimbus Two Thousand or a Cleansweep Seven, I'd say."

I shall speak to Professor Dumbledore and see if we can't bend the first-year rule. Heaven knows, we need a better team than last year. Flattened in that last match by Slytherin, I couldn't look Severus Snape in the face for weeks...."

Professor McGonagall peered sternly over her glasses at Harry.

"I want to hear you're training hard, Potter, or I may change my mind about punishing you."

Then she suddenly smiled.

"Your father would have been proud," she said. "He was an excellent Quidditch player himself."

"You're joking."

It was dinnertime. Harry had just finished telling Ron what had happened when he'd left the grounds with Professor McGonagall. Ron had a piece of steak and kidney pie halfway to his mouth, but he'd forgotten all about it.

"Seeker?" he said. "But first years never -- you must be the youngest house player in about a century, said Harry, shoveling pie into his mouth. He felt particularly hungry after the excitement of the afternoon. "Wood told me."

Ron was so amazed, so impressed, he just sat and gaped at Harry.

"I start training next week," said Harry. "Only don't tell anyone, Wood wants to keep it a secret."

Fred and George Weasley now came into the hall, spotted Harry, and hurried over.

"Well done," said George in a low voice. "Wood told us. We're on the team too -- Beaters."

"I tell you, we're going to win that Quidditch cup for sure this year," said Fred. "We haven't won since Charlie left, but this year's team is going to be brilliant. You must be good, Harry, Wood was almost skipping when he told us."

"Anyway, we've got to go, Lee Jordan reckons he's found a new secret passageway out of the school."

"Bet it's that one behind the statue of Gregory the Smarmy that we found in our first week. See you."

Fred and George had hardly disappeared when someone far less welcome turned up: Malfoy, flanked by Crabbe and Goyle.

"Having a last meal, Potter? When are you getting the train back to the Muggles?"

"You're a lot braver now that you're back on the ground and you've got your little friends with you," said Harry coolly. There was of course nothing at all little about Crabbe and Goyle, but as the High Table was full of teachers, neither of them could do more than crack their knuckles and scowl.

"I'd take you on anytime on my own," said Malfoy. "Tonight, if you want. Wizard's duel. Wands only -- no contact. What's the matter? Never heard of a wizard's duel before, I suppose?"

"Of course he has," said Ron, wheeling around. "I'm his second, who's yours?"

Malfoy looked at Crabbe and Goyle, sizing them up.

"Crabbe," he said. "Midnight all right? We'll meet you in the trophy room; that's always unlocked."

When Malfoy had gone, Ron and Harry looked at each other. "What is a wizard's duel?" said Harry. "And what do you mean, you're my second?"

"Well, a second's there to take over if you die," said Ron casually, getting started at last on his cold pie. Catching the look on Harry's face, he added quickly, "But people only die in proper duels, you know, with real wizards. The most you and Malfoy'll be able to do is send sparks at each other. Neither of you knows enough magic to do any real damage. I bet he expected you to refuse, anyway."

"And what if I wave my wand and nothing happens?"

"Throw it away and punch him on the nose," Ron suggested. "Excuse me."

They both looked up. It was Hermione Granger.

"Can't a person eat in peace in this place?" said Ron.

Hermione ignored him and spoke to Harry.

"I couldn't help overhearing what you and Malfoy were saying --"

"Bet you could," Ron muttered.

"--and you mustn't go wandering around the school at night, think of the points you'll lose Gryffindor if you're caught, and you're bound to be. It's really very selfish of you."

"And it's really none of your business," said Harry.

"Good-bye," said Ron.

All the same, it wasn't what you'd call the perfect end to the day, Harry thought, as he lay awake much later listening to Dean and Seamus falling asleep (Neville wasn't back from the hospital wing). Ron had spent all evening giving him advice such as "If he tries to curse you, you'd better dodge it, because I can't remember how to block them." There was a very good chance they were going to get caught by Filch or Mrs. Norris, and Harry felt he was pushing his luck, breaking another school rule today. On the other hand, Malfoys sneering face kept looming up out of the darkness - this was his big chance to beat Malfoy face-to-face. He couldn't miss it.

"Half-past eleven," Ron muttered at last, "we'd better go."

They pulled on their bathrobes, picked up their wands, and crept across the tower room, down the spiral staircase, and into the Gryffindor common room. A few embers were still glowing in the fireplace, turning all the armchairs into hunched black shadows. They had almost reached the portrait hole when a voice spoke from the chair nearest them, "I can't believe you're going to do this, Harry."

A lamp flickered on. It was Hermione Granger, wearing a pink bathrobe and a frown.

"You!" said Ron furiously. "Go back to bed!"

"I almost told your brother," Hermione snapped, "Percy -- he's a prefect, he'd put a stop to this."

Harry couldn't believe anyone could be so interfering.

"Come on," he said to Ron. He pushed open the portrait of the Fat Lady and climbed through the hole.

Hermione wasn't going to give up that easily. She followed Ron through the portrait hole, hissing at them like an angry goose.

"Don't you care about Gryffindor, do you only care about yourselves, I don't want Slytherin to win the house cup, and you'll lose all the points I got from Professor McGonagall for knowing about Switching Spells."

"Go away." "All right, but I warned you, you just remember what I said when you're on the train home tomorrow, you're so --"

But what they were, they didn't find out. Hermione had turned to the portrait of the Fat Lady to get back inside and found herself facing an empty painting. The Fat Lady had gone on a nighttime visit and Hermione was locked out of Gryffindor tower.

"Now what am I going to do?" she asked shrilly.

"That's your problem," said Ron. "We've got to go, we 3 re going to be late."

They hadn't even reached the end of the corridor when Hermione caught up with them.

"I'm coming with you," she said.

"You are not."

"D'you think I'm going to stand out here and wait for Filch to catch me? If he finds all three of us I'll tell him the truth, that I was trying to stop you, and you can back me up."

"You've got some nerve --" said Ron loudly.

"Shut up, both of you!" said Harry sharply. I heard something."

It was a sort of snuffling.

"Mrs. Norris?" breathed Ron, squinting through the dark.

It wasn't Mrs. Norris. It was Neville. He was curled up on the floor, fast asleep, but jerked suddenly awake as they crept nearer.

"Thank goodness you found me! I've been out here for hours, I couldn't remember the new password to get in to bed."

"Keep your voice down, Neville. The password's 'Pig snout' but it won't help you now, the Fat Lady's gone off somewhere."

"How's your arm?" said Harry.

"Fine," said Neville, showing them. "Madam Pomfrey mended it in about a minute."

"Good - well, look, Neville, we've got to be somewhere, we'll see you later --"

"Don't leave me!" said Neville, scrambling to his feet, "I don't want to stay here alone, the Bloody Baron's been past twice already."

Ron looked at his watch and then glared furiously at Hermione and Neville.

"If either of you get us caught, I'll never rest until I've learned that Curse of the Bogies Quirrell told us about, and used it on you.

Hermione opened her mouth, perhaps to tell Ron exactly how to use the Curse of the Bogies, but Harry hissed at her to be quiet and beckoned them all forward.

They flitted along corridors striped with bars of moonlight from the high windows. At every turn Harry expected to run into Filch or Mrs. Norris, but they were lucky. They sped up a staircase to the third floor and tiptoed toward the trophy room.

Malfoy and Crabbe weren't there yet. The crystal trophy cases glimmered where the moonlight caught them. Cups, shields, plates, and statues winked silver and gold in the darkness. They edged along the walls, keeping their eyes on the doors at either end of the room. Harry took out his wand in case Malfoy leapt in and started at once. The minutes crept by.

"He's late, maybe he's chickened out," Ron whispered.

Then a noise in the next room made them jump. Harry had only just raised his wand when they heard someone speak -and it wasn't Malfoy.

"Sniff around, my sweet, they might be lurking in a corner."

It was Filch speaking to Mrs. Norris. Horror-struck, Harry waved madly at the other three to follow him as quickly as possible; they scurried silently toward the door, away from Filch's voice. Neville's robes had barely whipped round the corner when they heard Filch enter the trophy room.

"They're in here somewhere," they heard him mutter, "probably hiding."

"This way!" Harry mouthed to the others and, petrified, they began to creep down a long gallery full of suits of armor. They could hear Filch getting nearer. Neville suddenly let out a frightened squeak and broke into a run -he tripped, grabbed Ron around the waist, and the pair of them toppled right into a suit of armor.

The clanging and crashing were enough to wake the whole castle.

"RUN!" Harry yelled, and the four of them sprinted down the gallery, not looking back to see whether Filch was following -- they swung around the doorpost and galloped down one corridor then another, Harry in the lead, without any idea where they were or where they were going -- they ripped through a tapestry and found themselves in a hidden passageway, hurtled along it and came out near their Charms classroom, which they knew was miles from the trophy room.

"I think we've lost him," Harry panted, leaning against the cold wall and wiping his forehead. Neville was bent double, wheezing and spluttering.

I -- told -you," Hermione gasped, clutching at the stitch in her chest, "I -- told -- you."

"We've got to get back to Gryffindor tower," said Ron, "quickly as possible."

"Malfoy tricked you," Hermione said to Harry. "You realize that, don't you? He was never going to meet you -- Filch knew someone was going to

be in the trophy room, Malfoy must have tipped him off."

Harry thought she was probably right, but he wasn't going to tell her that.

"Let's go."

It wasn't going to be that simple. They hadn't gone more than a dozen paces when a doorknob rattled and something came shooting out of a classroom in front of them.

It was Peeves. He caught sight of them and gave a squeal of delight.

"Shut up, Peeves -- please -- you'll get us thrown out."

Peeves cackled.

"Wandering around at midnight, Ickle Firsties? Tut, tut, tut. Naughty, naughty, you'll get caughty."

"Not if you don't give us away, Peeves, please."

"Should tell Filch, I should," said Peeves in a saintly voice, but his eyes glittered wickedly. "It's for your own good, you know."

"Get out of the way," snapped Ron, taking a swipe at Peeves this was a big mistake.

"STUDENTS OUT OF BED!" Peeves bellowed, "STUDENTS OUT OF BED DOWN THE
CHARMS CORRIDOR"

Ducking under Peeves, they ran for their lives, right to the end of the corridor where they slammed into a door -- and it was locked.

"This is it!" Ron moaned, as they pushed helplessly at the door, "We're done for! This is the end!" They could hear footsteps, Filch running as fast as he could toward Peeves's shouts.

"Oh, move over," Hermione snarled. She grabbed Harry's wand, tapped the lock, and whispered, 'Alohomora!"

The lock clicked and the door swung open -- they piled through it, shut

it quickly, and pressed their ears against it, listening.

"Which way did they go, Peeves?" Filch was saying. "Quick, tell me."

"Say 'please.'"

"Don't mess with me, Peeves, now where did they go?"

"Shan't say nothing if you don't say please," said Peeves in his annoying singsong voice.

"All right -please."

"NOTHING! Ha haaa! Told you I wouldn't say nothing if you didn't say please! Ha ha! Haaaaaa!" And they heard the sound of Peeves whooshing away and Filch cursing in rage.

"He thinks this door is locked," Harry whispered. "I think we'll be okay -- get off, Neville!" For Neville had been tugging on the sleeve of Harry's bathrobe for the last minute. "What?"

Harry turned around -- and saw, quite clearly, what. For a moment, he was sure he'd walked into a nightmare -- this was too much, on top of everything that had happened so far.

They weren't in a room, as he had supposed. They were in a corridor. The forbidden corridor on the third floor. And now they knew why it was forbidden.

They were looking straight into the eyes of a monstrous dog, a dog that filled the whole space between ceiling and floor. It had three heads. Three pairs of rolling, mad eyes; three noses, twitching

and quivering in their direction; three drooling mouths, saliva hanging in slippery ropes from yellowish fangs.

It was standing quite still, all six eyes staring at them, and Harry knew that the only reason they weren't already dead was that their sudden appearance had taken it by surprise, but it was quickly getting over that, there was no mistaking what those thunderous growls meant.

Harry groped for the doorknob -- between Filch and death, he'd take Filch.

They fell backward -- Harry slammed the door shut, and they ran, they almost flew, back down the corridor. Filch must have hurried off to look for them somewhere else, because they didn't see him anywhere, but they hardly cared -- all they wanted to do was put as much space as possible between them and that monster. They didn't stop running until they reached the portrait of the Fat Lady on the seventh floor.

"Where on earth have you all been?" she asked, looking at their bathrobes hanging off their shoulders and their flushed, sweaty faces.

"Never mind that -- pig snout, pig snout," panted Harry, and the portrait swung forward. They scrambled into the common room and collapsed, trembling, into armchairs.

It was a while before any of them said anything. Neville, indeed, looked as if he'd never speak again.

"What do they think they're doing, keeping a thing like that locked up in a school?" said Ron finally. "If any dog needs exercise, that one does."

Hermione had got both her breath and her bad temper back again. "You don't use your eyes, any of you, do you?" she snapped. "Didn't you see what it was standing on.

"The floor?" Harry suggested. "I wasn't looking at its feet, I was too busy with its heads."

"No, not the floor. It was standing on a trapdoor. It's obviously guarding something."

She stood up, glaring at them.

I hope you're pleased with yourselves. We could all have been killed -- or worse, expelled. Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to bed."

Ron stared after her, his mouth open.

"No, we don't mind," he said. "You'd think we dragged her along, wouldn't you.

But Hermione had given Harry something else to think about as he climbed

back into bed. The dog was guarding something.... What had Hagrid said? Gringotts was the safest place in the world for something you wanted to hide -- except perhaps Hogwarts.

It looked as though Harry had found out where the grubby littie package from vault seven hundred and thirteen was.

CHAPTER TEN

HALLOWEEN

Malfoy couldn't believe his eyes when he saw that Harry and Ron were still at Hogwarts the next day, looking tired but perfectly cheerful. Indeed, by the next morning Harry and Ron thought that meeting the three-headed dog had been an excellent adventure, and they were quite keen to have another one. In the meantime, Harry filled Ron in about the package that seemed to have been moved from Gringotts to Hogwarts, and they spent a lot of time wondering what could possibly need such heavy protection. "It's either really valuable or really dangerous," said Ron.
"Or both," said Harry.

But as all they knew for sure about the mysterious object was that it was about two inches long, they didn't have much chance of guessing what it was without further clues.

Neither Neville nor Hermione showed the slightest interest in what lay underneath the dog and the trapdoor. All Neville cared about was never going near the dog again.

Hermione was now refusing to speak to Harry and Ron, but she was such a bossy know-it-all that they saw this as an added bonus. All they really wanted now was a way of getting back at Malfoy, and to their great delight, just such a thing arrived in the mail about a week later.

As the owls flooded into the Great Hall as usual, everyone's attention was caught at once by a long, thin package carried by six large screech owls. Harry was just as interested as everyone else to see what was in this large parcel, and was amazed when the owls soared down and dropped it right in front of him, knocking his bacon to the floor. They had hardly fluttered out of the way when another owl dropped a letter on top of the parcel.

Harry ripped open the letter first, which was lucky, because it said:

DO NOT OPEN THE PARCEL AT THE TABLE.

It contains your new Nimbus Two Thousand, but I don't want everybody knowing you've got a broomstick or they'll all want one. Oliver Wood will meet you tonight on the Quidditch field at seven o'clock for your first training session.

Professor McGonagall

Harry had difficulty hiding his glee as he handed the note to Ron to read.

"A Nimbus Two Thousand!" Ron moaned enviously. "I've never even touched one."

They left the hall quickly, wanting to unwrap the broomstick in private before their first class, but halfway across the entrance hall they found the way upstairs barred by Crabbe and Goyle. Malfoy seized the package from Harry and felt it.

"That's a broomstick," he said, throwing it back to Harry with a mixture of jealousy and spite on his face. "You'll be in for it this time, Potter, first years aren't allowed them."

Ron couldn't resist it.

"It's not any old broomstick," he said, "it's a Nimbus Two Thousand. What did you say you've got at home, Malfoy, a Comet Two Sixty?" Ron grinned at Harry. "Comets look flashy, but they're not in the same league as the Nimbus."

"What would you know about it, Weasley, you couldn't afford half the handle," Malfoy snapped back. "I suppose you and your brothers have to save up twig by twig."

Before Ron could answer, Professor Flitwick appeared at Malfoy's elbow.

"Not arguing, I hope, boys?" he squeaked.

"Potter's been sent a broomstick, Professor," said Malfoy quickly.

"Yes, yes, that's right," said Professor Flitwick, beaming at Harry. "Professor McGonagall told me all about the special circumstances, Potter. And what model is it?"

"A Nimbus Two Thousand, sit," said Harry, fighting not to laugh at the look of horror on Malfoy's face. "And it's really thanks to Malfoy here that I've got it," he added.

Harry and Ron headed upstairs, smothering their laughter at Malfoy's obvious rage and confusion. "Well, it's true," Harry chortled as they reached the top of the marble staircase, "If he hadn't stolen Neville's Remembrall I wouln't be on the team...."

"So I suppose you think that's a reward for breaking rules?" came an angry voice from just behind them. Hermione was stomping up the stairs, looking disapprovingly at the package in Harry's hand.

"I thought you weren't speaking to us?" said Harry.

"Yes, don't stop now," said Ron, "it's doing us so much good."

Hermione marched away with her nose in the air.

Harry had a lot of trouble keeping his mind on his lessons that day. It kept wandering up to the dormitory where his new broomstick was lying under his bed, or straying off to the Quidditch field where he'd be learning to play that night. He bolted his dinner that evening without noticing what he was eating, and then rushed upstairs with Ron to unwrap the Nimbus Two Thousand at last.

"Wow," Ron sighed, as the broomstick rolled onto Harry's bedspread.

Even Harry, who knew nothing about the different brooms, thought it looked wonderful. Sleek and shiny, with a mahogany handle, it had a long tail of neat, straight twigs and Nimbus Two Thousand written in gold near the top.

As seven o'clock drew nearer, Harry left the castle and set off in the dusk toward the Quidditch field. Held never been inside the stadium before. Hundreds of seats were raised in stands around the field so that the spectators were high enough to see what was going on. At either end

of the field were three golden poles with hoops on the end. They reminded Harry of the little plastic sticks Muggle

children blew bubbles through, except that they were fifty feet high.

Too eager to fly again to wait for Wood, Harry mounted his broomstick and kicked off from the ground. What a feeling -- he swooped in and out of the goal posts and then sped up and down the field. The Nimbus Two Thousand turned wherever he wanted at his lightest touch.

"Hey, Potter, come down!'

Oliver Wood had arrived. fie was carrying a large wooden crate under his arm. Harry landed next to him.

"Very nice," said Wood, his eyes glinting. "I see what McGonagall meant... you really are a natural. I'm just going to teach you the rules this evening, then you'll be joining team practice three times a week."

He opened the crate. Inside were four different-sized balls.

"Right," said Wood. "Now, Quidditch is easy enough to understand, even if it's not too easy to play. There are seven players on each side. Three of them are called Chasers."

"Three Chasers," Harry repeated, as Wood took out a bright red ball about the size of a soccer ball.

"This ball's called the Quaffle," said Wood. "The Chasers throw the Quaffle to each other and try and get it through one of the hoops to score a goal. Ten points every time the Quaffle goes through one of the hoops. Follow me?"

"The Chasers throw the Quaffle and put it through the hoops to score," Harry recited. "So -- that's sort of like basketball on broomsticks with six hoops, isn't it?"

"What's basketball?" said Wood curiously. "Never mind," said Harry quickly.

"Now, there's another player on each side who's called the Keeper -I'm Keeper for Gryffindor. I have to fly around our hoops and stop the other team from scoring."

"Three Chasers, one Keeper," said Harry, who was determined to remember it all. "And they play with the Quaffle. Okay, got that. So what are they for?" He pointed at the three balls left inside the box.

"I'll show you now," said Wood. "Take this."

He handed Harry a small club, a bit like a short baseball bat.

"I'm going to show you what the Bludgers do," Wood said. "These two are the Bludgers."

He showed Harry two identical balls, jet black and slightly smaller than the red Quaffle. Harry noticed that they seemed to be straining to escape the straps holding them inside the box.

"Stand back," Wood warned Harry. He bent down and freed one of the Bludgers.

At once, the black ball rose high in the air and then pelted straight at Harry's face. Harry swung at it with the bat to stop it from breaking his nose, and sent it zigzagging away into the air -- it zoomed around their heads and then shot at Wood, who dived on top of it and managed to pin it to the ground.

"See?" Wood panted, forcing the struggling Bludger back into the crate and strapping it down safely. "The Bludgers rocket around, trying to knock players off their brooms. That's why you have two Beaters on each team -- the Weasley twins are ours -- it's their job to protect their side from the Bludgers and try and knock them toward the other team. So -- think you've got all that?"

"Three Chasers try and score with the Quaffle; the Keeper guards the goal posts; the Beaters keep the Bludgers away from their team," Harry reeled off.

"Very good," said Wood.

"Er -- have the Bludgers ever killed anyone?" Harry asked, hoping he sounded offhand.

"Never at Hogwarts. We've had a couple of broken jaws but nothing worse than that. Now, the last member of the team is the

Seeker. That's you. And you don't have to worry about the Quaffle or the Bludgers unless they crack my head open."

"Don't worry, the Weasleys are more than a match for the Bludgers -- I mean, they're like a pair of human Bludgers themselves."

Wood reached into the crate and took out the fourth and last ball. Compared with the Quaffle and the Bludgers, it was tiny, about the size of a large walnut. It was bright gold and had little fluttering silver wings.

"This," said Wood, "is the Golden Snitch, and it's the most important ball of the lot. It's very hard to catch because it's so fast and difficult to see. It's the Seeker's job to catch it. You've got to weave in and out of the Chasers, Beaters, Bludgers, and Quaffle to get it before the other team's Seeker, because whichever Seeker catches the Snitch wins his team an extra hundred and fifty points, so they

nearly always win. That's why Seekers get fouled so much. A game of Quidditch only ends when the Snitch is caught, so it can go on for ages -- I think the record is three months, they had to keep bringing on substitutes so the players could get some sleep. "Well, that's it -- any questions?"

Harry shook his head. He understood what he had to do all right, it was doing it that was going to be the problem.

"We won't practice with the Snitch yet," said Wood, carefully shutting it back inside the crate, "it's too dark, we might lose it. Let's try you out with a few of these."

He pulled a bag of ordinary golf balls out of his pocket and a few minutes later, he and Harry were up in the air, Wood throwing the golf balls as hard as he could in every direction for Harry to catch.

Harry didn't miss a single one, and Wood was delighted. After half an hour, night had really fallen and they couldn't carry on.

"That Quidditch cup'll have our name on it this year," said Wood happily as they trudged back up to the castle. "I wouldn't be surprised if you turn out better than Charlie Weasley, and he could have played for England if he hadn't gone off chasing dragons."

Perhaps it was because he was now so busy, what with Quidditch practice three evenings a week on top of all his homework, but Harry could hardly believe it when he realized that he'd already been at Hogwarts two months. The castle felt more like home than Privet Drive ever had. His lessons, too, were becoming more and more interesting now that they had mastered the basics.

On Halloween morning they woke to the delicious smell of baking pumpkin wafting through the corridors. Even better, Professor Flitwick announced in Charms that he thought they were ready to start making objects fly, something they had all been dying to try since they'd seen him make Neville's toad zoom around the classroom. Professor Flitwick put the class into pairs to practice. Harry's partner was Seamus Finnigan (which was a relief, because Neville had been trying to catch his eye). Ron, however, was to be working with Hermione Granger. It was hard to tell whether Ron or Hermione was angrier about this. She hadn't spoken to either of them since the day Harry's broomstick had arrived.

"Now, don't forget that nice wrist movement we've been practicing!" squeaked Professor Flitwick, perched on top of his pile of books as usual. "Swish and flick, remember, swish and flick. And saying the magic words properly is very important, too -- never forget Wizard Baruffio, who said 's' instead of 'f' and found himself on the floor with a buffalo on his chest."

It was very difficult. Harry and Seamus swished and flicked, but the feather they were supposed to be sending skyward just lay on the desktop. Seamus got so impatient that he prodded it with his wand and set fire to it -- Harry had to put it out with his hat.

Ron, at the next table, wasn't having much more luck.

"Wingardium Leviosa!" he shouted, waving his long arms like a windmill.

"You're saying it wrong," Harry heard Hermione snap. "It's Wing-gar-dium Levi-o-sa, make the 'gar' nice and long."

"You do it, then, if you're so clever," Ron snarled.

Hermione rolled up the sleeves of her gown, flicked her wand, and said, "Wingardium Leviosa!"

Their feather rose off the desk and hovered about four feet above their heads.

"Oh, well done!" cried Professor Flitwick, clapping. "Everyone see here, Miss Granger's done it!"

Ron was in a very bad mood by the end of the class. "It's no wonder no one can stand her," he said to Harry as they pushed their way into the crowded corridor, "she's a nightmare, honestly. "

Someone knocked into Harry as they hurried past him. It was Hermione. Harry caught a glimpse of her face -- and was startled to see that she was in tears.

"I think she heard you."

"So?" said Ron, but he looked a bit uncomfortable. "She must've noticed she's got no friends."

Hermione didn't turn up for the next class and wasn't seen all afternoon. On their way down to the Great Hall for the Halloween feast, Harry and Ron overheard Parvati Patil telling her friend Lavender that Hermione was crying in the girls' bathroom and wanted to be left alone. Ron looked still more awkward at this, but a moment later they had entered the Great Hall, where the Halloween decorations put Hermione out of their minds.

A thousand live bats fluttered from the walls and ceiling while a thousand more swooped over the tables in low black clouds, making the candles in the pumpkins stutter. The feast appeared suddenly on the golden plates, as it had at the start-of-term banquet.

Harry was just helping himself to a baked potato when Professor Quirrell came sprinting into the hall, his turban askew and terror on his face. Everyone stared as he reached Professor Dumbledore's chair, slumped against the table, and gasped, "Troll -- in the dungeons -- thought you ought to know."

He then sank to the floor in a dead faint.

There was an uproar. It took several purple firecrackers exploding from the end of Professor Dumbledore's wand to bring silence.

"Prefects," he rumbled, "lead your Houses back to the dormitories immediately!"

Percy was in his element.

"Follow me! Stick together, first years! No need to fear the troll if you follow my orders! Stay close behind me, now. Make way, first years coming through! Excuse me, I'm a prefect!"

"How could a troll get in?" Harry asked as they climbed the stairs.

"Don't ask me, they're supposed to be really stupid," said Ron. "Maybe Peeves let it in for a Halloween joke."

They passed different groups of people hurrying in different directions. As they jostled their way through a crowd of confused Hufflepuffs, Harry suddenly grabbed Ron's arm.

"I've just thought -- Hermione."

"What about her?"

"She doesn't know about the troll."

Ron bit his lip.

"Oh, all right," he snapped. "But Percy'd better not see us."

Ducking down, they joined the Hufflepuffs going the other way, slipped down a deserted side corridor, and hurried off toward the girls' bathroom. They had just turned the corner when they heard quick footsteps behind them.

"Percy!" hissed Ron, pulling Harry behind a large stone griffin.

Peering around it, however, they saw not Percy but Snape. He crossed the corridor and disappeared from view.

"What's he doing?" Harry whispered. "Why isn't he down in the dungeons with the rest of the teachers?"

"Search me."

Quietly as possible, they crept along the next corridor after Snape's fading footsteps.

"He's heading for the third floor," Harry said, but Ron held up his hand.

"Can you smell something?"

Harry sniffed and a foul stench reached his nostrils, a mixture of old socks and the kind of public toilet no one seems to clean.

And then they heard it -- a low grunting, and the shuffling footfalls of gigantic feet. Ron pointed -- at the end of a passage to the left, something huge was moving toward them. They shrank into the shadows and watched as it emerged into a patch of moonlight.

It was a horrible sight. Twelve feet tall, its skin was a dull, granite gray, its great lumpy body like a boulder with its small bald head perched on top like a coconut. It had short legs thick as tree trunks with flat, horny feet. The smell coming from it was incredible. It was holding a huge wooden club, which dragged along the floor because its arms were so long.

The troll stopped next to a doorway and peered inside. It waggled its long ears, making up its tiny mind, then slouched slowly into the room.

"The keys in the lock," Harry muttered. "We could lock it in."

"Good idea," said Ron nervously.

They edged toward the open door, mouths dry, praying the troll wasn't about to come out of it. With one great leap, Harry managed to grab the key, slam the door, and lock it.

'Yes!"

Flushed with their victory, they started to run back up the passage, but as they reached the corner they heard something that made their hearts stop -- a high, petrified scream -- and it was coming from the chamber they'd just chained up.

"Oh, no," said Ron, pale as the Bloody Baron.

"It's the girls' bathroom!" Harry gasped.

"Hermione!" they said together.

It was the last thing they wanted to do, but what choice did they have? Wheeling around, they sprinted back to the door and turned the key, fumbling in their panic. Harry pulled the door open and they ran inside.

Hermione Granger was shrinking against the wall opposite, looking as if she was about to faint. The troll was advancing on her, knocking the sinks off the walls as it went.

"Confuse it!" Harry said desperately to Ron, and, seizing a tap, he threw it as hard as he could against the wall.

The troll stopped a few feet from Hermione. It lumbered around, blinking stupidly, to see what had made the noise. Its mean little eyes saw Harry. It hesitated, then made for him instead, lifting its club as it went.

"Oy, pea-brain!" yelled Ron from the other side of the chamber, and he threw a metal pipe at it. The troll didn't even seem to notice the pipe hitting its shoulder, but it heard the yell and paused again, turning its ugly snout toward Ron instead, giving Harry time to run around it.

"Come on, run, run!" Harry yelled at Hermione, trying to pull her toward the door, but she couldn't move, she was still flat against the wall, her mouth open with terror.

The shouting and the echoes seemed to be driving the troll berserk. It roared again and started toward Ron, who was nearest and had no way to escape.

Harry then did something that was both very brave and very stupid: He took a great running jump and managed to fasten his arms around the troll's neck from behind. The troll couldn't feel Harry hanging there, but even a troll will notice if you stick a long bit of wood up its nose, and Harry's wand had still been in his hand when he'd jumped -- it had gone straight up one of the troll's nostrils.

Howling with pain, the troll twisted and flailed its club, with Harry clinging on for dear life; any second, the troll was going to rip him

off or catch him a terrible blow with the club.

Hermione had sunk to the floor in fright; Ron pulled out his own wand -- not knowing what he was going to do he heard himself cry the first spell that came into his head: "Wingardium Leviosa!"

The club flew suddenly out of the troll's hand, rose high, high up into the air, turned slowly over -- and dropped, with a sickening crack, onto its owner's head. The troll swayed on the spot and then fell flat on its face, with a thud that made the whole room tremble.

Harry got to his feet. He was shaking and out of breath. Ron was standing there with his wand still raised, staring at what he had done.

It was Hermione who spoke first.

"Is it -- dead?"

I don't think so," said Harry, I think it's just been knocked out."

He bent down and pulled his wand out of the troll's nose. It was covered in what looked like lumpy gray glue.

"Urgh -- troll boogers."

He wiped it on the troll's trousers.

A sudden slamming and loud footsteps made the three of them look up. They hadn't realized what a racket they had been making, but of course, someone downstairs must have heard the crashes and the troll's roars. A moment later, Professor McGonagall had come bursting into the room, closely followed by Snape, with Quirrell bringing up the rear. Quirrell took one look at the troll, let out a faint whimper, and sat quickly down on a toilet, clutching his heart.

Snape bent over the troll. Professor McGonagall was looking at Ron and Harry. Harry had never seen her look so angry. Her lips were white. Hopes of winning fifty points for Gryffindor faded quickly from Harry's mind.

"What on earth were you thinking of?" said Professor McGonagall, with cold fury in her voice. Harry looked at Ron, who was still standing with his wand in the air. "You're lucky you weren't killed. Why aren't you in

your dormitory?"

Snape gave Harry a swift, piercing look. Harry looked at the floor. He wished Ron would put his wand down.

Then a small voice came out of the shadows.

"Please, Professor McGonagall -- they were looking for me."

"Miss Granger!"

Hermione had managed to get to her feet at last.

I went looking for the troll because I -- I thought I could deal with it on my own -- you know, because I've read all about them."

Ron dropped his wand. Hermione Granger, telling a downright lie to a teacher? "If they hadn't found me, I'd be dead now. Harry stuck his wand up its nose and Ron knocked it out with its own club. They didn't have time to come and fetch anyone. It was about to finish me off when they arrived."

Harry and Ron tried to look as though this story wasn't new to them.

"Well -- in that case..." said Professor McGonagall, staring at the three of them, "Miss Granger, you foolish girl, how could you think of tackling a mountain troll on your own?"

Hermione hung her head. Harry was speechless. Hermione was the last person to do anything against the rules, and here she was, pretending she had, to get them out of trouble. It was as if Snape had started handing out sweets.

"Miss Granger, five points will be taken from Gryffindor for this," said Professor McGonagall. "I'm very disappointed in you. If you're not hurt at all, you'd better get off to Gryffindor tower. Students are finishing the feast in their houses."

Hermione left.

Professor McGonagall turned to Harry and Ron.

"Well, I still say you were lucky, but not many first years could have

taken on a full-grown mountain troll. You each win Gryffindor five points. Professor Dumbledore will be informed of this. You may go."

They hurried out of the chamber and didn't speak at all until they had climbed two floors up. It was a relief to be away from the smell of the troll, quite apart from anything else.

"We should have gotten more than ten points," Ron grumbled.

"Five, you mean, once she's taken off Hermione's."

"Good of her to get us out of trouble like that," Ron admitted. "Mind you, we did save her."

"She might not have needed saving if we hadn't locked the thing in with her," Harry reminded him.

They had reached the portrait of the Fat Lady.

"Pig snout," they said and entered.

The common room was packed and noisy. Everyone was eating the food that had been sent up. Hermione, however, stood alone by the door, waiting for them. There was a very embarrassed pause. Then, none of them looking at each other, they all said "Thanks," and hurried off to get plates.

But from that moment on, Hermione Granger became their friend. There are some things you can't share without ending up liking each other, and knocking out a twelve-foot mountain troll is one of them.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

QUIDDITCH

As they entered November, the weather turned very cold. The mountains around the school became icy gray and the lake like chilled steel. Every morning the ground was covered in frost. Hagrid could be seen from the upstairs windows defrosting broomsticks on the Quidditch field, bundled up in a long moleskin overcoat, rabbit fur gloves, and enormous beaverskin boots.

The Quidditch season had begun. On Saturday, Harry would be playing in

his first match after weeks of training: Gryffindor versus Slytherin. If Gryffindor won, they would move up into second place in the house championship.

Hardly anyone had seen Harry play because Wood had decided that, as their secret weapon, Harry should be kept, well, secret. But the news that he was playing Seeker had leaked out somehow, and Harry didn't know which was worse -- people telling him he'd be brilliant or people telling him they'd be running around underneath him holding a mattress.

It was really lucky that Harry now had Hermlone as a friend. He didn't know how he'd have gotten through all his homework without her, what with all the last-minute Quidditch practice Wood was making them do. She had also tent him Quidditch Through the Ages, which turned out to be a very interesting read.

Harry learned that there were seven hundred ways of committing a Quidditch foul and that all of them had happened during a World Cup match in 1473; that Seekers were usually the smallest and fastest players, and that most serious Quidditch accidents seemed to happen to them; that although people rarely died playing Quidditch, referees had been known to vanish and turn up months later in the Sahara Desert.

Hermione had become a bit more relaxed about breaking rules since Harry and Ron had saved her from the mountain troll, and she was much nicer for it. The day before Harry's first Quidditch match the three of them were out in the freezing courtyard during break, and she had conjured them up a bright blue fire that could be carried around in a jam jar. They were standing with their backs to it, getting warm, when Snape crossed the yard. Harry noticed at once that Snape was limping. Harry, Ron, and Hermione moved closer together to block the fire from view; they were sure it wouldn't be allowed. Unfortunately, something about their guilty faces caught Snape's eye. He limped over. He hadn't seen the fire, but he seemed to be looking for a reason to tell them off anyway.

"What's that you've got there, Potter?"

It was Quidditch Through the Ages. Harry showed him.

"Library books are not to be taken outside the school," said Snape. "Give it to me. Five points from Gryffindor."

"He's just made that rule up," Harry muttered angrily as Snape limped away. "Wonder what's wrong with his leg?"

"Dunno, but I hope it's really hurting him," said Ron bitterly.

The Gryffindor common room was very noisy that evening. Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat together next to a window. Hermione was checking Harry and Ron's Charms homework for them. She would never let them copy ("How will you learn?"), but by asking her to read it through, they got the right answers anyway.

Harry felt restless. He wanted Quidditch Through the Ages back, to take his mind off his nerves about tomorrow. Why should he be afraid of Snape? Getting up, he told Ron and Hermione he was going to ask Snape if he could have it.

"Better you than me," they said together, but Harry had an idea that Snape wouldn't refuse if there were other teachers listening.

He made his way down to the staffroom and knocked. There was no answer. He knocked again. Nothing.

Perhaps Snape had left the book in there? It was worth a try. He pushed the door ajar and peered inside -- and a horrible scene met his eyes.

Snape and Filch were inside, alone. Snape was holding his robes above his knees. One of his legs was bloody and mangled. Filch was handing Snape bandages.

"Blasted thing*," Snape was saying. "How are you supposed to keep your eyes on all three heads at once?"

Harry tried to shut the door quietly, but --

"POTTER!"

Snape's face was twisted with fury as he dropped his robes quickly to hide his leg. Harry gulped.

"I just wondered if I could have my book back."

"GET OUT! OUT!"

Harry left, before Snape could take any more points from Gryffindor. He sprinted back upstairs.

"Did you get it?" Ron asked as Harry joined them. "What's the matter?"

In a low whisper, Harry told them what he'd seen.

"You know what this means?" he finished breathlessly. "He tried to get past that three-headed dog at Halloween! That's where he was going when we saw him -- he's after whatever it's guarding! And Id bet my broomstick he let that troll in, to make a diversion!"

Hermione's eyes were wide.

"No -- he wouldn't, she said. "I know he's not very nice, but he wouldn't try and steal something Dumbledore was keeping safe."

"Honestly, Hermione, you think all teachers are saints or something," snapped Ron. "I'm with Harry. I wouldn't put anything past Snape. But what's he after? What's that dog guarding?"

Harry went to bed with his head buzzing with the same question. Neville was snoring loudly, but Harry couldn't sleep. He tried to empty his mind -- he needed to sleep, he had to, he had his first Quidditch match in a few hours -- but the expression on Snape's face when Harry had seen his leg wasn't easy to forget.

The next morning dawned very bright and cold. The Great Hall was full of the delicious smell of fried sausages and the cheer ful chatter of everyone looking forward to a good Quidditch match.

"You've got to eat some breakfast."

"I don't want anything."

"Just a bit of toast," wheedled Hermione.

"I'm not hungry."

Harry felt terrible. In an hour's time he'd be walking onto the field.

"Harry, you need your strength," said Seamus Finnigan. "Seekers are always the ones who get clobbered by the other team."

"Thanks, Seamus," said Harry, watching Seamus pile ketchup on his sausages.

By eleven o'clock the whole school seemed to be out in the stands around the Quidditch pitch. Many students had binoculars. The seats might be raised high in the air, but it was still difficult to see what was going on sometimes.

Ron and Hermione joined Neville, Seamus, and Dean the West Ham fan up in the top row. As a surprise for Harry, they had painted a large banner on one of the sheets Scabbers had ruined. It said Potter for President, and Dean, who was good at drawing, had done a large Gryffindor lion underneath. Then Hermione had performed a tricky little charm so that the paint flashed different colors.

Meanwhile, in the locker room, Harry and the rest of the team were changing into their scarlet Quidditch robes (Slytherin would be playing in green).

Wood cleared his throat for silence.

"Okay, men," he said.

"And women," said Chaser Angelina Johnson.

"And women," Wood agreed. "This is it."

"The big one," said Fred Weasley.

"The one we've all been waiting for," said George.

"We know Oliver's speech by heart," Fred told Harry, "we were on the team last year."

"Shut up, you two," said Wood. "This is the best team Gryffindor's had in years. We're going to win. I know it."

He glared at them all as if to say, "Or else."

"Right. It's time. Good luck, all of you."

Harry followed Fred and George out of the locker room and, hoping his

knees weren't going to give way, walked onto the field to loud cheers.

Madam Hooch was refereeing. She stood in the middle of the field waiting for the two teams, her broom in her hand.

"Now, I want a nice fair game, all of you," she said, once they were all gathered around her. Harry noticed that she seemed to be speaking particularly to the Slytherin Captain, Marcus Flint, a sixth year. Harry thought Flint looked as if he had some troll blood in him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the fluttering banner high above, flashing Potter for President over the crowd. His heart skipped. He felt braver.

"Mount your brooms, please."

Harry clambered onto his Nimbus Two Thousand.

Madam Hooch gave a loud blast on her silver whistle.

Fifteen brooms rose up, high, high into the air. They were off. "And the Quaffle is taken immediately by Angelina Johnson of Gryffindor -- what an excellent Chaser that girl is, and rather attractive, too --"

"JORDAN!"

"Sorry, Professor."

The Weasley twins' friend, Lee Jordan, was doing the commentary for the match, closely watched by Professor McGonagall.

"And she's really belting along up there, a neat pass to Alicia Spinnet, a good find of Oliver Wood's, last year only a reserve -- back to Johnson and -- no, the Slytherins have taken the Quaffle, Slytherin Captain Marcus Flint gains the Quaffle and off he goes -- Flint flying like an eagle up there -- he's going to sc- no, stopped by an excellent move by Gryffindor Keeper Wood and the Gryffindors take the Quaffle -- that's Chaser Katie Bell of Gryffindor there, nice dive around Flint, off up the field and -- OUCH -- that must have hurt, hit in the back of the head by a Bludger -- Quaffle taken by the Slytherins -- that's Adrian Pucey speeding off toward the goal posts, but he's blocked by a second Bludger -- sent his way by Fred or George Weasley, can't tell which -- nice play by the Gryffindor Beater, anyway, and Johnson back in possession of the Quaffle, a clear field ahead and off she goes -- she's really flying -- dodges a speeding Bludger -- the goal posts are ahead

-- come on, now, Angelina -- Keeper Bletchley dives -- misses -- GRYFFINDORS SCORE!"

Gryffindor cheers filled the cold air, with howls and moans from the Slytherins.

"Budge up there, move along."

"Hagrid!"

Ron and Hermione squeezed together to give Hagrid enough space to join them.

"Bin watchin' from me hut," said Hagrid, patting a large pair of binoculars around his neck, "But it isn't the same as bein' in the crowd. No sign of the Snitch yet, eh?"

"Nope," said Ron. "Harry hasn't had much to do yet."

"Kept outta trouble, though, that's somethin'," said Hagrid, raising his binoculars and peering skyward at the speck that was Harry.

Way up above them, Harry was gliding over the game, squinting about for some sign of the Snitch. This was part of his and Wood's game plan.

"Keep out of the way until you catch sight of the Snitch," Wood had said. "We don't want you attacked before you have to be."

When Angelina had scored, Harry had done a couple of loop-the-loops to let off his feelings. Now he was back to staring around for the Snitch. Once he caught sight of a flash of gold, but it was just a reflection from one of the Weasleys' wristwatches, and once a Bludger decided to come pelting his way, more like a cannonball than anything, but Harry dodged it and Fred Weasley came chasing after it.

"All right there, Harry?" he had time to yell, as he beat the Bludger furiously toward Marcus Flint.

"Slytherin in possession," Lee Jordan was saying, "Chaser Pucey ducks two Bludgers, two Weasleys, and Chaser Bell, and speeds toward the -- wait a moment -- was that the Snitch?"

A murmur ran through the crowd as Adrian Pucey dropped the Quaffle, too

busy looking over his shoulder at the flash of gold that had passed his left ear.

Harry saw it. In a great rush of excitement he dived downward after the streak of gold. Slytherin Seeker Terence Higgs had seen it, too. Neck and neck they hurtled toward the Snitch -all the Chasers seemed to have forgotten what they were supposed to be doing as they hung in midair to watch.

Harry was faster than Higgs -- he could see the little round ball, wings fluttering, darting up ahead - - he put on an extra spurt of speed --

WHAM! A roar of rage echoed from the Gryffindors below -- Marcus Flint had blocked Harry on purpose, and Harry's broom spun off course, Harry holding on for dear life.

"Foul!" screamed the Gryffindors.

Madam Hooch spoke angrily to Flint and then ordered a free shot at the goal posts for Gryffindor. But in all the confusion, of course, the Golden Snitch had disappeared from sight again.

Down in the stands, Dean Thomas was yelling, "Send him off, ref! Red card!"

"What are you talking about, Dean?" said Ron.

"Red card!" said Dean furiously. "In soccer you get shown the red card and you're out of the game!"

"But this isn't soccer, Dean," Ron reminded him.

Hagrid, however, was on Dean's side.

"They oughta change the rules. Flint coulda knocked Harry outta the air."

Lee Jordan was finding it difficult not to take sides.

"So -- after that obvious and disgusting bit of cheating

"Jordan!" growled Professor McGonagall.

"I mean, after that open and revolting foul

'Jordan, I'm warning you --"

"All right, all right. Flint nearly kills the Gryffindor Seeker, which could happen to anyone, I'm sure, so a penalty to Gryffindor, taken by Spinner, who puts it away, no trouble, and we continue play, Gryffindor still in possession."

It was as Harry dodged another Bludger, which went spinning dangerously past his head, that it happened. His broom gave a sudden, frightening lurch. For a split second, he thought he was going to fall. He gripped the broom tightly with both his hands and knees. He'd never felt anything like that.

It happened again. It was as though the broom was trying to buck him off. But Nimbus Two Thousands did not suddenly decide to buck their riders off. Harry tried to turn back toward the Gryffindor goal- posts -- he had half a mind to ask Wood to call time-out -- and then he realized that his broom was completely out of his control. He couldn't turn it. He couldn't direct it at all. It was zigzagging through the air, and every now and then making violent swishing movements that almost unseated him.

Lee was still commentating.

"Slytherin in possession -- Flint with the Quaffle -- passes Spinnet -- passes Bell -- hit hard in the face by a Bludger, hope it broke his nose -- only joking, Professor -- Slytherins score -- A no...

The Slytherins were cheering. No one seemed to have noticed that Harry's broom was behaving strangely. It was carrying- him slowly higher, away from the game, jerking and twitching as it went.

"Dunno what Harry thinks he's doing," Hagrid mumbled. He stared through his binoculars. "If I didn' know better, I'd say he'd lost control of his broom... but he can't have...."

Suddenly, people were pointing up at Harry all over the stands. His broom had started to roll over and over, with him only just managing to hold on. Then the whole crowd gasped. Harry's broom had given a wild jerk and Harry swung off it. He was now dangling from it, holding on with only one hand.

"Did something happen to it when Flint blocked him?" Seamus whispered.

"Can't have," Hagrid said, his voice shaking. "Can't nothing interfere with a broomstick except powerful Dark magic -- no kid could do that to a Nimbus Two Thousand."

At these words, Hermione seized Hagrid's binoculars, but instead of looking up at Harry, she started looking frantically at the crowd.

"What are you doing?" moaned Ron, gray-faced.

"I knew it," Hermione gasped, "Snape -- look."

Ron grabbed the binoculars. Snape was in the middle of the stands opposite them. He had his eyes fixed on Harry and was muttering nonstop under his breath.

"He's doing something -- jinxing the broom," said Hermione.

"What should we do?"

"Leave it to me."

Before Ron could say another word, Hermione had disappeared. Ron turned the binoculars back on Harry. His broom was vibrating so hard, it was almost impossible for him to hang on much longer. The whole crowd was on its feet, watching, terrified, as the Weasleys flew up to try and pull Harry safely onto one of their brooms, but it was no good -- every time they got near him, the broom would jump higher still. They dropped lower and circled beneath him, obviously hoping to catch him if he fell.
Marcus

Flint seized the Quaffle and scored five times without anyone noticing.

"Come on, Hermione," Ron muttered desperately.

Hermione had fought her way across to the stand where Snape stood, and was now racing along the row behind him; she didn't even stop to say sorry as she knocked Professor Quirrell headfirst into the row in front. Reaching Snape, she crouched down, pulled out her wand, and whispered a few, well- chosen words. Bright blue flames shot from her wand onto the hem of Snape's robes.

It took perhaps thirty seconds for Snape to realize that he was on fire. A sudden yelp told her she had done her job. Scooping the fire off him into a little jar in her pocket, she scrambled back along the row -- Snape would never know what had happened.

It was enough. Up in the air, Harry was suddenly able to clamber back on to his broom.

"Neville, you can look!" Ron said. Neville had been sobbing into Hagrid's jacket for the last five minutes.

Harry was speeding toward the ground when the crowd saw him clap his hand to his mouth as though he was about to be sick -- he hit the field on all fours -- coughed -- and something gold fell into his hand.

"I've got the Snitch!" he shouted, waving it above his head, and the game ended in complete confusion.

"He didn't catch it, he nearly swallowed it," Flint was still howling twenty minutes later, but it made no difference -- Harry hadn't broken any rules and Lee Jordan was still happily shouting the results -- Gryffindor had won by one hundred and seventy points to sixty. Harry heard none of this, though. He was being made a cup of strong tea back in Hagrid's hut, with Ron and Hermione.

"It was Snape," Ron was explaining, "Hermione and I saw him. He was cursing your broomstick, muttering, he wouldn't take his eyes off you."

"Rubbish," said Hagrid, who hadn't heard a word of what had gone on next to him in the stands. "Why would Snape do somethin' like that?"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked at one another, wondering what to tell him. Harry decided on the truth.

"I found out something about him," he told Hagrid. "He tried to get past that three-headed dog on Halloween. It bit him. We think he was trying to steal whatever it's guarding."

Hagrid dropped the teapot.

"How do you know about Fluffy?" he said.

"Fluffy?"

"Yeah -- he's mine -- bought him off a Greek chappie I met in the pub las' year -- I lent him to Dumbledore to guard the

"Yes?" said Harry eagerly.

"Now, don't ask me anymore," said Hagrid gruffly. "That's top secret, that is."

"But Snape's trying to steal it."

"Rubbish," said Hagrid again. "Snape's a Hogwarts teacher, he'd do nothin' of the sort."

"So why did he just try and kill Harry?" cried Hermione.

The afternoon's events certainly seemed to have changed her mind about Snape.

I know a jinx when I see one, Hagrid, I've read all about them!

You've got to keep eye contact, and Snape wasn't blinking at all, I saw him!"

"I'm tellin' yeh, yer wrong!" said Hagrid hotly. "I don' know why Harry's broom acted like that, but Snape wouldn' try an' kill a student! Now, listen to me, all three of yeh -- yer meddlin' in things that don' concern yeh. It's dangerous. You forget that dog, an' you forget what it's guardin', that's between Professor Dumbledore an' Nicolas Flamel --"

"Aha!" said Harry, "so there's someone called Nicolas Flamel involved, is there?"

Hagrid looked furious with himself.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE MIRROR OF ERISED

Christmas was coming. One morning in mid-December, Hogwarts woke to find

itself covered in several feet of snow. The lake froze solid and the Weasley twins were punished for bewitching several snowballs so that they followed Quirrell around, bouncing off the back of his turban. The few owls that managed to battle their way through the stormy sky to deliver mail had to be nursed back to health by Hagrid before they could fly off again.

No one could wait for the holidays to start. While the Gryffindor common room and the Great Hall had roaring fires, the drafty corridors had become icy and a bitter wind rattled the windows in the classrooms. Worst of all were Professor Snape's classes down in the dungeons, where their breath rose in a mist before them and they kept as close as possible to their hot cauldrons.

"I do feel so sorry," said Draco Malfoy, one Potions class, "for all those people who have to stay at Hogwarts for Christmas because they're not wanted at home."

He was looking over at Harry as he spoke. Crabbe and Goyle chuckled. Harry, who was measuring out powdered spine of lionfish, ignored them. Malfoy had been even more unpleasant than usual since the Quidditch match. Disgusted that the Slytherins had lost, he had tried to get everyone laughing at how a wide-mouthed tree frog would be replacing Harry as Seeker next. Then he'd realized that nobody found this funny, because they were all so impressed at the way Harry had managed to stay on his bucking broomstick. So Malfoy, jealous and angry, had gone back to taunting Harry about having no proper family.

It was true that Harry wasn't going back to Privet Drive for Christmas. Professor McGonagall had come around the week before, making a list of students who would be staying for the holidays, and Harry had signed up at once. He didn't feel sorry for himself at all; this would probably be the best Christmas he'd ever had. Ron and his brothers were staying, too, because Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were going to Romania to visit Charlie.

When they left the dungeons at the end of Potions, they found a large fir tree blocking the corridor ahead. Two enormous feet sticking out at the bottom and a loud puffing sound told them that Hagrid was behind it.

"Hi, Hagrid, want any help?" Ron asked, sticking his head through the branches.

"Nah, I'm all right, thanks, Ron."

"Would you mind moving out of the way?" came Malfoys cold drawl from behind them. "Are you trying to earn some extra money, Weasley? Hoping to be gamekeeper yourself when you leave Hogwarts, I suppose -- that hut of Hagrid's must seem like a palace compared to what your family's used to."

Ron dived at Malfoy just as Snape came up the stairs.

"WEASLEY!"

Ron let go of the front of Malfoy's robes.

"He was provoked, Professor Snape," said Hagrid, sticking his huge hairy face out from behind the tree. "Malfoy was insultin' his family."

"Be that as it may, fighting is against Hogwarts rules, Hagrid," said Snape silkily. "Five points from Gryffindor, Weasley, and be grateful it isn't more. Move along, all of you."

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle pushed roughly past the tree, scattering needles everywhere and smirking.

"I'll get him," said Ron, grinding his teeth at Malfoy's back, "one of these days, I'll get him --"

"I hate them both," said Harry, "Malfoy and Snape."

"Come on, cheer up, it's nearly Christmas," said Hagrid. "Tell yeh what, come with me an' see the Great Hall, looks a treat."

So the three of them followed Hagrid and his tree off to -the Great Hall, where Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick were busy with the Christmas decorations.

"Ah, Hagrid, the last tree -- put it in the far corner, would you?"

The hall looked spectacular. Festoons of holly and mistletoe hung all around the walls, and no less than twelve towering Christmas trees stood around the room, some sparkling with tiny icicles, some glittering with hundreds of candles.

"How many days you got left until yer holidays?" Hagrid asked.

"Just one," said Hermione. "And that reminds me -Harry, Ron, we've got half an hour before lunch, we should be in the library."

"Oh yeah, you're right," said Ron, tearing his eyes away from Professor Flitwick, who had golden bubbles blossoming out of his wand and was trailing them over the branches of the new tree.

"The library?" said Hagrid, following them out of the hall. "Just before the holidays? Bit keen, aren't yeh?"

"Oh, we're not working," Harry told him brightly. "Ever since you mentioned Nicolas Flamel we've been trying to find out who he is."

"You what?" Hagrid looked shocked. "Listen here -- I've told yeh -- drop it. It's nothin' to you what that dog's guardin'."

"We just want to know who Nicolas Flamel is, that's all," said Hermione.

"Unless you'd like to tell us and save us the trouble?" Harry added. "We must've been through hundreds of books already and we can't find him anywhere -- just give us a hint -- I know I've read his name somewhere."

"I'm sayin' nothin, said Hagrid flatly.

"Just have to find out for ourselves, then," said Ron, and they left Hagrid looking disgruntled and hurried off to the library.

They had indeed been searching books for Flamel's name ever since Hagrid had let it slip, because how else were they going to find out what Snape was trying to steal? The trouble was, it was very hard to know where to begin, not knowing what Flamel might have done to get himself into a book. He wasn't in Great Wizards of the Twentieth Century, or Notable Magical Names of Our Time; he was missing, too, from Important Modern Magical Discoveries, and A Study of Recent Developments in Wizardry. And then, of course, there was the sheer size of the library; tens of thousands of books; thousands of shelves; hundreds of narrow rows.

Hermione took out a list of subjects and titles she had decided to search while Ron strode off down a row of books and started pulling them off the shelves at random. Harry wandered over to the Restricted Section. He had been wondering for a while if Flamel wasn't somewhere in

there. Unfortunately, you needed a specially signed note from one of the teachers to look in any of the restricted books, and he knew he'd never get one. These were the books containing powerful Dark Magic never taught at Hogwarts, and only read by older students studying advanced Defense Against the Dark Arts.

"What are you looking for, boy?"

"Nothing," said Harry.

Madam Pince the librarian brandished a feather duster at him.

"You'd better get out, then. Go on -- out!"

Wishing he'd been a bit quicker at thinking up some story, Harry left the library. He, Ron, and Hermione had already agreed they'd better not ask Madam Pince where they could find Flamel. They were sure she'd be able to tell them, but they couldn't risk Snape hearing what they were up to.

Harry waited outside in the corridor to see if the other two had found anything, but he wasn't very hopeful. They had been looking for two weeks, after A, but as they only had odd moments between lessons it wasn't surprising they'd found nothing. What they really needed was a nice long search without Madam Pince breathing down their necks.

Five minutes later, Ron and Hermione joined him, shaking their heads. They went off to lunch.

"You will keep looking while I'm away, won't you?" said Hermione. "And send me an owl if you find anything."

"And you could ask your parents if they know who Flamel is," said Ron. "It'd be safe to ask them."

"Very safe, as they're both dentists," said Hermione.

Once the holidays had started, Ron and Harry were having too good a time to think much about Flamel. They had the dormitory to themselves and the common room was far emptier than usual, so they were able to get the good armchairs by the fire. They sat by the hour eating anything they could spear on a toasting fork -- bread, English muffins, marshmallows -- and plotting ways of getting Malfoy expelled, which were fun to talk

about even if they wouldn't work.

Ron also started teaching Harry wizard chess. This was exactly like Muggle chess except that the figures were alive, which made it a lot like directing troops in battle. Ron's set was very old and battered. Like everything else he owned, it had once belonged to someone else in his family -- in this case, his grandfather. However, old chessmen weren't a drawback at all. Ron knew them so well he never had trouble getting them to do what he wanted.

Harry played with chessmen Seamus Finnigan had lent him, and they didn't trust him at all. He wasn't a very good player yet and they kept shouting different bits of advice at him, which was confusing. "Don't send me there, can't you see his knight? Send him, we can afford to lose him." On Christmas Eve, Harry went to bed looking forward to the next day for the food and the fun, but not expecting any presents at all. When he woke early in the morning, however, the first thing he saw was a small pile of packages at the foot of his bed.

"Merry Christmas," said Ron sleepily as Harry scrambled out of bed and pulled on his bathrobe.

"You, too," said Harry. "Will you look at this? I've got some presents!"

"What did you expect, turnips?" said Ron, turning to his own pile, which was a lot bigger than Harry's.

Harry picked up the top parcel. It was wrapped in thick brown paper and scrawled across it was To Harry, from Hagrid. Inside was a roughly cut wooden flute. Hagrid had obviously whittled it himself. Harry blew it -- it sounded a bit like an owl.

A second, very small parcel contained a note.

We received your message and enclose your Christmas present. From Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia. Taped to the note was a fifty-pence piece.

"That's friendly," said Harry.

Ron was fascinated by the fifty pence.

"Weird!" he said, 'NMat a shape! This is money?"

"You can keep it," said Harry, laughing at how pleased Ron was. "Hagrid and my aunt and uncle -- so who sent these?"

"I think I know who that one's from," said Ron, turning a bit pink and pointing to a very lumpy parcel. "My mom. I told her you didn't expect any presents and -- oh, no," he groaned, "she's made you a Weasley sweater."

Harry had torn open the parcel to find a thick, hand-knitted sweater in emerald green and a large box of homemade fudge.

"Every year she makes us a sweater," said Ron, unwrapping his own, "and mine's always maroon."

"That's really nice of her," said Harry, trying the fudge, which was very tasty.

His next present also contained candy -- a large box of Chocolate Frogs from Hermione.

This only left one parcel. Harry picked it up and felt it. It was very light. He unwrapped it.

Something fluid and silvery gray went slithering to the floor where it lay in gleaming folds. Ron gasped.

"I've heard of those," he said in a hushed voice, dropping the box of Every Flavor Beans he'd gotten from Hermione. "If that's what I think it is -- they're really rare, and really valuable."

"What is it?"

Harry picked the shining, silvery cloth off the floor. It was strange to the touch, like water woven into material.

"It's an invisibility cloak," said Ron, a look of awe on his face. "I'm sure it is -- try it on."

Harry threw the cloak around his shoulders and Ron gave a yell.

"It is! Look down!"

Harry looked down at his feet, but they were gone. He dashed to the

mirror. Sure enough, his reflection looked back at him, just his head suspended in midair, his body completely invisible. He pulled the cloak over his head and his reflection vanished completely.

"There's a note!" said Ron suddenly. "A note fell out of it!"

Harry pulled off the cloak and seized the letter. Written in narrow, loopy writing he had never seen before were the following words: Your father left this in my possession before he died. It is time it was returned to you. Use it well.

A Very Merry Christmas to you.

There was no signature. Harry stared at the note. Ron was admiring the cloak.

"I'd give anything for one of these," he said. "Anything. What's the matter?"

"Nothing," said Harry. He felt very strange. Who had sent the cloak? Had it really once belonged to his father?

Before he could say or think anything else, the dormitory door was flung open and Fred and George Weasley bounded in. Harry stuffed the cloak quickly out of sight. He didn't feel like sharing it with anyone else yet.

"Merry Christmas!"

"Hey, look -- Harry's got a Weasley sweater, too!"

Fred and George were wearing blue sweaters, one with a large yellow F on it, the other a G.

"Harry's is better than ours, though," said Fred, holding up Harry's sweater. "She obviously makes more of an effort if you're not family."

"Why aren't you wearing yours, Ron?" George demanded. "Come on, get it on, they're lovely and warm."

"I hate maroon," Ron moaned halfheartedly as he pulled it over his head.

"You haven't got a letter on yours," George observed. "I suppose she thinks you don't forget your name. But we're not stupid -- we know we're called Gred and Forge."

"What's all th is noise.

Percy Weasley stuck his head through the door, looking disapproving. He had clearly gotten halfway through unwrapping his presents as he, too, carried a lumpy sweater over his arm, which

Fred seized.

"P for prefect! Get it on, Percy, come on, we're all wearing ours, even Harry got one."

"I -- don't -- want said Percy thickly, as the twins forced the sweater over his head, knocking his glasses askew.

"And you're not sitting with the prefects today, either," said

George. "Christmas is a time for family."

They frog-marched Percy from the room, his arms pinned to his side by his sweater.

Harry had never in all his life had such a Christmas dinner. A hundred fat, roast turkeys; mountains of roast and boiled potatoes; platters of chipolatas; tureens of buttered peas, silver boats of thick, rich gravy and cranberry sauce -- and stacks of wizard crackers every few feet along the table. These fantastic party favors were nothing like the feeble Muggle ones the Dursleys usually bought, with their little plastic toys and their flimsy paper hats inside. Harry pulled a wizard cracker with Fred and it didn't just bang, it went off with a blast like a cannon and engulfed them all in a cloud of blue smoke, while from the inside exploded a rear admiral's hat and several live, white mice. Up at the High Table, Dumbledore had swapped his pointed wizard's hat for a flowered bonnet, and was chuckling merrily at a joke Professor Flitwick had just read him.

Flaming Christmas puddings followed the turkey. Percy nearly broke his teeth on a silver sickle embedded in his slice. Harry watched Hagrid getting redder and redder in the face as he called for more wine, finally kissing Professor McGonagall on the cheek, who, to Harry's

amazement, giggled and blushed, her top hat lopsided.

When Harry finally left the table, he was laden down with a stack of things out of the crackers, including a pack of nonexplodable, luminous balloons, a Grow-Your-Own-Warts kit, and his own new wizard chess set. The white mice had disappeared and Harry had a nasty feeling they were going to end up as Mrs. Norris's Christmas dinner.

Harry and the Weasleys spent a happy afternoon having a furious snowball fight on the grounds. Then, cold, wet, and gasping for breath, they returned to the fire in the Gryffindor common room, where Harry broke in his new chess set by losing spectacularly to Ron. He suspected he wouldn't have lost so badly if Percy hadn't tried to help him so much.

After a meal of turkey sandwiches, crumpets, trifle, and Christmas cake, everyone felt too full and sleepy to do much before bed except sit and watch Percy chase Fred and George all over Gryffindor tower because they'd stolen his prefect badge.

It had been Harry's best Christmas day ever. Yet something had been nagging at the back of his mind all day. Not until he climbed into bed was he free to think about it: the invisibility cloak and whoever had sent it.

Ron, full of turkey and cake and with nothing mysterious to bother him, fell asleep almost as soon as he'd drawn the curtains of his four-poster. Harry leaned over the side of his own bed and pulled the cloak out from under it.

His father's... this had been his father's. He let the material flow over his hands, smoother than silk, light as air. Use it well, the note had said.

He had to try it, now. He slipped out of bed and wrapped the cloak around himself. Looking down at his legs, he saw only moonlight and shadows. It was a very funny feeling.

Use it well.

Suddenly, Harry felt wide-awake. The whole of Hogwarts was open to him in this cloak. Excitement flooded through him as he stood there in the dark and silence. He could go anywhere in this, anywhere, and Filch would never know.

Ron grunted in his sleep. Should Harry wake him? Something held him back -- his father's cloak -- he felt that this time -- the first time -- he wanted to use it alone.

He crept out of the dormitory, down the stairs, across the common room, and climbed through the portrait hole.

"Who's there?" squawked the Fat Lady. Harry said nothing. He walked quickly down the corridor.

Where should he go? He stopped, his heart racing, and thought. And then it came to him. The Restricted Section in the library. He'd be able to read as long as he liked, as long as it took to find out who Flamel was. He set off, drawing the invisibility cloak tight around him as he walked.

The library was pitch-black and very eerie. Harry lit a lamp to see his way along the rows of books. The lamp looked as if it was floating along in midair, and even though Harry could feel his arm supporting it, the sight gave him the creeps.

The Restricted Section was right at the back of the library. Step ping carefully over the rope that separated these books from the rest of the library, he held up his lamp to read the titles.

They didn't tell him much. Their peeling, faded gold letters spelled words in languages Harry couldn't understand. Some had no title at all. One book had a dark stain on it that looked horribly like blood. The hairs on the back of Harry's neck prickled. Maybe he was imagining it, maybe not, but he thought a faint whispering was coming from the books, as though they knew someone was there who shouldn't be.

He had to start somewhere. Setting the lamp down carefully on the floor, he looked along the bottom shelf for an interestinglooking book. A large black and silver volume caught his eye. He pulled it out with difficulty, because it was very heavy, and, balancing it on his knee, let it fall open.

A piercing, bloodcurdling shriek split the silence -- the book was screaming! Harry snapped it shut, but the shriek went on and on, one high, unbroken, earsplitting note. He stumbled backward and knocked over his lamp, which went out at once. Panicking, he heard footsteps coming

down the corridor outside -- stuffing the shrieking book back on the shelf, he ran for it. He passed Filch in the doorway; Filch's pale, wild eyes looked straight through him, and Harry slipped under Filch's outstretched arm and streaked off up the corridor, the book's shrieks still ringing in his ears.

He came to a sudden halt in front of a tall suit of armor. He had been so busy getting away from the library, he hadn't paid attention to where he was going. Perhaps because it was dark, he didn't recognize where he was at all. There was a suit of armor near the kitchens, he knew, but he must be five floors above there.

"You asked me to come directly to you, Professor, if anyone was wandering around at night, and somebody's been in the library Restricted Section."

Harry felt the blood drain out of his face. Wherever he was, Filch must know a shortcut, because his soft, greasy voice was getting nearer, and to his horror, it was Snape who replied, "The Restricted Section? Well, they can't be far, we'll catch them."

Harry stood rooted to the spot as Filch and Snape came around the corner ahead. They couldn't see him, of course, but it was a narrow corridor and if they came much nearer they'd knock right into him -- the cloak didn't stop him from being solid.

He backed away as quietly as he could. A door stood ajar to his left. It was his only hope. He squeezed through it, holding his breath, trying not to move it, and to his relief he managed to get inside the room without their noticing anything. They walked straight past, and Harry leaned against the wall, breathing deeply, listening to their footsteps dying away. That had been close, very close. It was a few seconds before he noticed anything about the room he had hidden in.

It looked like an unused classroom. The dark shapes of desks and chairs were piled against the walls, and there was an upturned wastepaper basket -- but propped against the wall facing him was something that didn't look as if it belonged there, something that looked as if someone had just put it there to keep it out of the way.

It was a magnificent mirror, as high as the ceiling, with an ornate gold frame, standing on two clawed feet. There was an inscription carved around the top: Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi. His panic

fading now that there was no sound of Filch and Snape, Harry moved nearer to the mirror, wanting to look at himself but see no reflection again. He stepped in front of it.

He had to clap his hands to his mouth to stop himself from screaming. He whirled around. His heart was pounding far more furiously than when the book had screamed -- for he had seen not only himself in the mirror, but a whole crowd of people standing right behind him.

But the room was empty. Breathing very fast, he turned slowly back to the mirror.

There he was, reflected in it, white and scared-looking, and there, reflected behind him, were at least ten others. Harry looked over his shoulder -- but still, no one was there. Or were they all invisible, too? Was he in fact in a room full of invisible people and this mirror's trick was that it reflected them, invisible or not?

He looked in the mirror again. A woman standing right behind his reflection was smiling at him and waving. He reached out a hand and felt the air behind him. If she was really there, he'd touch her, their reflections were so close together, but he felt only air -- she and the others existed only in the mirror.

She was a very pretty woman. She had dark red hair and her eyes -- her eyes are just like mine, Harry thought, edging a little closer to the glass. Bright green -- exactly the same shape, but then he noticed that she was crying; smiling, but crying at the same time. The tall, thin, black-haired man standing next to her put his arm around her. He wore glasses, and his hair was very untidy. It stuck up at the back, just as Harry's did.

Harry was so close to the mirror now that his nose was nearly touching that of his reflection.

"Mom?" he whispered. "Dad?"

They just looked at him, smiling. And slowly, Harry looked into the faces of the other people in the mirror, and saw other pairs of green eyes like his, other noses like his, even a little old man who looked as though he had Harry's knobbly knees -- Harry was looking at his family, for the first time in his life.

The Potters smiled and waved at Harry and he stared hungrily back at them, his hands pressed flat against the glass as though he was hoping to fall right through it and reach them. He had a powerful kind of ache inside him, half joy, half terrible sadness.

How long he stood there, he didn't know. The reflections did not fade and he looked and looked until a distant noise brought him back to his senses. He couldn't stay here, he had to find his way back to bed. He tore his eyes away from his mother's face, whispered, "I'll come back," and hurried from the room.

"You could have woken me up," said Ron, crossly.

"You can come tonight, I'm going back, I want to show you the mirror.

"I'd like to see your mom and dad," Ron said eagerly.

"And I want to see all your family, all the Weasleys, you'll be able to show me your other brothers and everyone."

"You can see them any old time," said Ron. "Just come round my house this summer. Anyway, maybe it only shows dead people. Shame about not finding Flamel, though. Have some bacon or something, why aren't you eating anything?"

Harry couldn't eat. He had seen his parents and would be seeing them again tonight. He had almost forgotten about Flamel. It didn't seem very important anymore. Who cared what the three headed dog was guarding? What did it matter if Snape stole it, really?

"Are you all right?" said Ron. "You look odd."

What Harry feared most was that he might not be able to find the mirror room again. With Ron covered in the cloak, too, they had to walk much more slowly the next night. They tried retracing Harry's route from the library, wandering around the dark passageways for nearly an hour.

"I'm freezing," said Ron. "Let's forget it and go back."

"No!" Harry hissed. I know it's here somewhere."

They passed the ghost of a tall witch gliding in the opposite direction, but saw no one else. just as Ron started moaning that his feet were dead

with cold, Harry spotted the suit of armor.

"It's here -- just here -- yes!"

They pushed the door open. Harry dropped the cloak from around his shoulders and ran to the mirror.

There they were. His mother and father beamed at the sight of him.

"See?" Harry whispered.

"I can't see anything."

"Look! Look at them all... there are loads of them...."

"I can only see you."

"Look in it properly, go on, stand where I am."

Harry stepped aside, but with Ron in front of the mirror, he couldn't see his family anymore, just Ron in his paisley pajamas.

Ron, though, was staring transfixed at his image.

"Look at me!" he said.

"Can you see all your family standing around you?"

"No -- I'm alone -- but I'm different -- I look older -- and I'm head boy!"

"What?"

"I am -- I'm wearing the badge like Bill used to -- and I'm holding the house cup and the Quidditch cup -- I'm Quidditch captain, too.

Ron tore his eyes away from this splendid sight to look excitedly at Harry.

"Do you think this mirror shows the future?"

"How can it? All my family are dead -- let me have another look --"

"You had it to yourself all last night, give me a bit more time."

"You're only holding the Quidditch cup, what's interesting about that? I want to see my parents."

"Don't push me --"

A sudden noise outside in the corridor put an end to their discussion. They hadn't realized how loudly they had been talking.

"Quick!"

Ron threw the cloak back over them as the luminous eyes of Mrs. Norris came round the door. Ron and Harry stood quite still, both thinking the same thing -- did the cloak work on cats? After what seemed an age, she turned and left.

"This isn't safe -- she might have gone for Filch, I bet she heard us. Come on."

And Ron pulled Harry out of the room.

The snow still hadn't melted the next morning.

"Want to play chess, Harry?" said Ron.

"No."

"Why don't we go down and visit Hagrid?"

"No... you go..."

"I know what you're thinking about, Harry, that mirror. Don't go back tonight."

"Why not?"

"I dunno, I've just got a bad feeling about it -- and anyway, you've had too many close shaves already. Filch, Snape, and Mrs. Norris are wandering around. So what if they can't see you? What if they walk into you? What if you knock something over?"

"You sound like Hermione."

"I'm serious, Harry, don't go."

But Harry only had one thought in his head, which was to get back in front of the mirror, and Ron wasn't going to stop him.

That third night he found his way more quickly than before. He was walking so fast he knew he was making more noise than was wise, but he didn't meet anyone.

And there were his mother and father smiling at him again, and one of his grandfathers nodding happily. Harry sank down to sit on the floor in front of the mirror. There was nothing to stop him from staying here all night with his family. Nothing at all.

Except --

"So -- back again, Harry?"

Harry felt as though his insides had turned to ice. He looked behind him. Sitting on one of the desks by the wall was none other than Albus Dumbledore. Harry must have walked straight past him, so desperate to get to the mirror he hadn't noticed him.

" -- I didn't see you, sir."

"Strange how nearsighted being invisible can make you," said Dumbledore, and Harry was relieved to see that he was smiling.

"So," said Dumbledore, slipping off the desk to sit on the floor with Harry, "you, like hundreds before you, have discovered the delights of the Mirror of Erised."

"I didn't know it was called that, Sir."

"But I expect you've realized by now what it does?"

"It -- well -- it shows me my family --"

"And it showed your friend Ron himself as head boy."

"How did you know --?"

"I don't need a cloak to become invisible," said Dumbledore gently. "Now, can you think what the Mirror of Erised shows us all?"

Harry shook his head.

"Let me explain. The happiest man on earth would be able to use the Mirror of Erised like a normal mirror, that is, he would look into it and see himself exactly as he is. Does that help?"

Harry thought. Then he said slowly, "It shows us what we want... whatever we want..."

"Yes and no," said Dumbledore quietly. "It shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts. You, who have never known your family, see them standing around you. Ronald Weasley, who has always been overshadowed by his brothers, sees himself standing alone, the best of all of them. However, this mirror will give us neither knowledge or truth. Men have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen, or been driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible.

"The Mirror will be moved to a new home tomorrow, Harry, and I ask you not to go looking for it again. If you ever do run across it, you will now be prepared. It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live, remember that. Now, why don't you put that admirable cloak back on and get off to bed?"

Harry stood up.

"Sir -- Professor Dumbledore? Can I ask you something?"

"Obviously, you've just done so," Dumbledore smiled. "You may ask me one more thing, however."

"What do you see when you look in the mirror?"

"I? I see myself holding a pair of thick, woolen socks."

Harry stared.

"One can never have enough socks," said Dumbledore. "Another Christmas has come and gone and I didn't get a single pair. People will insist on giving me books."

It was only when he was back in bed that it struck Harry that Dumbledore might not have been quite truthful. But then, he thought, as he shoved Scabbers off his pillow, it had been quite a personal question.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

NICOLAS FLAMEL

Dumbledore had convinced Harry not to go looking for the Mirror of Erised again, and for the rest of the Christmas holidays the invisibility cloak stayed folded at the bottom of his trunk. Harry wished he could forget what he'd seen in the mirror as easily, but he couldn't. He started having nightmares. Over and over again he dreamed about his parents disappearing in a flash of green light, while a high voice cackled with laughter.

"You see, Dumbledore was right, that mirror could drive you mad," said Ron, when Harry told him about these drearns.

Hermione, who came back the day before term started, took a different view of things. She was torn between horror at the idea of Harry being out of bed, roaming the school three nights in a row ("If Filch had caught you!"), and disappointment that he hadn't at least found out who Nicolas Flamel was.

They had almost given up hope of ever finding Flamel in a li- brary book, even though Harry was still sure he'd read the name somewhere. Once term had started, they were back to skimming through books for ten minutes during their breaks. Harry had even less time than the other two, because Quidditch practice had started again.

Wood was working the team harder than ever. Even the endless rain that had replaced the snow couldn't dampen his spirits. The Weasleys complained that Wood was becoming a fanatic, but Harry was on Wood's side. If they won their next match, against Hufflepuff, they would overtake Slytherin in the house championship for the first time in seven years. Quite apart from wanting to win, Harry found that he had fewer nightmares when he was tired out after training.

Then, during one particularly wet and muddy practice session, Wood gave the team a bit of bad news. He'd just gotten very angry with the

Weasleys, who kept dive-bombing each other and pretending to fall off their brooms.

"Will you stop messing around!" he yelled. "That's exactly the sort of thing that'll lose us the match! Snape's refereeing this time, and he'll be looking for any excuse to knock points off Gryffindor!"

George Weasley really did fall off his broom at these words.

"Snape's refereeing?" he spluttered through a mouthful of mud. "When's he ever refereed a Quidditch match? He's not going to be fair if we might overtake Slytherin."

The rest of the team landed next to George to complain, too.

"It's not my fault," said Wood. "We've just got to make sure we play a clean game, so Snape hasn't got an excuse to pick on us."

Which was all very well, thought Harry, but he had another reason for not wanting Snape near him while he was playing Quidditch....

The rest of the team hung back to talk to one another as usual at the end of practice, but Harry headed straight back to the Gryffindor common room, where he found Ron and Hermione playing chess. Chess was the only thing Hermione ever lost at, something Harry and Ron thought was very good for her.

"Don't talk to me for a moment," said Ron when Harry sat down next to him, "I need to concen --" He caught sight of Harry's face. "What's the matter with you? You look terrible."

Speaking quietly so that no one else would hear, Harry told the other two about Snape's sudden, sinister desire to be a Quidditch referee.

"Don't play," said Hermione at once.

"Say you're ill," said Ron.

"Pretend to break your leg," Hermione suggested.

"Really break your leg," said Ron.

"I can't," said Harry. "There isn't a reserve Seeker. If I back out,

Gryffindor can't play at all."

At that moment Neville toppled into the common room. How he had managed to climb through the portrait hole was anyone's guess, because his legs had been stuck together with what they recognized at once as the Leg-Locker Curse. He must have had to bunny hop all the way up to Gryffindor tower.

Everyone fell over laughing except Hermione, who leapt up and performed the countercurse. Neville's legs sprang apart and he got to his feet, trembling. "What happened?" Hermione asked him, leading him over to sit with Harry and Ron.

"Malfoy," said Neville shakily. "I met him outside the library. He said he'd been looking for someone to practice that on."

"Go to Professor McGonagall!" Hermione urged Neville. "Report him!"

Neville shook his head.

"I don't want more trouble," he mumbled.

"You've got to stand up to him, Neville!" said Ron. "He's used to walking all over people, but that's no reason to lie down in front of him and make it easier."

"There's no need to tell me I'm not brave enough to be in Gryffindor, Malfoy's already done that," Neville choked out.

Harry felt in the pocket of his robes and pulled out a Chocolate Frog, the very last one from the box Hermione had given him for Christmas. He gave it to Neville, who looked as though he might cry.

"You're worth twelve of Malfoy," Harry said. "The Sorting Hat chose you for Gryffindor, didn't it? And where's Malfoy? In stinking Slytherin."

Neville's lips twitched in a weak smile as he unwrapped the frog.

"Thanks, Harry... I think I'll go to bed.... D'you want the card, you collect them, don't you?"

As Neville walked away, Harry looked at the Famous Wizard card.

"Dumbledore again," he said, "He was the first one I ever-"

He gasped. He stared at the back of the card. Then he looked up at Ron and Hermione.

"I've found him!" he whispered. "I've found Flamel! I told you I'd read the name somewhere before, I read it on the train coming here -- listen to this: 'Dumbledore is particularly famous for his defeat of the dark wizard Grindelwald in 1945, for the discovery of the twelve uses of dragon's blood, and his work on alchemy with his partner, Nicolas Flamel'!"

Hermione jumped to her feet. She hadn't looked so excited since they'd gotten back the marks for their very first piece of homework.

"Stay there!" she said, and she sprinted up the stairs to the girls' dormitories. Harry and Ron barely had time to exchange mystified looks before she was dashing back, an enormous old book in her arms.

"I never thought to look in here!" she whispered excitedly. "I got this out of the library weeks ago for a bit of light reading."

"Light?" said Ron, but Hermione told him to be quiet until she'd looked something up, and started flicking frantically through the pages, muttering to herself.

At last she found what she was looking for.

"I knew it! I knew it!"

"Are we allowed to speak yet?" said Ron grumpily. Hermione ignored him.

"Nicolas Flamel," she whispered dramatically, "is the only known maker of the Sorcerer's Stone!"

This didn't have quite the effect she'd expected.

"The what?" said Harry and Ron.

"Oh, honestly, don't you two read? Look -- read that, there."

She pushed the book toward them, and Harry and Ron read: The ancient study of alchemy is concerned with making the Sorcerer's Stone, a

legendary substance with astonishing powers. The stone will transform any metal into pure gold. It also produces the Elixir of Life, which will make the drinker immortal.

There have been many reports of the Sorcerer's Stone over the centuries, but the only Stone currently in existence belongs to Mr. Nicolas Flamel, the noted alchemist and opera lover. Mr. Flamel, who celebrated his six hundred and sixty-fifth birthday last year, enjoys a quiet life in Devon with his wife, Perenelle (six hundred and fifty-eight).

"See?" said Hermione, when Harry and Ron had finished. "The dog must be guarding Flamel's Sorcerer's Stone! I bet he asked Dumbledore to keep it safe for him, because they're friends and he knew someone was after it, that's why he wanted the Stone moved out of Gringotts!"

"A stone that makes gold and stops you from ever dying!" said Harry. "No wonder Snape's after it! Anyone would want it."

"And no wonder we couldn't find Flamel in that Study of Recent Developments in Wizardry," said Ron. "He's not exactly recent if he's six hundred and sixty-five, is he?"

The next morning in Defense Against the Dark Arts, while copying down different ways of treating werewolf bites, Harry and Ron were still discussing what they'd do with a Sorcerer's Stone if they had one. It wasn't until Ron said he'd buy his own Quidditch team that Harry remembered about Snape and the coming match.

"I'm going to play," he told Ron and Hermione. "If I don't, all the Slytherins will think I'm just too scared to face Snape. I'll show them... it'll really wipe the smiles off their faces if we win."

"Just as long as we're not wiping you off the field," said Hermione.

As the match drew nearer, however, Harry became more and more nervous, whatever he told Ron and Hermione. The rest of the team wasn't too calm, either. The idea of overtaking Slytherin in the house championship was wonderful, no one had done it for seven years, but would they be allowed to, with such a biased referee?

Harry didn't know whether he was imagining it or not, but he seemed to keep running into Snape wherever he went. At times, he even wondered whether Snape was following him, trying to catch him on his own. Potions

lessons were turning into a sort of weekly torture, Snape was so horrible to Harry. Could Snape possibly know they'd found out about the Sorcerer's Stone? Harry didn't see how he could -- yet he sometimes had the horrible feeling that Snape could read minds.

Harry knew, when they wished him good luck outside the locker rooms the next afternoon, that Ron and Hermione were wondering whether they'd ever see him alive again. This wasn't what you'd call comforting. Harry hardly heard a word of Wood's pep talk as he pulled on his Quidditch robes and picked up his Nimbus Two Thousand.

Ron and Hermione, meanwhile, had found a place in the stands next to Neville, who couldn't understand why they looked so grim and worried, or why they had both brought their wands to the match. Little did Harry know that Ron and Hermione had been secretly practicing the Leg-Locker Curse. They'd gotten the idea from Malfoy using it on Neville, and were ready to use it on Snape if he showed any sign of wanting to hurt Harry.

"Now, don't forget, it's Locomotor Mortis," Hermione muttered as Ron slipped his wand up his sleeve.

"I know," Ron snapped. "Don't nag."

Back in the locker room, Wood had taken Harry aside.

"Don't want to pressure you, Potter, but if we ever need an early capture of the Snitch it's now. Finish the game before Snape can favor Hufflepuff too much."

"The whole school's out there!" said Fred Weasley, peering out of the door. "Even -- blimey -- Dumbledore's come to watch!"

Harry's heart did a somersault.

"Dumbledore?" he said, dashing to the door to make sure. Fred was right. There was no mistaking that silver beard.

Harry could have laughed out loud with relief He was safe. There was simply no way that Snape would dare to try to hurt him if Dumbledore was watching.

Perhaps that was why Snape was looking so angry as the teams marched onto the field, something that Ron noticed, too.

"I've never seen Snape look so mean," he told Hermione. "Look -they're off Ouch!"

Someone had poked Ron in the back of the head. It was Malfoy.

"Oh, sorry, Weasley, didn't see you there."

Malfoy grinned broadly at Crabbe and Goyle.

"Wonder how long Potter's going to stay on his broom this time? Anyone want a bet? What about you, Weasley?"

Ron didn't answer; Snape had just awarded Hufflepuff a penalty because George Weasley had hit a Bludger at him. Hermione, who had all her fingers crossed in her lap, was squinting fixedly at Harry, who was circling the game like a hawk, looking for the Snitch.

"You know how I think they choose people for the Gryffindor team?" said Malfoy loudly a few minutes later, as Snape awarded Hufflepuff another penalty for no reason at all. "It's people they feel sorry for. See, there's Potter, who's got no parents, then there's the Weasleys, who've got no money -- you should be on the team, Longbottom, you've got no brains."

Neville went bright red but turned in his seat to face Malfoy.

"I'm worth twelve of you, Malfoy," he stammered.

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle howled with laughter, but Ron, still not daring to take his eyes from the game, said, "You tell him, Neville."

"Longbottom, if brains were gold you'd be poorer than Weasley, and that's saying something."

Ron's nerves were already stretched to the breaking point with anxiety about Harry.

"I'm warning you, Malfoy -- one more word

"Ron!" said Hermione suddenly, "Harry --"

"What? Where?"

Harry had suddenly gone into a spectacular dive, which drew gasps and cheers from the crowd. Hermione stood up, her crossed fingers in her mouth, as Harry streaked toward the ground like a bullet.

"You're in luck, Weasley, Potter's obviously spotted some money on the ground!" said Malfoy.

Ron snapped. Before Malfoy knew what was happening, Ron was on top of him, wrestling him to the ground. Neville hesitated, then clambered over the back of his seat to help.

"Come on, Harry!" Hermione screamed, leaping onto her seat to watch as Harry sped straight at Snape -- she didn't even notice Malfoy and Ron rolling around under her seat, or the scuffles and yelps coming from the whirl of fists that was Neville, Crabbe, and Goyle.

Up in the air, Snape turned on his broomstick just in time to see something scarlet shoot past him, missing him by inches -- the next second, Harry had pulled out of the dive, his arm raised in triumph, the Snitch clasped in his hand.

The stands erupted; it had to be a record, no one could ever remember the Snitch being caught so quickly.

"Ron! Ron! Where are you? The game's over! Harry's won! We've won! Gryffindor is in the lead!" shrieked Hermione, dancing up and down on her seat and hugging Parvati Patil in the row in front.

Harry jumped off his broom, a foot from the ground. He couldn't believe it. He'd done it -- the game was over; it had barely lasted five minutes. As Gryffindors came spilling onto the field, he saw Snape land nearby, white-faced and tight-lipped -- then Harry felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up into Dumbledore's smiling face.

"Well done," said Dumbledore quietly, so that only Harry could hear. "Nice to see you haven't been brooding about that mirror... been keeping busy... excellent..."

Snape spat bitterly on the ground.

Harry left the locker room alone some time later, to take his Nimbus Two Thousand back to the broomshed. He couldn't ever remember feeling

happier. He'd really done something to be proud of now -- no one could say he was just a famous name any more. The evening air had never smelled so sweet. He walked over the damp grass, reliving the last hour in his head, which was a happy blur: Gryffindors running to lift him onto their shoulders; Ron and Hermione in the distance, jumping up and down, Ron cheering through a heavy nosebleed.

Harry had reached the shed. He leaned against the wooden door and looked up at Hogwarts, with its windows glowing red in the setting sun. Gryffindor in the lead. He'd done it, he'd shown Snape....

And speaking of Snape...

A hooded figure came swiftly down the front steps of the castle. Clearly not wanting to be seen, it walked as fast as possible toward the forbidden forest. Harry's victory faded from his mind as he watched. He recognized the figure's prowling walk. Snape, sneaking into the forest while everyone else was at dinner -- what was going on?

Harry jumped back on his Nimbus Two Thousand and took off. Gliding silently over the castle he saw Snape enter the forest at a run. He followed.

The trees were so thick he couldn't see where Snape had gone. He flew in circles, lower and lower, brushing the top branches of trees until he heard voices. He glided toward them and landed noiselessly in a towering beech tree.

He climbed carefully along one of the branches, holding tight to his broomstick, trying to see through the leaves. Below, in a shadowy clearing, stood Snape, but he wasn't alone. Quirrell was there, too. Harry couldn't make out the look on his face, but he was stuttering worse than ever. Harry strained to catch what they were saying.

"... d-don't know why you wanted t-t-to meet here of all p-places, Severus..."

"Oh, I thought we'd keep this private," said Snape, his voice icy. "Students aren't supposed to know about the Sorcerer's Stone, after all."

Harry leaned forward. Quirrell was mumbling something. Snape interrupted him.

"Have you found out how to get past that beast of Hagrid's yet?"

"B-b-but Severus, I --"

"You don't want me as your enemy, Quirrell," said Snape, taking a step toward him.

"I-I don't know what you

"You know perfectly well what I mean."

An owl hooted loudly, and Harry nearly fell out of the tree. He steadied himself in time to hear Snape say, "-- your little bit of hocus-pocus. I'm waiting."

"B-but I d-d-don't --"

"Very well," Snape cut in. "We'll have another little chat soon, when you've had time to think things over and decided where your loyalties lie."

He threw his cloak over his head and strode out of the clearing. It was almost dark now, but Harry could see Quirrell, standing quite still as though he was petrified.

"Harry, where have you been?" Hermione squeaked.

"We won! You won! We won!" shouted Ron, thumping Harry on the back. "And I gave Malfoy a black eye, and Neville tried to take on Crabbe and Goyle single-handed! He's still out cold but Madam Pomftey says he'll be all right - talk about showing Slytherin! Everyone's waiting for you in the common room, we're having a party, Fred and George stole some cakes and stuff from the kitchens."

"Never mind that now," said Harry breathlessly. "Let's find an empty room, you wait 'til you hear this...."

He made sure Peeves wasn't inside before shutting the door behind them, then he told them what he'd seen and heard.

"So we were right, it is the Sorcerer's Stone, and Snape's trying to force Quirrell to help him get it. He asked if he knew how to get past

Fluffy - and he said something about Quirrell's 'hocus pocuss-- I reckon there are other things guarding the stone apart from Fluffy, loads of enchantments, probably, and Quirrell would have done some anti-Dark Arts spell that Snape needs to break through --"

"So you mean the Stone's only safe as long as Quirrell stands up to Snape?" said Hermione in alarm.

"It'll be gone by next Tuesday," said Ron.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

NORBERT THE NORWEGIAN RIDGEBACK

Quirrell, however, must have been braver than they'd thought. In the weeks that followed he did seem to be getting paler and thinner, but it didn't look as though he'd cracked yet.

Every time they passed the third-floor corridor, Harry, Ron, and Hermione would press their ears to the door to check that Fluffy was still growling inside. Snape was sweeping about in his usual bad temper, which surely meant that the Stone was still safe. Whenever Harry passed Quirrell these days he gave him an encouraging sort of smile, and Ron had started telling people off for laughing at Quirrell's stutter.

Hermione, however, had more on her mind than the Sorcerer's Stone. She had started drawing up study schedules and colorcoding all her notes. Harry and Ron wouldn't have minded, but she kept nagging them to do the same.

"Hermione, the exams are ages away."

"Ten weeks," Hermione snapped. "That's not ages, that's like a second to Nicolas Flamel."

"But we're not six hundred years old," Ron reminded her. "Anyway, what are you studying for, you already know it A."

"What am I studying for? Are you crazy? You realize we need to pass these exams to get into the second year? They're very important, I should have started studying a month ago, I don't know what's gotten into me...."

Unfortunately, the teachers seemed to be thinking along the same lines as Hermione. They piled so much homework on them that the Easter holidays weren't nearly as much fun as the Christmas ones. It was hard to relax with Hermione next to you reciting the twelve uses of dragon's blood or practicing wand movements. Moaning and yawning, Harry and Ron spent most of their free time in the library with her, trying to get through all their extra work.

"I'll never remember this," Ron burst out one afternoon, throwing down his quill and looking longingly out of the library window. It was the first really fine day they'd had in months. The sky was a clear, forget-me-not blue, and there was a feeling in the air of summer coming.

Harry, who was looking up "Dittany" in One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi, didn't look up until he heard Ron say, "Hagrid! What are you doing in the library?"

Hagrid shuffled into view, hiding something behind his back. He looked very out of place in his moleskin overcoat.

"Jus' lookin'," he said, in a shifty voice that got their interest at once. "An' what're you lot up ter?" He looked suddenly suspicious. "Yer not still lookin' fer Nicolas Flamel, are yeh?" "Oh, we found out who he is ages ago," said Ron impressively. "And we know what that dog's guarding, it's a Sorcerer's St --"

"Shhhh!" Hagrid looked around quickly to see if anyone was listening. "Don' go shoutin' about it, what's the matter with yeh?"

"There are a few things we wanted to ask you, as a matter of fact," said Harry, "about what's guarding the Stone apart from Fluffy --"

"SHHHH!" said Hagrid again. "Listen - come an' see me later, I'm not promisin' I'll tell yeh anythin', mind, but don' go rabbitin' about it in here, students aren' s'pposed ter know. They'll think I've told yeh --"

"See you later, then," said Harry.

Hagrid shuffled off.

"What was he hiding behind his back?" said Hermione thoughtfully.

"Do you think it had anything to do with the Stone?"

"I'm going to see what section he was in," said Ron, who'd had enough of working. He came back a minute later with a pile of books in his arms and slammed them down on the table.

"Dragons!" he whispered. "Hagrid was looking up stuff about dragons! Look at these: Dragon Species of Great Britain and Ireland; From Egg to Inferno, A Dragon Keeper's Guide."

"Hagrid's always wanted a dragon, he told me so the first time I ever met him, " said Harry.

"But it's against our laws," said Ron. "Dragon breeding was outlawed by the Warlocks' Convention of 1709, everyone knows that. It's hard to stop Muggles from noticing us if we're keeping dragons in the back garden - anyway, you can't tame dragons, it's dangerous. You should see the burns Charlie's got off wild ones in Romania."

"But there aren't wild dragons in Britain?" said Harry.

"Of course there are," said Ron. "Common Welsh Green and Hebridean Blacks. The Ministry of Magic has a job hushing them up, I can tell you. Our kind have to keep putting spells on Muggles who've spotted them, to make them forget."

"So what on earths Hagrid up to?" said Hermione.

When they knocked on the door of the gamekeeper's hut an hour later, they were surprised to see that all the curtains were closed. Hagrid called "Who is it?" before he let them in, and then shut the door quickly behind them.

It was stifling hot inside. Even though it was such a warm day, there was a blazing fire in the grate. Hagrid made them tea and offered them stoat sandwiches, which they refused.

"So -- yeh wanted to ask me somethin'?"

"Yes," said Harry. There was no point beating around the bush. "We were wondering if you could tell us what's guarding the Sorcerer's Stone apart from Fluffy."

Hagrid frowned at him.

"0' course I cant, he said. "Number one, I don' know meself. Number two, yeh know too much already, so I wouldn' tell yeh if I could. That Stone's here fer a good reason. It Was almost stolen outta Gringotts - I s'ppose yeh've worked that out an' all? Beats me how yeh even know abou' Fluffy."

"Oh, come on, Hagrid, you might not want to tell us, but you do know, you know everything that goes on round here," said Hermione in a warm, flattering voice. Hagrid's beard twitched and they could tell he was smiling. "We only wondered who had done the guarding, really." Hermione went on. "We wondered who Dumbledore had trusted enough to help him, apart from you."

Hagrid's chest swelled at these last words. Harry and Ron beamed at Hermione.

"Well, I don' s'pose it could hurt ter tell yeh that... let's see... he borrowed Fluffy from me... then some o' the teachers did enchantments... Professor Sprout -- Professor Flitwick -- Professor McGonagall --" he ticked them off on his fingers, "Professor Quirrell -- an' Dumbledore himself did somethin', o' course. Hang on, I've forgotten someone. Oh yeah, Professor Snape."

"Snape?"

"Yeah -- yer not still on abou' that, are yeh? Look, Snape helped protect the Stone, he's not about ter steal it."

Harry knew Ron and Hermione were thinking the same as he was. If Snape had been in on protecting the Stone, it must have been easy to find out how the other teachers had guarded it. He probably knew everything -- except, it seemed, Quirrell's spell and how to get past Fluffy.

"You're the only one who knows how to get past Fluffy. aren't you, Hagrid?" said Harry anxiously. "And you wouldn't tell anyone, would you? Not even one of the teachers?"

"Not a soul knows except me an' Dumbledore," said Hagrid proudly.

"Well, that's something," Harry muttered to the others. "Hagrid, can we

have a window open? I'm boiling."

"Can't, Harry, sorry," said Hagrid. Harry noticed him glance at the fire. Harry looked at it, too.

"Hagrid -- what's that?"

But he already knew what it was. In the very heart of the fire, underneath the kettle, was a huge, black egg.

"Ah," said Hagrid, fiddling nervously with his beard, "That's er..."

"Where did you get it, Hagrid?" said Ron, crouching over the fire to get a closer look at the egg. "It must've cost you a fortune."

"Won it," said Hagrid. "Las' night. I was down in the village havin' a few drinks an' got into a game o' cards with a stranger. Think he was quite glad ter get rid of it, ter be honest."

"But what are you going to do with it when it's hatched?" said Hermione.

"Well, I've bin doin' some readin' , said Hagrid, pulling a large book from under his pillow. "Got this outta the library -- Dragon Breeding for Pleasure and Profit -- it's a bit outta date, o' course, but it's all in here. Keep the egg in the fire, 'cause their mothers breathe on I em, see, an' when it hatches, feed it on a bucket o' brandy mixed with chicken blood every half hour. An' see here -- how ter recognize diff'rent eggs -- what I got there's a Norwegian Ridgeback. They're rare, them."

He looked very pleased with himself, but Hermione didn't.

"Hagrid, you live in a wooden house," she said.

But Hagrid wasn't listening. He was humming merrily as he stoked the fire.

So now they had something else to worry about: what might happen to Hagrid if anyone found out he was hiding an illegal dragon in his hut. "Wonder what it's like to have a peaceful life," Ron sighed, as evening after evening they struggled through all the extra homework they were getting. Hermione had now started making study schedules for Harry and Ron, too. It was driving them nuts.

Then, one breakfast time, Hedwig brought Harry another note from Hagrid. He had written only two words: It's hatching.

Ron wanted to skip Herbology and go straight down to the hut. Hermione wouldn't hear of it.

"Hermione, how many times in our lives are we going to see a dragon hatching?"

"We've got lessons, we'll get into trouble, and that's nothing to what Hagrid's going to be in when someone finds out what he's doing --"

"Shut up!" Harry whispered.

Malfoy was only a few feet away and he had stopped dead to listen. How much had he heard? Harry didn't like the look on Malfoy's face at all.

Ron and Hermione argued all the way to Herbology and in the end, Hermione agreed to run down to Hagrid's with the other two during morning break. When the bell sounded from the castle at the end of their lesson, the three of them dropped their trowels at once and hurried through the grounds to the edge of the forest. Hagrid greeted them, looking flushed and excited.

"It's nearly out." He ushered them inside.

The egg was lying on the table. There were deep cracks in it. Something was moving inside; a funny clicking noise was coming from it.

They all drew their chairs up to the table and watched with bated breath.

All at once there was a scraping noise and the egg split open. The baby dragon flopped onto the table. It wasn't exactly pretty; Harry thought it looked like a crumpled, black umbrella. Its spiny wings were huge compared to its skinny jet body, it had a long snout with wide nostrils, the stubs of horns and bulging, orange eyes.

It sneezed. A couple of sparks flew out of its snout.

"Isn't he beautiful?" Hagrid murmured. He reached out a hand to stroke the dragon's head. It snapped at his fingers, showing pointed fangs.

"Bless him, look, he knows his mommy!" said Hagrid.

"Hagrid," said Hermione, "how fast do Norwegian Ridgebacks grow, exactly?"

Hagrid was about to answer when the color suddenly drained from his face -- he leapt to his feet and ran to the window.

"What's the matter?"

"Someone was lookin' through the gap in the curtains -- it's a kid -- he's runnin' back up ter the school."

Harry bolted to the door and looked out. Even at a distance there was no mistaking him.

Malfoy had seen the dragon.

Something about the smile lurking on Malfoy's face during the next week made Harry, Ron, and Hermione very nervous. They spent most of their free time in Hagrid's darkened hut, trying to reason with him.

"Just let him go," Harry urged. "Set him free."

"I can't," said Hagrid. "He's too little. He'd die."

They looked at the dragon. It had grown three times in length in just a week. Smoke kept furling out of its nostrils. Hagrid hadn't been doing his gamekeeping duties because the dragon was keeping him so busy. There were empty brandy bottles and chicken feathers all over the floor.

"I've decided to call him Norbert," said Hagrid, looking at the dragon with misty eyes. "He really knows me now, watch. Norbert! Norbert! Where's Mommy?"

"He's lost his marbles," Ron muttered in Harry's ear.

"Hagrid," said Harry loudly, "give it two weeks and Norbert's going to be as long as your house. Malfoy could go to Dumbledore at any moment."

Hagrid bit his lip.

"I -- I know I can't keep him forever, but I can't jus' dump him, I can't."

Harry suddenly turned to Ron. Charlie, he said.

"You're losing it, too," said Ron. "I'm Ron, remember?"

"No -- Charlie -- your brother, Charlie. In Romania. Studying dragons. We could send Norbert to him. Charlie can take care of him and then put him back in the wild!"

"Brilliant!" said Ron. "How about it, Hagrid?"

And in the end, Hagrid agreed that they could send -an owl to Charlie to ask him.

The following week dragged by. Wednesday night found Hermione and Harry sitting alone in the common room, long after everyone else had gone to bed. The clock on the wall had just

chimed midnight when the portrait hole burst open. Ron appeared out of nowhere as he pulled off Harry's invisibility cloak. He had been down at Hagrid's hut, helping him feed Norbert, who was now eating dead rats by the crate.

"It bit me!" he said, showing them his hand, which was wrapped in a bloody handkerchief. "I'm not going to be able to hold a quill for a week. I tell you, that dragon's the most horrible animal I've ever met, but the way Hagrid goes on about it, you'd think it was a fluffy little bunny rabbit. When it bit me he told me off for frightening it. And when I left, he was singing it a lullaby."

There was a tap on the dark window.

"It's Hedwig!" said Harry, hurrying to let her in. "She'll have Charlie's answer!"

The three of them put their heads together to read the note.

Dear Ron,

How are you? Thanks for the letter -- I'd be glad to take the Norwegian Ridgeback, but it won't be easy getting him here. I think the best thing

will be to send him over with some friends of mine who are coming to visit me next week. Trouble is, they mustn't be seen carrying an illegal dragon.

Could you get the Ridgeback up the tallest tower at midnight on Saturday? They can meet you there and take him away while it's still dark.

Send me an answer as soon as possible.

Love,

Charlie

They looked at one another.

"We've got the invisibility cloak," said Harry. "It shouldn't be too difficult -- I think the cloaks big enough to cover two of us and Norbert."

It was a mark of how bad the last week had been that the other two agreed with him. Anything to get rid of Norbert -- and Malfoy.

There was a hitch. By the next morning, Ron's bitten hand had swollen to twice its usual size. He didn't know whether it was safe to go to Madam Pomfrey -- would she recognize a dragon bite? By the afternoon, though, he had no choice. The cut had turned a nasty shade of green. It looked as if Norbert's fangs were poisonous.

Harry and Hermione rushed up to the hospital wing at the end of the day to find Ron in a terrible state in bed.

"It's not just my hand," he whispered, "although that feels like it's about to fall off. Malfoy told Madam Pomfrey he wanted to borrow one of my books so he could come and have a good laugh at me. He kept threatening to tell her what really bit me -- I've told her it was a dog, but I don't think she believes me -I shouldn't have hit him at the Quidditch match, that's why he's doing this."

Harry and Hermione tried to calm Ron down.

"It'll all be over at midnight on Saturday," said Hermione, but this didn't soothe Ron at all. On the contrary, he sat bolt upright and broke

into a sweat.

"Midnight on Saturday!" he said in a hoarse voice. "Oh no oh no -- I've just remembered -- Charlie's letter was in that book Malfoy took, he's going to know we're getting rid of Norbert."

Harry and Hermione didn't get a chance to answer. Madam Pomfrey came over at that moment and made them leave, saying Ron needed sleep.

"It's too late to change the plan now," Harry told Hermione. "We haven't got time to send Charlie another owl, and this could be our only chance to get rid of Norbert. We'll have to risk it. And we have got the invisibility cloak, Malfoy doesn't know about that."

They found Fang, the boarhound, sitting outside with a bandaged tail when they went to tell Hagrid, who opened a window to talk to them.

"I won't let you in," he puffed. "Norbert's at a tricky stage -- nothin' I can't handle."

When they told him about Charlie's letter, his eyes filled with tears, although that might have been because Norbert had just bitten him on the leg.

"Aargh! It's all right, he only got my boot -- jus' playin' -- he's only a baby, after all."

The baby banged its tail on the wall, making the windows rattle. Harry and Hermione walked back to the castle feeling Saturday couldn't come quickly enough.

They would have felt sorry for Hagrid when the time came for him to say good-bye to Norbert if they hadn't been so worried about what they had to do. It was a very dark, cloudy night, and they were a bit late arriving at Hagrid's hut because they'd had to wait for Peeves to get out of their way in the entrance hall, where he'd been playing tennis against the wall. Hagrid had Norbert packed and ready in a large crate.

"He's got lots o' rats an' some brandy fer the journey," said Hagrid in a muffled voice. "An' I've packed his teddy bear in case he gets lonely."

From inside the crate came ripping noises that sounded to Harry as

though the teddy was having his head torn off.

"Bye-bye, Norbert!" Hagrid sobbed, as Harry and Hermione covered the crate with the invisibility cloak and stepped underneath it themselves. "Mommy will never forget you!"

How they managed to get the crate back up to the castle, they never knew. Midnight ticked nearer as they heaved Norbert up the marble staircase in the entrance hall and along the dark corridors. UP another staircase, then another -- even one of Harry's shortcuts didn't make the work much easier.

"Nearly there!" Harry panted as they reached the corridor beneath the tallest tower.

Then a sudden movement ahead of them made them almost drop the crate. Forgetting that they were already invisible, they shrank into the shadows, staring at the dark outlines of two people grappling with each other ten feet away. A lamp flared.

Professor McGonagall, in a tartan bathrobe and a hair net, had Malfoy by the ear.

"Detention!" she shouted. "And twenty points from Slytherin! Wandering around in the middle of the night, how dare you --"

"You don't understand, Professor. Harry Potter's coming -- he's got a dragon!"

"What utter rubbish! How dare you tell such lies! Come on -- I shall see Professor Snape about you, Malfoy!"

The steep spiral staircase up to the top of the tower seemed the easiest thing in the world after that. Not until they'd stepped out into the cold night air did they throw off the cloak, glad to be able to breathe properly again. Hermione did a sort of jig.

"Malfoy's got detention! I could sing!"

"Don't," Harry advised her.

Chuckling about Malfoy, they waited, Norbert thrashing about in his crate. About ten minutes later, four broomsticks came swooping down out

of the darkness.

Charlie's friends were a cheery lot. They showed Harry and Hermione the harness they'd rigged up, so they could suspend Norbert between them. They all helped buckle Norbert safely into it and then Harry and Hermione shook hands with the others and thanked them very much.

At last, Norbert was going... going... gone.

They slipped back down the spiral staircase, their hearts as light as their hands, now that Norbert was off them. No more dragon -- Malfoy in detention -- what could spoil their happiness?

The answer to that was waiting at the foot of the stairs. As they stepped into the corridor, Filch's face loomed suddenly out of the darkness.

"Well, well, well," he whispered, "we are in trouble."

They'd left the invisibility cloak on top of the tower.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE FORIBIDDEN FOREST

Things couldn't have been worse.

Filch took them down to Professor McGonagall's study on the first floor, where they sat and waited without saying a word to each other. Hermione was trembling. Excuses, alibis, and wild cover- up stories chased each other around Harry's brain, each more feeble than the last. He couldn't see how they were going to get out of trouble this time. They were cornered. How could they have been so stupid as to forget the cloak? There was no reason on earth that Professor McGonagall would accept for their being out of bed and creeping around the school in the dead of night, let alone being up the tallest astronomy tower, which was out-of-bounds except for classes. Add Norbert and the invisibility cloak, and they might as well be packing their bags already.

Had Harry thought that things couldn't have been worse? He was wrong. When Professor McGonagall appeared, she was leading Neville.

"Harry!" Neville burst Out, the moment he saw the other two. "I was trying to find you to warn you, I heard Malfoy saying he was going to catch you, he said you had a drag --"

Harry shook his head violently to shut Neville up, but Professor McGonagall had seen. She looked more likely to breathe fire than Norbert as she towered over the three of them.

"I would never have believed it of any of you. Mr. Filch says you were up in the astronomy tower. It's one o'clock in the morning. Explain yourselves."

It was the first time Hermione had ever failed to answer a teacher's question. She was staring at her slippers, as still as a statue.

"I think I've got a good idea of what's been going on," said Professor McGonagall. "It doesn't take a genius to work it out. You fed Draco Malfoy some cock-and-bull story about a dragon, trying to get him out of bed and into trouble. I've already caught him. I suppose you think it's funny that Longbottom here heard the story and believed it, too?"

Harry caught Neville's eye and tried to tell him without words that this wasn't true, because Neville was looking stunned and hurt. Poor, blundering Neville -- Harry knew what it must have cost him to try and find them in the dark, to warn them.

"I'm disgusted," said Professor McGonagall. "Four students out of bed in one night! I've never heard of such a thing before! You, Miss Granger, I thought you had more sense. As for you, Mr. Potter, I thought Gryffindor meant more to you than this. All three of you will receive detentions -- yes, you too, Mr. Longbottom, nothing gives you the right to walk around school at night, especially these days, it's very dangerous -- and fifty points will be taken from Gryffindor."

"Fifty?" Harry gasped -- they would lose the lead, the lead he'd won in the last Quidditch match.

"Fifty points each," said Professor McGonagall, breathing heavily through her long, pointed nose.

"Professor -- please

"You can't --"

"Don't tell me what I can and can't do, Potter. Now get back to bed, all of you. I've never been more ashamed of Gryffindor students."

A hundred and fifty points lost. That put Gryffindor in last place. In one night, they'd ruined any chance Gryffindor had had for the house cup. Harry felt as though the bottom had dropped out of his stomach. How could they ever make up for this?

Harry didn't sleep all night. He could hear Neville sobbing into his pillow for what seemed like hours. Harry couldn't think of anything to say to comfort him. He knew Neville, like himself, was dreading the dawn. What would happen when the rest of Gryffindor found out what they'd done?

At first, Gryffindors passing the giant hourglasses that recorded the house points the next day thought there'd been a mistake. How could they suddenly have a hundred and fifty points fewer than yesterday? And then the story started to spread: Harry Potter, the famous Harry Potter, their hero of two Quidditch matches, had lo st them all those points, him and a couple of other stupid first years.

From being one of the most popular and admired people at the school, Harry was suddenly the most hated. Even Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs turned on him, because everyone had been longing to see Slytherin lose the house cup. Everywhere Harry went, people pointed and didn't trouble to lower their voices as they insulted him. Slytherins, on the other hand, clapped as he walked past them, whistling and cheering, "Thanks Potter, we owe you one!"

Only Ron stood by him.

"They'll all forget this in a few weeks. Fred and George have lost loads of points in all the time they've been here, and people still like them."

"They've never lost a hundred and fifty points in one go, though, have they?" said Harry miserably.

"Well -- no," Ron admitted.

It was a bit late to repair the damage, but Harry swore to himself not to meddle in things that weren't his business from now on. He'd had it

with sneaking around and spying. He felt so ashamed of himself that he went to Wood and offered to resign from the Quidditch team.

"Resign?" Wood thundered. "What good'll that do? How are we going to get any points back if we can't win at Quidditch?"

But even Quidditch had lost its fun. The rest of the team wouldn't speak to Harry during practice, and if they had to speak about him, they called him "the Seeker."

Hermione and Neville were suffering, too. They didn't have as bad a time as Harry, because they weren't as well-known, but nobody would speak to them, either. Hermione had stopped drawing attention to herself in class, keeping her head down and working in silence.

Harry was almost glad that the exams weren't far away. All the studying he had to do kept his mind off his misery. He, Ron, and Hermione kept to themselves, working late into the night, trying to remember the ingredients in complicated potions, learn charms and spells by heart, memorize the dates of magical discoveries and goblin rebellions....

Then, about a week before the exams were due to start, Harry's new resolution not to interfere in anything that didn't concern him was put to an unexpected test. Walking back from the library on his own one afternoon, he heard somebody whimpering from a classroom up ahead. As he drew closer, he heard Quirrell's voice.

"No -- no -- not again, please --"

It sounded as though someone was threatening him. Harry moved closer.

"All right -- all right --" he heard Quirrell sob.

Next second, Quirrell came hurrying out of the classroom straightening his turban. He was pale and looked as though he was about to cry. He strode out of sight; Harry didn't think Quirrell had even noticed him. He waited until Quirrell's footsteps had disappeared, then peered into the classroom. It was empty, but a door stood ajar at the other end. Harry was halfway toward it before he remembered what he'd promised himself about not meddling.

All the same, he'd have gambled twelve Sorcerer's Stones that Snape had just left the room, and from what Harry had just heard, Snape would be

walking with a new spring in his step -- Quirrell seemed to have given in at last.

Harry went back to the library, where Hermione was testing Ron on Astronomy. Harry told them what he'd heard.

"Snape's done it, then!" said Ron. "If Quirrell's told him how to break his Anti-Dark Force spell --"

"There's still Fluffy, though," said Hermione.

"Maybe Snape's found out how to get past him without asking Hagrid," said Ron, looking up at the thousands of books surrounding them. "I bet there's a book somewhere in here telling you how to get past a giant three-headed dog. So what do we do, Harry?"

The light of adventure was kindling again in Ron's eyes, but Hermione answered before Harry could.

"Go to Dumbledore. That's what we should have done ages ago. If we try anything ourselves we'll be thrown out for sure."

"But we've got no proof!" said Harry. "Quirrell's too scared to back us up. Snape's only got to say he doesn't know how the troll got in at Halloween and that he was nowhere near the third floor -- who do you think they'll believe, him or us? It's not exactly a secret we hate him, Dumbledore'll think we made it up to get him sacked. Filch wouldn't help us if his life depended on it, he's too friendly with Snape, and the more students get thrown out, the better, he'll think. And don't forget, we're not supposed to know about the Stone or Fluffy. That'll take a lot of explaining."

Hermione looked convinced, but Ron didn't.

"If we just do a bit of poking around --"

"No," said Harry flatly, "we've done enough poking around."

He pulled a map of Jupiter toward him and started to learn the names of its moons.

The following morning, notes were delivered to Harry, Hermione, and Neville at the breakfast table. They were all the same:

Your detention will take place at eleven o'clock tonight. Meet Mr. Filch in the entrance hall.

Professor McGonagall Harry had forgotten they still had detentions to do in the furor over the points they'd lost. He half expected Hermione to complain that this was a whole night of studying lost, but she didn't say a word. Like Harry, she felt they deserved what they'd got.

At eleven o'clock that night, they said good-bye to Ron in the common room and went down to the entrance hall with Neville. Filch was already there -- and so was Malfoy. Harry had also forgotten that Malfoy had gotten a detention, too.

"Follow me," said Filch, lighting a lamp and leading them outside.

I bet you'll think twice about breaking a school rule again, won't you, eh?" he said, leering at them. "Oh yes... hard work and pain are the best teachers if you ask me.... It's just a pity they let the old punishments die out... hang you by your wrists from the ceiling for a few days, I've got the chains still in my office, keep 'em well oiled in case they're ever needed.... Right, off we go, and don't think of running off, now, it'll be worse for you if you do."

They marched off across the dark grounds. Neville kept sniffing. Harry wondered what their punishment was going to be. It must be something really horrible, or Filch wouldn't be sounding so delighted.

The moon was bright, but clouds scudding across it kept throwing them into darkness. Ahead, Harry could see the lighted windows of Hagrid's hut. Then they heard a distant shout.

"Is that you, Filch? Hurry up, I want ter get started."

Harry's heart rose; if they were going to be working with Hagrid it wouldn't be so bad. His relief must have showed in his -face, because Filch said, "I suppose you think you'll be enjoying yourself with that oaf? Well, think again, boy -- it's into the forest you're going and I'm much mistaken if you'll all come out in one piece."

At this, Neville let out a little moan, and Malfoy stopped dead in his tracks.

"The forest?" he repeated, and he didn't sound quite as cool as usual. "We can't go in there at night -- there's all sorts of things in there -- werewolves, I heard."

Neville clutched the sleeve of Harry's robe and made a choking noise.

"That's your problem, isn't it?" said Filch, his voice cracking with glee. "Should've thought of them werewolves before you got in trouble, shouldn't you?"

Hagrid came striding toward them out of the dark, Fang at his heel. He was carrying his large crossbow, and a quiver of arrows hung over his shoulder.

"Abou' time," he said. "I bin waitin' fer half an hour already. All right, Harry, Hermione?"

"I shouldn't be too friendly to them, Hagrid," said Filch coldly, they're here to be punished, after all."

"That's why yer late, is it?" said Hagrid, frowning at Filch. "Bin lecturin' them, eh? 'Snot your place ter do that. Yeh've done yer bit, I'll take over from here."

"I'll be back at dawn," said Filch, "for what's left of them," he added nastily, and he turned and started back toward the castle, his lamp bobbing away in the darkness.

Malfoy now turned to Hagrid.

"I'm not going in that forest, he said, and Harry was pleased to hear the note of panic in his voice.

"Yeh are if yeh want ter stay at Hogwarts," said Hagrid fiercely. "Yeh've done wrong an' now yehve got ter pay fer it."

"But this is servant stuff, it's not for students to do. I thought we'd be copying lines or something, if my father knew I was doing this, he'd

tell yer that's how it is at Hogwarts," Hagrid growled. "Copyin' lines! What good's that ter anyone? Yeh'll do summat useful or Yeh'll get out. If yeh think yer father'd rather you were expelled, then get back off ter the castle an' pack. Go on'"

Malfoy didn't move. He looked at Hagrid furiously, but then dropped his gaze.

"Right then," said Hagrid, "now, listen carefully, 'cause it's dangerous what we're gonna do tonight, an' I don' want no one takin' risks. Follow me over here a moment."

He led them to the very edge of the forest. Holding his lamp up high, he pointed down a narrow, winding earth track that disappeared into the thick black trees. A light breeze lifted their hair as they looked into the forest.

"Look there," said Hagrid, "see that stuff shinin' on the ground? Silvery stuff? That's unicorn blood. There's a unicorn in there bin hurt badly by summat. This is the second time in a week. I found one dead last Wednesday. We're gonna try an' find the poor thing. We might have ter put it out of its misery."

"And what if whatever hurt the unicorn finds us first?" said Malfoy, unable to keep the fear out of his voice.

"There's nothin' that lives in the forest that'll hurt yeh if yer with me or Fang," said Hagrid. "An' keep ter the path. Right, now, we're gonna split inter two parties an' follow the trail in diff'rent directions. There's blood all over the place, it must've bin staggerin' around since last night at least."

"I want Fang," said Malfoy quickly, looking at Fang's long teeth.

"All right, but I warn yeh, he's a coward," said Hagrid. " So me, Harry, an' Hermione'll go one way an' Draco, Neville, an' Fang'll go the other. Now, if any of us finds the unicorn, we'll send up green sparks, right? Get yer wands out an' practice now -- that's it -- an' if anyone gets in trouble, send up red sparks, an' we'll all come an' find yeh -- so, be careful -- let's go."

The forest was black and silent. A little way into it they reached a fork in the earth path, and Harry, Hermione, and Hagrid took the left path while Malfoy, Neville, and Fang took the right.

They walked in silence, their eyes on the ground. Every now and then a ray of moonlight through the branches above lit a spot of silver-blue

blood on the fallen leaves.

Harry saw that Hagrid looked very worried.

"Could a werewolf be killing the unicorns?" Harry asked.

"Not fast enough," said Hagrid. "It's not easy ter catch a unicorn, they're powerful magic creatures. I never knew one ter be hurt before."

They walked past a mossy tree stump. Harry could hear running water; there must be a stream somewhere close by. There were still spots of unicorn blood here and there along the winding path.

"You all right, Hermione?" Hagrid whispered. "Don' worry, it can't've gone far if it's this badly hurt, an' then we'll be able ter -- GET BEHIND THAT TREE!"

Hagrid seized Harry and Hermione and hoisted them off the path behind a towering oak. He pulled out an arrow and fitted it into his crossbow, raising it, ready to fire. The three of them listened. Something was slithering over dead leaves nearby: it sounded like a cloak trailing along the ground. Hagrid was squinting up the dark path, but after a few seconds, the sound faded away.

"I knew it, " he murmured. "There's summat in here that shouldn' be."

"A werewolf?" Harry suggested.

"That wasn' no werewolf an' it wasn' no unicorn, neither," said Hagrid grimly. "Right, follow me, but careful, now."

They walked more slowly, ears straining for the faintest sound. Suddenly, in a clearing ahead, something definitely moved.

"Who's there?" Hagrid called. "Show yerself -- I'm armed!"

And into the clearing came -- was it a man, or a horse? To the waist, a man, with red hair and beard, but below that was a horse's gleaming chestnut body with a long, reddish tail. Harry and Hermione's jaws dropped.

"Oh, it's you, Ronan," said Hagrid in relief. "How are yeh?"

He walked forward and shook the centaur's hand.

"Good evening to you, Hagrid," said Ronan. He had a deep, sorrowful voice. "Were you going to shoot me?"

"Can't be too careful, Ronan," said Hagrid, patting his crossbow. "There's summat bad loose in this forest. This is Harry Potter an' Hermione Granger, by the way. Students up at the school. An' this is Ronan, you two. He's a centaur.))

"We'd noticed," said Hermione faintly.

"Good evening," said Ronan. "Students, are you? And do you learn much, up at the school?"

"Erm --"

"A bit," said Hermione timidly.

"A bit. Well, that's something." Ronan sighed. He flung back his head and stared at the sky. "Mars is bright tonight."

"Yeah," said Hagrid, glancing up, too. "Listen, I'm glad we've run inter yeh, Ronan, 'cause there's a unicorn bin hurt -- you seen anythin'?"

Ronan didn't answer immediately. He stared unblinkingly upward, then sighed again.

"Always the innocent are the first victims," he said. "So it has been for ages past, so it is now."

"Yeah," said Hagrid, "but have yeh seen anythin', Ronan? Anythin' unusual?"

"Mars is bright tonight," Ronan repeated, while Hagrid watched him impatiently. "Unusually bright."

"Yeah, but I was meanin' anythin' unusual a bit nearer home, said Hagrid. "So yeh haven't noticed anythin' strange?"

Yet again, Ronan took a while to answer. At last, he said, "The forest hides many secrets."

A movement in the trees behind Ronan made Hagrid raise his bow again, but it was only a second centaur, black-haired and -bodied and wilder-looking than Ronan.

"Hullo, Bane," said Hagrid. "All right?"

"Good evening, Hagrid, I hope you are well?"

"Well enough. Look, I've jus' bin askin' Ronan, you seen anythin' odd in here lately? There's a unicorn bin injured -- would yeh know anythin' about it?"

Bane walked over to stand next to Ronan. He looked skyward. "Mars is bright tonight," he said simply.

"We've heard," said Hagrid grumpily. "Well, if either of you do see anythin', let me know, won't yeh? We'll be off, then."

Harry and Hermione followed him out of the clearing, staring over their shoulders at Ronan and Bane until the trees blocked their view.

"Never," said Hagrid irritably, "try an' get a straight answer out of a centaur. Ruddy stargazers. Not interested in anythin' closer'n the moon."

"Are there many of them in here?" asked Hermione.

"Oh, a fair few... Keep themselves to themselves mostly, but they're good enough about turnin' up if ever I want a word. They're deep, mind, centaurs... they know things... jus' don' let on much."

"D'you think that was a centaur we heard earlier?" said Harry.

"Did that sound like hooves to you? Nah, if yeh ask me, that was what's bin killin' the unicorns -- never heard anythin' like it before."

They walked on through the dense, dark trees. Harry kept looking nervously over his shoulder. He had the nasty feeling they were being watched. He was very glad they had Hagrid and his crossbow with them. They had just passed a bend in the path when Hermione grabbed Hagrid's arm.

"Hagrid! Look! Red sparks, the others are in trouble!"

"You two wait here!" Hagrid shouted. "Stay on the path, I'll come back for yeh!"

They heard him crashing away through the undergrowth and stood looking at each other, very scared, until they couldn't hear anything but the rustling of leaves around them.

"You don't think they've been hurt, do you?" whispered Hermione.

"I don't care if Malfoy has, but if something's got Neville... it's our fault he's here in the first place."

The minutes dragged by. Their ears seemed sharper than usual. Harry's seemed to be picking up every sigh of the wind, every cracking twig. What was going on? Where were the others?

At last, a great crunching noise announced Hagrid's return. Malfoy, Neville, and Fang were with him. Hagrid was fuming. Malfoy, it seemed, had sneaked up behind Neville and grabbed him as a joke. Neville had panicked and sent up the sparks.

"We'll be lucky ter catch anythin' now, with the racket you two were makin'. Right, we're changin' groups -- Neville, you stay with me an' Hermione, Harry, you go with Fang an' this idiot. I'm sorry," Hagrid added in a whisper to Harry, "but he'll have a harder time frightenin' you, an' we've gotta get this done."

So Harry set off into the heart of the forest with Malfoy and Fang. They walked for nearly half an hour, deeper and deeper into the forest, until the path became almost impossible to follow because the trees were so thick. Harry thought the blood seemed to be getting thicker. There were splashes on the roots of a tree, as though the poor creature had been thrashing around in pain close by. Harry could see a clearing ahead, through the tangled branches of an ancient oak.

"Look --" he murmured, holding out his arm to stop Malfoy.

Something bright white was gleaming on the ground. They inched closer.

It was the unicorn all right, and it was dead. Harry had never seen anything so beautiful and sad. Its long, slender legs were stuck out at odd angles where it had fallen and its mane was spread pearly-white on

the dark leaves.

Harry had taken one step toward it when a slithering sound made him freeze where he stood. A bush on the edge of the clearing quivered.... Then, out of the shadows, a hooded figure came crawling across the ground like some stalking beast. Harry, Malfoy, and Fang stood transfixed. The cloaked figure reached the unicorn, lowered its head over the wound in the animal's side, and began to drink its blood.

"AAAAAAAAAARGH!"

Malfoy let out a terrible scream and bolted -- so did Fang. The hooded figure raised its head and looked right at Harry -- unicorn blood was dribbling down its front. It got to its feet and came swiftly toward Harry -- he couldn't move for fear.

Then a pain like he'd never felt before pierced his head; it was as though his scar were on fire. Half blinded, he staggered backward. He heard hooves behind him, galloping, and something jumped clean over Harry, charging at the figure.

The pain in Harry's head was so bad he fell to his knees. It took a minute or two to pass. When he looked up, the figure had gone. A centaur was standing over him, not Ronan or Bane; this one looked younger; he had white-blond hair and a palomino body.

"Are you all right?" said the centaur, pulling Harry to his feet.

"Yes -- thank you -- what was that?"

The centaur didn't answer. He had astonishingly blue eyes, like pale sapphires. He looked carefully at Harry, his eyes lingering on the scar that stood out, livid, on Harry's forehead.

"You are the Potter boy," he said. "You had better get back to Hagrid. The forest is not safe at this time -- especially for you. Can you ride? It will be quicker this way.

"My name is Firenze," he added, as he lowered himself on to his front legs so that Harry could clamber onto his back.

There was suddenly a sound of more galloping from the other side of the clearing. Ronan and Bane came bursting through the trees, their flanks

heaving and sweaty.

"Firenze!" Bane thundered. "What are you doing? You have a human on your back! Have you no shame? Are you a common mule?"

"Do you realize who this is?" said Firenze. "This is the Potter boy. The quicker he leaves this forest, the better."

"What have you been telling him?" growled Bane. "Remember, Firenze, we are sworn not to set ourselves against the heavens. Have we not read what is to come in the movements of the planets?"

Ronan pawed the ground nervously. "I'm sure Firenze thought he was acting for the best, " he said in his gloomy voice.

Bane kicked his back legs in anger.

"For the best! What is that to do with us? Centaurs are concerned with what has been foretold! It is not our business to run around like donkeys after stray humans in our forest!"

Firenze suddenly reared on to his hind legs in anger, so that Harry had to grab his shoulders to stay on.

"Do you not see that unicorn?" Firenze bellowed at Bane. "Do you not understand why it was killed? Or have the planets not let you in on that secret? I set myself against what is lurking in this forest, Bane, yes, with humans alongside me if I must."

And Firenze whisked around; with Harry clutching on as best he could, they plunged off into the trees, leaving Ronan and Bane behind them.

Harry didn't have a clue what was going on.

"Why's Bane so angry?" he asked. "What was that thing you saved me from, anyway?"

Firenze slowed to a walk, warned Harry to keep his head bowed in case of low-hanging branches, but did not answer Harry's question. They made their way through the trees in silence for so long that Harry thought Firenze didn't want to talk to him anymore. They were passing through a particularly dense patch of trees, however, when Firenze suddenly stopped.

"Harry Potter, do you know what unicorn blood is used -for?"

"No," said Harry, startled by the odd question. "We've only used the horn and tail hair in Potions."

"That is because it is a monstrous thing, to slay a unicorn," said Firenze. "Only one who has nothing to lose, and everything to gain, would commit such a crime. The blood of a unicorn will keep you alive, even if you are an inch from death, but at a terrible price. You have slain something pure and defenseless to save yourself, and you will have but a half-life, a cursed life, from the moment the blood touches your lips."

Harry stared at the back of Firenze's head, which was dappled silver in the moonlight.

"But who'd be that desperate?" he wondered aloud. "If you're going to be cursed forever, deaths better, isn't it?"

"It is," Firenze agreed, "unless all you need is to stay alive long enough to drink something else -- something that will bring you back to full strength and power -- something that will mean you can never die. Mr. Potter, do you know what is hidden in the school at this very moment?"

"The Sorcerer's Stone! Of course -- the Elixir of Life! But I don't understand who --"

"Can you think of nobody who has waited many years to return to power, who has clung to life, awaiting their chance?"

It was as though an iron fist had clenched suddenly around Harry's heart. Over the rustling of the trees, he seemed to hear once more what Hagrid had told him on the night they had met: "Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die."

"Do you mean," Harry croaked, "that was Vol-"

"Harry! Harry, are you all right?"

Hermione was running toward them down the path, Hagrid puffing along

behind her.

"I'm fine," said Harry, hardly knowing what he was saying. "The unicorn's dead, Hagrid, it's in that clearing back there."

"This is where I leave you," Firenze murmured as Hagrid hurried off to examine the unicorn. "You are safe now."

Harry slid off his back.

"Good luck, Harry Potter," said Firenze. "The planets have been read wrongly before now, even by centaurs. I hope this is one of those times."

He turned and cantered back into the depths of the forest, leaving Harry shivering behind him.

Ron had fallen asleep in the dark common room, waiting for them to return. He shouted something about Quidditch fouls when Harry roughly shook him awake. In a matter of seconds, though, he was wide-eyed as Harry began to tell him and Hermione what had happened in the forest.

Harry couldn't sit down. He paced up and down in front of the fire. He was still shaking.

"Snape wants the stone for Voldemort... and Voldemort's waiting in the forest... and all this time we thought Snape just wanted to get rich...."

"Stop saying the name!" said Ron in a terrified whisper, as if he thought Voldemort could hear them.

Harry wasn't listening.

"Firenze saved me, but he shouldn't have done so.... Bane was furious... he was talking about interfering with what the planets say is going to happen.... They must show that Voldemort's coming back.... Bane thinks Firenze should have let Voldemort kill me.... I suppose that's written in the stars as well."

"Will you stop saying the name!" Ron hissed.

"So all I've got to wait for now is Snape to steal the Stone," Harry

went on feverishly, "then Voldemort will be able to come and finish me
off... Well, I suppose Bane'll be happy."

Hermione looked very frightened, but she had a word of comfort.

"Harry, everyone says Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was ever
afraid of With Dumbledore around, You-Know-Who won't touch you. Anyway,
who says the centaurs are right? It sounds like fortune-telling to me,
and Professor McGonagall says that's a very imprecise branch of magic."

The sky had turned light before they stopped talking. They went to bed
exhausted, their throats sore. But the night's surprises weren't over.

When Harry pulled back his sheets, he found his invisibility cloak
folded neatly underneath them. There was a note pinned to it:

Just in case.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THROUGH THE TRAPDOOR

In years to come, Harry would never quite remember how he had managed to
get through his exams when he half expected Voldemort to come bursting
through the door at any moment. Yet the days crept by, and there could
be no doubt that Fluffy was still alive and well behind the locked door.

It was sweltering hot, especially in the large classroom where they did
their written papers. They had been given special, new quills for the
exams, which had been bewitched with an AntiCheating spell.

They had practical exams as well. Professor Flitwick called them one by
one into his class to see if they could make a pineapple tapdance across
a desk. Professor McGonagall watched them turn a mouse into a snuffbox
-- points were given for how pretty the snuffbox was, but taken away if
it had whiskers. Snape made them all nervous, breathing down their necks
while they tried to remember how to make a Forgetfulness potion.

Harry did the best he could, trying to ignore the stabbing pains in his
forehead, which had been bothering him ever since his trip into the
forest. Neville thought Harry had a bad case of exam nerves because
Harry couldn't sleep, but the truth was that Harry kept being woken by

his old nightmare, except that it was now worse than ever because there was a hooded figure dripping blood in it.

Maybe it was because they hadn't seen what Harry had seen in the forest, or because they didn't have scars burning on their foreheads, but Ron and Hermione didn't seem as worried about the Stone as Harry. The idea of Voldemort certainly scared them, but he didn't keep visiting them in dreams, and they were so busy with their studying they didn't have much time to fret about what Snape or anyone else might be up to.

Their very last exam was History of Magic. One hour of answering questions about batty old wizards who'd invented selfstirring cauldrons and they'd be free, free for a whole wonderful week until their exam results came out. When the ghost of Professor Binns told them to put down their quills and roll up their parchment, Harry couldn't help cheering with the rest.

"That was far easier than I thought it would be," said Hermione as they joined the crowds flocking out onto the sunny grounds. "I needn't have learned about the 1637 Werewolf Code of Conduct or the uprising of Elfric the Eager."

Hermione always liked to go through their exam papers afterward, but Ron said this made him feel ill, so they wandered down to the lake and flopped under a tree. The Weasley twins and Lee Jordan were tickling the tentacles of a giant squid, which was basking in the warm shallows. "No more studying," Ron sighed happily, stretching out on the grass. "You could look more cheerful, Harry, we've got a week before we find out how badly we've done, there's no need to worry yet."

Harry was rubbing his forehead.

"I wish I knew what this means!" he burst out angrily. "My scar keeps hurting -- it's happened before, but never as often as this."

"Go to Madam Pomfrey," Hermione suggested.

"I'm not ill," said Harry. "I think it's a warning... it means danger's coming...."

Ron couldn't get worked up, it was too hot.

"Harry, relax, Hermione's right, the Stone's safe as long as

Dumbledore's around. Anyway, we've never had any proof Snape found out how to get past Fluffy. He nearly had his leg ripped off once, he's not going to try it again in a hurry. And Neville will play Quidditch for England before Hagrid lets Dumbledore down."

Harry nodded, but he couldn't shake off a lurking feeling that there was something he'd forgotten to do, something important. When he tried to explain this, Hermione said, "That's just the exams. I woke up last night and was halfway through my Transfiguration notes before I remembered we'd done that one."

Harry was quite sure the unsettled feeling didn't have anything to do with work, though. He watched an owl flutter toward the school across the bright blue sky, a note clamped in its mouth. Hagrid was the only one who ever sent him letters. Hagrid would never betray Dumbledore. Hagrid would never tell anyone how to get past Fluffy... never... but --

Harry suddenly jumped to his feet.

"Where're you going?" said Ron sleepily.

"I've just thought of something," said Harry. He had turned white. "We've got to go and see Hagrid, now."

"Why?" panted Hermione, hurrying to keep up.

"Don't you think it's a bit odd," said Harry, scrambling up the grassy slope, "that what Hagrid wants more than anything else is a dragon, and a stranger turns up who just happens to have an egg in his pocket? How many people wander around with dragon eggs if it's against wizard law? Lucky they found Hagrid, don't you think? Why didn't I see it before?"

"What are you talking about?" said Ron, but Harry, sprinting across the grounds toward the forest, didn't answer.

Hagrid was sitting in an armchair outside his house; his trousers and sleeves were rolled up, and he was shelling peas into a large bowl.

"Hullo," he said, smiling. "Finished yer exams? Got time fer a drink?"

"Yes, please," said Ron, but Harry cut him off.

"No, we're in a hurry. Hagrid, I've got to ask you something. You know

that night you won Norbert? What did the stranger you were playing cards with look like?"

"Dunno," said Hagrid casually, "he wouldn' take his cloak off."

He saw the three of them look stunned and raised his eyebrows.

"It's not that unusual, yeh get a lot o' funny folk in the Hog's Head -- that's the pub down in the village. Mighta bin a dragon dealer, mightn' he? I never saw his face, he kept his hood up."

Harry sank down next to the bowl of peas. "What did you talk to him about, Hagrid? Did you mention Hogwarts at all?"

"Mighta come up," said Hagrid, frowning as he tried to remember. "Yeah... he asked what I did, an' I told him I was gamekeeper here.... He asked a bit about the sorta creatures I took after... so I told him... an' I said what I'd always really wanted was a dragon... an' then... I can' remember too well, 'cause he kept buyin' me drinks.... Let's see... yeah, then he said he had the dragon egg an' we could play cards fer it if I wanted... but he had ter be sure I could handle it, he didn' want it ter go ter any old home.... So I told him, after Fluffy, a dragon would be easy..."

"And did he -- did he seem interested in Fluffy?" Harry asked, try ing to keep his voice calm.

"Well -- yeah -- how many three-headed dogs d'yeh meet, even around Hogwarts? So I told him, Fluffy's a piece o' cake if yeh know how to calm him down, jus' play him a bit o' music an' he'll go straight off ter sleep --"

Hagrid suddenly looked horrified.

"I shouldn'ta told yeh that!" he blurted out. "Forget I said it! Hey -- where're yeh goin'?"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione didn't speak to each other at all until they came to a halt in the entrance hall, which seemed very cold and gloomy after the grounds.

"We've got to go to Dumbledore," said Harry. "Hagrid told that stranger how to get past Fluffy, and it was either Snape or Voldemort under that

cloak -- it must've been easy, once he'd got Hagrid drunk. I just hope Dumbledore believes us. Firenze might back us up if Bane doesn't stop him. Where's Dumbledore's office?"

They looked around, as if hoping to see a sign pointing them in the right direction. They had never been told where Dumbledore lived, nor did they know anyone who had been sent to see him.

"We'll just have to --" Harry began, but a voice suddenly rang across the hall.

"What are you three doing inside?"

It was Professor McGonagall, carrying a large pile of books.

"We want to see Professor Dumbledore," said Hermione, rather bravely, Harry and Ron thought.

"See Professor Dumbledore?" Professor McGonagall repeated, as though this was a very fishy thing to want to do. "Why?"

Harry swallowed -- now what?

"It's sort of secret," he said, but he wished at once he hadn't, because Professor McGonagall's nostrils flared.

"Professor Dumbledore left ten minutes ago," she said coldly. "He received an urgent owl from the Ministry of Magic and flew off for London at once."

"He's gone?" said Harry frantically. "Now?"

"Professor Dumbledore is a very great wizard, Potter, he has many demands on his time --

"But this is important."

"Something you have to say is more important than the Ministry of Magic, Potter.

"Look," said Harry, throwing caution to the winds, "Professor -- it's about the Sorcerer's tone --"

Whatever Professor McGonagall had expected, it wasn't that. The books she was carrying tumbled out of her arms, but she didn't pick them up. "How do you know --?" she spluttered.

"Professor, I think -- I know -- that Sn- that someone's going to try and steal the Stone. I've got to talk to Professor Dumbledore."

She eyed him with a mixture of shock and suspicion.

"Professor Dumbledore will be back tomorrow," she said finally. I don't know how you found out about the Stone, but rest assured, no one can possibly steal it, it's too well protected."

"But Professor --"

"Potter, I know what I'm talking about," she said shortly. She bent down and gathered up the fallen books. I suggest you all go back outside and enjoy the sunshine."

But they didn't.

"It's tonight," said Harry, once he was sure Professor McGonagall was out of earshot. "Snape's going through the trapdoor tonight. He's found out everything he needs, and now he's got Dumbledore out of the way. He sent that note, I bet the Ministry of Magic will get a real shock when Dumbledore turns up."

"But what can we --"

Hermione gasped. Harry and Ron wheeled round.

Snape was standing there.

"Good afternoon," he said smoothly.

They stared at him.

"You shouldn't be inside on a day like this," he said, with an odd, twisted smile.

"We were --" Harry began, without any idea what he was going to say.

"You want to be more careful," said Snape. "Hanging around

like this, people will think you're up to something. And Gryffindor really can't afford to lose any more points, can it?"

Harry flushed. They turned to go outside, but Snape called them back.

"Be warned, Potter -- any more nighttime wanderings and I will personally make sure you are expelled. Good day to you."

He strode off in the direction of the staffroom.

Out on the stone steps, Harry turned to the others.

"Right, here's what we've got to do," he whispered urgently. "One of us has got to keep an eye on Snape -- wait outside the staff room and follow him if he leaves it. Hermione, you'd better do that."

"Why me?"

"It's obvious," said Ron. "You can pretend to be waiting for Professor Flitwick, you know." He put on a high voice, "'Oh Professor Flitwick, I'm so worried, I think I got question fourteen b wrong....'"

"Oh, shut up," said Hermione, but she agreed to go and watch out for Snape.

"And we'd better stay outside the third-floor corridor," Harry told Ron. "Come on."

But that part of the plan didn't work. No sooner had they reached the door separating Fluffy from the rest of the school than Professor McGonagall turned up again and this time, she lost her temper.

"I suppose you think you're harder to get past than a pack of enchantments!" she stormed. "Enough of this nonsense! If I hear you 've come anywhere near here again, I'll take another fifty points from Gryffindor! Yes, Weasley, from my own house!" Harry and Ron went back to the common room, Harry had just said, "At least Hermione's on Snape's tail," when the portrait of the Fat Lady swung open and Hermione came in.

"I'm sorry, Harry!" she wailed. "Snape came out and asked me what I was doing, so I said I was waiting for Flitwick, and Snape went to get him,

and I've only just got away, I don't know where Snape went."

"Well, that's it then, isn't it?" Harry said.

The other two stared at him. He was pale and his eyes were glittering.

"I'm going out of here tonight and I'm going to try and get to the Stone first."

"You're mad!" said Ron.

"You can't!" said Hermione. "After what McGonagall and Snape have said? You'll be expelled!"

"SO WHAP" Harry shouted. "Don't you understand? If Snape gets hold of the Stone, Voldemort's coming back! Haven't you heard what it was like when he was trying to take over? There won't be any Hogwarts to get expelled from! He'll flatten it, or turn it into a school for the Dark Arts! Losing points doesn't matter anymore, can't you see? D'you think he'll leave you and your families alone if Gryffindor wins the house cup? If I get caught before I can get to the Stone, well, I'll have to go back to the Dursleys and wait for Voldemort to find me there, it's only dying a bit later than I would have, because I'm never going over to the Dark Side! I'm going through that trapdoor tonight and nothing you two say is going to stop me! Voldemort killed my parents, remember?"

He glared at them.

"You're right Harry," said Hermione in a small voice.

"I'll use the invisibility cloak," said Harry. "It's just lucky I got it back."

"But will it cover all three of us?" said Ron.

"All -- all three of us?"

"Oh, come off it, you don't think we'd let you go alone?"

"Of course not," said Hermione briskly. "How do you think you'd get to the Stone without us? I'd better go and took through my books, there might be something useful..."

"But if we get caught, you two will be expelled, too."

"Not if I can help it," said Hermione grimly. "Flitwick told me in secret that I got a hundred and twelve percent on his exam. They're not throwing me out after that."

After dinner the three of them sat nervously apart in the common room. Nobody bothered them; none of the Gryffindors had anything to say to Harry any more, after all. This was the first night he hadn't been upset by it. Hermione was skimming through all her notes, hoping to come across one of the enchantments they were about to try to break. Harry and Ron didn't talk much. Both of them were thinking about what they were about to do.

Slowly, the room emptied as people drifted off to bed.

"Better get the cloak," Ron muttered, as Lee Jordan finally left, stretching and yawning. Harry ran upstairs to their dark dormitory. He putted out the cloak and then his eyes fell on the flute Hagrid had given him for Christmas. He pocketed it to use on Fluffy -- he didn't feel much like singing.

He ran back down to the common room.

"We'd better put the cloak on here, and make sure it covers all three of us -- if Filch spots one of our feet wandering along on its own --"

"What are you doing?" said a voice from the corner of the room. Neville appeared from behind an armchair, clutching Trevor the toad, who looked as though he'd been making another bid for freedom.

"Nothing, Neville, nothing," said Harry, hurriedly putting the cloak behind his back.

Neville stared at their guilty faces.

"You're going out again," he said.

"No, no, no," said Hermione. "No, we're not. Why don't you go to bed, Neville?"

Harry looked at the grandfather clock by the door. They couldn't afford to waste any more time, Snape might even now be playing Fluffy to sleep.

"You can't go out," said Neville, "you'll be caught again. Gryffindor will be in even more trouble."

"You don't understand," said Harry, "this is important."

But Neville was clearly steeling himself to do something desperate.

I won't let you do it," he said, hurrying to stand in front of the portrait hole. "I'll -- I'll fight you!"

"Neville, "Ron exploded, "get away from that hole and don't be an idiot --"

"Don't you call me an idiot!" said Neville. I don't think you should be breaking any more rules! And you were the one who told me to stand up to people!"

"Yes, but not to us," said Ron in exasperation. "Neville, you don't know what you're doing."

He took a step forward and Neville dropped Trevor the toad, who leapt out of sight.

"Go on then, try and hit me!" said Neville, raising his fists. "I'm ready!"

Harry turned to Hermione.

"Do something," he said desperately.

Hermione stepped forward.

"Neville," she said, "I'm really, really sorry about this."

She raised her wand.

"Petrificus Totalus!" she cried, pointing it at Neville.

Neville's arms snapped to his sides. His legs sprang together. His whole body rigid, he swayed where he stood and then fell flat on his face, stiff as a board.

Hermione ran to turn him over. Neville's jaws were jammed together so he couldn't speak. Only his eyes were moving, looking at them in horror.

"What've you done to him?" Harry whispered.

"It's the full Body-Bind," said Hermione miserably. "Oh, Neville, I'm so sorry."

"We had to, Neville, no time to explain," said Harry.

"You'll understand later, Neville," said Ron as they stepped over him and pulled on the invisibility cloak.

But leaving Neville lying motionless on the floor didn't feel like a very good omen. In their nervous state, every statue's shadow looked like Filch, every distant breath of wind sounded like Peeves swooping down on them. At the foot of the first set of stairs, they spotted Mrs. Norris skulking near the top.

"Oh, let's kick her, just this once," Ron whispered in Harry's ear, but Harry shook his head. As they climbed carefully around her, Mrs. Norris turned her lamplike eyes on them, but didn't do anything.

They didn't meet anyone else until they reached the staircase up to the third floor. Peeves was bobbing halfway up, loosening the carpet so that people would trip.

"Who's there?" he said suddenly as they climbed toward him. He narrowed his wicked black eyes. "Know you're there, even if I can't see you. Are you ghoulie or ghostie or wee student beastie?"

He rose up in the air and floated there, squinting at them.

"Should call Filch, I should, if something's a-creeping around unseen."

Harry had a sudden idea.

"Peeves," he said, in a hoarse whisper, "the Bloody Baron has his own reasons for being invisible."

Peeves almost fell out of the air in shock. He caught himself in time and hovered about a foot off the stairs.

"So sorry, your bloodiness, Mr. Baron, Sir," he said greasily. "My mistake, my mistake -- I didn't see you -- of course I didn't, you're invisible -- forgive old Peevsie his little joke, sir."

"I have business here, Peeves," croaked Harry. "Stay away from this place tonight."

"I will, sir, I most certainly will," said Peeves, rising up in the air again. "Hope your business goes well, Baron, I'll not bother you."

And he scooted off

"Brilliant, Harry!" whispered Ron.

A few seconds later, they were there, outside the third-floor corridor -- and the door was already ajar.

"Well, there you are," Harry said quietly, "Snape's already got past Fluffy."

Seeing the open door somehow seemed to impress upon all three of them what was facing them. Underneath the cloak, Harry turned to the other two.

"If you want to go back, I won't blame you," he said. "You can take the cloak, I won't need it now."

"Don't be stupid," said Ron.

"We're coming," said Hermione.

Harry pushed the door open.

As the door creaked, low, rumbling growls met their ears. All three of the dog's noses sniffed madly in their direction, even though it couldn't see them.

"What's that at its feet?" Hermione whispered.

"Looks like a harp," said Ron. "Snape must have left it there."

"It must wake up the moment you stop playing," said Harry. "Well, here goes..."

He put Hagrid's flute to his lips and blew. It wasn't really a tune, but from the first note the beast's eyes began to droop. Harry hardly drew breath. Slowly, the dog's growls ceased -- it tottered on its paws and fell to its knees, then it slumped to the ground, fast asleep.

"Keep playing," Ron warned Harry as they slipped out of the cloak and crept toward the trapdoor. They could feel the dog's hot, smelly breath as they approached the giant heads. "I think we'll be able to pull the door open," said Ron, peering over the dog's back. "Want to go first, Hermione?"

"No, I don't!"

"All right." Ron gritted his teeth and stepped carefully over the dog's legs. He bent and pulled the ring of the trapdoor, which swung up and open.

"What can you see?" Hermione said anxiously.

"Nothing -- just black -- there's no way of climbing down, we'll just have to drop."

Harry, who was still playing the flute, waved at Ron to get his attention and pointed at himself.

"You want to go first? Are you sure?" said Ron. "I don't know how deep this thing goes. Give the flute to Hermione so she can keep him asleep."

Harry handed the flute over. In the few seconds' silence, the dog growled and twitched, but the moment Hermione began to play, it fell back into its deep sleep.

Harry climbed over it and looked down through the trapdoor. There was no sign of the bottom.

He lowered himself through the hole until he was hanging on by his fingertips. Then he looked up at Ron and said, "If anything happens to me, don't follow. Go straight to the owlery and send Hedwig to Dumbledore, right?"

"Right," said Ron.

"See you in a minute, I hope...

And Harry let go. Cold, damp air rushed past him as he fell down, down, down and -- FLUMP. With a funny, muffled sort of thump he landed on something soft. He sat up and felt around, his eyes not used to the gloom. It felt as though he was sitting on some sort of plant.

"It's okay!" he called up to the light the size of a postage stamp, which was the open trapdoor, "it's a soft landing, you can jump!"

Ron followed right away. He landed, sprawled next to Harry.

"What's this stuff?" were his first words.

"Dunno, some sort of plant thing. I suppose it's here to break the fall. Come on, Hermione!"

The distant music stopped. There was a loud bark from the dog, but Hermione had already jumped. She landed on Harry's other side.

"We must be miles under the school , she said.

"Lucky this plant thing's here, really," said Ron.

"Lucky!" shrieked Hermione. "Look at you both!"

She leapt up and struggled toward a damp wall. She had to struggle because the moment she had landed, the plant had started to twist snakelike tendrils around her ankles. As for Harry and Ron, their legs had already been bound tightly in long creepers without their noticing.

Hermione had managed to free herself before the plant got a firm grip on her. Now she watched in horror as the two boys fought to pull the plant off them, but the more they strained against it, the tighter and faster the plant wound around them.

"Stop moving!" Hermione ordered them. "I know what this is -- it's Devil's Snare!"

"Oh, I'm so glad we know what it's called, that's a great help," snarled Ron, leaning back, trying to stop the plant from curling around his neck. "Shut up, I'm trying to remember how to kill it!" said Hermione.

"Well, hurry up, I can't breathe!" Harry gasped, wrestling with it as it curled around his chest.

"Devil's Snare, Devil's Snare... what did Professor Sprout say? -- it likes the dark and the damp

"So light a fire!" Harry choked.

"Yes -- of course -- but there's no wood!" Hermione cried, wringing her hands.

"HAVE YOU GONE MAD?" Ron bellowed. "ARE YOU A WITCH OR NOT?"

"Oh, right!" said Hermione, and she whipped out her wand, waved it, muttered something, and sent a jet of the same bluebell flames she had used on Snape at the plant. In a matter of seconds, the two boys felt it loosening its grip as it cringed away from the light and warmth. Wriggling and flailing, it unraveled itself from their bodies, and they were able to pull free.

"Lucky you pay attention in Herbology, Hermione," said Harry as he joined her by the wall, wiping sweat off his face.

"Yeah," said Ron, "and lucky Harry doesn't lose his head in a crisis -- 'there's no wood,' honestly."

"This way," said Harry, pointing down a stone passageway, which was the only way forward.

All they could hear apart from their footsteps was the gentle drip of water trickling down the walls. The passageway sloped downward, and Harry was reminded of Gringotts. With an unpleasant jolt of the heart, he remembered the dragons said to be guarding vaults in the wizards' bank. If they met a dragon, a fully-grown dragon -- Norbert had been bad enough...

"Can you hear something?" Ron whispered.

Harry listened. A soft rustling and clinking seemed to be coming from up ahead.

"Do you think it's a ghost?"

"I don't know... sounds like wings to me."

"There's light ahead -- I can see something moving."

They reached the end of the passageway and saw before them a brilliantly lit chamber, its ceiling arching high above them. It was full of small, jewel-bright birds, fluttering and tumbling all around the room. On the opposite side of the chamber was a heavy wooden door.

"Do you think they'll attack us if we cross the room?" said Ron.

"Probably," said Harry. "They don't look very vicious, but I suppose if they all swooped down at once... well, there's no other choice... I'll run."

He took a deep breath, covered his face with his arms, and sprinted across the room. He expected to feel sharp beaks and claws tearing at him any second, but nothing happened. He reached the door untouched. He pulled the handle, but it was locked.

The other two followed him. They tugged and heaved at the door, but it wouldn't budge, not even when Hermione tried her Alohomora charm.

"Now what?" said Ron.

"These birds... they can't be here just for decoration," said Hermione.

They watched the birds soaring overhead, glittering -- glittering?

"They're not birds!" Harry said suddenly. "They're keys! Winged keys -- look carefully. So that must mean..." he looked around the chamber while the other two squinted up at the flock of keys. "... yes -- look! Broomsticks! We've got to catch the key to the door!"

"But there are hundreds of them!"

Ron examined the lock on the door.

"We're looking for a big, old-fashioned one -- probably silver, like the handle."

They each seized a broomstick and kicked off into the air, soaring into the midst of the cloud of keys. They grabbed and snatched, but the

bewitched keys darted and dived so quickly it was almost impossible to catch one.

Not for nothing, though, was Harry the youngest Seeker in a century. He had a knack for spotting things other people didn't. After a minute's weaving about through the whirl of rainbow feathers, he noticed a large silver key that had a bent wing, as if it had already been caught and stuffed roughly into the keyhole.

"That one!" he called to the others. "That big one -- there -- no, there -- with bright blue wings -- the feathers are all crumpled on one side."

Ron went speeding in the direction that Harry was pointing, crashed into the ceiling, and nearly fell off his broom.

"We've got to close in on it!" Harry called, not taking his eyes off the key with the damaged wing. "Ron, you come at it from above -- Hermione, stay below and stop it from going down and I'll try and catch it. Right, NOW!"

Ron dived, Hermione rocketed upward, the key dodged them both, and Harry streaked after it; it sped toward the wall, Harry leaned forward and with a nasty, crunching noise, pinned it against the stone with one hand. Ron and Hermione's cheers echoed around the high chamber.

They landed quickly, and Harry ran to the door, the key struggling in his hand. He rammed it into the lock and turned -- it worked. The moment the lock had clicked open, the key took flight again, looking very battered now that it had been caught twice.

"Ready?" Harry asked the other two, his hand on the door handle. They nodded. He pulled the door open.

The next chamber was so dark they couldn't see anything at all. But as they stepped into it, light suddenly flooded the room to reveal an astonishing sight.

They were standing on the edge of a huge chessboard, behind the black chessmen, which were all taller than they were and carved from what looked like black stone. Facing them, way across the chamber, were the white pieces. Harry, Ron and Hermione shivered slightly -- the towering white chessmen had no faces.

"Now what do we do?" Harry whispered.

"It's obvious, isn't it?" said Ron. "We've got to play our way across the room."

Behind the white pieces they could see another door.

"How?" said Hermione nervously.

"I think," said Ron, "we're going to have to be chessmen."

He walked up to a black knight and put his hand out to touch the knight's horse. At once, the stone sprang to life. The horse pawed the ground and the knight turned his helmeted head to look down at Ron.

"Do we -- er -- have to join you to get across?" The black knight nodded. Ron turned to the other two.

"This needs thinking about he said. I suppose we've got to take the place of three of the black pieces...."

Harry and Hermione stayed quiet, watching Ron think. Finally he said, "Now, don't be offended or anything, but neither of you are that good at chess --"

"We're not offended," said Harry quickly. "Just tell us what to do."

"Well, Harry, you take the place of that bishop, and Hermione, YOU 90 next to him instead of that castle."

"What about you?"

"I'm going to be a knight," said Ron.

The chessmen seemed to have been listening, because at these words a knight, a bishop, and a castle turned their backs on the white pieces and walked off the board, leaving three empty squares that Harry, Ron, and Hermione took.

"White always plays first in chess," said Ron, peering across the board. "Yes... look..."

A white pawn had moved forward two squares.

Ron started to direct the black pieces. They moved silently wherever he sent them. Harry's knees were trembling. What if they lost?

"Harry -- move diagonally four squares to the right."

Their first real shock came when their other knight was taken. The white queen smashed him to the floor and dragged him off the board, where he lay quite still, facedown.

"Had to let that happen," said Ron, looking shaken. "Leaves you free to take that bishop, Hermione, go on."

Every time one of their men was lost, the white pieces showed no mercy. Soon there was a huddle of limp black players slumped along the wall. Twice, Ron only just noticed in time that Harry and Hermione were in danger. He himself darted around the board, taking almost as many white pieces as they had lost black ones.

"We're nearly there," he muttered suddenly. "Let me think let me think..."

The white queen turned her blank face toward him.

"Yes..." said Ron softly, "It's the only way... I've got to be taken."

"NOF Harry and Hermione shouted.

"That's chess!" snapped Ron. "You've got to make some sacrifices! I take one step forward and she'll take me -- that leaves you free to checkmate the king, Harry!"

"But --"

"Do you want to stop Snape or not?"

"Ron --"

"Look, if you don't hurry up, he'll already have the Stone!"

There was no alternative.

"Ready?" Ron called, his face pale but determined. "Here I go - now,

don't hang around once you've won."

He stepped forward, and the white queen pounced. She struck Ron hard across the head with her stone arm, and he crashed to the floor - Hermione screamed but stayed on her square - the white queen dragged Ron to one side. He looked as if he'd been knocked out.

Shaking, Harry moved three spaces to the left.

The white king took off his crown and threw it at Harry's feet. They had won. The chessmen parted and bowed, leaving the door ahead clear. With one last desperate look back at Ron, Harry and Hermione charged through the door and up the next passageway.

"What if he's --?"

"He'll be all right," said Harry, trying to convince himself. "What do you reckon's next?"

"We've had Sprout's, that was the Devil's Snare; Flitwick must've put charms on the keys; McGonagall transfigured the chessmen to make them alive; that leaves Quirrell's spell, and Snape's."

They had reached another door.

"All right?" Harry whispered.

"Go on."

Harry pushed it open.

A disgusting smell filled their nostrils, making both of them pull their robes up over their noses. Eyes watering, they saw, flat on the floor in front of them, a troll even larger than the one they had tackled, out cold with a bloody lump on its head.

"I'm glad we didn't have to fight that one," Harry whispered as they stepped carefully over one of its massive legs. "Come on, I can't breathe."

He pulled open the next door, both of them hardly daring to look at what came next - but there was nothing very frightening in here, just a table with seven differently shaped bottles standing on it in a line.

"Snape's," said Harry. "What do we have to do?"

They stepped over the threshold, and immediately a fire sprang up behind them in the doorway. It wasn't ordinary fire either; it was purple. At the same instant, black flames shot up in the doorway leading onward. They were trapped.

"Look!" Hermione seized a roll of paper lying next to the bottles. Harry looked over her shoulder to read it:

Danger lies before you, while safety lies behind,

Two of us will help you, which ever you would find,

One among us seven will let you move ahead,

Another will transport the drinker back instead,

Two among our number hold only nettle wine,

Three of us are killers, waiting bidden in line.

Choose, unless you wish to stay here forevermore,

To help you in your choice, we give you these clues four:

First, however slyly the poison tries to hide

You will always find some on nettle wine's left side;

Second, different are those who stand at either end,

But if you would move onward, neither is your friend;

Third, as you see clearly, all are different size,

Neither dwarf nor giant holds death in their insides;

Fourth, the second left and the second on the right

Are twins once you taste them, though different at first sight.

Hermione let out a great sigh and Harry, amazed, saw that she was smiling, the very last thing he felt like doing.

"Brilliant," said Hermione. "This isn't magic -- it's logic -- a puzzle. A lot of the greatest wizards haven't got an ounce of logic, they'd be stuck in here forever."

"But so will we, won't we?" "Of course not," said Hermione. "Everything we need is here on this paper. Seven bottles: three are poison; two are wine; one will get us safely through the black fire, and one will get us back through the purple."

"But how do we know which to drink?"

"Give me a minute."

Hermione read the paper several times. Then she walked up and down the line of bottles, muttering to herself and pointing at them. At last, she clapped her hands.

"Got it," she said. "The smallest bottle will get us through the black fire -- toward the Stone."

Harry looked at the tiny bottle.

"There's only enough there for one of us," he said. "That's hardly one swallow."

They looked at each other.

"Which one will get you back through the purple flames?"

Hermione pointed at a rounded bottle at the right end of the line.

"You drink that," said Harry. "No, listen, get back and get Ron. Grab brooms from the flying- key room, they'll get you out of the trapdoor and past Fluffy -- go straight to the owlery and send Hedwig to Dumbledore, we need him. I might be able to hold Snape off for a while, but I'm no match for him, really."

"But Harry -- what if You-Know-Who's with him?"

"Well -- I was lucky once, wasn't I?" said Harry, pointing at his scar.

"I might get lucky again."

Hermione's lip trembled, and she suddenly dashed at Harry and threw her arms around him.

"Hermione!"

"Harry -- you're a great wizard, you know."

"I'm not as good as you," said Harry, very embarrassed, as she let go of him.

"Me!" said Hermione. "Books! And cleverness! There are more important things -- friendship and bravery and -- oh Harry -- be careful!"

"You drink first," said Harry. "You are sure which is which, aren't you?"

"Positive," said Hermione. She took a long drink from the round bottle at the end, and shuddered.

"It's not poison?" said Harry anxiously.

"No -- but it's like ice."

"Quick, go, before it wears off."

"Good luck -- take care."

"GO!"

Hermione turned and walked straight through the purple fire.

Harry took a deep breath and picked up the smallest bottle. He turned to face the black flames.

"Here I come," he said, and he drained the little bottle in one gulp.

It was indeed as though ice was flooding his body. He put the bottle down and walked forward; he braced himself, saw the black flames licking his body, but couldn't feel them -- for a moment he could see nothing but dark fire -- then he was on the other side, in the last chamber.

There was already someone there -- but it wasn't Snape. It wasn't even Voldemort.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE MAN WITH TWO FACES

It was Quirrell.

"You!" gasped Harry.

Quirrell smiled. His face wasn't twitching at all.

"Me," he said calmly. "I wondered whether I'd be meeting you here, Potter."

"But I thought -- Snape --"

"Severus?" Quirrell laughed, and it wasn't his usual quivering treble, either, but cold and sharp. "Yes, Severus does seem the type, doesn't he? So useful to have him swooping around like an overgrown bat. Next to him, who would suspect p-p-poor, st-stuttering P-Professor Quirrell?"

Harry couldn't take it in. This couldn't be true, it couldn't.

"But Snape tried to kill me!"

"No, no, no. I tried to kill you. Your friend Miss Granger accidentally knocked me over as she rushed to set fire to Snape at that Quidditch match. She broke my eye contact with you. Another few seconds and I'd have got you off that broom. I'd have managed it before then if Snape hadn't been muttering a countercurse, trying to save you."

"Snape was trying to save me?"

"Of course," said Quirrell coolly. "\Why do you think he wanted to referee your next match? He was trying to make sure I didn't do it again. Funny, really... he needn't have bothered. I couldn't do anything with Dumbledore watching. All the other teachers thought Snape was trying to stop Gryffindor from winning, he did make himself unpopular... and what a waste of time, when after all that, I'm going to kill you tonight."

Quirrell snapped his fingers. Ropes sprang out of thin air and wrapped themselves tightly around Harry.

"You're too nosy to live, Potter. Scurrying around the school on Halloween like that, for all I knew you'd seen me coming to look at what was guarding the Stone."

"You let the troll in?"

"Certainly. I have a special gift with trolls -- you must have seen what I did to the one in the chamber back there? Unfortunately, while everyone else was running around looking for it, Snape, who already suspected me, went straight to the third floor to head me off -- and not only did my troll fail to beat you to death, that three-headed dog didn't even manage to bite Snape's leg off properly.

"Now, wait quietly, Potter. I need to examine this interesting mirror.

It was only then that Harry realized what was standing behind Quirrell. It was the Mirror of Erised.

"This mirror is the key to finding the Stone," Quirrell murmured, tapping his way around the frame. "Trust Dumbledore to come up with something like this... but he's in London... I'll be far away by the time he gets back...."

All Harry could think of doing was to keep Quirrell talking and stop him from concentrating on the mirror.

"I saw you and Snape in the forest --" he blurted out.

"Yes," said Quirrell idly, walking around the mirror to look at the back. "He was on to me by that time, trying to find out how far I'd got. He suspected me all along. Tried to frighten me - as though he could, when I had Lord Voldemort on my side...."

Quirrell came back out from behind the mirror and stared hungrily into it.

"I see the Stone... I'm presenting it to my master... but where is it?"

Harry struggled against the ropes binding him, but they didn't give. He

had to keep Quirrell from giving his whole attention to the mirror.

"But Snape always seemed to hate me so much."

"Oh, he does," said Quirrell casually, "heavens, yes. He was at Hogwarts with your father, didn't you know? They loathed each other. But he never wanted you dead."

"But I heard you a few days ago, sobbing -- I thought Snape was threatening you...."

For the first time, a spasm of fear flitted across Quirrell's face.

"Sometimes," he said, "I find it hard to follow my master's instructions -- he is a great wizard and I am weak --"

"You mean he was there in the classroom with you?" Harry gasped.

"He is with me wherever I go," said Quirrell quietly. "I met him when I traveled around the world. A foolish young man I was then, full of ridiculous ideas about good and evil. Lord Voldemort showed me how wrong I was. There is no good and evil, there is only power, and those too weak to seek it.... Since then, I have served him faithfully, although I have let him down many times. He has had to be very hard on me." Quirrell shivered suddenly. "He does not forgive mistakes easily. When I failed to steal the stone from Gringotts, he was most displeased. He punished me... decided he would have to keep a closer watch on me...."

Quirrell's voice trailed away. Harry was remembering his trip to Diagon Alley -how could he have been so stupid? He'd seen Quirrell there that very day, shaken hands with him in the Leaky Cauldron.

Quirrell cursed under his breath.

"I don't understand... is the Stone inside the mirror? Should I break it?"

Harry's mind was racing.

What I want more than anything else in the world at the moment, he thought, is to find the Stone before Quirrell does. So if I look in the mirror, I should see myseff finding it -- which means I'll see where it's hidden! But how can I look without Quirrell realizing what I'm up

to?

He tried to edge to the left, to get in front of the glass without Quirrell noticing, but the ropes around his ankles were too tight: he tripped and fell over. Quirrell ignored him. He was still talking to himself. "What does this mirror do? How does it work? Help me, Master!"

And to Harry's horror, a voice answered, and the voice seemed to come from Quirrell himself

"Use the boy... Use the boy..."

Quirrell rounded on Harry.

"Yes -- Potter -- come here."

He clapped his hands once, and the ropes binding Harry fell off. Harry got slowly to his feet.

"Come here," Quirrell repeated. "Look in the mirror and tell me what you see."

Harry walked toward him.

I must lie, he thought desperately. I must look and lie about what I see, that's all.

Quirrell moved close behind him. Harry breathed in the funny smell that seemed to come from Quirrell's turban. He closed his eyes, stepped in front of the mirror, and opened them again.

He saw his reflection, pale and scared-looking at first. But a moment later, the reflection smiled at him. It put its hand into its pocket and pulled out a blood-red stone. It winked and put the Stone back in its pocket -- and as it did so, Harry felt something heavy drop into his real pocket. Somehow -- incredibly -- he'd gotten the Stone.

"Well?" said Quirrell impatiently. "What do you see?"

Harry screwed up his courage.

"I see myself shaking hands with Dumbledore," he invented. "I -- I've won the house cup for Gryffindor."

Quirrell cursed again.

"Get out of the way," he said. As Harry moved aside, he felt the Sorcerer's Stone against his leg. Dare he make a break for it?

But he hadn't walked five paces before a high voice spoke, though Quirrell wasn't moving his lips.

"He lies... He lies..."

"Potter, come back here!" Quirrell shouted. "Tell me the truth! What did you just see?"

The high voice spoke again.

"Let me speak to him... face-to-face..."

"Master, you are not strong enough!"

"I have strength enough... for this...."

Harry felt as if Devil's Snare was rooting him to the spot. He couldn't move a muscle. Petrified, he watched as Quirrell reached up and began to unwrap his turban. What was going on? The turban fell away. Quirrell's head looked strangely small without it. Then he turned slowly on the spot.

Harry would have screamed, but he couldn't make a sound. Where there should have been a back to Quirrell's head, there was a face, the most terrible face Harry had ever seen. It was chalk white with glaring red eyes and slits for nostrils, like a snake.

"Harry Potter..." it whispered.

Harry tried to take a step backward but his legs wouldn't move.

"See what I have become?" the face said. "Mere shadow and vapor ... I have form only when I can share another's body... but there have always been those willing to let me into their hearts and minds.... Unicorn blood has strengthened me, these past weeks... you saw faithful Quirrell drinking it for me in the forest... and once I have the Elixir of Life, I will be able to create a body of my own.... Now... why don't you give

me that Stone in your pocket?"

So he knew. The feeling suddenly surged back into Harry's legs. He stumbled backward.

"Don't be a fool," snarled the face. "Better save your own life and join me... or you'll meet the same end as your parents.... They died begging me for mercy..."

"LIAR!" Harry shouted suddenly.

Quirrell was walking backward at him, so that Voldemort could still see him. The evil face was now smiling.

"How touching..." it hissed. "I always value bravery... Yes, boy, your parents were brave.... I killed your father first; and he put up a courageous fight... but your mother needn't have died... she was trying to protect you.... Now give me the Stone, unless you want her to have died in vain."

"NEVER!"

Harry sprang toward the flame door, but Voldemort screamed "SEIZE HIM!" and the next second, Harry felt Quirrell's hand close on his wrist. At once, a needle-sharp pain seared across Harry's scar; his head felt as though it was about to split in two; he yelled, struggling with all his might, and to his surprise, Quirrell let go of him. The pain in his head lessened -- he looked around wildly to see where Quirrell had gone, and saw him hunched in pain, looking at his fingers -- they were blistering before his eyes.

"Seize him! SEIZE HIM!" shrieked Voldemort again, and Quirrell lunged, knocking Harry clean off his feet' landing on top of him, both hands around Harry's neck -- Harry's scar was almost blinding him with pain, yet he could see Quirrell howling in agony.

"Master, I cannot hold him -- my hands -- my hands!"

And Quirrell, though pinning Harry to the ground with his knees, let go of his neck and stared, bewildered, at his own palms -- Harry could see they looked burned, raw, red, and shiny.

"Then kill him, fool, and be done!" screeched Voldemort.

Quirrell raised his hand to perform a deadly curse, but Harry, by instinct, reached up and grabbed Quirrell's face --

"AAAARGH!"

Quirrell rolled off him, his face blistering, too, and then Harry knew: Quirrell couldn't touch his bare skin, not without suffering terrible pain -- his only chance was to keep hold of Quirrell, keep him in enough pain to stop him from doing a curse.

Harry jumped to his feet, caught Quirrell by the arm, and hung on as tight as he could. Quirrell screamed and tried to throw Harry off -- the pain in Harry's head was building -- he couldn't see -- he could only hear Quirrell's terrible shrieks and Voldemort's yells of, "KILL HIM! KILL HIM!" and other voices, maybe in Harry's own head, crying, "Harry! Harry!"

He felt Quirrell's arm wrenched from his grasp, knew all was lost, and fell into blackness, down ... down... down...

Something gold was glinting just above him. The Snitch! He tried to catch it, but his arms were too heavy.

He blinked. It wasn't the Snitch at all. It was a pair of glasses. How strange.

He blinked again. The smiling face of Albus Dumbledore swam into view above him.

"Good afternoon, Harry," said Dumbledore. Harry stared at him. Then he remembered: "Sir! The Stone! It was Quirrell! He's got the Stone! Sir, quick --"

"Calm yourself, dear boy, you are a little behind the times," said Dumbledore. "Quirrell does not have the Stone."

"Then who does? Sir, I --"

"Harry, please relax, or Madam Pomfrey will have me thrown out.

Harry swallowed and looked around him. He realized he must be in the hospital wing. He was lying in a bed with white linen sheets, and next

to him was a table piled high with what looked like half the candy shop.

"Tokens from your friends and admirers," said Dumbledore, beaming. "What happened down in the dungeons between you and Professor Quirrell is a complete secret, so, naturally, the whole school knows. I believe your friends Misters Fred and George Weasley were responsible for trying to send you a toilet seat. No doubt they thought it would amuse you. Madam Pomfrey, however, felt it might not be very hygienic, and confiscated it."

"How long have I been in here?"

"Three days. Mr. Ronald Weasley and Miss Granger will be most relieved you have come round, they have been extremely worried."

"But sit, the Stone

I see you are not to be distracted. Very well, the Stone. Professor Quirrell did not manage to take it from you. I arrived in time to prevent that, although you were doing very well on your own, I must say.

"You got there? You got Hermione's owl?"

"We must have crossed in midair. No sooner had I reached London than it became clear to me that the place I should be was the one I had just left. I arrived just in time to pull Quirrell off you."

"It was you."

"I feared I might be too late."

"You nearly were, I couldn't have kept him off the Stone much longer --"

"Not the Stone, boy, you -- the effort involved nearly killed you. For one terrible moment there, I was afraid it had. As for the Stone, it has been destroyed."

"Destroyed?" said Harry blankly. "But your friend -- Nicolas Flamel --"

"Oh, you know about Nicolas?" said Dumbledore, sounding quite delighted. "You did do the thing properly, didn't you? Well, Nicolas and I have had a little chat, and agreed it's all for the best."

"But that means he and his wife will die, won't they?"

"They have enough Elixir stored to set their affairs in order and then, yes, they will die."

Dumbledore smiled at the look of amazement on Harry's face.

"To one as young as you, I'm sure it seems incredible, but to Nicolas and Perenelle, it really is like going to bed after a very, very long day. After all, to the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure. You know, the Stone was really not such a wonderful thing. As much money and life as you could want! The two things most human beings would choose above all -- the trouble is, humans do have a knack of choosing precisely those things that are worst for them." Harry lay there, lost for words. Dumbledore hummed a little and smiled at the ceiling.

"Sir?" said Harry. "I've been thinking... sir -- even if the Stone's gone, Vol-, I mean, You-Know- Who --"

"Call him Voldemort, Harry. Always use the proper name for things. Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself."

"Yes, sir. Well, Voldemort's going to try other ways of coming back, isn't he? I mean, he hasn't gone, has he?"

"No, Harry, he has not. He is still out there somewhere, perhaps looking for another body to share... not being truly alive, he cannot be killed. He left Quirrell to die; he shows just as little mercy to his followers as his enemies. Nevertheless, Harry, while you may only have delayed his return to power, it will merely take someone else who is prepared to fight what seems a losing battle next time -- and if he is delayed again, and again, why, he may never return to power."

Harry nodded, but stopped quickly, because it made his head hurt. Then he said, "Sir, there are some other things I'd like to know, if you can tell me... things I want to know the truth about...."

"The truth." Dumbledore sighed. "It is a beautiful and terrible thing, and should therefore be treated with great caution. However, I shall answer your questions unless I have a very good reason not to, in which case I beg you'll forgive me. I shall not, of course, lie."

"Well... Voldemort said that he only killed my mother because she tried to stop him from killing me. But why would he want to kill me in the first place?"

Dumbledore sighed very deeply this time.

"Alas, the first thing you ask me, I cannot tell you. Not today. Not now. You will know, one day... put it from your mind for now, Harry. When you are older... I know you hate to hear this... when you are ready, you will know."

And Harry knew it would be no good to argue.

"But why couldn't Quirrell touch me?"

"Your mother died to save you. If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He didn't realize that love as powerful as your mother's for you leaves its own mark. Not a scar, no visible sign... to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever. It is in your very skin. Quirrell, full of hatred, greed, and ambition, sharing his soul with Voldemort, could not touch you for this reason. It was agony to touch a person marked by something so good."

Dumbledore now became very interested in a bird out on the windowsill, which gave Harry time to dry his eyes on the sheet. When he had found his voice again, Harry said, "And the invisibility cloak - do you know who sent it to me?"

"Ah - your father happened to leave it in my possession, and I thought you might like it." Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. "Useful things... your father used it mainly for sneaking off to the kitchens to steal food when he was here."

"And there's something else..."

"Fire away."

"Quirrell said Snape --"

"Professor Snape, Harry." "Yes, him -- Quirrell said he hates me because he hated my father. Is that true?"

"Well, they did rather detest each other. Not unlike yourself and Mr. Malfoy. And then, your father did something Snape could never forgive."

"What?"

"He saved his life."

"What?"

"Yes..." said Dumbledore dreamily. "Funny, the way people's minds work, isn't it? Professor Snape couldn't bear being in your father's debt.... I do believe he worked so hard to protect you this year because he felt that would make him and your father even. Then he could go back to hating your father's memory in peace...."

Harry tried to understand this but it made his head pound, so he stopped.

"And sir, there's one more thing..."

"Just the one?"

"How did I get the Stone out of the mirror?"

"Ah, now, I'm glad you asked me that. It was one of my more brilliant ideas, and between you and me, that's saying something. You see, only one who wanted to find the Stone -- find it, but not use it -- would be able to get it, otherwise they'd just see themselves making gold or drinking Elixir of Life. My brain surprises even me sometimes.... Now, enough questions. I suggest you make a start on these sweets. Ah! Bettie Bott's Every Flavor Beans! I was unfortunate enough in my youth to come across a vomitflavored one, and since then I'm afraid I've rather lost my liking for them -- but I think I'll be safe with a nice toffee, don't you?"

He smiled and popped the golden-brown bean into his mouth. Then he choked and said, "Alas! Ear wax!"

Madam Pomfrey, the nurse, was a nice woman, but very strict.

"Just five minutes," Harry pleaded.

"Absolutely not."

"You let Professor Dumbledore in..."

"Well, of course, that was the headmaster, quite different. You need rest."

"I am resting, look, lying down and everything. Oh, go on, Madam Pomfrey..."

"Oh, very well," she said. "But five minutes only."

And she let Ron and Hermione in.

"Harry!"

Hermione looked ready to fling her arms around him again, but Harry was glad she held herself in as his head was still very sore.

"Oh, Harry, we were sure you were going to -- Dumbledore was so worried --"

"The whole school's talking about it," said Ron. "What really happened?"

It was one of those rare occasions when the true story is even more strange and exciting than the wild rumors. Harry told them everything: Quirrell; the mirror; the Stone; and Voldemort. Ron and Hermione were a very good audience; they gasped in all the right places, and when Harry told them what was under Quirrell's turban, Hermione screamed out loud.

"So the Stone's gone?" said Ron finally. "Flamel's just going to die?"

"That's what I said, but Dumbledore thinks that -- what was it? -- 'to the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure.

"I always said he was off his rocker," said Ron, looking quite impressed at how crazy his hero was.

"So what happened to you two?" said Harry.

"Well, I got back all right," said Hermione. "I brought Ron round -- that took a while -- and we were dashing up to the owlery to contact Dumbledore when we met him in the entrance hall -- he already knew -- he just said, 'Harry's gone after him, hasn't he?' and hurtled off to the

third floor."

"D'you think he meant you to do it?" said Ron. "Sending you your father's cloak and everything?"

"Well, " Hermione exploded, "if he did -- I mean to say that's terrible -- you could have been killed."

"No, it isn't," said Harry thoughtfully. "He's a funny man, Dumbledore. I think he sort of wanted to give me a chance. I think he knows more or less everything that goes on here, you know. I reckon he had a pretty good idea we were going to try, and instead of stopping us, he just taught us enough to help. I don't think it was an accident he let me find out how the mirror worked. It's almost like he thought I had the right to face Voldemort if I could...."

"Yeah, Dumbledore's off his rocker, all right," said Ron proudly. "Listen, you've got to be up for the end-of-year feast tomorrow. The points are all in and Slytherin won, of course -- you missed the last Quidditch match, we were steamrollered by Ravenclaw without you -- but the food'll be good."

At that moment, Madam Pomfrey bustled over.

"You've had nearly fifteen minutes, now OUT" she said firmly.

After a good night's sleep, Harry felt nearly back to normal.

I want to go to the feast," he told Madam Pomfrey as she straightened his many candy boxes. I can, can't I?"

"Professor Dumbledore says you are to be allowed to go," she said stiffily, as though in her opinion Professor Dumbledore didn't realize how risky feasts could be. "And you have another visitor."

"Oh, good," said Harry. "Who is it?"

Hagrid sidled through the door as he spoke. As usual when he was indoors, Hagrid looked too big to be allowed. He sat down next to Harry, took one look at him, and burst into tears.

"It's -- all -- my -- ruddy -- fault!" he sobbed, his face in his hands. I told the evil git how ter get past Fluffy! I told him! It was the only

thing he didn't know, an' I told him! Yeh could've died! All fer a dragon egg! I'll never drink again! I should be chucked out an' made ter live as a Muggle!"

"Hagrid!" said Harry, shocked to see Hagrid shaking with grief and remorse, great tears leaking down into his beard. "Hagrid, he'd have found out somehow, this is Voldemort we're talking about, he'd have found out even if you hadn't told him."

"Yeh could've died!" sobbed Hagrid. "An' don' say the name!"

"VOLDEMORT!" Harry bellowed, and Hagrid was so shocked, he stopped crying. "I've met him and I'm calling him by his name. Please cheer up, Hagrid, we saved the Stone, it's gone, he can't use it. Have a Chocolate Frog, I've got loads...."

Hagrid wiped his nose on the back of his hand and said, "That reminds me. I've got yeh a present."

"It's not a stoat sandwich, is it?" said Harry anxiously, and at last Hagrid gave a weak chuckle. "Nah. Dumbledore gave me the day off yesterday ter fix it. 'Course, he shoulda sacked me instead -- anyway, got yeh this..."

It seemed to be a handsome, leather-covered book. Harry opened it curiously. It was full of wizard photographs. Smiling and waving at him from every page were his mother and father.

"Sent owls off ter all yer parents' old school friends, askin' fer photos... knew yeh didn' have any... d'yeh like it?"

Harry couldn't speak, but Hagrid understood.

Harry made his way down to the end-of-year feast alone that night. He had been held up by Madam Pomfrey's fussing about, insisting on giving him one last checkup, so the Great Hall was already full. It was decked out in the Slytherin colors of green and silver to celebrate Slytherin's winning the house cup for the seventh year in a row. A huge banner showing the Slytherin serpent covered the wall behind the High Table.

When Harry walked in there was a sudden hush, and then everybody started talking loudly at once. He slipped into a seat between Ron and Hermione at the Gryffindor table and tried to ignore the fact that people were

standing up to look at him.

Fortunately, Dumbledore arrived moments later. The babble died away.

"Another year gone!" Dumbledore said cheerfully. "And I must trouble you with an old man's wheezing waffle before we sink our teeth into our delicious feast. What a year it has been! Hopefully your heads are all a little fuller than they were... you have the whole summer ahead to get them nice and empty before next year starts....

"Now, as I understand it, the house cup here needs awarding, and the points stand thus: In fourth place, Gryffindor, with three hundred and twelve points; in third, Hufflepuff, with three hundred and fifty-two; Ravenclaw has four hundred and twenty-six and Slytherin, four hundred and seventy- two."

A storm of cheering and stamping broke out from the Slytherin table. Harry could see Draco Malfoy banging his goblet on the table. It was a sickening sight.

"Yes, Yes, well done, Slytherin," said Dumbledore. "However, recent events must be taken into account."

The room went very still. The Slytherins' smiles faded a little.

"Ahem," said Dumbledore. "I have a few last-minute points to dish out. Let me see. Yes...

"First -- to Mr. Ronald Weasley..."

Ron went purple in the face; he looked like a radish with a bad sunburn.

"...for the best-played game of chess Hogwarts has seen in many years, I award Gryffindor house fifty points."

Gryffindor cheers nearly raised the bewitched ceiling; the stars overhead seemed to quiver. Percy could be heard telling the other prefects, "My brother, you know! My youngest brother! Got past McGonagall's giant chess set!"

At last there was silence again.

"Second -- to Miss Hermione Granger... for the use of cool logic in the

face of fire, I award Gryffindor house fifty points."

Hermione buried her face in her arms; Harry strongly suspected she had burst into tears. Gryffindors up and down the table were beside themselves -- they were a hundred points up. "Third -- to Mr. Harry Potter..." said Dumbledore. The room went deadly quiet for pure nerve and outstanding courage, I award Gryffindor house sixty points."

The din was deafening. Those who could add up while yelling themselves hoarse knew that Gryffindor now had four hundred and seventy-two points -- exactly the same as Slytherin. They had tied for the house cup -- if only Dumbledore had given Harry just one more point.

Dumbledore raised his hand. The room gradually fell silent.

"There are all kinds of courage," said Dumbledore, smiling. "It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends. I therefore award ten points to Mr. Neville Longbottom."

Someone standing outside the Great Hall might well have thought some sort of explosion had taken place, so loud was the noise that erupted from the Gryffindor table. Harry, Ron, and Hermione stood up to yell and cheer as Neville, white with shock, disappeared under a pile of people hugging him. He had never won so much as a point for Gryffindor before. Harry, still cheering, nudged Ron in the ribs and pointed at Malfoy, who couldn't have looked more stunned and horrified if he'd just had the Body-Bind Curse put on him.

"Which means, Dumbledore called over the storm of applause, for even Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff were celebrating the downfall of Slytherin, "we need a little change of decoration."

He clapped his hands. In an instant, the green hangings became scarlet and the silver became gold; the huge Slytherin serpent vanished and a towering Gryffindor lion took its place. Snape was shaking Professor McGonagall's hand, with a horrible, forced smile. He caught Harry's eye and Harry knew at once that Snape's feelings toward him hadn't changed one jot. This didn't worry Harry. It seemed as though life would be back to normal next year, or as normal as it ever was at Hogwarts.

It was the best evening of Harry's life, better than winning at Quidditch, or Christmas, or knocking out mountain trolls... he would

never, ever forget tonight.

Harry had almost forgotten that the exam results were still to come, but come they did. To their great surprise, both he and Ron passed with good marks; Hermione, of course, had the best grades of the first years. Even Neville scraped through, his good Herbology mark making up for his abysmal Potions one. They had hoped that Goyle, who was almost as stupid as he was mean, might be thrown out, but he had passed, too. It was a shame, but as Ron said, you couldn't have everything in life.

And suddenly, their wardrobes were empty, their trunks were packed, Neville's toad was found lurking in a corner of the toilets; notes were handed out to all students, warning them not to use magic over the holidays ("I always hope they'll forget to give us these," said Fred Weasley sadly); Hagrid was there to take them down to the fleet of boats that sailed across the lake; they were boarding the Hogwarts Express; talking and laughing as the countryside became greener and tidier; eating Bettie Bott's Every Flavor Beans as they sped past Muggle towns; pulling off their wizard robes and putting on jackets and coats; pulling into platform nine and three-quarters at King's Cross Station.

It took quite a while for them all to get off the platform. A wizened old guard was up by the ticket barrier, letting them go through the gate in twos and threes so they didn't attract attention by all bursting out of a solid wall at once and alarming the Muggles.

"You must come and stay this summer," said Ron, "both of you -- I'll send you an owl."

"Thanks," said Harry, "I'll need something to look forward to." People jostled them as they moved forward toward the gateway back to the Muggle world. Some of them called:

"Bye, Harry!"

"See you, Potter!"

"Still famous," said Ron, grinning at him.

"Not where I'm going, I promise you," said Harry.

He, Ron, and Hermione passed through the gateway together. "There he is, Mom, there he is, look!"

It was Ginny Weasley, Ron's younger sister, but she wasn't pointing at Ron.

"Harry Potter!" she squealed. "Look, Mom! I can see

"Be quiet, Ginny, and it's rude to point."

Mrs. Weasley smiled down at them.

"Busy year?" she said.

"Very," said Harry. "Thanks for the fudge and the sweater, Mrs. Weasley."

"Oh, it was nothing, dear."

"Ready, are you?"

It was Uncle Vernon, still purple-faced, still mustached, still looking furious at the nerve of Harry, carrying an owl in a cage in a station full of ordinary people. Behind him stood Aunt Petunia and Dudley, looking terrified at the very sight of Harry.

"You must be Harry's family!" said Mrs. Weasley.

"In a manner of speaking," said Uncle Vernon. "Hurry up, boy, we haven't got all day." He walked away.

Harry hung back for a last word with Ron and Hermione.

"See you over the summer, then."

"Hope you have -- er -- a good holiday," said Hermione, looking uncertainly after Uncle Vernon, shocked that anyone could be so unpleasant.

"Oh, I will," said Harry, and they were surprised at the grin that was spreading over his face. "They don't know we're not allowed to use magic at home. I'm going to have a lot of fun with Dudley this summer...."

THE END

ROWLING

YEAR 2

HARRY POTTER
AND THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS

ARTHUR A. LEVINE BOOKS

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Harry Potter

AND THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS

J. K. ROWLING

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THE DURSLEYS

were so mean and hideous that summer that all Harry Potter wanted was to get back to the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. But just as he's packing his bags, Harry receives a warning from a strange, impish creature named Dobby who says that if Harry Potter returns to Hogwarts, disaster will strike.

And strike it does. For in Harry's second year at Hogwarts, fresh torments and horrors arise, including an outrageously stuck-up new professor, Gilderoy Lockhart, a spirit named Moaning Myrtle who haunts the girls' bathroom, and the unwanted attentions of Ron Weasley's younger sister, Ginny.

But each of these seem minor annoyances when the real trouble begins, and someone—or something—starts turning Hogwarts students to stone. Could it be Draco Malfoy, a more poisonous rival than ever? Could it possibly be Hagrid, whose mysterious past is finally told? Or could it be the one everyone at Hogwarts most suspects . . . Harry Potter himself!

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For Seán P. F. Harris,
getaway driver and foul-weather friend

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CHAPTER ONE

THE WORST BIRTHDAY

Not for the first time, an argument had broken out over breakfast at number four, Privet Drive. Mr. Vernon Dursley had been woken in the early hours of the morning by a loud, hooting noise from his nephew Harry's room.

"Third time this week!" he roared across the table. "If you can't control that owl, it'll have to go!"

Harry tried, yet again, to explain.

"She's *bored,*" he said. "She's used to flying around outside. If I could just let her out at night —"

"Do I look stupid?" snarled Uncle Vernon, a bit of fried egg dangling from his bushy mustache. "I know what'll happen if that owl's let out."

He exchanged dark looks with his wife, Petunia.

Harry tried to argue back but his words were drowned by a long, loud belch from the Dursleys' son, Dudley.

"I want more bacon."

"There's more in the frying pan, sweetums," said Aunt Petunia, turning misty eyes on her massive son. "We must build you up while we've got the chance. . . . I don't like the sound of that school food. . . ."

"Nonsense, Petunia, I never went hungry when *I* was at Smeltings," said Uncle Vernon heartily. "Dudley gets enough, don't you, son?"

Dudley, who was so large his bottom drooped over either side of the kitchen chair, grinned and turned to Harry.

"Pass the frying pan."

"You've forgotten the magic word," said Harry irritably.

The effect of this simple sentence on the rest of the family was incredible: Dudley gasped and fell off his chair with a crash that shook the whole kitchen; Mrs. Dursley gave a small scream and clapped her hands to her mouth; Mr. Dursley jumped to his feet, veins throbbing in his temples.

"I meant 'please'!" said Harry quickly. "I didn't mean —"

"WHAT HAVE I TOLD YOU," thundered his uncle, spraying spit over the table, "ABOUT SAYING THE 'M' WORD IN OUR HOUSE?"

"But I —"

"HOW DARE YOU THREATEN DUDLEY!" roared Uncle Vernon, pounding the table with his fist.

"I just —"

"I WARNED YOU! I WILL NOT TOLERATE MENTION OF YOUR ABNORMALITY UNDER THIS ROOF!"

Harry stared from his purple-faced uncle to his pale aunt, who was trying to heave Dudley to his feet.

"All right," said Harry, "*all right . . .*"

Uncle Vernon sat back down, breathing like a winded rhinoceros and watching Harry closely out of the corners of his small, sharp eyes.

Ever since Harry had come home for the summer holidays, Uncle Vernon had been treating him like a bomb that might go off at any moment, because Harry Potter *wasn't* a normal boy. As a matter of fact, he was as not normal as it is possible to be.

Harry Potter was a wizard — a wizard fresh from his first year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. And if the Dursleys were unhappy to have him back for the holidays, it was nothing to how Harry felt.

He missed Hogwarts so much it was like having a constant stomachache. He missed the castle, with its secret passageways and ghosts, his classes (though perhaps not Snape, the Potions master), the mail arriving by owl, eating banquets in the Great Hall, sleeping in his four-poster bed in the tower dormitory, visiting the gamekeeper, Hagrid, in his cabin next to the Forbidden Forest in the grounds, and, especially, Quidditch, the most popular sport in the wizarding world (six tall goal posts, four flying balls, and fourteen players on broomsticks).

All Harry's spellbooks, his wand, robes, cauldron, and top-of-the-line Nimbus Two Thousand broomstick had been locked in a cupboard under the stairs by Uncle Vernon the instant Harry had come home. What did the Dursleys care if Harry lost his place on the House Quidditch team because he hadn't practiced all summer? What was it to the Dursleys if Harry went back to school without any of his homework done? The Dursleys were what wizards called Muggles (not a drop of magical blood in their veins),

and as far as they were concerned, having a wizard in the family was a matter of deepest shame. Uncle Vernon had even padlocked Harry's owl, Hedwig, inside her cage, to stop her from carrying messages to anyone in the wizarding world.

Harry looked nothing like the rest of the family. Uncle Vernon was large and neckless, with an enormous black mustache; Aunt Petunia was horse-faced and bony; Dudley was blond, pink, and porky. Harry, on the other hand, was small and skinny, with brilliant green eyes and jet-black hair that was always untidy. He wore round glasses, and on his forehead was a thin, lightning-shaped scar.

It was this scar that made Harry so particularly unusual, even for a wizard. This scar was the only hint of Harry's very mysterious past, of the reason he had been left on the Dursleys' doorstep eleven years before.

At the age of one year old, Harry had somehow survived a curse from the greatest Dark sorcerer of all time, Lord Voldemort, whose name most witches and wizards still feared to speak. Harry's parents had died in Voldemort's attack, but Harry had escaped with his lightning scar, and somehow — nobody understood why — Voldemort's powers had been destroyed the instant he had failed to kill Harry.

So Harry had been brought up by his dead mother's sister and her husband. He had spent ten years with the Dursleys, never understanding why he kept making odd things happen without meaning to, believing the Dursleys' story that he had got his scar in the car crash that had killed his parents.

And then, exactly a year ago, Hogwarts had written to Harry,

and the whole story had come out. Harry had taken up his place at wizard school, where he and his scar were famous . . . but now the school year was over, and he was back with the Dursleys for the summer, back to being treated like a dog that had rolled in something smelly.

The Dursleys hadn't even remembered that today happened to be Harry's twelfth birthday. Of course, his hopes hadn't been high; they'd never given him a real present, let alone a cake — but to ignore it completely . . .

At that moment, Uncle Vernon cleared his throat importantly and said, "Now, as we all know, today is a very important day."

Harry looked up, hardly daring to believe it.

"This could well be the day I make the biggest deal of my career," said Uncle Vernon.

Harry went back to his toast. *Of course,* he thought bitterly, *Uncle Vernon was talking about the stupid dinner party.* He'd been talking of nothing else for two weeks. Some rich builder and his wife were coming to dinner and Uncle Vernon was hoping to get a huge order from him (Uncle Vernon's company made drills).

"I think we should run through the schedule one more time," said Uncle Vernon. "We should all be in position at eight o'clock. Petunia, you will be — ?"

"In the lounge," said Aunt Petunia promptly, "waiting to welcome them graciously to our home."

"Good, good. And Dudley?"

"I'll be waiting to open the door." Dudley put on a foul, simpering smile. "May I take your coats, Mr. and Mrs. Mason?"

"They'll *love* him!" cried Aunt Petunia rapturously.

"Excellent, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon. Then he rounded on Harry. "And *you*?"

"I'll be in my bedroom, making no noise and pretending I'm not there," said Harry tonelessly.

"Exactly," said Uncle Vernon nastily. "I will lead them into the lounge, introduce you, Petunia, and pour them drinks. At eight-fifteen —"

"I'll announce dinner," said Aunt Petunia.

"And, Dudley, you'll say —"

"May I take you through to the dining room, Mrs. Mason?" said Dudley, offering his fat arm to an invisible woman.

"My perfect little gentleman!" sniffed Aunt Petunia.

"And *you*?" said Uncle Vernon viciously to Harry.

"I'll be in my room, making no noise and pretending I'm not there," said Harry dully.

"Precisely. Now, we should aim to get in a few good compliments at dinner. Petunia, any ideas?"

"Vernon tells me you're a *wonderful* golfer, Mr. Mason. . . . *Do* tell me where you bought your dress, Mrs. Mason. . . ."

"Perfect . . . Dudley?"

"How about — 'We had to write an essay about our hero at school, Mr. Mason, and *I* wrote about *you.*' "

This was too much for both Aunt Petunia and Harry. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and hugged her son, while Harry ducked under the table so they wouldn't see him laughing.

"And you, boy?"

Harry fought to keep his face straight as he emerged.

"I'll be in my room, making no noise and pretending I'm not there," he said.

"Too right, you will," said Uncle Vernon forcefully. "The Masons don't know anything about you and it's going to stay that way. When dinner's over, you take Mrs. Mason back to the lounge for coffee, Petunia, and I'll bring the subject around to drills. With any luck, I'll have the deal signed and sealed before the news at ten. We'll be shopping for a vacation home in Majorca this time tomorrow."

Harry couldn't feel too excited about this. He didn't think the Dursleys would like him any better in Majorca than they did on Privet Drive.

"Right — I'm off into town to pick up the dinner jackets for Dudley and me. And *you,*" he snarled at Harry. "You stay out of your aunt's way while she's cleaning."

Harry left through the back door. It was a brilliant, sunny day. He crossed the lawn, slumped down on the garden bench, and sang under his breath:

"Happy birthday to me . . . happy birthday to me . . ."

No cards, no presents, and he would be spending the evening pretending not to exist. He gazed miserably into the hedge. He had never felt so lonely. More than anything else at Hogwarts, more even than playing Quidditch, Harry missed his best friends, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger. They, however, didn't seem to be missing him at all. Neither of them had written to him all summer, even though Ron had said he was going to ask Harry to come and stay.

Countless times, Harry had been on the point of unlocking Hedwig's cage by magic and sending her to Ron and Hermione with a letter, but it wasn't worth the risk. Underage wizards weren't allowed to use magic outside of school. Harry hadn't told the

Dursleys this; he knew it was only their terror that he might turn them all into dung beetles that stopped them from locking *him* in the cupboard under the stairs with his wand and broomstick. For the first couple of weeks back, Harry had enjoyed muttering nonsense words under his breath and watching Dudley tearing out of the room as fast as his fat legs would carry him. But the long silence from Ron and Hermione had made Harry feel so cut off from the magical world that even taunting Dudley had lost its appeal — and now Ron and Hermione had forgotten his birthday.

What wouldn't he give now for a message from Hogwarts? From any witch or wizard? He'd almost be glad of a sight of his archenemy, Draco Malfoy, just to be sure it hadn't all been a dream. . . .

Not that his whole year at Hogwarts had been fun. At the very end of last term, Harry had come face-to-face with none other than Lord Voldemort himself. Voldemort might be a ruin of his former self, but he was still terrifying, still cunning, still determined to regain power. Harry had slipped through Voldemort's clutches for a second time, but it had been a narrow escape, and even now, weeks later, Harry kept waking in the night, drenched in cold sweat, wondering where Voldemort was now, remembering his livid face, his wide, mad eyes —

Harry suddenly sat bolt upright on the garden bench. He had been staring absent-mindedly into the hedge — *and the hedge was staring back.* Two enormous green eyes had appeared among the leaves.

Harry jumped to his feet just as a jeering voice floated across the lawn.

"I know what day it is," sang Dudley, waddling toward him.

The huge eyes blinked and vanished.

"What?" said Harry, not taking his eyes off the spot where they had been.

"I know what day it is," Dudley repeated, coming right up to him.

"Well done," said Harry. "So you've finally learned the days of the week."

"Today's your *birthday,*" sneered Dudley. "How come you haven't got any cards? Haven't you even got friends at that freak place?"

"Better not let your mum hear you talking about my school," said Harry coolly.

Dudley hitched up his trousers, which were slipping down his fat bottom.

"Why're you staring at the hedge?" he said suspiciously.

"I'm trying to decide what would be the best spell to set it on fire," said Harry.

Dudley stumbled backward at once, a look of panic on his fat face.

"You c-can't — Dad told you you're not to do m-magic — he said he'll chuck you out of the house — and you haven't got anywhere else to go — you haven't got any *friends* to take you —"

"*Jiggery pokery*!" said Harry in a fierce voice. "*Hocus pocus — squiggly wiggly —*"

"MUUUUUUM!" howled Dudley, tripping over his feet as he dashed back toward the house. "MUUUUM! He's doing you know what!"

Harry paid dearly for his moment of fun. As neither Dudley nor

the hedge was in any way hurt, Aunt Petunia knew he hadn't really done magic, but he still had to duck as she aimed a heavy blow at his head with the soapy frying pan. Then she gave him work to do, with the promise he wouldn't eat again until he'd finished.

While Dudley lolled around watching and eating ice cream, Harry cleaned the windows, washed the car, mowed the lawn, trimmed the flowerbeds, pruned and watered the roses, and repainted the garden bench. The sun blazed overhead, burning the back of his neck. Harry knew he shouldn't have risen to Dudley's bait, but Dudley had said the very thing Harry had been thinking himself . . . maybe he *didn't* have any friends at Hogwarts. . . .

Wish they could see famous Harry Potter now, he thought savagely as he spread manure on the flower beds, his back aching, sweat running down his face.

It was half past seven in the evening when at last, exhausted, he heard Aunt Petunia calling him.

"Get in here! And walk on the newspaper!"

Harry moved gladly into the shade of the gleaming kitchen. On top of the fridge stood tonight's pudding: a huge mound of whipped cream and sugared violets. A loin of roast pork was sizzling in the oven.

"Eat quickly! The Masons will be here soon!" snapped Aunt Petunia, pointing to two slices of bread and a lump of cheese on the kitchen table. She was already wearing a salmon-pink cocktail dress.

Harry washed his hands and bolted down his pitiful supper. The moment he had finished, Aunt Petunia whisked away his plate. "Upstairs! Hurry!"

As he passed the door to the living room, Harry caught a glimpse of Uncle Vernon and Dudley in bow ties and dinner jackets. He had only just reached the upstairs landing when the doorbell rang and Uncle Vernon's furious face appeared at the foot of the stairs.

"Remember, boy — one sound —"

Harry crossed to his bedroom on tiptoe, slipped inside, closed the door, and turned to collapse on his bed.

The trouble was, there was already someone sitting on it.

CHAPTER TWO

DOBBY'S WARNING

Harry managed not to shout out, but it was a close thing. The little creature on the bed had large, bat-like ears and bulging green eyes the size of tennis balls. Harry knew instantly that this was what had been watching him out of the garden hedge that morning.

As they stared at each other, Harry heard Dudley's voice from the hall.

"May I take your coats, Mr. and Mrs. Mason?"

The creature slipped off the bed and bowed so low that the end of its long, thin nose touched the carpet. Harry noticed that it was wearing what looked like an old pillowcase, with rips for arm- and leg-holes.

"Er — hello," said Harry nervously.

"Harry Potter!" said the creature in a high-pitched voice Harry was sure would carry down the stairs. "So long has Dobby wanted to meet you, sir . . . Such an honor it is. . . ."

"Th-thank you," said Harry, edging along the wall and sinking into his desk chair, next to Hedwig, who was asleep in her large cage. He wanted to ask, "What are you?" but thought it would sound too rude, so instead he said, "Who are you?"

"Dobby, sir. Just Dobby. Dobby the house-elf," said the creature.

"Oh — really?" said Harry. "Er — I don't want to be rude or anything, but — this isn't a great time for me to have a house-elf in my bedroom."

Aunt Petunia's high, false laugh sounded from the living room. The elf hung his head.

"Not that I'm not pleased to meet you," said Harry quickly, "but, er, is there any particular reason you're here?"

"Oh, yes, sir," said Dobby earnestly. "Dobby has come to tell you, sir . . . it is difficult, sir . . . Dobby wonders where to begin. . . ."

"Sit down," said Harry politely, pointing at the bed.

To his horror, the elf burst into tears — very noisy tears.

"*S-sit down*!" he wailed. "*Never . . . never ever . . .*"

Harry thought he heard the voices downstairs falter.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, "I didn't mean to offend you or anything —"

"Offend Dobby!" choked the elf. "Dobby has *never* been asked to sit down by a wizard — like an *equal* —"

Harry, trying to say "Shh!" and look comforting at the same time, ushered Dobby back onto the bed where he sat hiccoughing, looking like a large and very ugly doll. At last he managed to control himself, and sat with his great eyes fixed on Harry in an expression of watery adoration.

"You can't have met many decent wizards," said Harry, trying to cheer him up.

Dobby shook his head. Then, without warning, he leapt up and started banging his head furiously on the window, shouting, "*Bad* Dobby! *Bad* Dobby!"

"Don't — what are you doing?" Harry hissed, springing up and pulling Dobby back onto the bed — Hedwig had woken up with a particularly loud screech and was beating her wings wildly against the bars of her cage.

"Dobby had to punish himself, sir," said the elf, who had gone slightly cross-eyed. "Dobby almost spoke ill of his family, sir. . . ."

"Your family?"

"The wizard family Dobby serves, sir. . . . Dobby is a house-elf — bound to serve one house and one family forever. . . ."

"Do they know you're here?" asked Harry curiously.

Dobby shuddered.

"Oh, no, sir, no . . . Dobby will have to punish himself most grievously for coming to see you, sir. Dobby will have to shut his ears in the oven door for this. If they ever knew, sir —"

"But won't they notice if you shut your ears in the oven door?"

"Dobby doubts it, sir. Dobby is always having to punish himself for something, sir. They lets Dobby get on with it, sir. Sometimes they reminds me to do extra punishments. . . ."

"But why don't you leave? Escape?"

"A house-elf must be set free, sir. And the family will never set Dobby free . . . Dobby will serve the family until he dies, sir. . . ."

Harry stared.

"And I thought I had it bad staying here for another four weeks,"

he said. "This makes the Dursleys sound almost human. Can't anyone help you? Can't I?"

Almost at once, Harry wished he hadn't spoken. Dobby dissolved again into wails of gratitude.

"Please," Harry whispered frantically, "please be quiet. If the Dursleys hear anything, if they know you're here —"

"Harry Potter asks if he can help Dobby . . . Dobby has heard of your greatness, sir, but of your goodness, Dobby never knew. . . ."

Harry, who was feeling distinctly hot in the face, said, "Whatever you've heard about my greatness is a load of rubbish. I'm not even top of my year at Hogwarts; that's Hermione, she —"

But he stopped quickly, because thinking about Hermione was painful.

"Harry Potter is humble and modest," said Dobby reverently, his orb-like eyes aglow. "Harry Potter speaks not of his triumph over He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named —"

"Voldemort?" said Harry.

Dobby clapped his hands over his bat ears and moaned, "Ah, speak not the name, sir! Speak not the name!"

"Sorry," said Harry quickly. "I know lots of people don't like it. My friend Ron —"

He stopped again. Thinking about Ron was painful, too.

Dobby leaned toward Harry, his eyes wide as headlights.

"Dobby heard tell," he said hoarsely, "that Harry Potter met the Dark Lord for a second time, just weeks ago . . . that Harry Potter escaped *yet again.*"

Harry nodded and Dobby's eyes suddenly shone with tears.

"Ah, sir," he gasped, dabbing his face with a corner of the grubby

pillowcase he was wearing. "Harry Potter is valiant and bold! He has braved so many dangers already! But Dobby has come to protect Harry Potter, to warn him, even if he *does* have to shut his ears in the oven door later. . . . *Harry Potter must not go back to Hogwarts.*"

There was a silence broken only by the chink of knives and forks from downstairs and the distant rumble of Uncle Vernon's voice.

"W-what?" Harry stammered. "But I've got to go back — term starts on September first. It's all that's keeping me going. You don't know what it's like here. I don't *belong* here. I belong in your world — at Hogwarts."

"No, no, no," squeaked Dobby, shaking his head so hard his ears flapped. "Harry Potter must stay where he is safe. He is too great, too good, to lose. If Harry Potter goes back to Hogwarts, he will be in mortal danger."

"Why?" said Harry in surprise.

"There is a plot, Harry Potter. A plot to make most terrible things happen at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry this year," whispered Dobby, suddenly trembling all over. "Dobby has known it for months, sir. Harry Potter must not put himself in peril. He is too important, sir!"

"What terrible things?" said Harry at once. "Who's plotting them?"

Dobby made a funny choking noise and then banged his head frantically against the wall.

"All right!" cried Harry, grabbing the elf's arm to stop him. "You can't tell me. I understand. But why are you warning *me*?" A sudden, unpleasant thought struck him. "Hang on — this hasn't got anything to do with Vol — sorry — with You-Know-Who, has it?

You could just shake or nod," he added hastily as Dobby's head tilted worryingly close to the wall again.

Slowly, Dobby shook his head.

"Not — not *He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named,* sir —"

But Dobby's eyes were wide and he seemed to be trying to give Harry a hint. Harry, however, was completely lost.

"He hasn't got a brother, has he?"

Dobby shook his head, his eyes wider than ever.

"Well then, I can't think who else would have a chance of making horrible things happen at Hogwarts," said Harry. "I mean, there's Dumbledore, for one thing — you know who Dumbledore is, don't you?"

Dobby bowed his head.

"Albus Dumbledore is the greatest headmaster Hogwarts has ever had. Dobby knows it, sir. Dobby has heard Dumbledore's powers rival those of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named at the height of his strength. But, sir" — Dobby's voice dropped to an urgent whisper — "there are powers Dumbledore doesn't . . . powers no decent wizard . . ."

And before Harry could stop him, Dobby bounded off the bed, seized Harry's desk lamp, and started beating himself around the head with earsplitting yelps.

A sudden silence fell downstairs. Two seconds later Harry, heart thudding madly, heard Uncle Vernon coming into the hall, calling, "Dudley must have left his television on again, the little tyke!"

"Quick! In the closet!" hissed Harry, stuffing Dobby in, shutting the door, and flinging himself onto the bed just as the door handle turned.

"What — the — *devil* — are — you — doing?" said Uncle Vernon through gritted teeth, his face horribly close to Harry's. "You've just ruined the punch line of my Japanese golfer joke. . . . One more sound and you'll wish you'd never been born, boy!"

He stomped flat-footed from the room.

Shaking, Harry let Dobby out of the closet.

"See what it's like here?" he said. "See why I've got to go back to Hogwarts? It's the only place I've got — well, I *think* I've got friends."

"Friends who don't even *write* to Harry Potter?" said Dobby slyly.

"I expect they've just been — wait a minute," said Harry, frowning. "How do *you* know my friends haven't been writing to me?"

Dobby shuffled his feet.

"Harry Potter mustn't be angry with Dobby. Dobby did it for the best —"

"*Have you been stopping my letters*?"

"Dobby has them here, sir," said the elf. Stepping nimbly out of Harry's reach, he pulled a thick wad of envelopes from the inside of the pillowcase he was wearing. Harry could make out Hermione's neat writing, Ron's untidy scrawl, and even a scribble that looked as though it was from the Hogwarts gamekeeper, Hagrid.

Dobby blinked anxiously up at Harry.

"Harry Potter mustn't be angry. . . . Dobby hoped . . . if Harry Potter thought his friends had forgotten him . . . Harry Potter might not want to go back to school, sir. . . ."

Harry wasn't listening. He made a grab for the letters, but Dobby jumped out of reach.

"Harry Potter will have them, sir, if he gives Dobby his word

that he will not return to Hogwarts. Ah, sir, this is a danger you must not face! Say you won't go back, sir!"

"No," said Harry angrily. "Give me my friends' letters!"

"Then Harry Potter leaves Dobby no choice," said the elf sadly.

Before Harry could move, Dobby had darted to the bedroom door, pulled it open, and sprinted down the stairs.

Mouth dry, stomach lurching, Harry sprang after him, trying not to make a sound. He jumped the last six steps, landing catlike on the hall carpet, looking around for Dobby. From the dining room he heard Uncle Vernon saying, ". . . tell Petunia that very funny story about those American plumbers, Mr. Mason. She's been dying to hear . . ."

Harry ran up the hall into the kitchen and felt his stomach disappear.

Aunt Petunia's masterpiece of a pudding, the mountain of cream and sugared violets, was floating up near the ceiling. On top of a cupboard in the corner crouched Dobby.

"No," croaked Harry. "Please . . . they'll kill me. . . ."

"Harry Potter must say he's not going back to school —"

"Dobby . . . please . . ."

"Say it, sir —"

"I can't —"

Dobby gave him a tragic look.

"Then Dobby must do it, sir, for Harry Potter's own good."

The pudding fell to the floor with a heart-stopping crash. Cream splattered the windows and walls as the dish shattered. With a crack like a whip, Dobby vanished.

There were screams from the dining room and Uncle Vernon

burst into the kitchen to find Harry, rigid with shock, covered from head to foot in Aunt Petunia's pudding.

At first, it looked as though Uncle Vernon would manage to gloss the whole thing over. ("Just our nephew — very disturbed — meeting strangers upsets him, so we kept him upstairs. . . .") He shooed the shocked Masons back into the dining room, promised Harry he would flay him to within an inch of his life when the Masons had left, and handed him a mop. Aunt Petunia dug some ice cream out of the freezer and Harry, still shaking, started scrubbing the kitchen clean.

Uncle Vernon might still have been able to make his deal — if it hadn't been for the owl.

Aunt Petunia was just passing around a box of after-dinner mints when a huge barn owl swooped through the dining room window, dropped a letter on Mrs. Mason's head, and swooped out again. Mrs. Mason screamed like a banshee and ran from the house shouting about lunatics. Mr. Mason stayed just long enough to tell the Dursleys that his wife was mortally afraid of birds of all shapes and sizes, and to ask whether this was their idea of a joke.

Harry stood in the kitchen, clutching the mop for support, as Uncle Vernon advanced on him, a demonic glint in his tiny eyes.

"Read it!" he hissed evilly, brandishing the letter the owl had delivered. "Go on — read it!"

Harry took it. It did not contain birthday greetings.

> Dear Mr. Potter,
>
> We have received intelligence that a Hover Charm was used at your place of residence this evening at twelve minutes past nine.

As you know, underage wizards are not permitted to perform spells outside school, and further spellwork on your part may lead to expulsion from said school (Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery, 1875, Paragraph C).

We would also ask you to remember that any magical activity that risks notice by members of the non-magical community (Muggles) is a serious offense under section 13 of the International Confederation of Warlocks' Statute of Secrecy.

Enjoy your holidays!

Yours sincerely,

Mafalda Hopkirk

Mafalda Hopkirk
IMPROPER USE OF MAGIC OFFICE
Ministry of Magic

Harry looked up from the letter and gulped.

"You didn't tell us you weren't allowed to use magic outside school," said Uncle Vernon, a mad gleam dancing in his eyes. "Forgot to mention it. . . . Slipped your mind, I daresay. . . ."

He was bearing down on Harry like a great bulldog, all his teeth bared. "Well, I've got news for you, boy. . . . I'm locking you up. . . . You're never going back to that school . . . never . . . and if you try and magic yourself out — they'll expel you!"

And laughing like a maniac, he dragged Harry back upstairs.

Uncle Vernon was as bad as his word. The following morning,

he paid a man to fit bars on Harry's window. He himself fitted a cat-flap in the bedroom door, so that small amounts of food could be pushed inside three times a day. They let Harry out to use the bathroom morning and evening. Otherwise, he was locked in his room around the clock.

Three days later, the Dursleys were showing no sign of relenting, and Harry couldn't see any way out of his situation. He lay on his bed watching the sun sinking behind the bars on the window and wondered miserably what was going to happen to him.

What was the good of magicking himself out of his room if Hogwarts would expel him for doing it? Yet life at Privet Drive had reached an all-time low. Now that the Dursleys knew they weren't going to wake up as fruit bats, he had lost his only weapon. Dobby might have saved Harry from horrible happenings at Hogwarts, but the way things were going, he'd probably starve to death anyway.

The cat-flap rattled and Aunt Petunia's hand appeared, pushing a bowl of canned soup into the room. Harry, whose insides were aching with hunger, jumped off his bed and seized it. The soup was stone-cold, but he drank half of it in one gulp. Then he crossed the room to Hedwig's cage and tipped the soggy vegetables at the bottom of the bowl into her empty food tray. She ruffled her feathers and gave him a look of deep disgust.

"It's no good turning your beak up at it — that's all we've got," said Harry grimly.

He put the empty bowl back on the floor next to the cat-flap and lay back down on the bed, somehow even hungrier than he had been before the soup.

Supposing he was still alive in another four weeks, what would happen if he didn't turn up at Hogwarts? Would someone be sent to see why he hadn't come back? Would they be able to make the Dursleys let him go?

The room was growing dark. Exhausted, stomach rumbling, mind spinning over the same unanswerable questions, Harry fell into an uneasy sleep.

He dreamed that he was on show in a zoo, with a card reading UNDERAGE WIZARD attached to his cage. People goggled through the bars at him as he lay, starving and weak, on a bed of straw. He saw Dobby's face in the crowd and shouted out, asking for help, but Dobby called, "Harry Potter is safe there, sir!" and vanished. Then the Dursleys appeared and Dudley rattled the bars of the cage, laughing at him.

"Stop it," Harry muttered as the rattling pounded in his sore head. "Leave me alone . . . cut it out . . . I'm trying to sleep. . . ."

He opened his eyes. Moonlight was shining through the bars on the window. And someone *was* goggling through the bars at him: a freckle-faced, red-haired, long-nosed someone.

Ron Weasley was outside Harry's window.

CHAPTER THREE

THE BURROW

"Ron!" breathed Harry, creeping to the window and pushing it up so they could talk through the bars. "Ron, how did you — What the — ?"

Harry's mouth fell open as the full impact of what he was seeing hit him. Ron was leaning out of the back window of an old turquoise car, which was parked *in midair.* Grinning at Harry from the front seats were Fred and George, Ron's elder twin brothers.

"All right, Harry?" asked George.

"What's been going on?" said Ron. "Why haven't you been answering my letters? I've asked you to stay about twelve times, and then Dad came home and said you'd got an official warning for using magic in front of Muggles —"

"It wasn't me — and how did he know?"

"He works for the Ministry," said Ron. "You *know* we're not supposed to do spells outside school —"

"You should talk," said Harry, staring at the floating car.

"Oh, this doesn't count," said Ron. "We're only borrowing this. It's Dad's, *we* didn't enchant it. But doing magic in front of those Muggles you live with —"

"I told you, I didn't — but it'll take too long to explain now — look, can you tell them at Hogwarts that the Dursleys have locked me up and won't let me come back, and obviously I can't magic myself out, because the Ministry'll think that's the second spell I've done in three days, so —"

"Stop gibbering," said Ron. "We've come to take you home with us."

"But you can't magic me out either —"

"We don't need to," said Ron, jerking his head toward the front seat and grinning. "You forget who I've got with me."

"Tie that around the bars," said Fred, throwing the end of a rope to Harry.

"If the Dursleys wake up, I'm dead," said Harry as he tied the rope tightly around a bar and Fred revved up the car.

"Don't worry," said Fred, "and stand back."

Harry moved back into the shadows next to Hedwig, who seemed to have realized how important this was and kept still and silent. The car revved louder and louder and suddenly, with a crunching noise, the bars were pulled clean out of the window as Fred drove straight up in the air. Harry ran back to the window to see the bars dangling a few feet above the ground. Panting, Ron hoisted them up into the car. Harry listened anxiously, but there was no sound from the Dursleys' bedroom.

When the bars were safely in the back seat with Ron, Fred reversed as close as possible to Harry's window.

"Get in," Ron said.

"But all my Hogwarts stuff — my wand — my broomstick —"

"Where is it?"

"Locked in the cupboard under the stairs, and I can't get out of this room —"

"No problem," said George from the front passenger seat. "Out of the way, Harry."

Fred and George climbed catlike through the window into Harry's room. You had to hand it to them, thought Harry, as George took an ordinary hairpin from his pocket and started to pick the lock.

"A lot of wizards think it's a waste of time, knowing this sort of Muggle trick," said Fred, "but we feel they're skills worth learning, even if they are a bit slow."

There was a small click and the door swung open.

"So — we'll get your trunk — you grab anything you need from your room and hand it out to Ron," whispered George.

"Watch out for the bottom stair — it creaks," Harry whispered back as the twins disappeared onto the dark landing.

Harry dashed around his room, collecting his things and passing them out of the window to Ron. Then he went to help Fred and George heave his trunk up the stairs. Harry heard Uncle Vernon cough.

At last, panting, they reached the landing, then carried the trunk through Harry's room to the open window. Fred climbed back into the car to pull with Ron, and Harry and George pushed from the bedroom side. Inch by inch, the trunk slid through the window.

Uncle Vernon coughed again.

"A bit more," panted Fred, who was pulling from inside the car. "One good push —"

Harry and George threw their shoulders against the trunk and it slid out of the window into the back seat of the car.

"Okay, let's go," George whispered.

But as Harry climbed onto the windowsill there came a sudden loud screech from behind him, followed immediately by the thunder of Uncle Vernon's voice.

"THAT RUDDY OWL!"

"I've forgotten Hedwig!"

Harry tore back across the room as the landing light clicked on — he snatched up Hedwig's cage, dashed to the window, and passed it out to Ron. He was scrambling back onto the chest of drawers when Uncle Vernon hammered on the unlocked door — and it crashed open.

For a split second, Uncle Vernon stood framed in the doorway; then he let out a bellow like an angry bull and dived at Harry, grabbing him by the ankle.

Ron, Fred, and George seized Harry's arms and pulled as hard as they could.

"Petunia!" roared Uncle Vernon. "He's getting away! HE'S GETTING AWAY!"

But the Weasleys gave a gigantic tug and Harry's leg slid out of Uncle Vernon's grasp — Harry was in the car — he'd slammed the door shut —

"Put your foot down, Fred!" yelled Ron, and the car shot suddenly toward the moon.

Harry couldn't believe it — he was free. He rolled down the

window, the night air whipping his hair, and looked back at the shrinking rooftops of Privet Drive. Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, and Dudley were all hanging, dumbstruck, out of Harry's window.

"See you next summer!" Harry yelled.

The Weasleys roared with laughter and Harry settled back in his seat, grinning from ear to ear.

"Let Hedwig out," he told Ron. "She can fly behind us. She hasn't had a chance to stretch her wings for ages."

George handed the hairpin to Ron and, a moment later, Hedwig soared joyfully out of the window to glide alongside them like a ghost.

"So — what's the story, Harry?" said Ron impatiently. "What's been happening?"

Harry told them all about Dobby, the warning he'd given Harry and the fiasco of the violet pudding. There was a long, shocked silence when he had finished.

"Very fishy," said Fred finally.

"Definitely dodgy," agreed George. "So he wouldn't even tell you who's supposed to be plotting all this stuff?"

"I don't think he could," said Harry. "I told you, every time he got close to letting something slip, he started banging his head against the wall."

He saw Fred and George look at each other.

"What, you think he was lying to me?" said Harry.

"Well," said Fred, "put it this way — house-elves have got powerful magic of their own, but they can't usually use it without their master's permission. I reckon old Dobby was sent to stop you com-

ing back to Hogwarts. Someone's idea of a joke. Can you think of anyone at school with a grudge against you?"

"Yes," said Harry and Ron together, instantly.

"Draco Malfoy," Harry explained. "He hates me."

"Draco Malfoy?" said George, turning around. "Not Lucius Malfoy's son?"

"Must be, it's not a very common name, is it?" said Harry. "Why?"

"I've heard Dad talking about him," said George. "He was a big supporter of You-Know-Who."

"And when You-Know-Who disappeared," said Fred, craning around to look at Harry, "Lucius Malfoy came back saying he'd never meant any of it. Load of dung — Dad reckons he was right in You-Know-Who's inner circle."

Harry had heard these rumors about Malfoy's family before, and they didn't surprise him at all. Malfoy made Dudley Dursley look like a kind, thoughtful, and sensitive boy.

"I don't know whether the Malfoys own a house-elf. . . ." said Harry.

"Well, whoever owns him will be an old wizarding family, and they'll be rich," said Fred.

"Yeah, Mum's always wishing we had a house-elf to do the ironing," said George. "But all we've got is a lousy old ghoul in the attic and gnomes all over the garden. House-elves come with big old manors and castles and places like that; you wouldn't catch one in our house. . . ."

Harry was silent. Judging by the fact that Draco Malfoy usually had the best of everything, his family was rolling in wizard gold; he

could just see Malfoy strutting around a large manor house. Sending the family servant to stop Harry from going back to Hogwarts also sounded exactly like the sort of thing Malfoy would do. Had Harry been stupid to take Dobby seriously?

"I'm glad we came to get you, anyway," said Ron. "I was getting really worried when you didn't answer any of my letters. I thought it was Errol's fault at first —"

"Who's Errol?"

"Our owl. He's ancient. It wouldn't be the first time he'd collapsed on a delivery. So then I tried to borrow Hermes —"

"*Who*?"

"The owl Mum and Dad bought Percy when he was made prefect," said Fred from the front.

"But Percy wouldn't lend him to me," said Ron. "Said he needed him."

"Percy's been acting very oddly this summer," said George, frowning. "And he *has* been sending a lot of letters and spending a load of time shut up in his room. . . . I mean, there's only so many times you can polish a prefect badge. . . . You're driving too far west, Fred," he added, pointing at a compass on the dashboard. Fred twiddled the steering wheel.

"So, does your dad know you've got the car?" said Harry, guessing the answer.

"Er, no," said Ron, "he had to work tonight. Hopefully we'll be able to get it back in the garage without Mum noticing we flew it."

"What does your dad do at the Ministry of Magic, anyway?"

"He works in the most boring department," said Ron. "The Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office."

"The *what*?"

"It's all to do with bewitching things that are Muggle-made, you know, in case they end up back in a Muggle shop or house. Like, last year, some old witch died and her tea set was sold to an antiques shop. This Muggle woman bought it, took it home, and tried to serve her friends tea in it. It was a nightmare — Dad was working overtime for weeks."

"What happened?"

"The teapot went berserk and squirted boiling tea all over the place and one man ended up in the hospital with the sugar tongs clamped to his nose. Dad was going frantic — it's only him and an old warlock called Perkins in the office — and they had to do Memory Charms and all sorts of stuff to cover it up —"

"But your dad — this car —"

Fred laughed. "Yeah, Dad's crazy about everything to do with Muggles; our shed's full of Muggle stuff. He takes it apart, puts spells on it, and puts it back together again. If he raided *our* house he'd have to put himself under arrest. It drives Mum mad."

"That's the main road," said George, peering down through the windshield. "We'll be there in ten minutes. . . . Just as well, it's getting light. . . ."

A faint pinkish glow was visible along the horizon to the east.

Fred brought the car lower, and Harry saw a dark patchwork of fields and clumps of trees.

"We're a little way outside the village," said George. "Ottery St. Catchpole."

Lower and lower went the flying car. The edge of a brilliant red sun was now gleaming through the trees.

CHAPTER THREE

"Touchdown!" said Fred as, with a slight bump, they hit the ground. They had landed next to a tumbledown garage in a small yard, and Harry looked out for the first time at Ron's house.

It looked as though it had once been a large stone pigpen, but extra rooms had been added here and there until it was several stories high and so crooked it looked as though it were held up by magic (which, Harry reminded himself, it probably was). Four or five chimneys were perched on top of the red roof. A lopsided sign stuck in the ground near the entrance read, THE BURROW. Around the front door lay a jumble of rubber boots and a very rusty cauldron. Several fat brown chickens were pecking their way around the yard.

"It's not much," said Ron.

"It's *wonderful,*" said Harry happily, thinking of Privet Drive.

They got out of the car.

"Now, we'll go upstairs really quietly," said Fred, "and wait for Mum to call us for breakfast. Then, Ron, you come bounding downstairs going, 'Mum, look who turned up in the night!' and she'll be all pleased to see Harry and no one need ever know we flew the car."

"Right," said Ron. "Come on, Harry, I sleep at the — at the top —"

Ron had gone a nasty greenish color, his eyes fixed on the house. The other three wheeled around.

Mrs. Weasley was marching across the yard, scattering chickens, and for a short, plump, kind-faced woman, it was remarkable how much she looked like a saber-toothed tiger.

"*Ah,*" said Fred.

"Oh, dear," said George.

Mrs. Weasley came to a halt in front of them, her hands on her hips, staring from one guilty face to the next. She was wearing a flowered apron with a wand sticking out of the pocket.

"*So,*" she said.

" 'Morning, Mum," said George, in what he clearly thought was a jaunty, winning voice.

"Have you any idea how worried I've been?" said Mrs. Weasley in a deadly whisper.

"Sorry, Mum, but see, we had to —"

All three of Mrs. Weasley's sons were taller than she was, but they cowered as her rage broke over them.

"Beds empty! No note! Car gone — could have crashed — out of my mind with worry — did you care? — never, as long as I've lived — you wait until your father gets home, we never had trouble like this from Bill or Charlie or Percy —"

"Perfect Percy," muttered Fred.

"YOU COULD DO WITH TAKING A LEAF OUT OF PERCY'S BOOK!" yelled Mrs. Weasley, prodding a finger in Fred's chest. "You could have *died,* you could have been *seen,* you could have lost your father his *job* —"

It seemed to go on for hours. Mrs. Weasley had shouted herself hoarse before she turned on Harry, who backed away.

"I'm very pleased to see you, Harry, dear," she said. "Come in and have some breakfast."

She turned and walked back into the house and Harry, after a nervous glance at Ron, who nodded encouragingly, followed her.

The kitchen was small and rather cramped. There was a

scrubbed wooden table and chairs in the middle, and Harry sat down on the edge of his seat, looking around. He had never been in a wizard house before.

The clock on the wall opposite him had only one hand and no numbers at all. Written around the edge were things like *Time to make tea, Time to feed the chickens,* and *You're late.* Books were stacked three deep on the mantelpiece, books with titles like *Charm Your Own Cheese, Enchantment in Baking,* and *One Minute Feasts — It's Magic*! And unless Harry's ears were deceiving him, the old radio next to the sink had just announced that coming up was "Witching Hour, with the popular singing sorceress, Celestina Warbeck."

Mrs. Weasley was clattering around, cooking breakfast a little haphazardly, throwing dirty looks at her sons as she threw sausages into the frying pan. Every now and then she muttered things like "don't know *what* you were thinking of," and "*never* would have believed it."

"I don't blame *you,* dear," she assured Harry, tipping eight or nine sausages onto his plate. "Arthur and I have been worried about you, too. Just last night we were saying we'd come and get you ourselves if you hadn't written back to Ron by Friday. But really" (she was now adding three fried eggs to his plate), "flying an illegal car halfway across the country — anyone could have seen you —"

She flicked her wand casually at the dishes in the sink, which began to clean themselves, clinking gently in the background.

"It was *cloudy,* Mum!" said Fred.

"You keep your mouth closed while you're eating!" Mrs. Weasley snapped.

"They were starving him, Mum!" said George.

"And you!" said Mrs. Weasley, but it was with a slightly softened expression that she started cutting Harry bread and buttering it for him.

At that moment there was a diversion in the form of a small, red-headed figure in a long nightdress, who appeared in the kitchen, gave a small squeal, and ran out again.

"Ginny," said Ron in an undertone to Harry. "My sister. She's been talking about you all summer."

"Yeah, she'll be wanting your autograph, Harry," Fred said with a grin, but he caught his mother's eye and bent his face over his plate without another word. Nothing more was said until all four plates were clean, which took a surprisingly short time.

"*Blimey,* I'm tired," yawned Fred, setting down his knife and fork at last. "I think I'll go to bed and —"

"You will not," snapped Mrs. Weasley. "It's your own fault you've been up all night. You're going to de-gnome the garden for me; they're getting completely out of hand again —"

"Oh, Mum —"

"And you two," she said, glaring at Ron and Fred. "You can go up to bed, dear," she added to Harry. "You didn't ask them to fly that wretched car —"

But Harry, who felt wide awake, said quickly, "I'll help Ron. I've never seen a de-gnoming —"

"That's very sweet of you, dear, but it's dull work," said Mrs. Weasley. "Now, let's see what Lockhart's got to say on the subject —"

And she pulled a heavy book from the stack on the mantelpiece. George groaned.

"Mum, we know how to de-gnome a garden —"

Harry looked at the cover of Mrs. Weasley's book. Written across it in fancy gold letters were the words *Gilderoy Lockhart's Guide to Household Pests.* There was a big photograph on the front of a very good-looking wizard with wavy blond hair and bright blue eyes. As always in the wizarding world, the photograph was moving; the wizard, who Harry supposed was Gilderoy Lockhart, kept winking cheekily up at them all. Mrs. Weasley beamed down at him.

"Oh, he is marvelous," she said. "He knows his household pests, all right, it's a wonderful book. . . ."

"Mum *fancies* him," said Fred, in a very audible whisper.

"Don't be so ridiculous, Fred," said Mrs. Weasley, her cheeks rather pink. "All right, if you think you know better than Lockhart, you can go and get on with it, and woe betide you if there's a single gnome in that garden when I come out to inspect it."

Yawning and grumbling, the Weasleys slouched outside with Harry behind them. The garden was large, and in Harry's eyes, exactly what a garden should be. The Dursleys wouldn't have liked it — there were plenty of weeds, and the grass needed cutting — but there were gnarled trees all around the walls, plants Harry had never seen spilling from every flower bed, and a big green pond full of frogs.

"Muggles have garden gnomes, too, you know," Harry told Ron as they crossed the lawn.

"Yeah, I've seen those things they think are gnomes," said Ron, bent double with his head in a peony bush, "like fat little Santa Clauses with fishing rods. . . ."

There was a violent scuffling noise, the peony bush shuddered, and Ron straightened up. "*This* is a gnome," he said grimly.

"Gerroff me! Gerroff me!" squealed the gnome.

It was certainly nothing like Santa Claus. It was small and leathery looking, with a large, knobby, bald head exactly like a potato. Ron held it at arm's length as it kicked out at him with its horny little feet; he grasped it around the ankles and turned it upside down.

"This is what you have to do," he said. He raised the gnome above his head ("Gerroff me!") and started to swing it in great circles like a lasso. Seeing the shocked look on Harry's face, Ron added, "It doesn't *hurt* them — you've just got to make them really dizzy so they can't find their way back to the gnomeholes."

He let go of the gnome's ankles: It flew twenty feet into the air and landed with a thud in the field over the hedge.

"Pitiful," said Fred. "I bet I can get mine beyond that stump."

Harry learned quickly not to feel too sorry for the gnomes. He decided just to drop the first one he caught over the hedge, but the gnome, sensing weakness, sank its razor-sharp teeth into Harry's finger and he had a hard job shaking it off — until —

"Wow, Harry — that must've been fifty feet. . . ."

The air was soon thick with flying gnomes.

"See, they're not too bright," said George, seizing five or six gnomes at once. "The moment they know the de-gnoming's going on they storm up to have a look. You'd think they'd have learned by now just to stay put."

Soon, the crowd of gnomes in the field started walking away in a straggling line, their little shoulders hunched.

"They'll be back," said Ron as they watched the gnomes disappear into the hedge on the other side of the field. "They love it here. . . . Dad's too soft with them; he thinks they're funny. . . ."

Just then, the front door slammed.

"He's back!" said George. "Dad's home!"

They hurried through the garden and back into the house.

Mr. Weasley was slumped in a kitchen chair with his glasses off and his eyes closed. He was a thin man, going bald, but the little hair he had was as red as any of his children's. He was wearing long green robes, which were dusty and travel-worn.

"What a night," he mumbled, groping for the teapot as they all sat down around him. "Nine raids. Nine! And old Mundungus Fletcher tried to put a hex on me when I had my back turned. . . ."

Mr. Weasley took a long gulp of tea and sighed.

"Find anything, Dad?" said Fred eagerly.

"All I got were a few shrinking door keys and a biting kettle," yawned Mr. Weasley. "There was some pretty nasty stuff that wasn't my department, though. Mortlake was taken away for questioning about some extremely odd ferrets, but that's the Committee on Experimental Charms, thank goodness. . . ."

"Why would anyone bother making door keys shrink?" said George.

"Just Muggle-baiting," sighed Mr. Weasley. "Sell them a key that keeps shrinking to nothing so they can never find it when they need it. . . . Of course, it's very hard to convict anyone because no Muggle would admit their key keeps shrinking — they'll insist they just keep losing it. Bless them, they'll go to any lengths to ignore magic, even if it's staring them in the face. . . . But the things our lot have taken to enchanting, you wouldn't believe —"

"LIKE CARS, FOR INSTANCE?"

Mrs. Weasley had appeared, holding a long poker like a sword. Mr. Weasley's eyes jerked open. He stared guiltily at his wife.

"C-cars, Molly, dear?"

"Yes, Arthur, cars," said Mrs. Weasley, her eyes flashing. "Imagine a wizard buying a rusty old car and telling his wife all he wanted to do with it was take it apart to see how it worked, while *really* he was enchanting it to make it *fly.*"

Mr. Weasley blinked.

"Well, dear, I think you'll find that he would be quite within the law to do that, even if — er — he maybe would have done better to, um, tell his wife the truth. . . . There's a loophole in the law, you'll find. . . . As long as he wasn't *intending* to fly the car, the fact that the car *could* fly wouldn't —"

"Arthur Weasley, you made sure there was a loophole when you wrote that law!" shouted Mrs. Weasley. "Just so you could carry on tinkering with all that Muggle rubbish in your shed! And for your information, Harry arrived this morning in the car you weren't intending to fly!"

"Harry?" said Mr. Weasley blankly. "Harry who?"

He looked around, saw Harry, and jumped.

"Good lord, is it Harry Potter? Very pleased to meet you, Ron's told us so much about —"

"*Your sons flew that car to Harry's house and back last night*!" shouted Mrs. Weasley. "What have you got to say about that, eh?"

"Did you really?" said Mr. Weasley eagerly. "Did it go all right? I — I mean," he faltered as sparks flew from Mrs. Weasley's eyes, "that — that was very wrong, boys — very wrong indeed. . . ."

"Let's leave them to it," Ron muttered to Harry as Mrs. Weasley swelled like a bullfrog. "Come on, I'll show you my bedroom."

They slipped out of the kitchen and down a narrow passageway to an uneven staircase, which wound its way, zigzagging up

through the house. On the third landing, a door stood ajar. Harry just caught sight of a pair of bright brown eyes staring at him before it closed with a snap.

"Ginny," said Ron. "You don't know how weird it is for her to be this shy. She never shuts up normally —"

They climbed two more flights until they reached a door with peeling paint and a small plaque on it, saying RONALD'S ROOM.

Harry stepped in, his head almost touching the sloping ceiling, and blinked. It was like walking into a furnace: Nearly everything in Ron's room seemed to be a violent shade of orange: the bedspread, the walls, even the ceiling. Then Harry realized that Ron had covered nearly every inch of the shabby wallpaper with posters of the same seven witches and wizards, all wearing bright orange robes, carrying broomsticks, and waving energetically.

"Your Quidditch team?" said Harry.

"The Chudley Cannons," said Ron, pointing at the orange bedspread, which was emblazoned with two giant black C's and a speeding cannonball. "Ninth in the league."

Ron's school spellbooks were stacked untidily in a corner, next to a pile of comics that all seemed to feature *The Adventures of Martin Miggs, the Mad Muggle.* Ron's magic wand was lying on top of a fish tank full of frog spawn on the windowsill, next to his fat gray rat, Scabbers, who was snoozing in a patch of sun.

Harry stepped over a pack of Self-Shuffling playing cards on the floor and looked out of the tiny window. In the field far below he could see a gang of gnomes sneaking one by one back through the Weasleys' hedge. Then he turned to look at Ron, who was watching him almost nervously, as though waiting for his opinion.

“It’s a bit small,” said Ron quickly. “Not like that room you had with the Muggles. And I’m right underneath the ghoul in the attic; he’s always banging on the pipes and groaning. . . .”

But Harry, grinning widely, said, “This is the best house I’ve ever been in.”

Ron’s ears went pink.

CHAPTER FOUR

AT FLOURISH AND BLOTTS

Life at the Burrow was as different as possible from life on Privet Drive. The Dursleys liked everything neat and ordered; the Weasleys' house burst with the strange and unexpected. Harry got a shock the first time he looked in the mirror over the kitchen mantelpiece and it shouted, "*Tuck your shirt in, scruffy*!" The ghoul in the attic howled and dropped pipes whenever he felt things were getting too quiet, and small explosions from Fred and George's bedroom were considered perfectly normal. What Harry found most unusual about life at Ron's, however, wasn't the talking mirror or the clanking ghoul: It was the fact that everybody there seemed to like him.

Mrs. Weasley fussed over the state of his socks and tried to force him to eat fourth helpings at every meal. Mr. Weasley liked Harry to sit next to him at the dinner table so that he could bombard him with questions about life with Muggles, asking him to explain how things like plugs and the postal service worked.

"*Fascinating*!" he would say as Harry talked him through using a telephone. "*Ingenious,* really, how many ways Muggles have found of getting along without magic."

Harry heard from Hogwarts one sunny morning about a week after he had arrived at the Burrow. He and Ron went down to breakfast to find Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Ginny already sitting at the kitchen table. The moment she saw Harry, Ginny accidentally knocked her porridge bowl to the floor with a loud clatter. Ginny seemed very prone to knocking things over whenever Harry entered a room. She dived under the table to retrieve the bowl and emerged with her face glowing like the setting sun. Pretending he hadn't noticed this, Harry sat down and took the toast Mrs. Weasley offered him.

"Letters from school," said Mr. Weasley, passing Harry and Ron identical envelopes of yellowish parchment, addressed in green ink. "Dumbledore already knows you're here, Harry — doesn't miss a trick, that man. You two've got them, too," he added, as Fred and George ambled in, still in their pajamas.

For a few minutes there was silence as they all read their letters. Harry's told him to catch the Hogwarts Express as usual from King's Cross station on September first. There was also a list of the new books he'd need for the coming year.

SECOND-YEAR STUDENTS WILL REQUIRE:

The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 2
by Miranda Goshawk
Break with a Banshee by Gilderoy Lockhart
Gadding with Ghouls by Gilderoy Lockhart
Holidays with Hags by Gilderoy Lockhart

Travels with Trolls by Gilderoy Lockhart
Voyages with Vampires by Gilderoy Lockhart
Wanderings with Werewolves by Gilderoy Lockhart
Year with the Yeti by Gilderoy Lockhart

Fred, who had finished his own list, peered over at Harry's.

"You've been told to get all Lockhart's books, too!" he said. "The new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher must be a fan — bet it's a witch."

At this point, Fred caught his mother's eye and quickly busied himself with the marmalade.

"That lot won't come cheap," said George, with a quick look at his parents. "Lockhart's books are really expensive. . . ."

"Well, we'll manage," said Mrs. Weasley, but she looked worried. "I expect we'll be able to pick up a lot of Ginny's things secondhand."

"Oh, are you starting at Hogwarts this year?" Harry asked Ginny.

She nodded, blushing to the roots of her flaming hair, and put her elbow in the butter dish. Fortunately no one saw this except Harry, because just then Ron's elder brother Percy walked in. He was already dressed, his Hogwarts prefect badge pinned to his sweater vest.

"Morning, all," said Percy briskly. "Lovely day."

He sat down in the only remaining chair but leapt up again almost immediately, pulling from underneath him a molting, gray feather duster — at least, that was what Harry thought it was, until he saw that it was breathing.

"Errol!" said Ron, taking the limp owl from Percy and extracting a letter from under its wing. "*Finally* — he's got Hermione's answer. I wrote to her saying we were going to try and rescue you from the Dursleys."

He carried Errol to a perch just inside the back door and tried to stand him on it, but Errol flopped straight off again so Ron laid him on the draining board instead, muttering, "Pathetic." Then he ripped open Hermione's letter and read it out loud:

" '*Dear Ron, and Harry if you're there,*

" '*I hope everything went all right and that Harry is okay and that you didn't do anything illegal to get him out, Ron, because that would get Harry into trouble, too. I've been really worried and if Harry is all right, will you please let me know at once, but perhaps it would be better if you used a different owl, because I think another delivery might finish your one off.*

" '*I'm very busy with schoolwork, of course*' — How *can* she be?" said Ron in horror. "We're on vacation! — '*and we're going to London next Wednesday to buy my new books. Why don't we meet in Diagon Alley*?

" '*Let me know what's happening as soon as you can. Love from Hermione*.' "

"Well, that fits in nicely, we can go and get all your things then, too," said Mrs. Weasley, starting to clear the table. "What're you all up to today?"

Harry, Ron, Fred, and George were planning to go up the hill to a small paddock the Weasleys owned. It was surrounded by trees that blocked it from view of the village below, meaning that they could practice Quidditch there, as long as they didn't fly too high.

They couldn't use real Quidditch balls, which would have been hard to explain if they had escaped and flown away over the village; instead they threw apples for one another to catch. They took turns riding Harry's Nimbus Two Thousand, which was easily the best broom; Ron's old Shooting Star was often outstripped by passing butterflies.

Five minutes later they were marching up the hill, broomsticks over their shoulders. They had asked Percy if he wanted to join them, but he had said he was busy. Harry had only seen Percy at mealtimes so far; he stayed shut in his room the rest of the time.

"Wish I knew what he was up to," said Fred, frowning. "He's not himself. His exam results came the day before you did; twelve O.W.L.s and he hardly gloated at all."

"Ordinary Wizarding Levels," George explained, seeing Harry's puzzled look. "Bill got twelve, too. If we're not careful, we'll have another Head Boy in the family. I don't think I could stand the shame."

Bill was the oldest Weasley brother. He and the next brother, Charlie, had already left Hogwarts. Harry had never met either of them, but knew that Charlie was in Romania studying dragons and Bill in Egypt working for the wizard's bank, Gringotts.

"Dunno how Mum and Dad are going to afford all our school stuff this year," said George after a while. "Five sets of Lockhart books! And Ginny needs robes and a wand and everything. . . ."

Harry said nothing. He felt a bit awkward. Stored in an underground vault at Gringotts in London was a small fortune that his parents had left him. Of course, it was only in the wizarding world that he had money; you couldn't use Galleons, Sickles, and Knuts

in Muggle shops. He had never mentioned his Gringotts bank account to the Dursleys; he didn't think their horror of anything connected with magic would stretch to a large pile of gold.

Mrs. Weasley woke them all early the following Wednesday. After a quick half a dozen bacon sandwiches each, they pulled on their coats and Mrs. Weasley took a flowerpot off the kitchen mantelpiece and peered inside.

"We're running low, Arthur," she sighed. "We'll have to buy some more today. . . . Ah well, guests first! After you, Harry dear!"

And she offered him the flowerpot.

Harry stared at them all watching him.

"W-what am I supposed to do?" he stammered.

"He's never traveled by Floo powder," said Ron suddenly. "Sorry, Harry, I forgot."

"Never?" said Mr. Weasley. "But how did you get to Diagon Alley to buy your school things last year?"

"I went on the Underground —"

"Really?" said Mr. Weasley eagerly. "Were there *escapators*? How exactly —"

"Not *now,* Arthur," said Mrs. Weasley. "Floo powder's a lot quicker, dear, but goodness me, if you've never used it before —"

"He'll be all right, Mum," said Fred. "Harry, watch us first."

He took a pinch of glittering powder out of the flowerpot, stepped up to the fire, and threw the powder into the flames.

With a roar, the fire turned emerald green and rose higher than Fred, who stepped right into it, shouted, "Diagon Alley!" and vanished.

"You must speak clearly, dear," Mrs. Weasley told Harry as George dipped his hand into the flowerpot. "And be sure to get out at the right grate. . . ."

"The right what?" said Harry nervously as the fire roared and whipped George out of sight, too.

"Well, there are an awful lot of wizard fires to choose from, you know, but as long as you've spoken clearly —"

"He'll be fine, Molly, don't fuss," said Mr. Weasley, helping himself to Floo powder, too.

"But, dear, if he got lost, how would we ever explain to his aunt and uncle?"

"They wouldn't mind," Harry reassured her. "Dudley would think it was a brilliant joke if I got lost up a chimney, don't worry about that —"

"Well . . . all right . . . you go after Arthur," said Mrs. Weasley. "Now, when you get into the fire, say where you're going —"

"And keep your elbows tucked in," Ron advised.

"And your eyes shut," said Mrs. Weasley. "The soot —"

"Don't fidget," said Ron. "Or you might well fall out of the wrong fireplace —"

"But don't panic and get out too early; wait until you see Fred and George."

Trying hard to bear all this in mind, Harry took a pinch of Floo powder and walked to the edge of the fire. He took a deep breath, scattered the powder into the flames, and stepped forward; the fire felt like a warm breeze; he opened his mouth and immediately swallowed a lot of hot ash.

"D-Dia-gon Alley," he coughed.

It felt as though he were being sucked down a giant drain. He seemed to be spinning very fast — the roaring in his ears was deafening — he tried to keep his eyes open but the whirl of green flames made him feel sick — something hard knocked his elbow and he tucked it in tightly, still spinning and spinning — now it felt as though cold hands were slapping his face — squinting through his glasses he saw a blurred stream of fireplaces and snatched glimpses of the rooms beyond — his bacon sandwiches were churning inside him — he closed his eyes again wishing it would stop, and then —

He fell, face forward, onto cold stone and felt the bridge of his glasses snap.

Dizzy and bruised, covered in soot, he got gingerly to his feet, holding his broken glasses up to his eyes. He was quite alone, but *where* he was, he had no idea. All he could tell was that he was standing in the stone fireplace of what looked like a large, dimly lit wizard's shop — but nothing in here was ever likely to be on a Hogwarts school list.

A glass case nearby held a withered hand on a cushion, a bloodstained pack of cards, and a staring glass eye. Evil-looking masks stared down from the walls, an assortment of human bones lay upon the counter, and rusty, spiked instruments hung from the ceiling. Even worse, the dark, narrow street Harry could see through the dusty shop window was definitely not Diagon Alley.

The sooner he got out of here, the better. Nose still stinging where it had hit the hearth, Harry made his way swiftly and silently toward the door, but before he'd got halfway toward it, two people appeared on the other side of the glass — and one of them was the

very last person Harry wanted to meet when he was lost, covered in soot, and wearing broken glasses: Draco Malfoy.

Harry looked quickly around and spotted a large black cabinet to his left; he shot inside it and pulled the doors closed, leaving a small crack to peer through. Seconds later, a bell clanged, and Malfoy stepped into the shop.

The man who followed could only be Draco's father. He had the same pale, pointed face and identical cold, gray eyes. Mr. Malfoy crossed the shop, looking lazily at the items on display, and rang a bell on the counter before turning to his son and saying, "Touch nothing, Draco."

Malfoy, who had reached for the glass eye, said, "I thought you were going to buy me a present."

"I said I would buy you a racing broom," said his father, drumming his fingers on the counter.

"What's the good of that if I'm not on the House team?" said Malfoy, looking sulky and bad-tempered. "Harry Potter got a Nimbus Two Thousand last year. Special permission from Dumbledore so he could play for Gryffindor. He's not even that good, it's just because he's *famous* . . . famous for having a stupid *scar* on his forehead. . . ."

Malfoy bent down to examine a shelf full of skulls.

". . . everyone thinks he's so *smart,* wonderful *Potter* with his *scar* and his *broomstick* —"

"You have told me this at least a dozen times already," said Mr. Malfoy, with a quelling look at his son. "And I would remind you that it is not — prudent — to appear less than fond of Harry Potter, not when most of our kind regard him as the hero who made the Dark Lord disappear — ah, Mr. Borgin."

A stooping man had appeared behind the counter, smoothing his greasy hair back from his face.

"Mr. Malfoy, what a pleasure to see you again," said Mr. Borgin in a voice as oily as his hair. "Delighted — and young Master Malfoy, too — charmed. How may I be of assistance? I must show you, just in today, and very reasonably priced —"

"I'm not buying today, Mr. Borgin, but selling," said Mr. Malfoy.

"Selling?" The smile faded slightly from Mr. Borgin's face.

"You have heard, of course, that the Ministry is conducting more raids," said Mr. Malfoy, taking a roll of parchment from his inside pocket and unraveling it for Mr. Borgin to read. "I have a few — ah — items at home that might embarrass me, if the Ministry were to call. . . ."

Mr. Borgin fixed a pair of pince-nez to his nose and looked down the list.

"The Ministry wouldn't presume to trouble you, sir, surely?"

Mr. Malfoy's lip curled.

"I have not been visited yet. The name Malfoy still commands a certain respect, yet the Ministry grows ever more meddlesome. There are rumors about a new Muggle Protection Act — no doubt that flea-bitten, Muggle-loving fool Arthur Weasley is behind it —"

Harry felt a hot surge of anger.

"— and as you see, certain of these poisons might make it *appear* —"

"I understand, sir, of course," said Mr. Borgin. "Let me see . . ."

"Can I have *that*?" interrupted Draco, pointing at the withered hand on its cushion.

"Ah, the Hand of Glory!" said Mr. Borgin, abandoning Mr. Malfoy's list and scurrying over to Draco. "Insert a candle and it gives light only to the holder! Best friend of thieves and plunderers! Your son has fine taste, sir."

"I hope my son will amount to more than a thief or a plunderer, Borgin," said Mr. Malfoy coldly, and Mr. Borgin said quickly, "No offense, sir, no offense meant —"

"Though if his grades don't pick up," said Mr. Malfoy, more coldly still, "that may indeed be all he is fit for —"

"It's not my fault," retorted Draco. "The teachers all have favorites, that Hermione Granger —"

"I would have thought you'd be ashamed that a girl of no wizard family beat you in every exam," snapped Mr. Malfoy.

"Ha!" said Harry under his breath, pleased to see Draco looking both abashed and angry.

"It's the same all over," said Mr. Borgin, in his oily voice. "Wizard blood is counting for less everywhere —"

"Not with me," said Mr. Malfoy, his long nostrils flaring.

"No, sir, nor with me, sir," said Mr. Borgin, with a deep bow.

"In that case, perhaps we can return to my list," said Mr. Malfoy shortly. "I am in something of a hurry, Borgin, I have important business elsewhere today —"

They started to haggle. Harry watched nervously as Draco drew nearer and nearer to his hiding place, examining the objects for sale. Draco paused to examine a long coil of hangman's rope and to read, smirking, the card propped on a magnificent necklace of opals, *Caution: Do Not Touch. Cursed — Has Claimed the Lives of Nineteen Muggle Owners to Date.*

Draco turned away and saw the cabinet right in front of him. He walked forward — he stretched out his hand for the handle —

"Done," said Mr. Malfoy at the counter. "Come, Draco —"

Harry wiped his forehead on his sleeve as Draco turned away.

"Good day to you, Mr. Borgin. I'll expect you at the manor tomorrow to pick up the goods."

The moment the door had closed, Mr. Borgin dropped his oily manner.

"Good day yourself, *Mister* Malfoy, and if the stories are true, you haven't sold me half of what's hidden in your *manor*. . . ."

Muttering darkly, Mr. Borgin disappeared into a back room. Harry waited for a minute in case he came back, then, quietly as he could, slipped out of the cabinet, past the glass cases, and out of the shop door.

Clutching his broken glasses to his face, Harry stared around. He had emerged into a dingy alleyway that seemed to be made up entirely of shops devoted to the Dark Arts. The one he'd just left, Borgin and Burkes, looked like the largest, but opposite was a nasty window display of shrunken heads and, two doors down, a large cage was alive with gigantic black spiders. Two shabby-looking wizards were watching him from the shadow of a doorway, muttering to each other. Feeling jumpy, Harry set off, trying to hold his glasses on straight and hoping against hope he'd be able to find a way out of here.

An old wooden street sign hanging over a shop selling poisonous candles told him he was in Knockturn Alley. This didn't help, as Harry had never heard of such a place. He supposed he hadn't spoken clearly enough through his mouthful of ashes

back in the Weasleys' fire. Trying to stay calm, he wondered what to do.

"Not lost are you, my dear?" said a voice in his ear, making him jump.

An aged witch stood in front of him, holding a tray of what looked horribly like whole human fingernails. She leered at him, showing mossy teeth. Harry backed away.

"I'm fine, thanks," he said. "I'm just —"

"HARRY! What d'yeh think yer doin' down there?"

Harry's heart leapt. So did the witch; a load of fingernails cascaded down over her feet and she cursed as the massive form of Hagrid, the Hogwarts gamekeeper, came striding toward them, beetle-black eyes flashing over his great bristling beard.

"Hagrid!" Harry croaked in relief. "I was lost — Floo powder —"

Hagrid seized Harry by the scruff of the neck and pulled him away from the witch, knocking the tray right out of her hands. Her shrieks followed them all the way along the twisting alleyway out into bright sunlight. Harry saw a familiar, snow-white marble building in the distance — Gringotts Bank. Hagrid had steered him right into Diagon Alley.

"Yer a mess!" said Hagrid gruffly, brushing soot off Harry so forcefully he nearly knocked him into a barrel of dragon dung outside an apothecary. "Skulkin' around Knockturn Alley, I dunno — dodgy place, Harry — don' want no one ter see yeh down there —"

"I realized *that,*" said Harry, ducking as Hagrid made to brush him off again. "I told you, I was lost — what were you doing down there, anyway?"

"*I* was lookin' fer a Flesh-Eatin' Slug Repellent," growled Hagrid. "They're ruinin' the school cabbages. Yer not on yer own?"

"I'm staying with the Weasleys but we got separated," Harry explained. "I've got to go and find them. . . ."

They set off together down the street.

"How come yeh never wrote back ter me?" said Hagrid as Harry jogged alongside him (he had to take three steps to every stride of Hagrid's enormous boots). Harry explained all about Dobby and the Dursleys.

"Lousy Muggles," growled Hagrid. "If I'd've known —"

"Harry! Harry! Over here!"

Harry looked up and saw Hermione Granger standing at the top of the white flight of steps to Gringotts. She ran down to meet them, her bushy brown hair flying behind her.

"What happened to your glasses? Hello, Hagrid — Oh, it's *wonderful* to see you two again — Are you coming into Gringotts, Harry?"

"As soon as I've found the Weasleys," said Harry.

"Yeh won't have long ter wait," Hagrid said with a grin.

Harry and Hermione looked around: Sprinting up the crowded street were Ron, Fred, George, Percy, and Mr. Weasley.

"Harry," Mr. Weasley panted. "We *hoped* you'd only gone one grate too far. . . ." He mopped his glistening bald patch. "Molly's frantic — she's coming now —"

"Where did you come out?" Ron asked.

"Knockturn Alley," said Hagrid grimly.

"*Excellent*!" said Fred and George together.

"We've never been allowed in," said Ron enviously.

"I should ruddy well think not," growled Hagrid.

Mrs. Weasley now came galloping into view, her handbag swinging wildly in one hand, Ginny just clinging onto the other.

"Oh, Harry — oh, my dear — you could have been anywhere —"

Gasping for breath she pulled a large clothes brush out of her bag and began sweeping off the soot Hagrid hadn't managed to beat away. Mr. Weasley took Harry's glasses, gave them a tap of his wand, and returned them, good as new.

"Well, gotta be off," said Hagrid, who was having his hand wrung by Mrs. Weasley ("Knockturn Alley! If you hadn't found him, Hagrid!"). "See yer at Hogwarts!" And he strode away, head and shoulders taller than anyone else in the packed street.

"Guess who I saw in Borgin and Burkes?" Harry asked Ron and Hermione as they climbed the Gringotts steps. "Malfoy and his father."

"Did Lucius Malfoy buy anything?" said Mr. Weasley sharply behind them.

"No, he was selling —"

"So he's worried," said Mr. Weasley with grim satisfaction. "Oh, I'd love to get Lucius Malfoy for something. . . ."

"You be careful, Arthur," said Mrs. Weasley sharply as they were bowed into the bank by a goblin at the door. "That family's trouble. Don't go biting off more than you can chew —"

"So you don't think I'm a match for Lucius Malfoy?" said Mr. Weasley indignantly, but he was distracted almost at once by the sight of Hermione's parents, who were standing nervously at the counter that ran all along the great marble hall, waiting for Hermione to introduce them.

"But you're *Muggles*!" said Mr. Weasley delightedly. "We must have a drink! What's that you've got there? Oh, you're changing Muggle money. Molly, look!" He pointed excitedly at the ten-pound notes in Mr. Granger's hand.

"Meet you back here," Ron said to Hermione as the Weasleys and Harry were led off to their underground vaults by another Gringotts goblin.

The vaults were reached by means of small, goblin-driven carts that sped along minature train tracks through the bank's underground tunnels. Harry enjoyed the breakneck journey down to the Weasleys' vault, but felt dreadful, far worse than he had in Knockturn Alley, when it was opened. There was a very small pile of silver Sickles inside, and just one gold Galleon. Mrs. Weasley felt right into the corners before sweeping the whole lot into her bag. Harry felt even worse when they reached his vault. He tried to block the contents from view as he hastily shoved handfuls of coins into a leather bag.

Back outside on the marble steps, they all separated. Percy muttered vaguely about needing a new quill. Fred and George had spotted their friend from Hogwarts, Lee Jordan. Mrs. Weasley and Ginny were going to a secondhand robe shop. Mr. Weasley was insisting on taking the Grangers off to the Leaky Cauldron for a drink.

"We'll all meet at Flourish and Blotts in an hour to buy your schoolbooks," said Mrs. Weasley, setting off with Ginny. "And not one step down Knockturn Alley!" she shouted at the twins' retreating backs.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione strolled off along the winding, cobbled street. The bag of gold, silver, and bronze jangling cheerfully

in Harry's pocket was clamoring to be spent, so he bought three large strawberry-and-peanut-butter ice creams, which they slurped happily as they wandered up the alley, examining the fascinating shop windows. Ron gazed longingly at a full set of Chudley Cannon robes in the windows of Quality Quidditch Supplies until Hermione dragged them off to buy ink and parchment next door. In Gambol and Japes Wizarding Joke Shop, they met Fred, George, and Lee Jordan, who were stocking up on Dr. Filibuster's Fabulous Wet-Start, No-Heat Fireworks, and in a tiny junk shop full of broken wands, lopsided brass scales, and old cloaks covered in potion stains they found Percy, deeply immersed in a small and deeply boring book called *Prefects Who Gained Power.*

"*A study of Hogwarts prefects and their later careers,*" Ron read aloud off the back cover. "That sounds *fascinating*. . . ."

"Go away," Percy snapped.

" 'Course, he's very ambitious, Percy, he's got it all planned out. . . . He wants to be Minister of Magic . . ." Ron told Harry and Hermione in an undertone as they left Percy to it.

An hour later, they headed for Flourish and Blotts. They were by no means the only ones making their way to the bookshop. As they approached it, they saw to their surprise a large crowd jostling outside the doors, trying to get in. The reason for this was proclaimed by a large banner stretched across the upper windows:

GILDEROY LOCKHART
will be signing copies of his autobiography
MAGICAL ME
today 12:30 P.M. to 4:30 P.M.

"We can actually meet him!" Hermione squealed. "I mean, he's written almost the whole booklist!"

The crowd seemed to be made up mostly of witches around Mrs. Weasley's age. A harassed-looking wizard stood at the door, saying, "Calmly, please, ladies. . . . Don't push, there . . . mind the books, now. . . ."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione squeezed inside. A long line wound right to the back of the shop, where Gilderoy Lockhart was signing his books. They each grabbed a copy of *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 2* and sneaked up the line to where the rest of the Weasleys were standing with Mr. and Mrs. Granger.

"Oh, there you are, good," said Mrs. Weasley. She sounded breathless and kept patting her hair. "We'll be able to see him in a minute. . . ."

Gilderoy Lockhart came slowly into view, seated at a table surrounded by large pictures of his own face, all winking and flashing dazzlingly white teeth at the crowd. The real Lockhart was wearing robes of forget-me-not blue that exactly matched his eyes; his pointed wizard's hat was set at a jaunty angle on his wavy hair.

A short, irritable-looking man was dancing around taking photographs with a large black camera that emitted puffs of purple smoke with every blinding flash.

"Out of the way, there," he snarled at Ron, moving back to get a better shot. "This is for the *Daily Prophet* —"

"Big deal," said Ron, rubbing his foot where the photographer had stepped on it.

Gilderoy Lockhart heard him. He looked up. He saw Ron —

and then he saw Harry. He stared. Then he leapt to his feet and positively shouted, "It *can't* be Harry Potter?"

The crowd parted, whispering excitedly; Lockhart dived forward, seized Harry's arm, and pulled him to the front. The crowd burst into applause. Harry's face burned as Lockhart shook his hand for the photographer, who was clicking away madly, wafting thick smoke over the Weasleys.

"Nice big smile, Harry," said Lockhart, through his own gleaming teeth. "Together, you and I are worth the front page."

When he finally let go of Harry's hand, Harry could hardly feel his fingers. He tried to sidle back over to the Weasleys, but Lockhart threw an arm around his shoulders and clamped him tightly to his side.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said loudly, waving for quiet. "What an extraordinary moment this is! The perfect moment for me to make a little announcement I've been sitting on for some time!

"When young Harry here stepped into Flourish and Blotts today, he only wanted to buy my autobiography — which I shall be happy to present him now, free of charge —" The crowd applauded again. "He had *no idea,*" Lockhart continued, giving Harry a little shake that made his glasses slip to the end of his nose, "that he would shortly be getting much, much more than my book, *Magical Me.* He and his schoolmates will, in fact, be getting the real magical me. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, I have great pleasure and pride in announcing that this September, I will be taking up the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry!"

The crowd cheered and clapped and Harry found himself being

presented with the entire works of Gilderoy Lockhart. Staggering slightly under their weight, he managed to make his way out of the limelight to the edge of the room, where Ginny was standing next to her new cauldron.

"You have these," Harry mumbled to her, tipping the books into the cauldron. "I'll buy my own —"

"Bet you loved that, didn't you, Potter?" said a voice Harry had no trouble recognizing. He straightened up and found himself face-to-face with Draco Malfoy, who was wearing his usual sneer.

"*Famous* Harry Potter," said Malfoy. "Can't even go into a *bookshop* without making the front page."

"Leave him alone, he didn't want all that!" said Ginny. It was the first time she had spoken in front of Harry. She was glaring at Malfoy.

"Potter, you've got yourself a *girlfriend*!" drawled Malfoy. Ginny went scarlet as Ron and Hermione fought their way over, both clutching stacks of Lockhart's books.

"Oh, it's you," said Ron, looking at Malfoy as if he were something unpleasant on the sole of his shoe. "Bet you're surprised to see Harry here, eh?"

"Not as surprised as I am to see you in a shop, Weasley," retorted Malfoy. "I suppose your parents will go hungry for a month to pay for all those."

Ron went as red as Ginny. He dropped his books into the cauldron, too, and started toward Malfoy, but Harry and Hermione grabbed the back of his jacket.

"Ron!" said Mr. Weasley, struggling over with Fred and George. "What are you doing? It's too crowded in here, let's go outside."

"Well, well, well — Arthur Weasley."

It was Mr. Malfoy. He stood with his hand on Draco's shoulder, sneering in just the same way.

"Lucius," said Mr. Weasley, nodding coldly.

"Busy time at the Ministry, I hear," said Mr. Malfoy. "All those raids . . . I hope they're paying you overtime?"

He reached into Ginny's cauldron and extracted, from amid the glossy Lockhart books, a very old, very battered copy of *A Beginner's Guide to Transfiguration.*

"Obviously not," Mr. Malfoy said. "Dear me, what's the use of being a disgrace to the name of wizard if they don't even pay you well for it?"

Mr. Weasley flushed darker than either Ron or Ginny.

"We have a very different idea of what disgraces the name of wizard, Malfoy," he said.

"Clearly," said Mr. Malfoy, his pale eyes straying to Mr. and Mrs. Granger, who were watching apprehensively. "The company you keep, Weasley . . . and I thought your family could sink no lower —"

There was a thud of metal as Ginny's cauldron went flying; Mr. Weasley had thrown himself at Mr. Malfoy, knocking him backward into a bookshelf. Dozens of heavy spellbooks came thundering down on all their heads; there was a yell of, "Get him, Dad!" from Fred or George; Mrs. Weasley was shrieking, "No, Arthur, no!"; the crowd stampeded backward, knocking more shelves over; "Gentlemen, please — please!" cried the assistant, and then, louder than all —

"Break it up, there, gents, break it up —"

Hagrid was wading toward them through the sea of books. In an instant he had pulled Mr. Weasley and Mr. Malfoy apart. Mr. Weasley had a cut lip and Mr. Malfoy had been hit in the eye by an *Encyclopedia of Toadstools.* He was still holding Ginny's old Transfiguration book. He thrust it at her, his eyes glittering with malice.

"Here, girl — take your book — it's the best your father can give you —" Pulling himself out of Hagrid's grip he beckoned to Draco and swept from the shop.

"Yeh should've ignored him, Arthur," said Hagrid, almost lifting Mr. Weasley off his feet as he straightened his robes. "Rotten ter the core, the whole family, everyone knows that — no Malfoy's worth listenin' ter — bad blood, that's what it is — come on now — let's get outta here."

The assistant looked as though he wanted to stop them from leaving, but he barely came up to Hagrid's waist and seemed to think better of it. They hurried up the street, the Grangers shaking with fright and Mrs. Weasley beside herself with fury.

"A *fine* example to set for your children . . . *brawling* in public . . . *what* Gilderoy Lockhart must've thought —"

"He was pleased," said Fred. "Didn't you hear him as we were leaving? He was asking that bloke from the *Daily Prophet* if he'd be able to work the fight into his report — said it was all publicity —"

But it was a subdued group that headed back to the fireside in the Leaky Cauldron, where Harry, the Weasleys, and all their shopping would be traveling back to the Burrow using Floo powder. They said good-bye to the Grangers, who were leaving the pub for the Muggle street on the other side; Mr. Weasley started to ask

them how bus stops worked, but stopped quickly at the look on Mrs. Weasley's face.

Harry took off his glasses and put them safely in his pocket before helping himself to Floo powder. It definitely wasn't his favorite way to travel.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE WHOMPING WILLOW

The end of the summer vacation came too quickly for Harry's liking. He was looking forward to getting back to Hogwarts, but his month at the Burrow had been the happiest of his life. It was difficult not to feel jealous of Ron when he thought of the Dursleys and the sort of welcome he could expect next time he turned up on Privet Drive.

On their last evening, Mrs. Weasley conjured up a sumptuous dinner that included all of Harry's favorite things, ending with a mouthwatering treacle pudding. Fred and George rounded off the evening with a display of Filibuster fireworks; they filled the kitchen with red and blue stars that bounced from ceiling to wall for at least half an hour. Then it was time for a last mug of hot chocolate and bed.

It took a long while to get started next morning. They were up at dawn, but somehow they still seemed to have a great deal to do.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mrs. Weasley dashed about in a bad mood looking for spare socks and quills; people kept colliding on the stairs, half-dressed with bits of toast in their hands; and Mr. Weasley nearly broke his neck, tripping over a stray chicken as he crossed the yard carrying Ginny's trunk to the car.

Harry couldn't see how eight people, six large trunks, two owls, and a rat were going to fit into one small Ford Anglia. He had reckoned, of course, without the special features that Mr. Weasley had added.

"Not a word to Molly," he whispered to Harry as he opened the trunk and showed him how it had been magically expanded so that the luggage fitted easily.

When at last they were all in the car, Mrs. Weasley glanced into the back seat, where Harry, Ron, Fred, George, and Percy were all sitting comfortably side by side, and said, "Muggles *do* know more than we give them credit for, don't they?" She and Ginny got into the front seat, which had been stretched so that it resembled a park bench. "I mean, you'd never know it was this roomy from the outside, would you?"

Mr. Weasley started up the engine and they trundled out of the yard, Harry turning back for a last look at the house. He barely had time to wonder when he'd see it again when they were back — George had forgotten his box of Filibuster fireworks. Five minutes after that, they skidded to a halt in the yard so that Fred could run in for his broomstick. They had almost reached the highway when Ginny shrieked that she'd left her diary. By the time she had clambered back into the car, they were running very late, and tempers were running high.

Mr. Weasley glanced at his watch and then at his wife.

"Molly, dear —"

"*No,* Arthur —"

"No one would see — this little button here is an Invisibility Booster I installed — that'd get us up in the air — then we fly above the clouds. We'd be there in ten minutes and no one would be any the wiser —"

"I said *no,* Arthur, not in broad daylight —"

They reached King's Cross at a quarter to eleven. Mr. Weasley dashed across the road to get trolleys for their trunks and they all hurried into the station.

Harry had caught the Hogwarts Express the previous year. The tricky part was getting onto platform nine and three-quarters, which wasn't visible to the Muggle eye. What you had to do was walk through the solid barrier dividing platforms nine and ten. It didn't hurt, but it had to be done carefully so that none of the Muggles noticed you vanishing.

"Percy first," said Mrs. Weasley, looking nervously at the clock overhead, which showed they had only five minutes to disappear casually through the barrier.

Percy strode briskly forward and vanished. Mr. Weasley went next; Fred and George followed.

"I'll take Ginny and you two come right after us," Mrs. Weasley told Harry and Ron, grabbing Ginny's hand and setting off. In the blink of an eye they were gone.

"Let's go together, we've only got a minute," Ron said to Harry.

Harry made sure that Hedwig's cage was safely wedged on top of his trunk and wheeled his trolley around to face the barrier. He felt

perfectly confident; this wasn't nearly as uncomfortable as using Floo powder. Both of them bent low over the handles of their trolleys and walked purposefully toward the barrier, gathering speed. A few feet away from it, they broke into a run and —

CRASH.

Both trolleys hit the barrier and bounced backward; Ron's trunk fell off with a loud thump, Harry was knocked off his feet, and Hedwig's cage bounced onto the shiny floor, and she rolled away, shrieking indignantly; people all around them stared and a guard nearby yelled, "What in blazes d'you think you're doing?"

"Lost control of the trolley," Harry gasped, clutching his ribs as he got up. Ron ran to pick up Hedwig, who was causing such a scene that there was a lot of muttering about cruelty to animals from the surrounding crowd.

"Why can't we get through?" Harry hissed to Ron.

"I dunno —"

Ron looked wildly around. A dozen curious people were still watching them.

"We're going to miss the train," Ron whispered. "I don't understand why the gateway's sealed itself —"

Harry looked up at the giant clock with a sickening feeling in the pit of his stomach. Ten seconds . . . nine seconds . . .

He wheeled his trolley forward cautiously until it was right against the barrier and pushed with all his might. The metal remained solid.

Three seconds . . . two seconds . . . one second . . .

"It's gone," said Ron, sounding stunned. "The train's left. What if Mum and Dad can't get back through to us? Have you got any Muggle money?"

Harry gave a hollow laugh. "The Dursleys haven't given me pocket money for about six years."

Ron pressed his ear to the cold barrier.

"Can't hear a thing," he said tensely. "What're we going to do? I don't know how long it'll take Mum and Dad to get back to us."

They looked around. People were still watching them, mainly because of Hedwig's continuing screeches.

"I think we'd better go and wait by the car," said Harry. "We're attracting too much atten —"

"Harry!" said Ron, his eyes gleaming. "The car!"

"What about it?"

"We can fly the car to Hogwarts!"

"But I thought —"

"We're stuck, right? And we've got to get to school, haven't we? And even underage wizards are allowed to use magic if it's a real emergency, section nineteen or something of the Restriction of Thingy —"

"But your mum and dad . . ." said Harry, pushing against the barrier again in the vain hope that it would give way. "How will they get home?"

"They don't need the car!" said Ron impatiently. "They know how to Apparate! You know, just vanish and reappear at home! They only bother with Floo powder and the car because we're all underage and we're not allowed to Apparate yet. . . ."

Harry's feeling of panic turned suddenly to excitement.

"Can you fly it?"

"No problem," said Ron, wheeling his trolley around to face the exit. "C'mon, let's go. If we hurry we'll be able to follow the Hogwarts Express —"

And they marched off through the crowd of curious Muggles, out of the station and back onto the side road where the old Ford Anglia was parked.

Ron unlocked the cavernous trunk with a series of taps from his wand. They heaved their luggage back in, put Hedwig on the back seat, and got into the front.

"Check that no one's watching," said Ron, starting the ignition with another tap of his wand. Harry stuck his head out of the window: Traffic was rumbling along the main road ahead, but their street was empty.

"Okay," he said.

Ron pressed a tiny silver button on the dashboard. The car around them vanished — and so did they. Harry could feel the seat vibrating beneath him, hear the engine, feel his hands on his knees and his glasses on his nose, but for all he could see, he had become a pair of eyeballs, floating a few feet above the ground in a dingy street full of parked cars.

"Let's go," said Ron's voice from his right.

And the ground and the dirty buildings on either side fell away, dropping out of sight as the car rose; in seconds, the whole of London lay, smoky and glittering, below them.

Then there was a popping noise and the car, Harry, and Ron reappeared.

"Uh-oh," said Ron, jabbing at the Invisibility Booster. "It's faulty —"

Both of them pummeled it. The car vanished. Then it flickered back again.

"Hold on!" Ron yelled, and he slammed his foot on the acceler-

ator; they shot straight into the low, woolly clouds and everything turned dull and foggy.

"Now what?" said Harry, blinking at the solid mass of cloud pressing in on them from all sides.

"We need to see the train to know what direction to go in," said Ron.

"Dip back down again — quickly —"

They dropped back beneath the clouds and twisted around in their seats, squinting at the ground.

"I can see it!" Harry yelled. "Right ahead — there!"

The Hogwarts Express was streaking along below them like a scarlet snake.

"Due north," said Ron, checking the compass on the dashboard. "Okay, we'll just have to check on it every half hour or so — hold on —"

And they shot up through the clouds. A minute later, they burst out into a blaze of sunlight.

It was a different world. The wheels of the car skimmed the sea of fluffy cloud, the sky a bright, endless blue under the blinding white sun.

"All we've got to worry about now are airplanes," said Ron.

They looked at each other and started to laugh; for a long time, they couldn't stop.

It was as though they had been plunged into a fabulous dream. This, thought Harry, was surely the only way to travel — past swirls and turrets of snowy cloud, in a car full of hot, bright sunlight, with a fat pack of toffees in the glove compartment, and the prospect of seeing Fred's and George's jealous faces when they

landed smoothly and spectacularly on the sweeping lawn in front of Hogwarts castle.

They made regular checks on the train as they flew farther and farther north, each dip beneath the clouds showing them a different view. London was soon far behind them, replaced by neat green fields that gave way in turn to wide, purplish moors, a great city alive with cars like multicolored ants, villages with tiny toy churches.

Several uneventful hours later, however, Harry had to admit that some of the fun was wearing off. The toffees had made them extremely thirsty and they had nothing to drink. He and Ron had pulled off their sweaters, but Harry's T-shirt was sticking to the back of his seat and his glasses kept sliding down to the end of his sweaty nose. He had stopped noticing the fantastic cloud shapes now and was thinking longingly of the train miles below, where you could buy ice-cold pumpkin juice from a trolley pushed by a plump witch. *Why* hadn't they been able to get onto platform nine and three-quarters?

"Can't be much further, can it?" croaked Ron, hours later still, as the sun started to sink into their floor of cloud, staining it a deep pink. "Ready for another check on the train?"

It was still right below them, winding its way past a snowcapped mountain. It was much darker beneath the canopy of clouds.

Ron put his foot on the accelerator and drove them upward again, but as he did so, the engine began to whine.

Harry and Ron exchanged nervous glances.

"It's probably just tired," said Ron. "It's never been this far before. . . ."

And they both pretended not to notice the whining growing louder and louder as the sky became steadily darker. Stars were blossoming in the blackness. Harry pulled his sweater back on, trying to ignore the way the windshield wipers were now waving feebly, as though in protest.

"Not far," said Ron, more to the car than to Harry, "not far now," and he patted the dashboard nervously.

When they flew back beneath the clouds a little while later, they had to squint through the darkness for a landmark they knew.

"*There*!" Harry shouted, making Ron and Hedwig jump. "Straight ahead!"

Silhouetted on the dark horizon, high on the cliff over the lake, stood the many turrets and towers of Hogwarts castle.

But the car had begun to shudder and was losing speed.

"Come on," Ron said cajolingly, giving the steering wheel a little shake, "nearly there, come on —"

The engine groaned. Narrow jets of steam were issuing from under the hood. Harry found himself gripping the edges of his seat very hard as they flew toward the lake.

The car gave a nasty wobble. Glancing out of his window, Harry saw the smooth, black, glassy surface of the water, a mile below. Ron's knuckles were white on the steering wheel. The car wobbled again.

"Come *on,*" Ron muttered.

They were over the lake — the castle was right ahead — Ron put his foot down.

There was a loud clunk, a splutter, and the engine died completely.

"Uh-oh," said Ron, into the silence.

The nose of the car dropped. They were falling, gathering speed, heading straight for the solid castle wall.

"*Noooooo*!" Ron yelled, swinging the steering wheel around; they missed the dark stone wall by inches as the car turned in a great arc, soaring over the dark greenhouses, then the vegetable patch, and then out over the black lawns, losing altitude all the time.

Ron let go of the steering wheel completely and pulled his wand out of his back pocket —

"STOP! STOP!" he yelled, whacking the dashboard and the windshield, but they were still plummeting, the ground flying up toward them —

"WATCH OUT FOR THAT TREE!" Harry bellowed, lunging for the steering wheel, but too late —

CRUNCH.

With an earsplitting bang of metal on wood, they hit the thick tree trunk and dropped to the ground with a heavy jolt. Steam was billowing from under the crumpled hood; Hedwig was shrieking in terror; a golf-ball-sized lump was throbbing on Harry's head where he had hit the windshield; and to his right, Ron let out a low, despairing groan.

"Are you okay?" Harry said urgently.

"My wand," said Ron, in a shaky voice. "Look at my wand —"

It had snapped, almost in two; the tip was dangling limply, held on by a few splinters.

Harry opened his mouth to say he was sure they'd be able to mend it up at the school, but he never even got started. At that very moment, something hit his side of the car with the force of a

charging bull, sending him lurching sideways into Ron, just as an equally heavy blow hit the roof.

"What's happen — ?"

Ron gasped, staring through the windshield, and Harry looked around just in time to see a branch as thick as a python smash into it. The tree they had hit was attacking them. Its trunk was bent almost double, and its gnarled boughs were pummeling every inch of the car it could reach.

"Aaargh!" said Ron as another twisted limb punched a large dent into his door; the windshield was now trembling under a hail of blows from knuckle-like twigs and a branch as thick as a battering ram was pounding furiously on the roof, which seemed to be caving —

"Run for it!" Ron shouted, throwing his full weight against his door, but next second he had been knocked backward into Harry's lap by a vicious uppercut from another branch.

"We're done for!" he moaned as the ceiling sagged, but suddenly the floor of the car was vibrating — the engine had restarted.

"*Reverse*!" Harry yelled, and the car shot backward; the tree was still trying to hit them; they could hear its roots creaking as it almost ripped itself up, lashing out at them as they sped out of reach.

"That," panted Ron, "was close. Well done, car —"

The car, however, had reached the end of its tether. With two sharp clunks, the doors flew open and Harry felt his seat tip sideways: Next thing he knew he was sprawled on the damp ground. Loud thuds told him that the car was ejecting their luggage from the trunk; Hedwig's cage flew through the air and burst open; she rose out of it with an angry screech and sped off toward the castle

without a backward look. Then, dented, scratched, and steaming, the car rumbled off into the darkness, its rear lights blazing angrily.

"Come back!" Ron yelled after it, brandishing his broken wand. "Dad'll kill me!"

But the car disappeared from view with one last snort from its exhaust.

"Can you *believe* our luck?" said Ron miserably, bending down to pick up Scabbers. "Of all the trees we could've hit, we had to get one that hits back."

He glanced over his shoulder at the ancient tree, which was still flailing its branches threateningly.

"Come on," said Harry wearily, "we'd better get up to the school. . . ."

It wasn't at all the triumphant arrival they had pictured. Stiff, cold, and bruised, they seized the ends of their trunks and began dragging them up the grassy slope, toward the great oak front doors.

"I think the feast's already started," said Ron, dropping his trunk at the foot of the front steps and crossing quietly to look through a brightly lit window. "Hey — Harry — come and look — it's the Sorting!"

Harry hurried over and, together, he and Ron peered in at the Great Hall.

Innumerable candles were hovering in midair over four long, crowded tables, making the golden plates and goblets sparkle. Overhead, the bewitched ceiling, which always mirrored the sky outside, sparkled with stars.

Through the forest of pointed black Hogwarts hats, Harry saw a long line of scared-looking first years filing into the Hall. Ginny

was among them, easily visible because of her vivid Weasley hair. Meanwhile, Professor McGonagall, a bespectacled witch with her hair in a tight bun, was placing the famous Hogwarts Sorting Hat on a stool before the newcomers.

Every year, this aged old hat, patched, frayed, and dirty, sorted new students into the four Hogwarts houses (Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin). Harry well remembered putting it on, exactly one year ago, and waiting, petrified, for its decision as it muttered aloud in his ear. For a few horrible seconds he had feared that the hat was going to put him in Slytherin, the House that had turned out more Dark witches and wizards than any other — but he had ended up in Gryffindor, along with Ron, Hermione, and the rest of the Weasleys. Last term, Harry and Ron had helped Gryffindor win the House Championship, beating Slytherin for the first time in seven years.

A very small, mousy-haired boy had been called forward to place the hat on his head. Harry's eyes wandered past him to where Professor Dumbledore, the headmaster, sat watching the Sorting from the staff table, his long silver beard and half-moon glasses shining brightly in the candlelight. Several seats along, Harry saw Gilderoy Lockhart, dressed in robes of aquamarine. And there at the end was Hagrid, huge and hairy, drinking deeply from his goblet.

"Hang on . . ." Harry muttered to Ron. "There's an empty chair at the staff table. . . . Where's Snape?"

Professor Severus Snape was Harry's least favorite teacher. Harry also happened to be Snape's least favorite student. Cruel, sarcastic, and disliked by everybody except the students from his own House (Slytherin), Snape taught Potions.

"Maybe he's ill!" said Ron hopefully.

"Maybe he's *left,*" said Harry, "because he missed out on the Defense Against the Dark Arts job *again*!"

"Or he might have been *sacked*!" said Ron enthusiastically. "I mean, everyone hates him —"

"Or maybe," said a very cold voice right behind them, "he's waiting to hear why you two didn't arrive on the school train."

Harry spun around. There, his black robes rippling in a cold breeze, stood Severus Snape. He was a thin man with sallow skin, a hooked nose, and greasy, shoulder-length black hair, and at this moment, he was smiling in a way that told Harry he and Ron were in very deep trouble.

"Follow me," said Snape.

Not daring even to look at each other, Harry and Ron followed Snape up the steps into the vast, echoing entrance hall, which was lit with flaming torches. A delicious smell of food was wafting from the Great Hall, but Snape led them away from the warmth and light, down a narrow stone staircase that led into the dungeons.

"In!" he said, opening a door halfway down the cold passageway and pointing.

They entered Snape's office, shivering. The shadowy walls were lined with shelves of large glass jars, in which floated all manner of revolting things Harry didn't really want to know the name of at the moment. The fireplace was dark and empty. Snape closed the door and turned to look at them.

"So," he said softly, "the train isn't good enough for the famous Harry Potter and his faithful sidekick, Weasley. Wanted to arrive with a *bang,* did we, boys?"

"No, sir, it was the barrier at King's Cross, it —"

"Silence!" said Snape coldly. "What have you done with the car?"

Ron gulped. This wasn't the first time Snape had given Harry the impression of being able to read minds. But a moment later, he understood, as Snape unrolled today's issue of the *Evening Prophet.*

"You were seen," he hissed, showing them the headline: *FLYING FORD ANGLIA MYSTIFIES MUGGLES.* He began to read aloud: "Two Muggles in London, convinced they saw an old car flying over the Post Office tower . . . at noon in Norfolk, Mrs. Hetty Bayliss, while hanging out her washing . . . Mr. Angus Fleet, of Peebles, reported to police . . . Six or seven Muggles in all. I believe *your* father works in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office?" he said, looking up at Ron and smiling still more nastily. "Dear, dear . . . his own son . . ."

Harry felt as though he'd just been walloped in the stomach by one of the mad tree's larger branches. If anyone found out Mr. Weasley had bewitched the car . . . he hadn't thought of that. . . .

"I noticed, in my search of the park, that considerable damage seems to have been done to a very valuable Whomping Willow," Snape went on.

"That tree did more damage to *us* than we —" Ron blurted out.

"*Silence*!" snapped Snape again. "Most unfortunately, you are not in my House and the decision to expel you does not rest with me. I shall go and fetch the people who *do* have that happy power. You will wait here."

Harry and Ron stared at each other, white-faced. Harry didn't feel hungry anymore. He now felt extremely sick. He tried not to look at a large, slimy something suspended in green liquid on a

shelf behind Snape's desk. If Snape had gone to fetch Professor McGonagall, head of Gryffindor House, they were hardly any better off. She might be fairer than Snape, but she was still extremely strict.

Ten minutes later, Snape returned, and sure enough it was Professor McGonagall who accompanied him. Harry had seen Professor McGonagall angry on several occasions, but either he had forgotten just how thin her mouth could go, or he had never seen her this angry before. She raised her wand the moment she entered; Harry and Ron both flinched, but she merely pointed it at the empty fireplace, where flames suddenly erupted.

"Sit," she said, and they both backed into chairs by the fire.

"Explain," she said, her glasses glinting ominously.

Ron launched into the story, starting with the barrier at the station refusing to let them through.

"— so we had no choice, Professor, we couldn't get on the train."

"Why didn't you send us a letter by owl? I believe *you* have an owl?" Professor McGonagall said coldly to Harry.

Harry gaped at her. Now she'd said it, that seemed the obvious thing to have done.

"I — I didn't think —"

"That," said Professor McGonagall, "is obvious."

There was a knock on the office door and Snape, now looking happier than ever, opened it. There stood the headmaster, Professor Dumbledore.

Harry's whole body went numb. Dumbledore was looking unusually grave. He stared down his very crooked nose at them, and

Harry suddenly found himself wishing he and Ron were still being beaten up by the Whomping Willow.

There was a long silence. Then Dumbledore said, "Please explain why you did this."

It would have been better if he had shouted. Harry hated the disappointment in his voice. For some reason, he was unable to look Dumbledore in the eyes, and spoke instead to his knees. He told Dumbledore everything except that Mr. Weasley owned the bewitched car, making it sound as though he and Ron had happened to find a flying car parked outside the station. He knew Dumbledore would see through this at once, but Dumbledore asked no questions about the car. When Harry had finished, he merely continued to peer at them through his spectacles.

"We'll go and get our stuff," said Ron in a hopeless sort of voice.

"What are you talking about, Weasley?" barked Professor McGonagall.

"Well, you're expelling us, aren't you?" said Ron.

Harry looked quickly at Dumbledore.

"Not today, Mr. Weasley," said Dumbledore. "But I must impress upon both of you the seriousness of what you have done. I will be writing to both your families tonight. I must also warn you that if you do anything like this again, I will have no choice but to expel you."

Snape looked as though Christmas had been canceled. He cleared his throat and said, "Professor Dumbledore, these boys have flouted the Decree for the Restriction of Underage Wizardry, caused serious damage to an old and valuable tree — surely acts of this nature —"

"It will be for Professor McGonagall to decide on these boys' punishments, Severus," said Dumbledore calmly. "They are in her House and are therefore her responsibility." He turned to Professor McGonagall. "I must go back to the feast, Minerva, I've got to give out a few notices. Come, Severus, there's a delicious-looking custard tart I want to sample —"

Snape shot a look of pure venom at Harry and Ron as he allowed himself to be swept out of his office, leaving them alone with Professor McGonagall, who was still eyeing them like a wrathful eagle.

"You'd better get along to the hospital wing, Weasley, you're bleeding."

"Not much," said Ron, hastily wiping the cut over his eye with his sleeve. "Professor, I wanted to watch my sister being Sorted —"

"The Sorting Ceremony is over," said Professor McGonagall. "Your sister is also in Gryffindor."

"Oh, good," said Ron.

"And speaking of Gryffindor —" Professor McGonagall said sharply, but Harry cut in: "Professor, when we took the car, term hadn't started, so — so Gryffindor shouldn't really have points taken from it — should it?" he finished, watching her anxiously.

Professor McGonagall gave him a piercing look, but he was sure she had almost smiled. Her mouth looked less thin, anyway.

"I will not take any points from Gryffindor," she said, and Harry's heart lightened considerably. "But you will both get a detention."

It was better than Harry had expected. As for Dumbledore's writing to the Dursleys, that was nothing. Harry knew perfectly well they'd just be disappointed that the Whomping Willow hadn't squashed him flat.

Professor McGonagall raised her wand again and pointed it at Snape's desk. A large plate of sandwiches, two silver goblets, and a jug of iced pumpkin juice appeared with a pop.

"You will eat in here and then go straight up to your dormitory," she said. "I must also return to the feast."

When the door had closed behind her, Ron let out a long, low whistle.

"I thought we'd had it," he said, grabbing a sandwich.

"So did I," said Harry, taking one, too.

"Can you believe our luck, though?" said Ron thickly through a mouthful of chicken and ham. "Fred and George must've flown that car five or six times and no Muggle ever saw *them.*" He swallowed and took another huge bite. "*Why* couldn't we get through the barrier?"

Harry shrugged. "We'll have to watch our step from now on, though," he said, taking a grateful swig of pumpkin juice. "Wish we could've gone up to the feast. . . ."

"She didn't want us showing off," said Ron sagely. "Doesn't want people to think it's clever, arriving by flying car."

When they had eaten as many sandwiches as they could (the plate kept refilling itself), they rose and left the office, treading the familiar path to Gryffindor Tower. The castle was quiet; it seemed that the feast was over. They walked past muttering portraits and creaking suits of armor, and climbed narrow flights of stone stairs, until at last they reached the passage where the secret entrance to Gryffindor Tower was hidden, behind an oil painting of a very fat woman in a pink silk dress.

"Password?" she said as they approached.

"Er —" said Harry.

They didn't know the new year's password, not having met a Gryffindor prefect yet, but help came almost immediately; they heard hurrying feet behind them and turned to see Hermione dashing toward them.

"*There* you are! Where have you *been*? The most *ridiculous* rumors — someone said you'd been expelled for crashing a flying *car* —"

"Well, we haven't been expelled," Harry assured her.

"You're not telling me you *did* fly here?" said Hermione, sounding almost as severe as Professor McGonagall.

"Skip the lecture," said Ron impatiently, "and tell us the new password."

"It's 'wattlebird,' " said Hermione impatiently, "but that's not the point —"

Her words were cut short, however, as the portrait of the fat lady swung open and there was a sudden storm of clapping. It looked as though the whole of Gryffindor House was still awake, packed into the circular common room, standing on the lopsided tables and squashy armchairs, waiting for them to arrive. Arms reached through the portrait hole to pull Harry and Ron inside, leaving Hermione to scramble in after them.

"Brilliant!" yelled Lee Jordan. "Inspired! What an entrance! Flying a car right into the Whomping Willow, people'll be talking about that one for years —"

"Good for you," said a fifth year Harry had never spoken to; someone was patting him on the back as though he'd just won a marathon; Fred and George pushed their way to the front of the crowd and said together, "Why couldn't we've come in the car, eh?"

Ron was scarlet in the face, grinning embarrassedly, but Harry could see one person who didn't look happy at all. Percy was visible over the heads of some excited first years, and he seemed to be trying to get near enough to start telling them off. Harry nudged Ron in the ribs and nodded in Percy's direction. Ron got the point at once.

"Got to get upstairs — bit tired," he said, and the two of them started pushing their way toward the door on the other side of the room, which led to a spiral staircase and the dormitories.

" 'Night," Harry called back to Hermione, who was wearing a scowl just like Percy's.

They managed to get to the other side of the common room, still having their backs slapped, and gained the peace of the staircase. They hurried up it, right to the top, and at last reached the door of their old dormitory, which now had a sign on it saying SECOND YEARS. They entered the familiar, circular room, with its five four-posters hung with red velvet and its high, narrow windows. Their trunks had been brought up for them and stood at the ends of their beds.

Ron grinned guiltily at Harry.

"I know I shouldn't've enjoyed that or anything, but —"

The dormitory door flew open and in came the other second year Gryffindor boys, Seamus Finnigan, Dean Thomas, and Neville Longbottom.

"*Unbelievable*!" beamed Seamus.

"Cool," said Dean.

"Amazing," said Neville, awestruck.

Harry couldn't help it. He grinned, too.

CHAPTER SIX

GILDEROY LOCKHART

The next day, however, Harry barely grinned once. Things started to go downhill from breakfast in the Great Hall. The four long House tables were laden with tureens of porridge, plates of kippers, mountains of toast, and dishes of eggs and bacon, beneath the enchanted ceiling (today, a dull, cloudy gray). Harry and Ron sat down at the Gryffindor table next to Hermione, who had her copy of *Voyages with Vampires* propped open against a milk jug. There was a slight stiffness in the way she said " 'Morning," which told Harry that she was still disapproving of the way they had arrived. Neville Longbottom, on the other hand, greeted them cheerfully. Neville was a round-faced and accident-prone boy with the worst memory of anyone Harry had ever met.

"Mail's due any minute — I think Gran's sending a few things I forgot."

Harry had only just started his porridge when, sure enough, there was a rushing sound overhead and a hundred or so owls

streamed in, circling the hall and dropping letters and packages into the chattering crowd. A big, lumpy package bounced off Neville's head and, a second later, something large and gray fell into Hermione's jug, spraying them all with milk and feathers.

"*Errol*!" said Ron, pulling the bedraggled owl out by the feet. Errol slumped, unconscious, onto the table, his legs in the air and a damp red envelope in his beak.

"Oh, no —" Ron gasped.

"It's all right, he's still alive," said Hermione, prodding Errol gently with the tip of her finger.

"It's not that — it's *that.*"

Ron was pointing at the red envelope. It looked quite ordinary to Harry, but Ron and Neville were both looking at it as though they expected it to explode.

"What's the matter?" said Harry.

"She's — she's sent me a Howler," said Ron faintly.

"You'd better open it, Ron," said Neville in a timid whisper. "It'll be worse if you don't. My gran sent me one once, and I ignored it and" — he gulped — "it was horrible."

Harry looked from their petrified faces to the red envelope.

"What's a Howler?" he said.

But Ron's whole attention was fixed on the letter, which had begun to smoke at the corners.

"Open it," Neville urged. "It'll all be over in a few minutes —"

Ron stretched out a shaking hand, eased the envelope from Errol's beak, and slit it open. Neville stuffed his fingers in his ears. A split second later, Harry knew why. He thought for a moment it *had* exploded; a roar of sound filled the huge hall, shaking dust from the ceiling.

CHAPTER SIX

"— STEALING THE CAR, I WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN SURPRISED IF THEY'D EXPELLED YOU, YOU WAIT TILL I GET HOLD OF YOU, I DON'T SUPPOSE YOU STOPPED TO THINK WHAT YOUR FATHER AND I WENT THROUGH WHEN WE SAW IT WAS GONE —"

Mrs. Weasley's yells, a hundred times louder than usual, made the plates and spoons rattle on the table, and echoed deafeningly off the stone walls. People throughout the hall were swiveling around to see who had received the Howler, and Ron sank so low in his chair that only his crimson forehead could be seen.

"— LETTER FROM DUMBLEDORE LAST NIGHT, I THOUGHT YOUR FATHER WOULD DIE OF SHAME, WE DIDN'T BRING YOU UP TO BEHAVE LIKE THIS, YOU AND HARRY COULD BOTH HAVE DIED —"

Harry had been wondering when his name was going to crop up. He tried very hard to look as though he couldn't hear the voice that was making his eardrums throb.

"— ABSOLUTELY DISGUSTED — YOUR FATHER'S FACING AN INQUIRY AT WORK, IT'S ENTIRELY YOUR FAULT AND IF YOU PUT ANOTHER TOE OUT OF LINE WE'LL BRING YOU STRAIGHT BACK HOME."

A ringing silence fell. The red envelope, which had dropped from Ron's hand, burst into flames and curled into ashes. Harry and Ron sat stunned, as though a tidal wave had just passed over them. A few people laughed and, gradually, a babble of talk broke out again.

Hermione closed *Voyages with Vampires* and looked down at the top of Ron's head.

“Well, I don’t know what you expected, Ron, but you —”

“Don’t tell me I deserved it,” snapped Ron.

Harry pushed his porridge away. His insides were burning with guilt. Mr. Weasley was facing an inquiry at work. After all Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had done for him over the summer . . .

But he had no time to dwell on this; Professor McGonagall was moving along the Gryffindor table, handing out course schedules. Harry took his and saw that they had double Herbology with the Hufflepuffs first.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione left the castle together, crossed the vegetable patch, and made for the greenhouses, where the magical plants were kept. At least the Howler had done one good thing: Hermione seemed to think they had now been punished enough and was being perfectly friendly again.

As they neared the greenhouses they saw the rest of the class standing outside, waiting for Professor Sprout. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had only just joined them when she came striding into view across the lawn, accompanied by Gilderoy Lockhart. Professor Sprout’s arms were full of bandages, and with another twinge of guilt, Harry spotted the Whomping Willow in the distance, several of its branches now in slings.

Professor Sprout was a squat little witch who wore a patched hat over her flyaway hair; there was usually a large amount of earth on her clothes and her fingernails would have made Aunt Petunia faint. Gilderoy Lockhart, however, was immaculate in sweeping robes of turquoise, his golden hair shining under a perfectly positioned turquoise hat with gold trimming.

“Oh, hello there!” he called, beaming around at the assembled

students. "Just been showing Professor Sprout the right way to doctor a Whomping Willow! But I don't want you running away with the idea that I'm better at Herbology than she is! I just happen to have met several of these exotic plants on my travels . . ."

"Greenhouse three today, chaps!" said Professor Sprout, who was looking distinctly disgruntled, not at all her usual cheerful self.

There was a murmur of interest. They had only ever worked in greenhouse one before — greenhouse three housed far more interesting and dangerous plants. Professor Sprout took a large key from her belt and unlocked the door. Harry caught a whiff of damp earth and fertilizer mingling with the heavy perfume of some giant, umbrella-sized flowers dangling from the ceiling. He was about to follow Ron and Hermione inside when Lockhart's hand shot out.

"Harry! I've been wanting a word — you don't mind if he's a couple of minutes late, do you, Professor Sprout?"

Judging by Professor Sprout's scowl, she did mind, but Lockhart said, "That's the ticket," and closed the greenhouse door in her face.

"Harry," said Lockhart, his large white teeth gleaming in the sunlight as he shook his head. "Harry, Harry, Harry."

Completely nonplussed, Harry said nothing.

"When I heard — well, of course, it was all my fault. Could have kicked myself."

Harry had no idea what he was talking about. He was about to say so when Lockhart went on, "Don't know when I've been more shocked. Flying a car to Hogwarts! Well, of course, I knew at once why you'd done it. Stood out a mile. Harry, Harry, *Harry.*"

It was remarkable how he could show every one of those brilliant teeth even when he wasn't talking.

"Gave you a taste for publicity, didn't I?" said Lockhart. "Gave you the *bug.* You got onto the front page of the paper with me and you couldn't wait to do it again."

"Oh, no, Professor, see —"

"Harry, Harry, Harry," said Lockhart, reaching out and grasping his shoulder. "*I understand.* Natural to want a bit more once you've had that first taste — and I blame myself for giving you that, because it was bound to go to your head — but see here, young man, you can't start *flying cars* to try and get yourself noticed. Just calm down, all right? Plenty of time for all that when you're older. Yes, yes, I know what you're thinking! 'It's all right for him, he's an internationally famous wizard already!' But when I was twelve, I was just as much of a nobody as you are now. In fact, I'd say I was even more of a nobody! I mean, a few people have heard of you, haven't they? All that business with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named!" He glanced at the lightning scar on Harry's forehead. "I know, I know — it's not quite as good as winning *Witch Weekly's* Most-Charming-Smile Award five times in a row, as I have — but it's a *start,* Harry, it's a *start.*"

He gave Harry a hearty wink and strode off. Harry stood stunned for a few seconds, then, remembering he was supposed to be in the greenhouse, he opened the door and slid inside.

Professor Sprout was standing behind a trestle bench in the center of the greenhouse. About twenty pairs of different-colored earmuffs were lying on the bench. When Harry had taken his place between Ron and Hermione, she said, "We'll be repotting Mandrakes today. Now, who can tell me the properties of the Mandrake?"

To nobody's surprise, Hermione's hand was first into the air.

"Mandrake, or Mandragora, is a powerful restorative," said Hermione, sounding as usual as though she had swallowed the textbook. "It is used to return people who have been transfigured or cursed to their original state."

"Excellent. Ten points to Gryffindor," said Professor Sprout. "The Mandrake forms an essential part of most antidotes. It is also, however, dangerous. Who can tell me why?"

Hermione's hand narrowly missed Harry's glasses as it shot up again.

"The cry of the Mandrake is fatal to anyone who hears it," she said promptly.

"Precisely. Take another ten points," said Professor Sprout. "Now, the Mandrakes we have here are still very young."

She pointed to a row of deep trays as she spoke, and everyone shuffled forward for a better look. A hundred or so tufty little plants, purplish green in color, were growing there in rows. They looked quite unremarkable to Harry, who didn't have the slightest idea what Hermione meant by the "cry" of the Mandrake.

"Everyone take a pair of earmuffs," said Professor Sprout.

There was a scramble as everyone tried to seize a pair that wasn't pink and fluffy.

"When I tell you to put them on, make sure your ears are *completely* covered," said Professor Sprout. "When it is safe to remove them, I will give you the thumbs-up. Right — earmuffs *on.*"

Harry snapped the earmuffs over his ears. They shut out sound completely. Professor Sprout put the pink, fluffy pair over her own ears, rolled up the sleeves of her robes, grasped one of the tufty plants firmly, and pulled hard.

Harry let out a gasp of surprise that no one could hear.

Instead of roots, a small, muddy, and extremely ugly baby popped out of the earth. The leaves were growing right out of his head. He had pale green, mottled skin, and was clearly bawling at the top of his lungs.

Professor Sprout took a large plant pot from under the table and plunged the Mandrake into it, burying him in dark, damp compost until only the tufted leaves were visible. Professor Sprout dusted off her hands, gave them all the thumbs-up, and removed her own earmuffs.

"As our Mandrakes are only seedlings, their cries won't kill yet," she said calmly as though she'd just done nothing more exciting than water a begonia. "However, they *will* knock you out for several hours, and as I'm sure none of you want to miss your first day back, make sure your earmuffs are securely in place while you work. I will attract your attention when it is time to pack up.

"Four to a tray — there is a large supply of pots here — compost in the sacks over there — and be careful of the Venomous Tentacula, it's teething."

She gave a sharp slap to a spiky, dark red plant as she spoke, making it draw in the long feelers that had been inching sneakily over her shoulder.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione were joined at their tray by a curly-haired Hufflepuff boy Harry knew by sight but had never spoken to.

"Justin Finch-Fletchley," he said brightly, shaking Harry by the hand. "Know who you are, of course, the famous Harry Potter. . . . And you're Hermione Granger — always top in everything"

(Hermione beamed as she had her hand shaken too) "— and Ron Weasley. Wasn't that your flying car?"

Ron didn't smile. The Howler was obviously still on his mind.

"That Lockhart's something, isn't he?" said Justin happily as they began filling their plant pots with dragon dung compost. "Awfully brave chap. Have you read his books? I'd have died of fear if I'd been cornered in a telephone booth by a werewolf, but he stayed cool and — zap — just *fantastic.*

"My name was down for Eton, you know. I can't tell you how glad I am I came here instead. Of course, Mother was slightly disappointed, but since I made her read Lockhart's books I think she's begun to see how useful it'll be to have a fully trained wizard in the family. . . ."

After that they didn't have much chance to talk. Their earmuffs were back on and they needed to concentrate on the Mandrakes. Professor Sprout had made it look extremely easy, but it wasn't. The Mandrakes didn't like coming out of the earth, but didn't seem to want to go back into it either. They squirmed, kicked, flailed their sharp little fists, and gnashed their teeth; Harry spent ten whole minutes trying to squash a particularly fat one into a pot.

By the end of the class, Harry, like everyone else, was sweaty, aching, and covered in earth. Everyone traipsed back to the castle for a quick wash and then the Gryffindors hurried off to Transfiguration.

Professor McGonagall's classes were always hard work, but today was especially difficult. Everything Harry had learned last year seemed to have leaked out of his head during the summer. He was supposed to be turning a beetle into a button, but all he managed

to do was give his beetle a lot of exercise as it scuttled over the desk-top avoiding his wand.

Ron was having far worse problems. He had patched up his wand with some borrowed Spellotape, but it seemed to be damaged beyond repair. It kept crackling and sparking at odd moments, and every time Ron tried to transfigure his beetle it engulfed him in thick gray smoke that smelled of rotten eggs. Unable to see what he was doing, Ron accidentally squashed his beetle with his elbow and had to ask for a new one. Professor McGonagall wasn't pleased.

Harry was relieved to hear the lunch bell. His brain felt like a wrung sponge. Everyone filed out of the classroom except him and Ron, who was whacking his wand furiously on the desk.

"Stupid — useless — thing —"

"Write home for another one," Harry suggested as the wand let off a volley of bangs like a firecracker.

"Oh, yeah, and get another Howler back," said Ron, stuffing the now hissing wand into his bag. " '*It's your own fault your wand got snapped* —' "

They went down to lunch, where Ron's mood was not improved by Hermione's showing them the handful of perfect coat buttons she had produced in Transfiguration.

"What've we got this afternoon?" said Harry, hastily changing the subject.

"Defense Against the Dark Arts," said Hermione at once.

"*Why,*" demanded Ron, seizing her schedule, "have you outlined all Lockhart's lessons in little hearts?"

Hermione snatched the schedule back, blushing furiously.

CHAPTER SIX

They finished lunch and went outside into the overcast courtyard. Hermione sat down on a stone step and buried her nose in *Voyages with Vampires* again. Harry and Ron stood talking about Quidditch for several minutes before Harry became aware that he was being closely watched. Looking up, he saw the very small, mousy-haired boy he'd seen trying on the Sorting Hat last night staring at Harry as though transfixed. He was clutching what looked like an ordinary Muggle camera, and the moment Harry looked at him, he went bright red.

"All right, Harry? I'm — I'm Colin Creevey," he said breathlessly, taking a tentative step forward. "I'm in Gryffindor, too. D'you think — would it be all right if — can I have a picture?" he said, raising the camera hopefully.

"A picture?" Harry repeated blankly.

"So I can prove I've met you," said Colin Creevey eagerly, edging further forward. "I know all about you. Everyone's told me. About how you survived when You-Know-Who tried to kill you and how he disappeared and everything and how you've still got a lightning scar on your forehead" (his eyes raked Harry's hairline) "and a boy in my dormitory said if I develop the film in the right potion, the pictures'll *move.*" Colin drew a great shuddering breath of excitement and said, "It's *amazing* here, isn't it? I never knew all the odd stuff I could do was magic till I got the letter from Hogwarts. My dad's a milkman, he couldn't believe it either. So I'm taking loads of pictures to send home to him. And it'd be really good if I had one of you" — he looked imploringly at Harry — "maybe your friend could take it and I could stand next to you? And then, could you sign it?"

"*Signed photos*? You're giving out *signed photos,* Potter?"

Loud and scathing, Draco Malfoy's voice echoed around the courtyard. He had stopped right behind Colin, flanked, as he always was at Hogwarts, by his large and thuggish cronies, Crabbe and Goyle.

"Everyone line up!" Malfoy roared to the crowd. "Harry Potter's giving out signed photos!"

"No, I'm not," said Harry angrily, his fists clenching. "Shut up, Malfoy."

"You're just jealous," piped up Colin, whose entire body was about as thick as Crabbe's neck.

"*Jealous*?" said Malfoy, who didn't need to shout anymore: Half the courtyard was listening in. "Of what? I don't want a foul scar right across my head, thanks. I don't think getting your head cut open makes you that special, myself."

Crabbe and Goyle were sniggering stupidly.

"Eat slugs, Malfoy," said Ron angrily. Crabbe stopped laughing and started rubbing his knuckles in a menacing way.

"Be careful, Weasley," sneered Malfoy. "You don't want to start any trouble or your mommy'll have to come and take you away from school." He put on a shrill, piercing voice. "*If you put another toe out of line —*"

A knot of Slytherin fifth years nearby laughed loudly at this.

"Weasley would like a signed photo, Potter," smirked Malfoy. "It'd be worth more than his family's whole house —"

Ron whipped out his Spellotaped wand, but Hermione shut *Voyages with Vampires* with a snap and whispered, "Look out!"

"What's all this, what's all this?" Gilderoy Lockhart was striding

toward them, his turquoise robes swirling behind him. "Who's giving out signed photos?"

Harry started to speak but he was cut short as Lockhart flung an arm around his shoulders and thundered jovially, "Shouldn't have asked! We meet again, Harry!"

Pinned to Lockhart's side and burning with humiliation, Harry saw Malfoy slide smirking back into the crowd.

"Come on then, Mr. Creevey," said Lockhart, beaming at Colin. "A double portrait, can't do better than that, and we'll *both* sign it for you."

Colin fumbled for his camera and took the picture as the bell rang behind them, signaling the start of afternoon classes.

"Off you go, move along there," Lockhart called to the crowd, and he set off back to the castle with Harry, who was wishing he knew a good Vanishing Spell, still clasped to his side.

"A word to the wise, Harry," said Lockhart paternally as they entered the building through a side door. "I covered up for you back there with young Creevey — if he was photographing me, too, your schoolmates won't think you're setting yourself up so much. . . ."

Deaf to Harry's stammers, Lockhart swept him down a corridor lined with staring students and up a staircase.

"Let me just say that handing out signed pictures at this stage of your career isn't sensible — looks a tad bigheaded, Harry, to be frank. There may well come a time when, like me, you'll need to keep a stack handy wherever you go, but" — he gave a little chortle — "I don't think you're quite there yet."

They had reached Lockhart's classroom and he let Harry go at

last. Harry yanked his robes straight and headed for a seat at the very back of the class, where he busied himself with piling all seven of Lockhart's books in front of him, so that he could avoid looking at the real thing.

The rest of the class came clattering in, and Ron and Hermione sat down on either side of Harry.

"You could've fried an egg on your face," said Ron. "You'd better hope Creevey doesn't meet Ginny, or they'll be starting a Harry Potter fan club."

"Shut up," snapped Harry. The last thing he needed was for Lockhart to hear the phrase "Harry Potter fan club."

When the whole class was seated, Lockhart cleared his throat loudly and silence fell. He reached forward, picked up Neville Longbottom's copy of *Travels with Trolls,* and held it up to show his own, winking portrait on the front.

"Me," he said, pointing at it and winking as well. "Gilderoy Lockhart, Order of Merlin, Third Class, Honorary Member of the Dark Force Defense League, and five-time winner of *Witch Weekly's* Most-Charming-Smile Award — but I don't talk about that. I didn't get rid of the Bandon Banshee by *smiling* at her!"

He waited for them to laugh; a few people smiled weakly.

"I see you've all bought a complete set of my books — well done. I thought we'd start today with a little quiz. Nothing to worry about — just to check how well you've read them, how much you've taken in —"

When he had handed out the test papers he returned to the front of the class and said, "You have thirty minutes — start — *now*!"

Harry looked down at his paper and read:

1. What is Gilderoy Lockhart's favorite color?
2. What is Gilderoy Lockhart's secret ambition?
3. What, in your opinion, is Gilderoy Lockhart's greatest achievement to date?

On and on it went, over three sides of paper, right down to:

54. When is Gilderoy Lockhart's birthday, and what would his ideal gift be?

Half an hour later, Lockhart collected the papers and rifled through them in front of the class.

"Tut, tut — hardly any of you remembered that my favorite color is lilac. I say so in *Year with the Yeti.* And a few of you need to read *Wanderings with Werewolves* more carefully — I clearly state in chapter twelve that my ideal birthday gift would be harmony between all magic and non-magic peoples — though I wouldn't say no to a large bottle of Ogden's Old Firewhisky!"

He gave them another roguish wink. Ron was now staring at Lockhart with an expression of disbelief on his face; Seamus Finnigan and Dean Thomas, who were sitting in front, were shaking with silent laughter. Hermione, on the other hand, was listening to Lockhart with rapt attention and gave a start when he mentioned her name.

". . . but Miss Hermione Granger knew my secret ambition is to rid the world of evil and market my own range of hair-care potions — good girl! In fact" — he flipped her paper over — "full marks! Where is Miss Hermione Granger?"

Hermione raised a trembling hand.

"Excellent!" beamed Lockhart. "Quite excellent! Take ten points for Gryffindor! And so — to business —"

He bent down behind his desk and lifted a large, covered cage onto it.

"Now — be warned! It is my job to arm you against the foulest creatures known to wizardkind! You may find yourselves facing your worst fears in this room. Know only that no harm can befall you whilst I am here. All I ask is that you remain calm."

In spite of himself, Harry leaned around his pile of books for a better look at the cage. Lockhart placed a hand on the cover. Dean and Seamus had stopped laughing now. Neville was cowering in his front row seat.

"I must ask you not to scream," said Lockhart in a low voice. "It might provoke them."

As the whole class held its breath, Lockhart whipped off the cover.

"Yes," he said dramatically. *"Freshly caught Cornish pixies."*

Seamus Finnigan couldn't control himself. He let out a snort of laughter that even Lockhart couldn't mistake for a scream of terror.

"Yes?" He smiled at Seamus.

"Well, they're not — they're not very — *dangerous,* are they?" Seamus choked.

"Don't be so sure!" said Lockhart, waggling a finger annoyingly at Seamus. "Devilish tricky little blighters they can be!"

The pixies were electric blue and about eight inches high, with pointed faces and voices so shrill it was like listening to a lot of budgies arguing. The moment the cover had been removed, they

had started jabbering and rocketing around, rattling the bars and making bizarre faces at the people nearest them.

"Right, then," Lockhart said loudly. "Let's see what you make of them!" And he opened the cage.

It was pandemonium. The pixies shot in every direction like rockets. Two of them seized Neville by the ears and lifted him into the air. Several shot straight through the window, showering the back row with broken glass. The rest proceeded to wreck the classroom more effectively than a rampaging rhino. They grabbed ink bottles and sprayed the class with them, shredded books and papers, tore pictures from the walls, up-ended the waste basket, grabbed bags and books and threw them out of the smashed window; within minutes, half the class was sheltering under desks and Neville was swinging from the iron chandelier in the ceiling.

"Come on now — round them up, round them up, they're only pixies," Lockhart shouted.

He rolled up his sleeves, brandished his wand, and bellowed, "*Peskipiksi Pesternomi*!"

It had absolutely no effect; one of the pixies seized his wand and threw it out of the window, too. Lockhart gulped and dived under his own desk, narrowly avoiding being squashed by Neville, who fell a second later as the chandelier gave way.

The bell rang and there was a mad rush toward the exit. In the relative calm that followed, Lockhart straightened up, caught sight of Harry, Ron, and Hermione, who were almost at the door, and said, "Well, I'll ask you three to just nip the rest of them back into their cage." He swept past them and shut the door quickly behind him.

“Can you *believe* him?” roared Ron as one of the remaining pixies bit him painfully on the ear.

“He just wants to give us some hands-on experience,” said Hermione, immobilizing two pixies at once with a clever Freezing Charm and stuffing them back into their cage.

“*Hands on*?” said Harry, who was trying to grab a pixie dancing out of reach with its tongue out. “Hermione, he didn’t have a clue what he was doing —”

“Rubbish,” said Hermione. “You’ve read his books — look at all those amazing things he’s done —”

“He *says* he’s done,” Ron muttered.

CHAPTER SEVEN

MUDBLOODS AND MURMURS

Harry spent a lot of time over the next few days dodging out of sight whenever he saw Gilderoy Lockhart coming down a corridor. Harder to avoid was Colin Creevey, who seemed to have memorized Harry's schedule. Nothing seemed to give Colin a bigger thrill than to say, "All right, Harry?" six or seven times a day and hear, "Hello, Colin," back, however exasperated Harry sounded when he said it.

Hedwig was still angry with Harry about the disasterous car journey and Ron's wand was still malfunctioning, surpassing itself on Friday morning by shooting out of Ron's hand in Charms and hitting tiny old Professor Flitwick squarely between the eyes, creating a large, throbbing green boil where it had struck. So with one thing and another, Harry was quite glad to reach the weekend. He, Ron, and Hermione were planning to visit Hagrid on Saturday morning. Harry, however, was shaken awake several hours earlier

than he would have liked by Oliver Wood, Captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team.

"Whassamatter?" said Harry groggily.

"Quidditch practice!" said Wood. "Come on!"

Harry squinted at the window. There was a thin mist hanging across the pink-and-gold sky. Now that he was awake, he couldn't understand how he could have slept through the racket the birds were making.

"Oliver," Harry croaked. "It's the crack of dawn."

"Exactly," said Wood. He was a tall and burly sixth year and, at the moment, his eyes were gleaming with a crazed enthusiasm. "It's part of our new training program. Come on, grab your broom, and let's go," said Wood heartily. "None of the other teams have started training yet; we're going to be first off the mark this year —"

Yawning and shivering slightly, Harry climbed out of bed and tried to find his Quidditch robes.

"Good man," said Wood. "Meet you on the field in fifteen minutes."

When he'd found his scarlet team robes and pulled on his cloak for warmth, Harry scribbled a note to Ron explaining where he'd gone and went down the spiral staircase to the common room, his Nimbus Two Thousand on his shoulder. He had just reached the portrait hole when there was a clatter behind him and Colin Creevey came dashing down the spiral staircase, his camera swinging madly around his neck and something clutched in his hand.

"I heard someone saying your name on the stairs, Harry! Look what I've got here! I've had it developed, I wanted to show you —"

Harry looked bemusedly at the photograph Colin was brandishing under his nose.

A moving, black-and-white Lockhart was tugging hard on an arm Harry recognized as his own. He was pleased to see that his photographic self was putting up a good fight and refusing to be dragged into view. As Harry watched, Lockhart gave up and slumped, panting, against the white edge of the picture.

"Will you sign it?" said Colin eagerly.

"No," said Harry flatly, glancing around to check that the room was really deserted. "Sorry, Colin, I'm in a hurry — Quidditch practice —"

He climbed through the portrait hole.

"Oh, wow! Wait for me! I've never watched a Quidditch game before!"

Colin scrambled through the hole after him.

"It'll be really boring," Harry said quickly, but Colin ignored him, his face shining with excitement.

"You were the youngest House player in a hundred years, weren't you, Harry? Weren't you?" said Colin, trotting alongside him. "You must be brilliant. I've never flown. Is it easy? Is that your own broom? Is that the best one there is?"

Harry didn't know how to get rid of him. It was like having an extremely talkative shadow.

"I don't really understand Quidditch," said Colin breathlessly. "Is it true there are four balls? And two of them fly around trying to knock people off their brooms?"

"Yes," said Harry heavily, resigned to explaining the complicated rules of Quidditch. "They're called Bludgers. There are two Beaters

on each team who carry clubs to beat the Bludgers away from their side. Fred and George Weasley are the Gryffindor Beaters."

"And what are the other balls for?" Colin asked, tripping down a couple of steps because he was gazing open-mouthed at Harry.

"Well, the Quaffle — that's the biggish red one — is the one that scores goals. Three Chasers on each team throw the Quaffle to each other and try and get it through the goal posts at the end of the pitch — they're three long poles with hoops on the end."

"And the fourth ball —"

"— is the Golden Snitch," said Harry, "and it's very small, very fast, and difficult to catch. But that's what the Seeker's got to do, because a game of Quidditch doesn't end until the Snitch has been caught. And whichever team's Seeker gets the Snitch earns his team an extra hundred and fifty points."

"And *you're* the Gryffindor Seeker, aren't you?" said Colin in awe.

"Yes," said Harry as they left the castle and started across the dew-drenched grass. "And there's the Keeper, too. He guards the goal posts. That's it, really."

But Colin didn't stop questioning Harry all the way down the sloping lawns to the Quidditch field, and Harry only shook him off when he reached the changing rooms; Colin called after him in a piping voice, "I'll go and get a good seat, Harry!" and hurried off to the stands.

The rest of the Gryffindor team were already in the changing room. Wood was the only person who looked truly awake. Fred and George Weasley were sitting, puffy-eyed and tousle-haired, next to fourth year Alicia Spinnet, who seemed to be nodding off against the wall behind her. Her fellow Chasers, Katie

Bell and Angelina Johnson, were yawning side by side opposite them.

"There you are, Harry, what kept you?" said Wood briskly. "Now, I wanted a quick talk with you all before we actually get onto the field, because I spent the summer devising a whole new training program, which I really think will make all the difference. . . ."

Wood was holding up a large diagram of a Quidditch field, on which were drawn many lines, arrows, and crosses in different-colored inks. He took out his wand, tapped the board, and the arrows began to wiggle over the diagram like caterpillars. As Wood launched into a speech about his new tactics, Fred Weasley's head drooped right onto Alicia Spinnet's shoulder and he began to snore.

The first board took nearly twenty minutes to explain, but there was another board under that, and a third under that one. Harry sank into a stupor as Wood droned on and on.

"So," said Wood, at long last, jerking Harry from a wistful fantasy about what he could be eating for breakfast at this very moment up at the castle. "Is that clear? Any questions?"

"I've got a question, Oliver," said George, who had woken with a start. "Why couldn't you have told us all this yesterday when we were awake?"

Wood wasn't pleased.

"Now, listen here, you lot," he said, glowering at them all. "We should have won the Quidditch Cup last year. We're easily the best team. But unfortunately — owing to circumstances beyond our control —"

Harry shifted guiltily in his seat. He had been unconscious in the hospital wing for the final match of the previous year, meaning that Gryffindor had been a player short and had suffered their worst defeat in three hundred years.

Wood took a moment to regain control of himself. Their last defeat was clearly still torturing him.

"So this year, we train harder than ever before. . . . Okay, let's go and put our new theories into practice!" Wood shouted, seizing his broomstick and leading the way out of the locker rooms. Stiff-legged and still yawning, his team followed.

They had been in the locker room so long that the sun was up completely now, although remnants of mist hung over the grass in the stadium. As Harry walked onto the field, he saw Ron and Hermione sitting in the stands.

"Aren't you finished yet?" called Ron incredulously.

"Haven't even started," said Harry, looking jealously at the toast and marmalade Ron and Hermione had brought out of the Great Hall. "Wood's been teaching us new moves."

He mounted his broomstick and kicked at the ground, soaring up into the air. The cool morning air whipped his face, waking him far more effectively than Wood's long talk. It felt wonderful to be back on the Quidditch field. He soared right around the stadium at full speed, racing Fred and George.

"What's that funny clicking noise?" called Fred as they hurtled around the corner.

Harry looked into the stands. Colin was sitting in one of the highest seats, his camera raised, taking picture after picture, the sound strangely magnified in the deserted stadium.

"Look this way, Harry! This way!" he cried shrilly.

"Who's that?" said Fred.

"No idea," Harry lied, putting on a spurt of speed that took him as far away as possible from Colin.

"What's going on?" said Wood, frowning, as he skimmed through the air toward them. "Why's that first year taking pictures? I don't like it. He could be a Slytherin spy, trying to find out about our new training program."

"He's in Gryffindor," said Harry quickly.

"And the Slytherins don't need a spy, Oliver," said George.

"What makes you say that?" said Wood testily.

"Because they're here in person," said George, pointing.

Several people in green robes were walking onto the field, broomsticks in their hands.

"I don't believe it!" Wood hissed in outrage. "I booked the field for today! We'll see about this!"

Wood shot toward the ground, landing rather harder than he meant to in his anger, staggering slightly as he dismounted. Harry, Fred, and George followed.

"Flint!" Wood bellowed at the Slytherin Captain. "This is our practice time! We got up specially! You can clear off now!"

Marcus Flint was even larger than Wood. He had a look of troll-ish cunning on his face as he replied, "Plenty of room for all of us, Wood."

Angelina, Alicia, and Katie had come over, too. There were no girls on the Slytherin team, who stood shoulder to shoulder, facing the Gryffindors, leering to a man.

"But I booked the field!" said Wood, positively spitting with rage. "I booked it!"

"Ah," said Flint. "But I've got a specially signed note here from Professor Snape. *'I, Professor S. Snape, give the Slytherin team permission to practice today on the Quidditch field owing to the need to train their new Seeker.'* "

"You've got a new Seeker?" said Wood, distracted. "Where?"

And from behind the six large figures before them came a seventh, smaller boy, smirking all over his pale, pointed face. It was Draco Malfoy.

"Aren't you Lucius Malfoy's son?" said Fred, looking at Malfoy with dislike.

"Funny you should mention Draco's father," said Flint as the whole Slytherin team smiled still more broadly. "Let me show you the generous gift he's made to the Slytherin team."

All seven of them held out their broomsticks. Seven highly polished, brand-new handles and seven sets of fine gold lettering spelling the words *Nimbus Two Thousand and One* gleamed under the Gryffindors' noses in the early morning sun.

"Very latest model. Only came out last month," said Flint carelessly, flicking a speck of dust from the end of his own. "I believe it outstrips the old Two Thousand series by a considerable amount. As for the old Cleansweeps" — he smiled nastily at Fred and George, who were both clutching Cleansweep Fives — "sweeps the board with them."

None of the Gryffindor team could think of anything to say for a moment. Malfoy was smirking so broadly his cold eyes were reduced to slits.

"Oh, look," said Flint. "A field invasion."

Ron and Hermione were crossing the grass to see what was going on.

"What's happening?" Ron asked Harry. "Why aren't you playing? And what's *he* doing here?"

He was looking at Malfoy, taking in his Slytherin Quidditch robes.

"I'm the new Slytherin Seeker, Weasley," said Malfoy, smugly. "Everyone's just been admiring the brooms my father's bought our team."

Ron gaped, openmouthed, at the seven superb broomsticks in front of him.

"Good, aren't they?" said Malfoy smoothly. "But perhaps the Gryffindor team will be able to raise some gold and get new brooms, too. You could raffle off those Cleansweep Fives; I expect a museum would bid for them."

The Slytherin team howled with laughter.

"At least no one on the Gryffindor team had to *buy* their way in," said Hermione sharply. "*They* got in on pure talent."

The smug look on Malfoy's face flickered.

"No one asked your opinion, you filthy little Mudblood," he spat.

Harry knew at once that Malfoy had said something really bad because there was an instant uproar at his words. Flint had to dive in front of Malfoy to stop Fred and George jumping on him, Alicia shrieked, "*How dare you*!", and Ron plunged his hand into his robes, pulled out his wand, yelling, "You'll pay for that one, Malfoy!" and pointed it furiously under Flint's arm at Malfoy's face.

A loud bang echoed around the stadium and a jet of green light shot out of the wrong end of Ron's wand, hitting him in the stomach and sending him reeling backward onto the grass.

"Ron! Ron! Are you all right?" squealed Hermione.

Ron opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. Instead he gave an almighty belch and several slugs dribbled out of his mouth onto his lap.

The Slytherin team were paralyzed with laughter. Flint was doubled up, hanging onto his new broomstick for support. Malfoy was on all fours, banging the ground with his fist. The Gryffindors were gathered around Ron, who kept belching large, glistening slugs. Nobody seemed to want to touch him.

"We'd better get him to Hagrid's, it's nearest," said Harry to Hermione, who nodded bravely, and the pair of them pulled Ron up by the arms.

"What happened, Harry? What happened? Is he ill? But you can cure him, can't you?" Colin had run down from his seat and was now dancing alongside them as they left the field. Ron gave a huge heave and more slugs dribbled down his front.

"Oooh," said Colin, fascinated and raising his camera. "Can you hold him still, Harry?"

"Get out of the way, Colin!" said Harry angrily. He and Hermione supported Ron out of the stadium and across the grounds toward the edge of the forest.

"Nearly there, Ron," said Hermione as the gamekeeper's cabin came into view. "You'll be all right in a minute — almost there —"

They were within twenty feet of Hagrid's house when the front door opened, but it wasn't Hagrid who emerged. Gilderoy Lockhart, wearing robes of palest mauve today, came striding out.

"Quick, behind here," Harry hissed, dragging Ron behind a nearby bush. Hermione followed, somewhat reluctantly.

"It's a simple matter if you know what you're doing!" Lockhart was saying loudly to Hagrid. "If you need help, you know where I am! I'll let you have a copy of my book. I'm surprised you haven't already got one — I'll sign one tonight and send it over. Well, good-bye!" And he strode away toward the castle.

Harry waited until Lockhart was out of sight, then pulled Ron out of the bush and up to Hagrid's front door. They knocked urgently.

Hagrid appeared at once, looking very grumpy, but his expression brightened when he saw who it was.

"Bin wonderin' when you'd come ter see me — come in, come in — thought you mighta bin Professor Lockhart back again —"

Harry and Hermione supported Ron over the threshold into the one-roomed cabin, which had an enormous bed in one corner, a fire crackling merrily in the other. Hagrid didn't seem perturbed by Ron's slug problem, which Harry hastily explained as he lowered Ron into a chair.

"Better out than in," he said cheerfully, plunking a large copper basin in front of him. "Get 'em all up, Ron."

"I don't think there's anything to do except wait for it to stop," said Hermione anxiously, watching Ron bend over the basin. "That's a difficult curse to work at the best of times, but with a broken wand —"

Hagrid was bustling around making them tea. His boarhound, Fang, was slobbering over Harry.

"What did Lockhart want with you, Hagrid?" Harry asked, scratching Fang's ears.

"Givin' me advice on gettin' kelpies out of a well," growled

Hagrid, moving a half-plucked rooster off his scrubbed table and setting down the teapot. "Like I don' know. An' bangin' on about some banshee he banished. If one word of it was true, I'll eat my kettle."

It was most unlike Hagrid to criticize a Hogwarts teacher, and Harry looked at him in surprise. Hermione, however, said in a voice somewhat higher than usual, "I think you're being a bit unfair. Professor Dumbledore obviously thought he was the best man for the job —"

"He was the *on'y* man for the job," said Hagrid, offering them a plate of treacle toffee, while Ron coughed squelchily into his basin. "An' I mean the *on'y* one. Gettin' very difficult ter find anyone fer the Dark Arts job. People aren't too keen ter take it on, see. They're startin' ter think it's jinxed. No one's lasted long fer a while now. So tell me," said Hagrid, jerking his head at Ron. "Who was he tryin' ter curse?"

"Malfoy called Hermione something — it must've been really bad, because everyone went wild."

"It *was* bad," said Ron hoarsely, emerging over the tabletop looking pale and sweaty. "Malfoy called her 'Mudblood,' Hagrid —"

Ron dived out of sight again as a fresh wave of slugs made their appearance. Hagrid looked outraged.

"He didn'!" he growled at Hermione.

"He did," she said. "But I don't know what it means. I could tell it was really rude, of course —"

"It's about the most insulting thing he could think of," gasped Ron, coming back up. "Mudblood's a really foul name for someone who is Muggle-born — you know, non-magic parents. There are

some wizards — like Malfoy's family — who think they're better than everyone else because they're what people call pure-blood." He gave a small burp, and a single slug fell into his outstretched hand. He threw it into the basin and continued, "I mean, the rest of us know it doesn't make any difference at all. Look at Neville Longbottom — he's pure-blood and he can hardly stand a cauldron the right way up."

"An' they haven't invented a spell our Hermione can' do," said Hagrid proudly, making Hermione go a brilliant shade of magenta.

"It's a disgusting thing to call someone," said Ron, wiping his sweaty brow with a shaking hand. "Dirty blood, see. Common blood. It's ridiculous. Most wizards these days are half-blood anyway. If we hadn't married Muggles we'd've died out."

He retched and ducked out of sight again.

"Well, I don' blame yeh fer tryin' ter curse him, Ron," said Hagrid loudly over the thuds of more slugs hitting the basin. "Bu' maybe it was a good thing yer wand backfired. 'Spect Lucius Malfoy would've come marchin' up ter school if yeh'd cursed his son. Least yer not in trouble."

Harry would have pointed out that trouble didn't come much worse than having slugs pouring out of your mouth, but he couldn't; Hagrid's treacle toffee had cemented his jaws together.

"Harry," said Hagrid abruptly as though struck by a sudden thought. "Gotta bone ter pick with yeh. I've heard you've bin givin' out signed photos. How come I haven't got one?"

Furious, Harry wrenched his teeth apart.

"I have *not* been giving out signed photos," he said hotly. "If Lockhart's still spreading that around —"

But then he saw that Hagrid was laughing.

"I'm on'y jokin'," he said, patting Harry genially on the back and sending him face first into the table. "I knew yeh hadn't really. I told Lockhart yeh didn' need teh. Yer more famous than him without tryin'."

"Bet he didn't like that," said Harry, sitting up and rubbing his chin.

"Don' think he did," said Hagrid, his eyes twinkling. "An' then I told him I'd never read one o' his books an' he decided ter go. Treacle toffee, Ron?" he added as Ron reappeared.

"No thanks," said Ron weakly. "Better not risk it."

"Come an' see what I've bin growin'," said Hagrid as Harry and Hermione finished the last of their tea.

In the small vegetable patch behind Hagrid's house were a dozen of the largest pumpkins Harry had ever seen. Each was the size of a large boulder.

"Gettin' on well, aren't they?" said Hagrid happily. "Fer the Halloween feast . . . should be big enough by then."

"What've you been feeding them?" said Harry.

Hagrid looked over his shoulder to check that they were alone.

"Well, I've bin givin' them — you know — a bit o' help —"

Harry noticed Hagrid's flowery pink umbrella leaning against the back wall of the cabin. Harry had had reason to believe before now that this umbrella was not all it looked; in fact, he had the strong impression that Hagrid's old school wand was concealed inside it. Hagrid wasn't supposed to use magic. He had been expelled from Hogwarts in his third year, but Harry had never found out why — any mention of the matter and Hagrid would clear his

throat loudly and become mysteriously deaf until the subject was changed.

"An Engorgement Charm, I suppose?" said Hermione, halfway between disapproval and amusement. "Well, you've done a good job on them."

"That's what yer little sister said," said Hagrid, nodding at Ron. "Met her jus' yesterday." Hagrid looked sideways at Harry, his beard twitching. "Said she was jus' lookin' round the grounds, but I reckon she was hopin' she might run inter someone else at my house." He winked at Harry. "If yeh ask me, *she* wouldn' say no ter a signed —"

"Oh, shut up," said Harry. Ron snorted with laughter and the ground was sprayed with slugs.

"Watch it!" Hagrid roared, pulling Ron away from his precious pumpkins.

It was nearly lunchtime and as Harry had only had one bit of treacle toffee since dawn, he was keen to go back to school to eat. They said good-bye to Hagrid and walked back up to the castle, Ron hiccoughing occasionally, but only bringing up two very small slugs.

They had barely set foot in the cool entrance hall when a voice rang out, "There you are, Potter — Weasley." Professor McGonagall was walking toward them, looking stern. "You will both do your detentions this evening."

"What're we doing, Professor?" said Ron, nervously suppressing a burp.

"*You* will be polishing the silver in the trophy room with Mr. Filch," said Professor McGonagall. "And no magic, Weasley — elbow grease."

Ron gulped. Argus Filch, the caretaker, was loathed by every student in the school.

"And you, Potter, will be helping Professor Lockhart answer his fan mail," said Professor McGonagall.

"Oh n — Professor, can't I go and do the trophy room, too?" said Harry desperately.

"Certainly not," said Professor McGonagall, raising her eyebrows. "Professor Lockhart requested you particularly. Eight o'clock sharp, both of you."

Harry and Ron slouched into the Great Hall in states of deepest gloom, Hermione behind them, wearing a *well-you-did-break-school-rules* sort of expression. Harry didn't enjoy his shepherd's pie as much as he'd thought. Both he and Ron felt they'd got the worse deal.

"Filch'll have me there all night," said Ron heavily. "No magic! There must be about a hundred cups in that room. I'm no good at Muggle cleaning."

"I'd swap anytime," said Harry hollowly. "I've had loads of practice with the Dursleys. Answering Lockhart's fan mail . . . he'll be a nightmare. . . ."

Saturday afternoon seemed to melt away, and in what seemed like no time, it was five minutes to eight, and Harry was dragging his feet along the second-floor corridor to Lockhart's office. He gritted his teeth and knocked.

The door flew open at once. Lockhart beamed down at him.

"Ah, here's the scalawag!" he said. "Come in, Harry, come in —"

Shining brightly on the walls by the light of many candles were countless framed photographs of Lockhart. He had even signed a few of them. Another large pile lay on his desk.

"You can address the envelopes!" Lockhart told Harry, as though this was a huge treat. "This first one's to Gladys Gudgeon, bless her — huge fan of mine —"

The minutes snailed by. Harry let Lockhart's voice wash over him, occasionally saying, "Mmm" and "Right" and "Yeah." Now and then he caught a phrase like, "Fame's a fickle friend, Harry," or "Celebrity is as celebrity does, remember that."

The candles burned lower and lower, making the light dance over the many moving faces of Lockhart watching him. Harry moved his aching hand over what felt like the thousandth envelope, writing out Veronica Smethley's address. *It must be nearly time to leave,* Harry thought miserably, *please let it be nearly time.* . . .

And then he heard something — something quite apart from the spitting of the dying candles and Lockhart's prattle about his fans.

It was a voice, a voice to chill the bone marrow, a voice of breathtaking, ice-cold venom.

"*Come . . . come to me. . . . Let me rip you. . . . Let me tear you. . . . Let me kill you. . . .*"

Harry gave a huge jump and a large lilac blot appeared on Veronica Smethley's street.

"*What*?" he said loudly.

"I know!" said Lockhart. "Six solid months at the top of the best-seller list! Broke all records!"

"No," said Harry frantically. "That voice!"

"Sorry?" said Lockhart, looking puzzled. "What voice?"

"That — that voice that said — didn't you hear it?"

Lockhart was looking at Harry in high astonishment.

"What *are* you talking about, Harry? Perhaps you're getting a little drowsy? Great Scott — look at the time! "We've been here nearly four hours! I'd never have believed it — the time's flown, hasn't it?"

Harry didn't answer. He was straining his ears to hear the voice again, but there was no sound now except for Lockhart telling him he mustn't expect a treat like this every time he got detention. Feeling dazed, Harry left.

It was so late that the Gryffindor common room was almost empty. Harry went straight up to the dormitory. Ron wasn't back yet. Harry pulled on his pajamas, got into bed, and waited. Half an hour later, Ron arrived, nursing his right arm and bringing a strong smell of polish into the darkened room.

"My muscles have all seized up," he groaned, sinking on his bed. "Fourteen times he made me buff up that Quidditch Cup before he was satisfied. And then I had another slug attack all over a Special Award for Services to the School. Took ages to get the slime off. . . . How was it with Lockhart?"

Keeping his voice low so as not to wake Neville, Dean, and Seamus, Harry told Ron exactly what he had heard.

"And Lockhart said he couldn't hear it?" said Ron. Harry could see him frowning in the moonlight. "D'you think he was lying? But I don't get it — even someone invisible would've had to open the door."

"I know," said Harry, lying back in his four-poster and staring at the canopy above him. "I don't get it either."

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE DEATHDAY PARTY

October arrived, spreading a damp chill over the grounds and into the castle. Madam Pomfrey, the nurse, was kept busy by a sudden spate of colds among the staff and students. Her Pepperup Potion worked instantly, though it left the drinker smoking at the ears for several hours afterward. Ginny Weasley, who had been looking pale, was bullied into taking some by Percy. The steam pouring from under her vivid hair gave the impression that her whole head was on fire.

Raindrops the size of bullets thundered on the castle windows for days on end; the lake rose, the flower beds turned into muddy streams, and Hagrid's pumpkins swelled to the size of garden sheds. Oliver Wood's enthusiasm for regular training sessions, however, was not dampened, which was why Harry was to be found, late one stormy Saturday afternoon a few days before Halloween, returning to Gryffindor Tower, drenched to the skin and splattered with mud.

Even aside from the rain and wind it hadn't been a happy practice session. Fred and George, who had been spying on the Slytherin team, had seen for themselves the speed of those new Nimbus Two Thousand and Ones. They reported that the Slytherin team was no more than seven greenish blurs, shooting through the air like missiles.

As Harry squelched along the deserted corridor he came across somebody who looked just as preoccupied as he was. Nearly Headless Nick, the ghost of Gryffindor Tower, was staring morosely out of a window, muttering under his breath, ". . . don't fulfill their requirements . . . half an inch, if that . . ."

"Hello, Nick," said Harry.

"Hello, hello," said Nearly Headless Nick, starting and looking round. He wore a dashing, plumed hat on his long curly hair, and a tunic with a ruff, which concealed the fact that his neck was almost completely severed. He was pale as smoke, and Harry could see right through him to the dark sky and torrential rain outside.

"You look troubled, young Potter," said Nick, folding a transparent letter as he spoke and tucking it inside his doublet.

"So do you," said Harry.

"Ah," Nearly Headless Nick waved an elegant hand, "a matter of no importance. . . . It's not as though I really wanted to join. . . . Thought I'd apply, but apparently I 'don't fulfill requirements' —"

In spite of his airy tone, there was a look of great bitterness on his face.

"But you would think, wouldn't you," he erupted suddenly, pulling the letter back out of his pocket, "that getting hit forty-five times in the neck with a blunt axe would qualify you to join the Headless Hunt?"

"Oh — yes," said Harry, who was obviously supposed to agree.

"I mean, nobody wishes more than I do that it had all been quick and clean, and my head had come off properly, I mean, it would have saved me a great deal of pain and ridicule. However —" Nearly Headless Nick shook his letter open and read furiously:

> "'*We can only accept huntsmen whose heads have parted company with their bodies. You will appreciate that it would be impossible otherwise for members to participate in hunt activities such as Horseback Head-Juggling and Head Polo. It is with the greatest regret, therefore, that I must inform you that you do not fulfill our requirements. With very best wishes, Sir Patrick Delaney-Podmore.*'"

Fuming, Nearly Headless Nick stuffed the letter away.

"Half an inch of skin and sinew holding my neck on, Harry! Most people would think that's good and beheaded, but oh, no, it's not enough for Sir Properly Decapitated-Podmore."

Nearly Headless Nick took several deep breaths and then said, in a far calmer tone, "So — what's bothering you? Anything I can do?"

"No," said Harry. "Not unless you know where we can get seven free Nimbus Two Thousand and Ones for our match against Sly —"

The rest of Harry's sentence was drowned out by a high-pitched mewling from somewhere near his ankles. He looked down and found himself gazing into a pair of lamp-like yellow eyes. It was Mrs. Norris, the skeletal gray cat who was used by the caretaker, Argus Filch, as a sort of deputy in his endless battle against students.

"You'd better get out of here, Harry," said Nick quickly. "Filch

isn't in a good mood — he's got the flu and some third years accidentally plastered frog brains all over the ceiling in dungeon five. He's been cleaning all morning, and if he sees you dripping mud all over the place —"

"Right," said Harry, backing away from the accusing stare of Mrs. Norris, but not quickly enough. Drawn to the spot by the mysterious power that seemed to connect him with his foul cat, Argus Filch burst suddenly through a tapestry to Harry's right, wheezing and looking wildly about for the rule-breaker. There was a thick tartan scarf bound around his head, and his nose was unusually purple.

"Filth!" he shouted, his jowls aquiver, his eyes popping alarmingly as he pointed at the muddy puddle that had dripped from Harry's Quidditch robes. "Mess and muck everywhere! I've had enough of it, I tell you! Follow me, Potter!"

So Harry waved a gloomy good-bye to Nearly Headless Nick and followed Filch back downstairs, doubling the number of muddy footprints on the floor.

Harry had never been inside Filch's office before; it was a place most students avoided. The room was dingy and windowless, lit by a single oil lamp dangling from the low ceiling. A faint smell of fried fish lingered about the place. Wooden filing cabinets stood around the walls; from their labels, Harry could see that they contained details of every pupil Filch had ever punished. Fred and George Weasley had an entire drawer to themselves. A highly polished collection of chains and manacles hung on the wall behind Filch's desk. It was common knowledge that he was always begging Dumbledore to let him suspend students by their ankles from the ceiling.

Filch grabbed a quill from a pot on his desk and began shuffling around looking for parchment.

"Dung," he muttered furiously, "great sizzling dragon bogies . . . frog brains . . . rat intestines . . . I've had enough of it . . . make an *example* . . . where's the form . . . yes . . ."

He retrieved a large roll of parchment from his desk drawer and stretched it out in front of him, dipping his long black quill into the ink pot.

"*Name* . . . Harry Potter. *Crime* . . ."

"It was only a bit of mud!" said Harry.

"It's only a bit of mud to you, boy, but to me it's an extra hour scrubbing!" shouted Filch, a drip shivering unpleasantly at the end of his bulbous nose. "*Crime* . . . befouling the castle . . . *suggested sentence* . . ."

Dabbing at his streaming nose, Filch squinted unpleasantly at Harry, who waited with bated breath for his sentence to fall.

But as Filch lowered his quill, there was a great BANG! on the ceiling of the office, which made the oil lamp rattle.

"PEEVES!" Filch roared, flinging down his quill in a transport of rage. "I'll have you this time, I'll have you!"

And without a backward glance at Harry, Filch ran flat-footed from the office, Mrs. Norris streaking alongside him.

Peeves was the school poltergeist, a grinning, airborne menace who lived to cause havoc and distress. Harry didn't much like Peeves, but couldn't help feeling grateful for his timing. Hopefully, whatever Peeves had done (and it sounded as though he'd wrecked something very big this time) would distract Filch from Harry.

Thinking that he should probably wait for Filch to come back, Harry sank into a moth-eaten chair next to the desk. There was only one thing on it apart from his half-completed form: a large, glossy,

purple envelope with silver lettering on the front. With a quick glance at the door to check that Filch wasn't on his way back, Harry picked up the envelope and read:

KWIKSPELL

A Correspondence Course in Beginners' Magic

Intrigued, Harry flicked the envelope open and pulled out the sheaf of parchment inside. More curly silver writing on the front page said:

Feel out of step in the world of modern magic? Find yourself making excuses not to perform simple spells? Ever been taunted for your woeful wandwork?
There is an answer!

Kwikspell is an all-new, fail-safe, quick-result, easy-learn course. Hundreds of witches and wizards have benefited from the Kwikspell method!

Madam Z. Nettles of Topsham writes:
"I had no memory for incantations and my potions were a family joke! Now, after a Kwikspell course, I am the center of attention at parties and friends beg for the recipe of my Scintillation Solution!"

Warlock D. J. Prod of Didsbury says:
"My wife used to sneer at my feeble charms, but one month into your fabulous Kwikspell course and I succeeded in turning her into a yak! Thank you, Kwikspell!"

Fascinated, Harry thumbed through the rest of the envelope's contents. Why on earth did Filch want a Kwikspell course? Did this mean he wasn't a proper wizard? Harry was just reading "Lesson One: Holding Your Wand (Some Useful Tips)" when shuffling footsteps outside told him Filch was coming back. Stuffing the parchment back into the envelope, Harry threw it back onto the desk just as the door opened.

Filch was looking triumphant.

"That vanishing cabinet was extremely valuable!" he was saying gleefully to Mrs. Norris. "We'll have Peeves out this time, my sweet —"

His eyes fell on Harry and then darted to the Kwikspell envelope, which, Harry realized too late, was lying two feet away from where it had started.

Filch's pasty face went brick red. Harry braced himself for a tidal wave of fury. Filch hobbled across to his desk, snatched up the envelope, and threw it into a drawer.

"Have you — did you read — ?" he sputtered.

"No," Harry lied quickly.

Filch's knobbly hands were twisting together.

"If I thought you'd read my private — not that it's mine — for a friend — be that as it may — however —"

Harry was staring at him, alarmed; Filch had never looked madder. His eyes were popping, a tic was going in one of his pouchy cheeks, and the tartan scarf didn't help.

"Very well — go — and don't breathe a word — not that — however, if you didn't read — go now, I have to write up Peeves' report — go —"

Amazed at his luck, Harry sped out of the office, up the corridor, and back upstairs. To escape from Filch's office without punishment was probably some kind of school record.

"Harry! Harry! Did it work?"

Nearly Headless Nick came gliding out of a classroom. Behind him, Harry could see the wreckage of a large black-and-gold cabinet that appeared to have been dropped from a great height.

"I persuaded Peeves to crash it right over Filch's office," said Nick eagerly. "Thought it might distract him —"

"Was that you?" said Harry gratefully. "Yeah, it worked, I didn't even get detention. Thanks, Nick!"

They set off up the corridor together. Nearly Headless Nick, Harry noticed, was still holding Sir Patrick's rejection letter.

"I wish there was something I could do for you about the Headless Hunt," Harry said.

Nearly Headless Nick stopped in his tracks and Harry walked right through him. He wished he hadn't; it was like stepping through an icy shower.

"But there *is* something you could do for me," said Nick excitedly. "Harry — would I be asking too much — but no, you wouldn't want —"

"What is it?" said Harry.

"Well, this Halloween will be my five hundredth deathday," said Nearly Headless Nick, drawing himself up and looking dignified.

"Oh," said Harry, not sure whether he should look sorry or happy about this. "Right."

"I'm holding a party down in one of the roomier dungeons. Friends will be coming from all over the country. It would be such

an *honor* if you would attend. Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger would be most welcome, too, of course — but I daresay you'd rather go to the school feast?" He watched Harry on tenterhooks.

"No," said Harry quickly, "I'll come —"

"My dear boy! Harry Potter, at my deathday party! And" — he hesitated, looking excited — "do you think you could *possibly* mention to Sir Patrick how *very* frightening and impressive you find me?"

"Of — of course," said Harry.

Nearly Headless Nick beamed at him.

"A deathday party?" said Hermione keenly when Harry had changed at last and joined her and Ron in the common room. "I bet there aren't many living people who can say they've been to one of those — it'll be fascinating!"

"Why would anyone want to celebrate the day they died?" said Ron, who was halfway through his Potions homework and grumpy. "Sounds dead depressing to me. . . ."

Rain was still lashing the windows, which were now inky black, but inside all looked bright and cheerful. The firelight glowed over the countless squashy armchairs where people sat reading, talking, doing homework or, in the case of Fred and George Weasley, trying to find out what would happen if you fed a Filibuster firework to a salamander. Fred had "rescued" the brilliant orange, fire-dwelling lizard from a Care of Magical Creatures class and it was now smoldering gently on a table surrounded by a knot of curious people.

Harry was at the point of telling Ron and Hermione about Filch

and the Kwikspell course when the salamander suddenly whizzed into the air, emitting loud sparks and bangs as it whirled wildly round the room. The sight of Percy bellowing himself hoarse at Fred and George, the spectacular display of tangerine stars showering from the salamander's mouth, and its escape into the fire, with accompanying explosions, drove both Filch and the Kwikspell envelope from Harry's mind.

By the time Halloween arrived, Harry was regretting his rash promise to go to the deathday party. The rest of the school was happily anticipating their Halloween feast; the Great Hall had been decorated with the usual live bats, Hagrid's vast pumpkins had been carved into lanterns large enough for three men to sit in, and there were rumors that Dumbledore had booked a troupe of dancing skeletons for the entertainment.

"A promise is a promise," Hermione reminded Harry bossily. "You *said* you'd go to the deathday party."

So at seven o'clock, Harry, Ron, and Hermione walked straight past the doorway to the packed Great Hall, which was glittering invitingly with gold plates and candles, and directed their steps instead toward the dungeons.

The passageway leading to Nearly Headless Nick's party had been lined with candles, too, though the effect was far from cheerful: These were long, thin, jet-black tapers, all burning bright blue, casting a dim, ghostly light even over their own living faces. The temperature dropped with every step they took. As Harry shivered and drew his robes tightly around him, he heard what sounded like a thousand fingernails scraping an enormous blackboard.

"Is that supposed to be *music*?" Ron whispered. They turned a corner and saw Nearly Headless Nick standing at a doorway hung with black velvet drapes.

"My dear friends," he said mournfully. "Welcome, welcome . . . so pleased you could come. . . ."

He swept off his plumed hat and bowed them inside.

It was an incredible sight. The dungeon was full of hundreds of pearly-white, translucent people, mostly drifting around a crowded dance floor, waltzing to the dreadful, quavering sound of thirty musical saws, played by an orchestra on a raised, black-draped platform. A chandelier overhead blazed midnight-blue with a thousand more black candles. Their breath rose in a mist before them; it was like stepping into a freezer.

"Shall we have a look around?" Harry suggested, wanting to warm up his feet.

"Careful not to walk through anyone," said Ron nervously, and they set off around the edge of the dance floor. They passed a group of gloomy nuns, a ragged man wearing chains, and the Fat Friar, a cheerful Hufflepuff ghost, who was talking to a knight with an arrow sticking out of his forehead. Harry wasn't surprised to see that the Bloody Baron, a gaunt, staring Slytherin ghost covered in silver bloodstains, was being given a wide berth by the other ghosts.

"Oh, no," said Hermione, stopping abruptly. "Turn back, turn back, I don't want to talk to Moaning Myrtle —"

"Who?" said Harry as they backtracked quickly.

"She haunts one of the toilets in the girls' bathroom on the first floor," said Hermione.

"She haunts a *toilet*?"

"Yes. It's been out-of-order all year because she keeps having tantrums and flooding the place. I never went in there anyway if I could avoid it; it's awful trying to have a pee with her wailing at you —"

"Look, food!" said Ron.

On the other side of the dungeon was a long table, also covered in black velvet. They approached it eagerly but next moment had stopped in their tracks, horrified. The smell was quite disgusting. Large, rotten fish were laid on handsome silver platters; cakes, burned charcoal-black, were heaped on salvers; there was a great maggoty haggis, a slab of cheese covered in furry green mold and, in pride of place, an enormous gray cake in the shape of a tombstone, with tar-like icing forming the words,

SIR NICHOLAS DE MIMSY-PORPINGTON
DIED 31ST OCTOBER, 1492

Harry watched, amazed, as a portly ghost approached the table, crouched low, and walked through it, his mouth held wide so that it passed through one of the stinking salmon.

"Can you taste it if you walk through it?" Harry asked him.

"Almost," said the ghost sadly, and he drifted away.

"I expect they've let it rot to give it a stronger flavor," said Hermione knowledgeably, pinching her nose and leaning closer to look at the putrid haggis.

"Can we move? I feel sick," said Ron.

They had barely turned around, however, when a little man swooped suddenly from under the table and came to a halt in midair before them.

"Hello, Peeves," said Harry cautiously.

Unlike the ghosts around them, Peeves the Poltergeist was the very reverse of pale and transparent. He was wearing a bright orange party hat, a revolving bow tie, and a broad grin on his wide, wicked face.

"Nibbles?" he said sweetly, offering them a bowl of peanuts covered in fungus.

"No thanks," said Hermione.

"Heard you talking about poor Myrtle," said Peeves, his eyes dancing. "*Rude* you was about poor Myrtle." He took a deep breath and bellowed, "OY! MYRTLE!"

"Oh, no, Peeves, don't tell her what I said, she'll be really upset," Hermione whispered frantically. "I didn't mean it, I don't mind her — er, hello, Myrtle."

The squat ghost of a girl had glided over. She had the glummest face Harry had ever seen, half-hidden behind lank hair and thick, pearly spectacles.

"What?" she said sulkily.

"How are you, Myrtle?" said Hermione in a falsely bright voice. "It's nice to see you out of the toilet."

Myrtle sniffed.

"Miss Granger was just talking about you —" said Peeves slyly in Myrtle's ear.

"Just saying — saying — how nice you look tonight," said Hermione, glaring at Peeves.

Myrtle eyed Hermione suspiciously.

"You're making fun of me," she said, silver tears welling rapidly in her small, see-through eyes.

"No — honestly — didn't I just say how nice Myrtle's looking?" said Hermione, nudging Harry and Ron painfully in the ribs.

"Oh, yeah —"

"She did —"

"Don't lie to me," Myrtle gasped, tears now flooding down her face, while Peeves chuckled happily over her shoulder. "D'you think I don't know what people call me behind my back? Fat Myrtle! Ugly Myrtle! Miserable, moaning, moping Myrtle!"

"You've forgotten pimply," Peeves hissed in her ear.

Moaning Myrtle burst into anguished sobs and fled from the dungeon. Peeves shot after her, pelting her with moldy peanuts, yelling, "*Pimply*! *Pimply*!"

"Oh, dear," said Hermione sadly.

Nearly Headless Nick now drifted toward them through the crowd.

"Enjoying yourselves?"

"Oh, yes," they lied.

"Not a bad turnout," said Nearly Headless Nick proudly. "The Wailing Widow came all the way up from Kent. . . . It's nearly time for my speech, I'd better go and warn the orchestra. . . ."

The orchestra, however, stopped playing at that very moment. They, and everyone else in the dungeon, fell silent, looking around in excitement, as a hunting horn sounded.

"Oh, here we go," said Nearly Headless Nick bitterly.

Through the dungeon wall burst a dozen ghost horses, each ridden by a headless horseman. The assembly clapped wildly; Harry started to clap, too, but stopped quickly at the sight of Nick's face.

The horses galloped into the middle of the dance floor and halted, rearing and plunging. At the front of the pack was a large ghost who held his bearded head under his arm, from which position he was blowing the horn. The ghost leapt down, lifted his head high in the air so he could see over the crowd (everyone laughed), and strode over to Nearly Headless Nick, squashing his head back onto his neck.

"Nick!" he roared. "How are you? Head still hanging in there?"

He gave a hearty guffaw and clapped Nearly Headless Nick on the shoulder.

"Welcome, Patrick," said Nick stiffly.

"Live 'uns!" said Sir Patrick, spotting Harry, Ron, and Hermione and giving a huge, fake jump of astonishment, so that his head fell off again (the crowd howled with laughter).

"Very amusing," said Nearly Headless Nick darkly.

"Don't mind Nick!" shouted Sir Patrick's head from the floor. "Still upset we won't let him join the Hunt! But I mean to say — look at the fellow —"

"I think," said Harry hurriedly, at a meaningful look from Nick, "Nick's very — frightening and — er —"

"Ha!" yelled Sir Patrick's head. "Bet he asked you to say that!"

"If I could have everyone's attention, it's time for my speech!" said Nearly Headless Nick loudly, striding toward the podium and climbing into an icy blue spotlight.

"My late lamented lords, ladies, and gentlemen, it is my great sorrow . . ."

But nobody heard much more. Sir Patrick and the rest of the Headless Hunt had just started a game of Head Hockey and the crowd were turning to watch. Nearly Headless Nick tried vainly to

recapture his audience, but gave up as Sir Patrick's head went sailing past him to loud cheers.

Harry was very cold by now, not to mention hungry.

"I can't stand much more of this," Ron muttered, his teeth chattering, as the orchestra ground back into action and the ghosts swept back onto the dance floor.

"Let's go," Harry agreed.

They backed toward the door, nodding and beaming at anyone who looked at them, and a minute later were hurrying back up the passageway full of black candles.

"Pudding might not be finished yet," said Ron hopefully, leading the way toward the steps to the entrance hall.

And then Harry heard it.

". . . *rip* . . . *tear* . . . *kill* . . ."

It was the same voice, the same cold, murderous voice he had heard in Lockhart's office.

He stumbled to a halt, clutching at the stone wall, listening with all his might, looking around, squinting up and down the dimly lit passageway.

"Harry, what're you — ?"

"It's that voice again — shut up a minute —"

". . . *soo hungry* . . . *for so long* . . ."

"Listen!" said Harry urgently, and Ron and Hermione froze, watching him.

". . . *kill* . . . *time to kill* . . ."

The voice was growing fainter. Harry was sure it was moving away — moving upward. A mixture of fear and excitement gripped him as he stared at the dark ceiling; how could it be moving upward? Was it a phantom, to whom stone ceilings didn't matter?

"This way," he shouted, and he began to run, up the stairs, into the entrance hall. It was no good hoping to hear anything here, the babble of talk from the Halloween feast was echoing out of the Great Hall. Harry sprinted up the marble staircase to the first floor, Ron and Hermione clattering behind him.

"Harry, what're we —"

"SHH!"

Harry strained his ears. Distantly, from the floor above, and growing fainter still, he heard the voice: ". . . *I smell blood. . . . I SMELL BLOOD*!"

His stomach lurched —

"It's going to kill someone!" he shouted, and ignoring Ron's and Hermione's bewildered faces, he ran up the next flight of steps three at a time, trying to listen over his own pounding footsteps —

Harry hurtled around the whole of the second floor, Ron and Hermione panting behind him, not stopping until they turned a corner into the last, deserted passage.

"Harry, *what* was that all about?" said Ron, wiping sweat off his face. "I couldn't hear anything. . . ."

But Hermione gave a sudden gasp, pointing down the corridor.

"*Look*!"

Something was shining on the wall ahead. They approached slowly, squinting through the darkness. Foot-high words had been daubed on the wall between two windows, shimmering in the light cast by the flaming torches.

THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN
OPENED. ENEMIES OF THE HEIR, BEWARE.

"What's that thing — hanging underneath?" said Ron, a slight quiver in his voice.

As they edged nearer, Harry almost slipped — there was a large puddle of water on the floor; Ron and Hermione grabbed him, and they inched toward the message, eyes fixed on a dark shadow beneath it. All three of them realized what it was at once, and leapt backward with a splash.

Mrs. Norris, the caretaker's cat, was hanging by her tail from the torch bracket. She was stiff as a board, her eyes wide and staring.

For a few seconds, they didn't move. Then Ron said, "Let's get out of here."

"Shouldn't we try and help —" Harry began awkwardly.

"Trust me," said Ron. "We don't want to be found here."

But it was too late. A rumble, as though of distant thunder, told them that the feast had just ended. From either end of the corridor where they stood came the sound of hundreds of feet climbing the stairs, and the loud, happy talk of well-fed people; next moment, students were crashing into the passage from both ends.

The chatter, the bustle, the noise died suddenly as the people in front spotted the hanging cat. Harry, Ron, and Hermione stood alone, in the middle of the corridor, as silence fell among the mass of students pressing forward to see the grisly sight.

Then someone shouted through the quiet.

"Enemies of the Heir, beware! You'll be next, Mudbloods!"

It was Draco Malfoy. He had pushed to the front of the crowd, his cold eyes alive, his usually bloodless face flushed, as he grinned at the sight of the hanging, immobile cat.

CHAPTER NINE

THE WRITING ON THE WALL

"What's going on here? What's going on?"

Attracted no doubt by Malfoy's shout, Argus Filch came shouldering his way through the crowd. Then he saw Mrs. Norris and fell back, clutching his face in horror.

"My cat! My cat! What's happened to Mrs. Norris?" he shrieked.

And his popping eyes fell on Harry.

"*You*!" he screeched. "*You*! You've murdered my cat! You've killed her! I'll kill you! I'll —"

"*Argus*!"

Dumbledore had arrived on the scene, followed by a number of other teachers. In seconds, he had swept past Harry, Ron, and Hermione and detached Mrs. Norris from the torch bracket.

"Come with me, Argus," he said to Filch. "You, too, Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger."

Lockhart stepped forward eagerly.

"My office is nearest, Headmaster — just upstairs — please feel free —"

"Thank you, Gilderoy," said Dumbledore.

The silent crowd parted to let them pass. Lockhart, looking excited and important, hurried after Dumbledore; so did Professors McGonagall and Snape.

As they entered Lockhart's darkened office there was a flurry of movement across the walls; Harry saw several of the Lockharts in the pictures dodging out of sight, their hair in rollers. The real Lockhart lit the candles on his desk and stood back. Dumbledore laid Mrs. Norris on the polished surface and began to examine her. Harry, Ron, and Hermione exchanged tense looks and sank into chairs outside the pool of candlelight, watching.

The tip of Dumbledore's long, crooked nose was barely an inch from Mrs. Norris's fur. He was looking at her closely through his half-moon spectacles, his long fingers gently prodding and poking. Professor McGonagall was bent almost as close, her eyes narrowed. Snape loomed behind them, half in shadow, wearing a most peculiar expression: It was as though he was trying hard not to smile. And Lockhart was hovering around all of them, making suggestions.

"It was definitely a curse that killed her — probably the Transmogrifian Torture — I've seen it used many times, so unlucky I wasn't there, I know the very countercurse that would have saved her. . . ."

Lockhart's comments were punctuated by Filch's dry, racking sobs. He was slumped in a chair by the desk, unable to look at Mrs. Norris, his face in his hands. Much as he detested Filch, Harry

couldn't help feeling a bit sorry for him, though not nearly as sorry as he felt for himself. If Dumbledore believed Filch, he would be expelled for sure.

Dumbledore was now muttering strange words under his breath and tapping Mrs. Norris with his wand but nothing happened: She continued to look as though she had been recently stuffed.

". . . I remember something very similar happening in Ouagadogou," said Lockhart, "a series of attacks, the full story's in my autobiography, I was able to provide the townsfolk with various amulets, which cleared the matter up at once. . . ."

The photographs of Lockhart on the walls were all nodding in agreement as he talked. One of them had forgotten to remove his hair net.

At last Dumbledore straightened up.

"She's not dead, Argus," he said softly.

Lockhart stopped abruptly in the middle of counting the number of murders he had prevented.

"Not dead?" choked Filch, looking through his fingers at Mrs. Norris. "But why's she all — all stiff and frozen?"

"She has been Petrified," said Dumbledore ("Ah! I thought so!" said Lockhart). "But how, I cannot say. . . ."

"Ask *him*!" shrieked Filch, turning his blotched and tearstained face to Harry.

"No second year could have done this," said Dumbledore firmly. "It would take Dark Magic of the most advanced —"

"He did it, he did it!" Filch spat, his pouchy face purpling. "You saw what he wrote on the wall! He found — in my office — he knows I'm a — I'm a —" Filch's face worked horribly. "He knows I'm a Squib!" he finished.

"I never *touched* Mrs. Norris!" Harry said loudly, uncomfortably aware of everyone looking at him, including all the Lockharts on the walls. "And I don't even know what a Squib *is*."

"Rubbish!" snarled Filch. "He saw my Kwikspell letter!"

"If I might speak, Headmaster," said Snape from the shadows, and Harry's sense of foreboding increased; he was sure nothing Snape had to say was going to do him any good.

"Potter and his friends may have simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time," he said, a slight sneer curling his mouth as though he doubted it. "But we do have a set of suspicious circumstances here. Why was he in the upstairs corridor at all? Why wasn't he at the Halloween feast?"

Harry, Ron and Hermione all launched into an explanation about the deathday party. ". . . there were hundreds of ghosts, they'll tell you we were there —"

"But why not join the feast afterward?" said Snape, his black eyes glittering in the candlelight. "Why go up to that corridor?"

Ron and Hermione looked at Harry.

"Because — because —" Harry said, his heart thumping very fast; something told him it would sound very far-fetched if he told them he had been led there by a bodiless voice no one but he could hear, "because we were tired and wanted to go to bed," he said.

"Without any supper?" said Snape, a triumphant smile flickering across his gaunt face. "I didn't think ghosts provided food fit for living people at their parties."

"We weren't hungry," said Ron loudly as his stomach gave a huge rumble.

Snape's nasty smile widened.

"I suggest, Headmaster, that Potter is not being entirely truthful," he said. "It might be a good idea if he were deprived of certain privileges until he is ready to tell us the whole story. I personally feel he should be taken off the Gryffindor Quidditch team until he is ready to be honest."

"Really, Severus," said Professor McGonagall sharply, "I see no reason to stop the boy playing Quidditch. This cat wasn't hit over the head with a broomstick. There is no evidence at all that Potter has done anything wrong."

Dumbledore was giving Harry a searching look. His twinkling light-blue gaze made Harry feel as though he were being X-rayed.

"Innocent until proven guilty, Severus," he said firmly.

Snape looked furious. So did Filch.

"My cat has been Petrified!" he shrieked, his eyes popping. "I want to see some *punishment*!"

"We will be able to cure her, Argus," said Dumbledore patiently. "Professer Sprout recently managed to procure some Mandrakes. As soon as they have reached their full size, I will have a potion made that will revive Mrs. Norris."

"I'll make it," Lockhart butted in. "I must have done it a hundred times. I could whip up a Mandrake Restorative Draught in my sleep —"

"Excuse me," said Snape icily. "But I believe I am the Potions master at this school."

There was a very awkward pause.

"You may go," Dumbledore said to Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

They went, as quickly as they could without actually running. When they were a floor up from Lockhart's office, they turned into

an empty classroom and closed the door quietly behind them. Harry squinted at his friends' darkened faces.

"D'you think I should have told them about that voice I heard?"

"No," said Ron, without hesitation. "Hearing voices no one else can hear isn't a good sign, even in the wizarding world."

Something in Ron's voice made Harry ask, "You do believe me, don't you?"

" 'Course I do," said Ron quickly. "But — you must admit it's weird. . . ."

"I know it's weird," said Harry. "The whole thing's weird. What was that writing on the wall about? 'The Chamber Has Been Opened'. . . . What's that supposed to mean?"

"You know, it rings a sort of bell," said Ron slowly. "I think someone told me a story about a secret chamber at Hogwarts once . . . might've been Bill. . . ."

"And what on earth's a Squib?" said Harry.

To his surprise, Ron stifled a snigger.

"Well — it's not funny really — but as it's Filch," he said. "A Squib is someone who was born into a wizarding family but hasn't got any magic powers. Kind of the opposite of Muggle-born wizards, but Squibs are quite unusual. If Filch's trying to learn magic from a Kwikspell course, I reckon he must be a Squib. It would explain a lot. Like why he hates students so much." Ron gave a satisfied smile. "He's bitter."

A clock chimed somewhere.

"Midnight," said Harry. "We'd better get to bed before Snape comes along and tries to frame us for something else."

* * *

CHAPTER NINE

For a few days, the school could talk of little else but the attack on Mrs. Norris. Filch kept it fresh in everyone's minds by pacing the spot where she had been attacked, as though he thought the attacker might come back. Harry had seen him scrubbing the message on the wall with Mrs. Skower's All-Purpose Magical Mess Remover, but to no effect; the words still gleamed as brightly as ever on the stone. When Filch wasn't guarding the scene of the crime, he was skulking red-eyed through the corridors, lunging out at unsuspecting students and trying to put them in detention for things like "breathing loudly" and "looking happy."

Ginny Weasley seemed very disturbed by Mrs. Norris's fate. According to Ron, she was a great cat lover.

"But you haven't really got to know Mrs. Norris," Ron told her bracingly. "Honestly, we're much better off without her." Ginny's lip trembled. "Stuff like this doesn't often happen at Hogwarts," Ron assured her. "They'll catch the maniac who did it and have him out of here in no time. I just hope he's got time to Petrify Filch before he's expelled. I'm only joking —" Ron added hastily as Ginny blanched.

The attack had also had an effect on Hermione. It was quite usual for Hermione to spend a lot of time reading, but she was now doing almost nothing else. Nor could Harry and Ron get much response from her when they asked what she was up to, and not until the following Wednesday did they find out.

Harry had been held back in Potions, where Snape had made him stay behind to scrape tubeworms off the desks. After a hurried lunch, he went upstairs to meet Ron in the library, and saw Justin Finch-Fletchley, the Hufflepuff boy from Herbology, coming

toward him. Harry had just opened his mouth to say hello when Justin caught sight of him, turned abruptly, and sped off in the opposite direction.

Harry found Ron at the back of the library, measuring his History of Magic homework. Professor Binns had asked for a three-foot-long composition on "The Medieval Assembly of European Wizards."

"I don't believe it, I'm still eight inches short. . . ." said Ron furiously, letting go of his parchment, which sprang back into a roll. "And Hermione's done four feet seven inches and her writing's *tiny.*"

"Where is she?" asked Harry, grabbing the tape measure and unrolling his own homework.

"Somewhere over there," said Ron, pointing along the shelves. "Looking for another book. I think she's trying to read the whole library before Christmas."

Harry told Ron about Justin Finch-Fletchley running away from him.

"Dunno why you care. I thought he was a bit of an idiot," said Ron, scribbling away, making his writing as large as possible. "All that junk about Lockhart being so great —"

Hermione emerged from between the bookshelves. She looked irritable and at last seemed ready to talk to them.

"*All* the copies of *Hogwarts, A History* have been taken out," she said, sitting down next to Harry and Ron. "And there's a two-week waiting list. I *wish* I hadn't left my copy at home, but I couldn't fit it in my trunk with all the Lockhart books."

"Why do you want it?" said Harry.

"The same reason everyone else wants it," said Hermione, "to read up on the legend of the Chamber of Secrets."

"What's that?" said Harry quickly.

"That's just it. I can't remember," said Hermione, biting her lip. "And I can't find the story anywhere else —"

"Hermione, let me read your composition," said Ron desperately, checking his watch.

"No, I won't," said Hermione, suddenly severe. "You've had ten days to finish it —"

"I only need another two inches, come on —"

The bell rang. Ron and Hermione led the way to History of Magic, bickering.

History of Magic was the dullest subject on their schedule. Professor Binns, who taught it, was their only ghost teacher, and the most exciting thing that ever happened in his classes was his entering the room through the blackboard. Ancient and shriveled, many people said he hadn't noticed he was dead. He had simply got up to teach one day and left his body behind him in an armchair in front of the staffroom fire; his routine had not varied in the slightest since.

Today was as boring as ever. Professor Binns opened his notes and began to read in a flat drone like an old vacuum cleaner until nearly everyone in the class was in a deep stupor, occasionally coming to long enough to copy down a name or date, then falling asleep again. He had been speaking for half an hour when something happened that had never happened before. Hermione put up her hand.

Professor Binns, glancing up in the middle of a deadly dull lec-

ture on the International Warlock Convention of 1289, looked amazed.

"Miss — er — ?"

"Granger, Professor. I was wondering if you could tell us anything about the Chamber of Secrets," said Hermione in a clear voice.

Dean Thomas, who had been sitting with his mouth hanging open, gazing out of the window, jerked out of his trance; Lavender Brown's head came up off her arms and Neville Longbottom's elbow slipped off his desk.

Professor Binns blinked.

"My subject is History of Magic," he said in his dry, wheezy voice. "I deal with, *facts,* Miss Granger, not myths and legends." He cleared his throat with a small noise like chalk snapping and continued, "In September of that year, a subcommittee of Sardinian sorcerers —"

He stuttered to a halt. Hermione's hand was waving in the air again.

"Miss Grant?"

"Please, sir, don't legends always have a basis in fact?"

Professor Binns was looking at her in such amazement, Harry was sure no student had ever interrupted him before, alive or dead.

"Well," said Professor Binns slowly, "yes, one could argue that, I suppose." He peered at Hermione as though he had never seen a student properly before. "However, the legend of which you speak is such a very *sensational,* even *ludicrous* tale —"

But the whole class was now hanging on Professor Binns's every word. He looked dimly at them all, every face turned to his. Harry

could tell he was completely thrown by such an unusual show of interest.

"Oh, very well," he said slowly. "Let me see . . . the Chamber of Secrets . . .

"You all know, of course, that Hogwarts was founded over a thousand years ago — the precise date is uncertain — by the four greatest witches and wizards of the age. The four school Houses are named after them: Godric Gryffindor, Helga Hufflepuff, Rowena Ravenclaw, and Salazar Slytherin. They built this castle together, far from prying Muggle eyes, for it was an age when magic was feared by common people, and witches and wizards suffered much persecution."

He paused, gazed blearily around the room, and continued.

"For a few years, the founders worked in harmony together, seeking out youngsters who showed signs of magic and bringing them to the castle to be educated. But then disagreements sprang up between them. A rift began to grow between Slytherin and the others. Slytherin wished to be more *selective* about the students admitted to Hogwarts. He believed that magical learning should be kept within all-magic families. He disliked taking students of Muggle parentage, believing them to be untrustworthy. After a while, there was a serious argument on the subject between Slytherin and Gryffindor, and Slytherin left the school."

Professor Binns paused again, pursing his lips, looking like a wrinkled old tortoise.

"Reliable historical sources tell us this much," he said. "But these honest facts have been obscured by the fanciful legend of the Chamber of Secrets. The story goes that Slytherin had built a

hidden chamber in the castle, of which the other founders knew nothing.

"Slytherin, according to the legend, sealed the Chamber of Secrets so that none would be able to open it until his own true heir arrived at the school. The heir alone would be able to unseal the Chamber of Secrets, unleash the horror within, and use it to purge the school of all who were unworthy to study magic."

There was silence as he finished telling the story, but it wasn't the usual, sleepy silence that filled Professor Binns's classes. There was unease in the air as everyone continued to watch him, hoping for more. Professor Binns looked faintly annoyed.

"The whole thing is arrant nonsense, of course," he said. "Naturally, the school has been searched for evidence of such a chamber, many times, by the most learned witches and wizards. It does not exist. A tale told to frighten the gullible."

Hermione's hand was back in the air.

"Sir — what exactly do you mean by the 'horror within' the Chamber?"

"That is believed to be some sort of monster, which the Heir of Slytherin alone can control," said Professor Binns in his dry, reedy voice.

The class exchanged nervous looks.

"I tell you, the thing does not exist," said Professor Binns, shuffling his notes. "There is no Chamber and no monster."

"But, sir," said Seamus Finnigan, "if the Chamber can only be opened by Slytherin's true heir, no one else *would* be able to find it, would they?"

"Nonsense, O'Flaherty," said Professor Binns in an aggravated

tone. "If a long succession of Hogwarts headmasters and headmistresses haven't found the thing —"

"But, Professor," piped up Parvati Patil, "you'd probably have to use Dark Magic to open it —"

"Just because a wizard *doesn't* use Dark Magic doesn't mean he *can't,* Miss Pennyfeather," snapped Professor Binns. "I repeat, if the likes of Dumbledore —"

"But maybe you've got to be related to Slytherin, so Dumbledore couldn't —" began Dean Thomas, but Professor Binns had had enough.

"That will do," he said sharply. "It is a myth! It does not exist! There is not a shred of evidence that Slytherin ever built so much as a secret broom cupboard! I regret telling you such a foolish story! We will return, if you please, to *history,* to solid, believable, verifiable *fact*!"

And within five minutes, the class had sunk back into its usual torpor.

"I always knew Salazar Slytherin was a twisted old loony," Ron told Harry and Hermione as they fought their way through the teeming corridors at the end of the lesson to drop off their bags before dinner. "But I never knew he started all this pure-blood stuff. I wouldn't be in his House if you paid me. Honestly, if the Sorting Hat had tried to put me in Slytherin, I'd've got the train straight back home. . . ."

Hermione nodded fervently, but Harry didn't say anything. His stomach had just dropped unpleasantly.

Harry had never told Ron and Hermione that the Sorting Hat

had seriously considered putting *him* in Slytherin. He could remember, as though it were yesterday, the small voice that had spoken in his ear when he'd placed the hat on his head a year before: *You could be great, you know, it's all here in your head, and Slytherin would help you on the way to greatness, no doubt about that. . . .*

But Harry, who had already heard of Slytherin House's reputation for turning out Dark wizards, had thought desperately, *Not Slytherin*! and the hat had said, *Oh, well, if you're sure . . . better be Gryffindor. . . .*

As they were shunted along in the throng, Colin Creevey went past.

"Hiya, Harry!"

"Hullo, Colin," said Harry automatically.

"Harry — Harry — a boy in my class has been saying you're —"

But Colin was so small he couldn't fight against the tide of people bearing him toward the Great Hall; they heard him squeak, "See you, Harry!" and he was gone.

"What's a boy in his class saying about you?" Hermione wondered.

"That I'm Slytherin's heir, I expect," said Harry, his stomach dropping another inch or so as he suddenly remembered the way Justin Finch-Fletchley had run away from him at lunchtime.

"People here'll believe anything," said Ron in disgust.

The crowd thinned and they were able to climb the next staircase without difficulty.

"D'you *really* think there's a Chamber of Secrets?" Ron asked Hermione.

"I don't know," she said, frowning. "Dumbledore couldn't cure

Mrs. Norris, and that makes me think that whatever attacked her might not be — well — human."

As she spoke, they turned a corner and found themselves at the end of the very corridor where the attack had happened. They stopped and looked. The scene was just as it had been that night, except that there was no stiff cat hanging from the torch bracket, and an empty chair stood against the wall bearing the message "The Chamber of Secrets Has Been Opened."

"That's where Filch has been keeping guard," Ron muttered.

They looked at each other. The corridor was deserted.

"Can't hurt to have a poke around," said Harry, dropping his bag and getting to his hands and knees so that he could crawl along, searching for clues.

"Scorch marks!" he said. "Here — and here —"

"Come and look at this!" said Hermione. "This is funny. . . ."

Harry got up and crossed to the window next to the message on the wall. Hermione was pointing at the topmost pane, where around twenty spiders were scuttling, apparently fighting to get through a small crack. A long, silvery thread was dangling like a rope, as though they had all climbed it in their hurry to get outside.

"Have you ever seen spiders act like that?" said Hermione wonderingly.

"No," said Harry, "have you, Ron? Ron?"

He looked over his shoulder. Ron was standing well back and seemed to be fighting the impulse to run.

"What's up?" said Harry.

"I — don't — like — spiders," said Ron tensely.

"I never knew that," said Hermione, looking at Ron in surprise. "You've used spiders in Potions loads of times. . . ."

"I don't mind them dead," said Ron, who was carefully looking anywhere but at the window. "I just don't like the way they move. . . ."

Hermione giggled.

"It's not funny," said Ron, fiercely. "If you must know, when I was three, Fred turned my — my teddy bear into a great big filthy spider because I broke his toy broomstick. . . . You wouldn't like them either if you'd been holding your bear and suddenly it had too many legs and . . ."

He broke off, shuddering. Hermione was obviously still trying not to laugh. Feeling they had better get off the subject, Harry said, "Remember all that water on the floor? Where did that come from? Someone's mopped it up."

"It was about here," said Ron, recovering himself to walk a few paces past Filch's chair and pointing. "Level with this door."

He reached for the brass doorknob but suddenly withdrew his hand as though he'd been burned.

"What's the matter?" said Harry.

"Can't go in there," said Ron gruffly. "That's a girls' toilet."

"Oh, Ron, there won't be anyone in there," said Hermione, standing up and coming over. "That's Moaning Myrtle's place. Come on, let's have a look."

And ignoring the large OUT OF ORDER sign, she opened the door.

It was the gloomiest, most depressing bathroom Harry had ever set foot in. Under a large, cracked, and spotted mirror were a row of chipped sinks. The floor was damp and reflected the dull light given off by the stubs of a few candles, burning low in their holders; the wooden doors to the stalls were flaking and scratched and one of them was dangling off its hinges.

CHAPTER NINE

Hermione put her fingers to her lips and set off toward the end stall. When she reached it she said, "Hello, Myrtle, how are you?"

Harry and Ron went to look. Moaning Myrtle was floating above the tank of the toilet, picking a spot on her chin.

"This is a *girls'* bathroom," she said, eyeing Ron and Harry suspiciously. "*They're* not girls."

"No," Hermione agreed. "I just wanted to show them how — er — nice it is in here."

She waved vaguely at the dirty old mirror and the damp floor.

"Ask her if she saw anything," Harry mouthed at Hermione.

"What are you whispering?" said Myrtle, staring at him.

"Nothing," said Harry quickly. "We wanted to ask —"

"I wish people would stop talking behind my back!" said Myrtle, in a voice choked with tears. "I *do* have feelings, you know, even if I *am* dead —"

"Myrtle, no one wants to upset you," said Hermione. "Harry only —"

"No one wants to upset me! That's a good one!" howled Myrtle. "My life was nothing but misery at this place and now people come along ruining my death!"

"We wanted to ask you if you've seen anything funny lately," said Hermione quickly. "Because a cat was attacked right outside your front door on Halloween."

"Did you see anyone near here that night?" said Harry.

"I wasn't paying attention," said Myrtle dramatically. "Peeves upset me so much I came in here and tried to *kill* myself. Then, of course, I remembered that I'm — that I'm —"

"Already dead," said Ron helpfully.

Myrtle gave a tragic sob, rose up in the air, turned over, and dived headfirst into the toilet, splashing water all over them and vanishing from sight, although from the direction of her muffled sobs, she had come to rest somewhere in the U-bend.

Harry and Ron stood with their mouths open, but Hermione shrugged wearily and said, "Honestly, that was almost cheerful for Myrtle. . . . Come on, let's go."

Harry had barely closed the door on Myrtle's gurgling sobs when a loud voice made all three of them jump.

"RON!"

Percy Weasley had stopped dead at the head of the stairs, prefect badge agleam, an expression of complete shock on his face.

"That's a *girls'* bathroom!" he gasped. "What were *you* — ?"

"Just having a look around," Ron shrugged. "Clues, you know —"

Percy swelled in a manner that reminded Harry forcefully of Mrs. Weasley.

"Get — away — from — there —" Percy said, striding toward them and starting to bustle them along, flapping his arms. "Don't you *care* what this looks like? Coming back here while everyone's at dinner —"

"Why shouldn't we be here?" said Ron hotly, stopping short and glaring at Percy. "Listen, we never laid a finger on that cat!"

"That's what I told Ginny," said Percy fiercely, "but she still seems to think you're going to be expelled, I've never seen her so upset, crying her eyes out, you might think of *her,* all the first years are thoroughly overexcited by this business —"

"*You* don't care about Ginny," said Ron, whose ears were now

reddening. "*You're* just worried I'm going to mess up your chances of being Head Boy —"

"Five points from Gryffindor!" Percy said tersely, fingering his prefect badge. "And I hope it teaches you a lesson! No more *detective work,* or I'll write to Mum!"

And he strode off, the back of his neck as red as Ron's ears.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione chose seats as far as possible from Percy in the common room that night. Ron was still in a very bad temper and kept blotting his Charms homework. When he reached absently for his wand to remove the smudges, it ignited the parchment. Fuming almost as much as his homework, Ron slammed *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 2* shut. To Harry's surprise, Hermione followed suit.

"Who can it be, though?" she said in a quiet voice, as though continuing a conversation they had just been having. "Who'd *want* to frighten all the Squibs and Muggle-borns out of Hogwarts?"

"Let's think," said Ron in mock puzzlement. "Who do we know who thinks Muggle-borns are scum?"

He looked at Hermione. Hermione looked back, unconvinced.

"If you're talking about Malfoy —"

"Of course I am!" said Ron. "You heard him — '*You'll be next, Mudbloods*!' — come on, you've only got to look at his foul rat face to know it's him —"

"Malfoy, the Heir of Slytherin?" said Hermione skeptically.

"Look at his family," said Harry, closing his books, too. "The whole lot of them have been in Slytherin; he's always boasting about it. They could easily be Slytherin's descendants. His father's definitely evil enough."

"They could've had the key to the Chamber of Secrets for centuries!" said Ron. "Handing it down, father to son. . . ."

"Well," said Hermione cautiously, "I suppose it's possible. . . ."

"But how do we prove it?" said Harry darkly.

"There might be a way," said Hermione slowly, dropping her voice still further with a quick glance across the room at Percy. "Of course, it would be difficult. And dangerous, very dangerous. We'd be breaking about fifty school rules, I expect —"

"If, in a month or so, you feel like explaining, you will let us know, won't you?" said Ron irritably.

"All right," said Hermione coldly. "What we'd need to do is to get inside the Slytherin common room and ask Malfoy a few questions without him realizing it's us."

"But that's impossible," Harry said as Ron laughed.

"No, it's not," said Hermione. "All we'd need would be some Polyjuice Potion."

"What's that?" said Ron and Harry together.

"Snape mentioned it in class a few weeks ago —"

"D'you think we've got nothing better to do in Potions than listen to Snape?" muttered Ron.

"It transforms you into somebody else. Think about it! We could change into three of the Slytherins. No one would know it was us. Malfoy would probably tell us anything. He's probably boasting about it in the Slytherin common room right now, if only we could hear him."

"This Polyjuice stuff sounds a bit dodgy to me," said Ron, frowning. "What if we were stuck looking like three of the Slytherins forever?"

"It wears off after a while," said Hermione, waving her hand

impatiently. “But getting hold of the recipe will be very difficult. Snape said it was in a book called *Moste Potente Potions* and it’s bound to be in the Restricted Section of the library.”

There was only one way to get out a book from the Restricted Section: You needed a signed note of permission from a teacher.

“Hard to see why we’d want the book, really,” said Ron, “if we weren’t going to try and make one of the potions.”

“I think,” said Hermione, “that if we made it sound as though we were just interested in the theory, we might stand a chance. . . .”

“Oh, come on, no teacher’s going to fall for that,” said Ron. “They’d have to be really thick. . . .”

CHAPTER TEN

THE ROGUE BLUDGER

Since the disastrous episode of the pixies, Professor Lockhart had not brought live creatures to class. Instead, he read passages from his books to them, and sometimes reenacted some of the more dramatic bits. He usually picked Harry to help him with these reconstructions; so far, Harry had been forced to play a simple Transylvanian villager whom Lockhart had cured of a Babbling Curse, a yeti with a head cold, and a vampire who had been unable to eat anything except lettuce since Lockhart had dealt with him.

Harry was hauled to the front of the class during their very next Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson, this time acting a werewolf. If he hadn't had a very good reason for keeping Lockhart in a good mood, he would have refused to do it.

"Nice loud howl, Harry — exactly — and then, if you'll believe it, I pounced — like this — *slammed* him to the floor — thus — with one hand, I managed to hold him down — with my other, I

put my wand to his throat — I then screwed up my remaining strength and performed the immensely complex Homorphus Charm — he let out a piteous moan — go on, Harry — higher than that — good — the fur vanished — the fangs shrank — and he turned back into a man. Simple, yet effective — and another village will remember me forever as the hero who delivered them from the monthly terror of werewolf attacks."

The bell rang and Lockhart got to his feet.

"Homework — compose a poem about my defeat of the Wagga Wagga Werewolf! Signed copies of *Magical Me* to the author of the best one!"

The class began to leave. Harry returned to the back of the room, where Ron and Hermione were waiting.

"Ready?" Harry muttered.

"Wait till everyone's gone," said Hermione nervously. "All right . . ."

She approached Lockhart's desk, a piece of paper clutched tightly in her hand, Harry and Ron right behind her.

"Er — Professor Lockhart?" Hermione stammered. "I wanted to — to get this book out of the library. Just for background reading." She held out the piece of paper, her hand shaking slightly. "But the thing is, it's in the Restricted Section of the library, so I need a teacher to sign for it — I'm sure it would help me understand what you say in *Gadding with Ghouls* about slow-acting venoms —"

"Ah, *Gadding with Ghouls*!" said Lockhart, taking the note from Hermione and smiling widely at her. "Possibly my very favorite book. You enjoyed it?"

"Oh, yes," said Hermione eagerly. "So clever, the way you trapped that last one with the tea-strainer —"

"Well, I'm sure no one will mind me giving the best student of the year a little extra help," said Lockhart warmly, and he pulled out an enormous peacock quill. "Yes, nice, isn't it?" he said, misreading the revolted look on Ron's face. "I usually save it for book signings."

He scrawled an enormous loopy signature on the note and handed it back to Hermione.

"So, Harry," said Lockhart, while Hermione folded the note with fumbling fingers and slipped it into her bag. "Tomorrow's the first Quidditch match of the season, I believe? Gryffindor against Slytherin, is it not? I hear you're a useful player. I was a Seeker, too. I was asked to try for the National Squad, but preferred to dedicate my life to the eradication of the Dark Forces. Still, if ever you feel the need for a little private training, don't hesitate to ask. Always happy to pass on my expertise to less able players. . . ."

Harry made an indistinct noise in his throat and then hurried off after Ron and Hermione.

"I don't believe it," he said as the three of them examined the signature on the note. "He didn't even *look* at the book we wanted."

"That's because he's a brainless *git,*" said Ron. "But who cares, we've got what we needed —"

"He is *not* a brainless git," said Hermione shrilly as they half ran toward the library.

"Just because he said you were the best student of the year —"

They dropped their voices as they entered the muffled stillness of the library. Madam Pince, the librarian, was a thin, irritable woman who looked like an underfed vulture.

"*Moste Potente Potions*?" she repeated suspiciously, trying to take the note from Hermione; but Hermione wouldn't let go.

"I was wondering if I could keep it," she said breathlessly.

"Oh, come on," said Ron, wrenching it from her grasp and thrusting it at Madam Pince. "We'll get you another autograph. Lockhart'll sign anything if it stands still long enough."

Madam Pince held the note up to the light, as though determined to detect a forgery, but it passed the test. She stalked away between the lofty shelves and returned several minutes later carrying a large and moldy-looking book. Hermione put it carefully into her bag and they left, trying not to walk too quickly or look too guilty.

Five minutes later, they were barricaded in Moaning Myrtle's out-of-order bathroom once again. Hermione had overridden Ron's objections by pointing out that it was the last place anyone in their right minds would go, so they were guaranteed some privacy. Moaning Myrtle was crying noisily in her stall, but they were ignoring her, and she them.

Hermione opened *Moste Potente Potions* carefully, and the three of them bent over the damp-spotted pages. It was clear from a glance why it belonged in the Restricted Section. Some of the potions had effects almost too gruesome to think about, and there were some very unpleasant illustrations, which included a man who seemed to have been turned inside out and a witch sprouting several extra pairs of arms out of her head.

"Here it is," said Hermione excitedly as she found the page headed *The Polyjuice Potion.* It was decorated with drawings of people halfway through transforming into other people. Harry sin-

cerely hoped the artist had imagined the looks of intense pain on their faces.

"This is the most complicated potion I've ever seen," said Hermione as they scanned the recipe. "Lacewing flies, leeches, fluxweed, and knotgrass," she murmured, running her finger down the list of ingredients. "Well, they're easy enough, they're in the student store-cupboard, we can help ourselves. . . . Oooh, look, powdered horn of a bicorn — don't know where we're going to get that — shredded skin of a boomslang — that'll be tricky, too — and of course a bit of whoever we want to change into."

"Excuse me?" said Ron sharply. "What d'you mean, a bit of whoever we're changing into? I'm drinking *nothing* with Crabbe's toenails in it —"

Hermione continued as though she hadn't heard him.

"We don't have to worry about that yet, though, because we add those bits last. . . ."

Ron turned, speechless, to Harry, who had another worry.

"D'you realize how much we're going to have to steal, Hermione? Shredded skin of a boomslang, that's definitely not in the students' cupboard. What're we going to do, break into Snape's private stores? I don't know if this is a good idea. . . ."

Hermione shut the book with a snap.

"Well, if you two are going to chicken out, fine," she said. There were bright pink patches on her cheeks and her eyes were brighter than usual. "*I* don't want to break rules, you know. *I* think threatening Muggle-borns is far worse than brewing up a difficult potion. But if you don't want to find out if it's Malfoy, I'll go straight to Madam Pince now and hand the book back in —"

CHAPTER TEN

"I never thought I'd see the day when you'd be persuading us to break rules," said Ron. "All right, we'll do it. But not toenails, okay?"

"How long will it take to make, anyway?" said Harry as Hermione, looking happier, opened the book again.

"Well, since the fluxweed has got to be picked at the full moon and the lacewings have got to be stewed for twenty-one days . . . I'd say it'd be ready in about a month, if we can get all the ingredients."

"A month?" said Ron. "Malfoy could have attacked half the Muggle-borns in the school by then!" But Hermione's eyes narrowed dangerously again, and he added swiftly, "But it's the best plan we've got, so full steam ahead, I say."

However, while Hermione was checking that the coast was clear for them to leave the bathroom, Ron muttered to Harry, "It'll be a lot less hassle if you can just knock Malfoy off his broom tomorrow."

Harry woke early on Saturday morning and lay for a while thinking about the coming Quidditch match. He was nervous, mainly at the thought of what Wood would say if Gryffindor lost, but also at the idea of facing a team mounted on the fastest racing brooms gold could buy. He had never wanted to beat Slytherin so badly. After half an hour of lying there with his insides churning, he got up, dressed, and went down to breakfast early, where he found the rest of the Gryffindor team huddled at the long, empty table, all looking uptight and not speaking much.

As eleven o'clock approached, the whole school started to make its way down to the Quidditch stadium. It was a muggy sort of day

with a hint of thunder in the air. Ron and Hermione came hurrying over to wish Harry good luck as he entered the locker rooms. The team pulled on their scarlet Gryffindor robes, then sat down to listen to Wood's usual pre-match pep talk.

"Slytherin has better brooms than us," he began. "No point denying it. But we've got better *people* on our brooms. We've trained harder than they have, we've been flying in all weathers —" ("Too true," muttered George Weasley. "I haven't been properly dry since August") "— and we're going to make them rue the day they let that little bit of slime, Malfoy, buy his way onto their team."

Chest heaving with emotion, Wood turned to Harry.

"It'll be down to you, Harry, to show them that a Seeker has to have something more than a rich father. Get to that Snitch before Malfoy or die trying, Harry, because we've got to win today, we've got to."

"So no pressure, Harry," said Fred, winking at him.

As they walked out onto the field, a roar of noise greeted them; mainly cheers, because Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff were anxious to see Slytherin beaten, but the Slytherins in the crowd made their boos and hisses heard, too. Madam Hooch, the Quidditch teacher, asked Flint and Wood to shake hands, which they did, giving each other threatening stares and gripping rather harder than was necessary.

"On my whistle," said Madam Hooch. "Three . . . two . . . one . . ."

With a roar from the crowd to speed them upward, the fourteen players rose toward the leaden sky. Harry flew higher than any of them, squinting around for the Snitch.

"All right there, Scarhead?" yelled Malfoy, shooting underneath him as though to show off the speed of his broom.

Harry had no time to reply. At that very moment, a heavy black Bludger came pelting toward him; he avoided it so narrowly that he felt it ruffle his hair as it passed.

"Close one, Harry!" said George, streaking past him with his club in his hand, ready to knock the Bludger back toward a Slytherin. Harry saw George give the Bludger a powerful whack in the direction of Adrian Pucey, but the Bludger changed direction in midair and shot straight for Harry again.

Harry dropped quickly to avoid it, and George managed to hit it hard toward Malfoy. Once again, the Bludger swerved like a boomerang and shot at Harry's head.

Harry put on a burst of speed and zoomed toward the other end of the field. He could hear the Bludger whistling along behind him. What was going on? Bludgers never concentrated on one player like this; it was their job to try and unseat as many people as possible. . . .

Fred Weasley was waiting for the Bludger at the other end. Harry ducked as Fred swung at the Bludger with all his might; the Bludger was knocked off course.

"Gotcha!" Fred yelled happily, but he was wrong; as though it was magnetically attracted to Harry, the Bludger pelted after him once more and Harry was forced to fly off at full speed.

It had started to rain; Harry felt heavy drops fall onto his face, splattering onto his glasses. He didn't have a clue what was going on in the rest of the game until he heard Lee Jordan, who was commentating, say, "Slytherin lead, sixty points to zero —"

The Slytherins' superior brooms were clearly doing their jobs, and meanwhile the mad Bludger was doing all it could to knock Harry out of the air. Fred and George were now flying so close to him on either side that Harry could see nothing at all except their flailing arms and had no chance to look for the Snitch, let alone catch it.

"Someone's — tampered — with — this — Bludger —" Fred grunted, swinging his bat with all his might at it as it launched a new attack on Harry.

"We need time out," said George, trying to signal to Wood and stop the Bludger breaking Harry's nose at the same time.

Wood had obviously got the message. Madam Hooch's whistle rang out and Harry, Fred, and George dived for the ground, still trying to avoid the mad Bludger.

"What's going on?" said Wood as the Gryffindor team huddled together, while Slytherins in the crowd jeered. "We're being flattened. Fred, George, where were you when that Bludger stopped Angelina scoring?"

"We were twenty feet above her, stopping the other Bludger from murdering Harry, Oliver," said George angrily. "Someone's fixed it — it won't leave Harry alone. It hasn't gone for anyone else all game. The Slytherins must have done something to it."

"But the Bludgers have been locked in Madam Hooch's office since our last practice, and there was nothing wrong with them then. . . ." said Wood, anxiously.

Madam Hooch was walking toward them. Over her shoulder, Harry could see the Slytherin team jeering and pointing in his direction.

"Listen," said Harry as she came nearer and nearer, "with you two flying around me all the time the only way I'm going to catch the Snitch is if it flies up my sleeve. Go back to the rest of the team and let me deal with the rogue one."

"Don't be thick," said Fred. "It'll take your head off."

Wood was looking from Harry to the Weasleys.

"Oliver, this is insane," said Alicia Spinnet angrily. "You can't let Harry deal with that thing on his own. Let's ask for an inquiry —"

"If we stop now, we'll have to forfeit the match!" said Harry. "And we're not losing to Slytherin just because of a crazy Bludger! Come on, Oliver, tell them to leave me alone!"

"This is all your fault," George said angrily to Wood. " 'Get the Snitch or die trying,' what a stupid thing to tell him —"

Madam Hooch had joined them.

"Ready to resume play?" she asked Wood.

Wood looked at the determined look on Harry's face.

"All right," he said. "Fred, George, you heard Harry — leave him alone and let him deal with the Bludger on his own."

The rain was falling more heavily now. On Madam Hooch's whistle, Harry kicked hard into the air and heard the telltale whoosh of the Bludger behind him. Higher and higher Harry climbed; he looped and swooped, spiraled, zigzagged, and rolled. Slightly dizzy, he nevertheless kept his eyes wide open, rain was speckling his glasses and ran up his nostrils as he hung upside down, avoiding another fierce dive from the Bludger. He could hear laughter from the crowd; he knew he must look very stupid, but the rogue Bludger was heavy and couldn't change direction as quickly as Harry could; he began a kind of roller-coaster ride around the

edges of the stadium, squinting through the silver sheets of rain to the Gryffindor goal posts, where Adrian Pucey was trying to get past Wood —

A whistling in Harry's ear told him the Bludger had just missed him again; he turned right over and sped in the opposite direction.

"Training for the ballet, Potter?" yelled Malfoy as Harry was forced to do a stupid kind of twirl in midair to dodge the Bludger, and he fled, the Bludger trailing a few feet behind him; and then, glaring back at Malfoy in hatred, he saw it — *the Golden Snitch.* It was hovering inches above Malfoy's left ear — and Malfoy, busy laughing at Harry, hadn't seen it.

For an agonizing moment, Harry hung in midair, not daring to speed toward Malfoy in case he looked up and saw the Snitch.

WHAM.

He had stayed still a second too long. The Bludger had hit him at last, smashed into his elbow, and Harry felt his arm break. Dimly, dazed by the searing pain in his arm, he slid sideways on his rain-drenched broom, one knee still crooked over it, his right arm dangling useless at his side — the Bludger came pelting back for a second attack, this time aiming at his face — Harry swerved out of the way, one idea firmly lodged in his numb brain: *get to Malfoy.*

Through a haze of rain and pain he dived for the shimmering, sneering face below him and saw its eyes widen with fear: Malfoy thought Harry was attacking him.

"What the —" he gasped, careening out of Harry's way.

Harry took his remaining hand off his broom and made a wild snatch; he felt his fingers close on the cold Snitch but was now only

gripping the broom with his legs, and there was a yell from the crowd below as he headed straight for the ground, trying hard not to pass out.

With a splattering thud he hit the mud and rolled off his broom. His arm was hanging at a very strange angle; riddled with pain, he heard, as though from a distance, a good deal of whistling and shouting. He focused on the Snitch clutched in his good hand.

"Aha," he said vaguely. "We've won."

And he fainted.

He came around, rain falling on his face, still lying on the field, with someone leaning over him. He saw a glitter of teeth.

"Oh, no, not you," he moaned.

"Doesn't know what he's saying," said Lockhart loudly to the anxious crowd of Gryffindors pressing around them. "Not to worry, Harry. I'm about to fix your arm."

"*No*!" said Harry. "I'll keep it like this, thanks. . . ."

He tried to sit up, but the pain was terrible. He heard a familiar clicking noise nearby.

"I don't want a photo of this, Colin," he said loudly.

"Lie back, Harry," said Lockhart soothingly. "It's a simple charm I've used countless times —"

"Why can't I just go to the hospital wing?" said Harry through clenched teeth.

"He should really, Professor," said a muddy Wood, who couldn't help grinning even though his Seeker was injured. "Great capture, Harry, really spectacular, your best yet, I'd say —"

Through the thicket of legs around him, Harry spotted Fred and

George Weasley, wrestling the rogue Bludger into a box. It was still putting up a terrific fight.

"Stand back," said Lockhart, who was rolling up his jade-green sleeves.

"No — don't —" said Harry weakly, but Lockhart was twirling his wand and a second later had directed it straight at Harry's arm.

A strange and unpleasant sensation started at Harry's shoulder and spread all the way down to his fingertips. It felt as though his arm was being deflated. He didn't dare look at what was happening. He had shut his eyes, his face turned away from his arm, but his worst fears were realized as the people above him gasped and Colin Creevey began clicking away madly. His arm didn't hurt anymore — nor did it feel remotely like an arm.

"Ah," said Lockhart. "Yes. Well, that can sometimes happen. But the point is, the bones are no longer broken. That's the thing to bear in mind. So, Harry, just toddle up to the hospital wing — ah, Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger, would you escort him? — and Madam Pomfrey will be able to — er — tidy you up a bit."

As Harry got to his feet, he felt strangely lopsided. Taking a deep breath he looked down at his right side. What he saw nearly made him pass out again.

Poking out of the end of his robes was what looked like a thick, flesh-colored rubber glove. He tried to move his fingers. Nothing happened.

Lockhart hadn't mended Harry's bones. He had removed them.

Madam Pomfrey wasn't at all pleased.

"You should have come straight to me!" she raged, holding up

the sad, limp remainder of what, half an hour before, had been a working arm. "I can mend bones in a second — but growing them back —"

"You will be able to, won't you?" said Harry desperately.

"I'll be able to, certainly, but it will be painful," said Madam Pomfrey grimly, throwing Harry a pair of pajamas. "You'll have to stay the night. . . ."

Hermione waited outside the curtain drawn around Harry's bed while Ron helped him into his pajamas. It took a while to stuff the rubbery, boneless arm into a sleeve.

"How can you stick up for Lockhart now, Hermione, eh?" Ron called through the curtain as he pulled Harry's limp fingers through the cuff. "If Harry had wanted deboning he would have asked."

"Anyone can make a mistake," said Hermione. "And it doesn't hurt anymore, does it, Harry?"

"No," said Harry, getting into bed. "But it doesn't do anything else either."

As he swung himself onto the bed, his arm flapped pointlessly.

Hermione and Madam Pomfrey came around the curtain. Madam Pomfrey was holding a large bottle of something labeled *Skele-Gro.*

"You're in for a rough night," she said, pouring out a steaming beakerful and handing it to him. "Regrowing bones is a nasty business."

So was taking the Skele-Gro. It burned Harry's mouth and throat as it went down, making him cough and splutter. Still tut-tutting about dangerous sports and inept teachers, Madam Pomfrey re-

treated, leaving Ron and Hermione to help Harry gulp down some water.

"We won, though," said Ron, a grin breaking across his face. "That was some catch you made. Malfoy's face . . . he looked ready to kill. . . ."

"I want to know how he fixed that Bludger," said Hermione darkly.

"We can add that to the list of questions we'll ask him when we've taken the Polyjuice Potion," said Harry, sinking back onto his pillows. "I hope it tastes better than this stuff. . . ."

"If it's got bits of Slytherins in it? You've got to be joking," said Ron.

The door of the hospital wing burst open at that moment. Filthy and soaking wet, the rest of the Gryffindor team had arrived to see Harry.

"Unbelievable flying, Harry," said George. "I've just seen Marcus Flint yelling at Malfoy. Something about having the Snitch on top of his head and not noticing. Malfoy didn't seem too happy."

They had brought cakes, sweets, and bottles of pumpkin juice; they gathered around Harry's bed and were just getting started on what promised to be a good party when Madam Pomfrey came storming over, shouting, "This boy needs rest, he's got thirty-three bones to regrow! Out! OUT!"

And Harry was left alone, with nothing to distract him from the stabbing pains in his limp arm.

Hours and hours later, Harry woke quite suddenly in the pitch blackness and gave a small yelp of pain: His arm now felt full of

large splinters. For a second, he thought that was what had woken him. Then, with a thrill of horror, he realized that someone was sponging his forehead in the dark.

"Get off!" he said loudly, and then, "*Dobby*!"

The house-elf's goggling tennis ball eyes were peering at Harry through the darkness. A single tear was running down his long, pointed nose.

"Harry Potter came back to school," he whispered miserably. "Dobby warned and warned Harry Potter. Ah sir, why didn't you heed Dobby? Why didn't Harry Potter go back home when he missed the train?"

Harry heaved himself up on his pillows and pushed Dobby's sponge away.

"What're you doing here?" he said. "And how did you know I missed the train?"

Dobby's lip trembled and Harry was seized by a sudden suspicion.

"It was *you*!" he said slowly. "*You* stopped the barrier from letting us through!"

"Indeed yes, sir," said Dobby, nodding his head vigorously, ears flapping. "Dobby hid and watched for Harry Potter and sealed the gateway and Dobby had to iron his hands afterward" — he showed Harry ten long, bandaged fingers — "but Dobby didn't care, sir, for he thought Harry Potter was safe, and *never* did Dobby dream that Harry Potter would get to school another way!"

He was rocking backward and forward, shaking his ugly head.

"Dobby was so shocked when he heard Harry Potter was back at Hogwarts, he let his master's dinner burn! Such a flogging Dobby never had, sir. . . ."

Harry slumped back onto his pillows.

"You nearly got Ron and me expelled," he said fiercely. "You'd better get lost before my bones come back, Dobby, or I might strangle you."

Dobby smiled weakly.

"Dobby is used to death threats, sir. Dobby gets them five times a day at home."

He blew his nose on a corner of the filthy pillowcase he wore, looking so pathetic that Harry felt his anger ebb away in spite of himself.

"Why d'you wear that thing, Dobby?" he asked curiously.

"This, sir?" said Dobby, plucking at the pillowcase. " 'Tis a mark of the house-elf's enslavement, sir. Dobby can only be freed if his masters present him with clothes, sir. The family is careful not to pass Dobby even a sock, sir, for then he would be free to leave their house forever."

Dobby mopped his bulging eyes and said suddenly, "Harry Potter *must* go home! Dobby thought his Bludger would be enough to make —"

"*Your* Bludger?" said Harry, anger rising once more. "What d'you mean, *your* Bludger? *You* made that Bludger try and kill me?"

"Not kill you, sir, never kill you!" said Dobby, shocked. "Dobby wants to save Harry Potter's life! Better sent home, grievously injured, than remain here, sir! Dobby only wanted Harry Potter hurt enough to be sent home!"

"Oh, is that all?" said Harry angrily. "I don't suppose you're going to tell me *why* you wanted me sent home in pieces?"

"Ah, if Harry Potter only knew!" Dobby groaned, more tears dripping onto his ragged pillowcase. "If he knew what he means

to us, to the lowly, the enslaved, we dregs of the magical world! Dobby remembers how it was when He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was at the height of his powers, sir! We house-elves were treated like vermin, sir! Of course, Dobby is still treated like that, sir," he admitted, drying his face on the pillowcase. "But mostly, sir, life has improved for my kind since you triumphed over He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Harry Potter survived, and the Dark Lord's power was broken, and it was a new dawn, sir, and Harry Potter shone like a beacon of hope for those of us who thought the Dark days would never end, sir. . . . And now, at Hogwarts, terrible things are to happen, are perhaps happening already, and Dobby cannot let Harry Potter stay here now that history is to repeat itself, now that the Chamber of Secrets is open once more —"

Dobby froze, horrorstruck, then grabbed Harry's water jug from his bedside table and cracked it over his own head, toppling out of sight. A second later, he crawled back onto the bed, cross-eyed, muttering, "Bad Dobby, very bad Dobby . . ."

"So there *is* a Chamber of Secrets?" Harry whispered. "And — did you say it's been opened *before*? *Tell* me, Dobby!"

He seized the elf's bony wrist as Dobby's hand inched toward the water jug. "But I'm not Muggle-born — how can I be in danger from the Chamber?"

"Ah, sir, ask no more, ask no more of poor Dobby," stammered the elf, his eyes huge in the dark. "Dark deeds are planned in this place, but Harry Potter must not be here when they happen — go home, Harry Potter, go home. Harry Potter must not meddle in this, sir, 'tis too dangerous —"

"Who is it, Dobby?" Harry said, keeping a firm hold on Dobby's

wrist to stop him from hitting himself with the water jug again. "Who's opened it? Who opened it last time?"

"Dobby can't, sir, Dobby can't, Dobby mustn't tell!" squealed the elf. "Go home, Harry Potter, go home!"

"I'm not going anywhere!" said Harry fiercely. "One of my best friends is Muggle-born; she'll be first in line if the Chamber really has been opened —"

"Harry Potter risks his own life for his friends!" moaned Dobby in a kind of miserable ecstasy. "So noble! So valiant! But he must save himself, he must, Harry Potter must not —"

Dobby suddenly froze, his bat ears quivering. Harry heard it, too. There were footsteps coming down the passageway outside.

"Dobby must go!" breathed the elf, terrified. There was a loud crack, and Harry's fist was suddenly clenched on thin air. He slumped back into bed, his eyes on the dark doorway to the hospital wing as the footsteps drew nearer.

Next moment, Dumbledore was backing into the dormitory, wearing a long woolly dressing gown and a nightcap. He was carrying one end of what looked like a statue. Professor McGonagall appeared a second later, carrying its feet. Together, they heaved it onto a bed.

"Get Madam Pomfrey," whispered Dumbledore, and Professor McGonagall hurried past the end of Harry's bed out of sight. Harry lay quite still, pretending to be asleep. He heard urgent voices, and then Professor McGonagall swept back into view, closely followed by Madam Pomfrey, who was pulling a cardigan on over her nightdress. He heard a sharp intake of breath.

"What happened?" Madam Pomfrey whispered to Dumbledore, bending over the statue on the bed.

"Another attack," said Dumbledore. "Minerva found him on the stairs."

"There was a bunch of grapes next to him," said Professor McGonagall. "We think he was trying to sneak up here to visit Potter."

Harry's stomach gave a horrible lurch. Slowly and carefully, he raised himself a few inches so he could look at the statue on the bed. A ray of moonlight lay across its staring face.

It was Colin Creevey. His eyes were wide and his hands were stuck up in front of him, holding his camera.

"Petrified?" whispered Madam Pomfrey.

"Yes," said Professor McGonagall. "But I shudder to think . . . If Albus hadn't been on the way downstairs for hot chocolate — who knows what might have —"

The three of them stared down at Colin. Then Dumbledore leaned forward and wrenched the camera out of Colin's rigid grip.

"You don't think he managed to get a picture of his attacker?" said Professor McGonagall eagerly.

Dumbledore didn't answer. He opened the back of the camera.

"Good gracious!" said Madam Pomfrey.

A jet of steam had hissed out of the camera. Harry, three beds away, caught the acrid smell of burnt plastic.

"Melted," said Madam Pomfrey wonderingly. "All melted . . ."

"What does this *mean,* Albus?" Professor McGonagall asked urgently.

"It means," said Dumbledore, "that the Chamber of Secrets is indeed open again."

Madam Pomfrey clapped a hand to her mouth. Professor McGonagall stared at Dumbledore.

“But, Albus . . . surely . . . *who*?”

“The question is not *who*,” said Dumbledore, his eyes on Colin. “The question is, *how*. . . .”

And from what Harry could see of Professor McGonagall’s shadowy face, she didn’t understand this any better than he did.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE DUELING CLUB

Harry woke up on Sunday morning to find the dormitory blazing with winter sunlight and his arm reboned but very stiff. He sat up quickly and looked over at Colin's bed, but it had been blocked from view by the high curtains Harry had changed behind yesterday. Seeing that he was awake, Madam Pomfrey came bustling over with a breakfast tray and then began bending and stretching his arm and fingers.

"All in order," she said as he clumsily fed himself porridge left-handed. "When you've finished eating, you may leave."

Harry dressed as quickly as he could and hurried off to Gryffindor Tower, desperate to tell Ron and Hermione about Colin and Dobby, but they weren't there. Harry left to look for them, wondering where they could have got to and feeling slightly hurt that they weren't interested in whether he had his bones back or not.

As Harry passed the library, Percy Weasley strolled out of it, looking in far better spirits than last time they'd met.

"Oh, hello, Harry," he said. "Excellent flying yesterday, really excellent. Gryffindor has just taken the lead for the House Cup — you earned fifty points!"

"You haven't seen Ron or Hermione, have you?" said Harry.

"No, I haven't," said Percy, his smile fading. "I hope Ron's not in another *girls' toilet. . . .*"

Harry forced a laugh, watched Percy walk out of sight, and then headed straight for Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. He couldn't see why Ron and Hermione would be in there again, but after making sure that neither Filch nor any prefects were around, he opened the door and heard their voices coming from a locked stall.

"It's me," he said, closing the door behind him. There was a clunk, a splash, and a gasp from within the stall and he saw Hermione's eye peering through the keyhole.

"*Harry*!" she said. "You gave us such a fright — come in — how's your arm?"

"Fine," said Harry, squeezing into the stall. An old cauldron was perched on the toilet, and a crackling from under the rim told Harry they had lit a fire beneath it. Conjuring up portable, waterproof fires was a speciality of Hermione's.

"We'd've come to meet you, but we decided to get started on the Polyjuice Potion," Ron explained as Harry, with difficulty, locked the stall again. "We've decided this is the safest place to hide it."

Harry started to tell them about Colin, but Hermione interrupted.

"We already know — we heard Professor McGonagall telling

Professor Flitwick this morning. That's why we decided we'd better get going —"

"The sooner we get a confession out of Malfoy, the better," snarled Ron. "D'you know what I think? He was in such a foul temper after the Quidditch match, he took it out on Colin."

"There's something else," said Harry, watching Hermione tearing bundles of knotgrass and throwing them into the potion. "Dobby came to visit me in the middle of the night."

Ron and Hermione looked up, amazed. Harry told them everything Dobby had told him — or hadn't told him. Hermione and Ron listened with their mouths open.

"The Chamber of Secrets has been opened *before*?" Hermione said.

"This settles it," said Ron in a triumphant voice. "Lucius Malfoy must've opened the Chamber when he was at school here and now he's told dear old Draco how to do it. It's obvious. Wish Dobby'd told you what kind of monster's in there, though. I want to know how come nobody's noticed it sneaking around the school."

"Maybe it can make itself invisible," said Hermione, prodding leeches to the bottom of the cauldron. "Or maybe it can disguise itself — pretend to be a suit of armor or something — I've read about Chameleon Ghouls —"

"You read too much, Hermione," said Ron, pouring dead lacewings on top of the leeches. He crumpled up the empty lacewing bag and looked at Harry.

"So Dobby stopped us from getting on the train and broke your arm. . . ." He shook his head. "You know what, Harry? If he doesn't stop trying to save your life he's going to kill you."

* * *

The news that Colin Creevey had been attacked and was now lying as though dead in the hospital wing had spread through the entire school by Monday morning. The air was suddenly thick with rumor and suspicion. The first years were now moving around the castle in tight-knit groups, as though scared they would be attacked if they ventured forth alone.

Ginny Weasley, who sat next to Colin Creevey in Charms, was distraught, but Harry felt that Fred and George were going the wrong way about cheering her up. They were taking turns covering themselves with fur or boils and jumping out at her from behind statues. They only stopped when Percy, apoplectic with rage, told them he was going to write to Mrs. Weasley and tell her Ginny was having nightmares.

Meanwhile, hidden from the teachers, a roaring trade in talismans, amulets, and other protective devices was sweeping the school. Neville Longbottom bought a large, evil-smelling green onion, a pointed purple crystal, and a rotting newt tail before the other Gryffindor boys pointed out that he was in no danger; he was a pureblood, and therefore unlikely to be attacked.

“They went for Filch first,” Neville said, his round face fearful. “And everyone knows I’m almost a Squib.”

In the second week of December Professor McGonagall came around as usual, collecting names of those who would be staying at school for Christmas. Harry, Ron, and Hermione signed her list; they had heard that Malfoy was staying, which struck them as very suspicious. The holidays would be the perfect time to use the Polyjuice Potion and try to worm a confession out of him.

Unfortunately, the potion was only half finished. They still

needed the bicorn horn and the boomslang skin, and the only place they were going to get them was from Snape's private stores. Harry privately felt he'd rather face Slytherin's legendary monster than let Snape catch him robbing his office.

"What we need," said Hermione briskly as Thursday afternoon's double Potions lesson loomed nearer, "is a diversion. Then one of us can sneak into Snape's office and take what we need."

Harry and Ron looked at her nervously.

"I think I'd better do the actual stealing," Hermione continued in a matter-of-fact tone. "You two will be expelled if you get into any more trouble, and I've got a clean record. So all you need to do is cause enough mayhem to keep Snape busy for five minutes or so."

Harry smiled feebly. Deliberately causing mayhem in Snape's Potions class was about as safe as poking a sleeping dragon in the eye.

Potions lessons took place in one of the large dungeons. Thursday afternoon's lesson proceeded in the usual way. Twenty cauldrons stood steaming between the wooden desks, on which stood brass scales and jars of ingredients. Snape prowled through the fumes, making waspish remarks about the Gryffindors' work while the Slytherins sniggered appreciatively. Draco Malfoy, who was Snape's favorite student, kept flicking puffer-fish eyes at Ron and Harry, who knew that if they retaliated they would get detention faster than you could say "Unfair."

Harry's Swelling Solution was far too runny, but he had his mind on more important things. He was waiting for Hermione's signal, and he hardly listened as Snape paused to sneer at his watery

potion. When Snape turned and walked off to bully Neville, Hermione caught Harry's eye and nodded.

Harry ducked swiftly down behind his cauldron, pulled one of Fred's Filibuster fireworks out of his pocket, and gave it a quick prod with his wand. The firework began to fizz and sputter. Knowing he had only seconds, Harry straightened up, took aim, and lobbed it into the air; it landed right on target in Goyle's cauldron.

Goyle's potion exploded, showering the whole class. People shrieked as splashes of the Swelling Solution hit them. Malfoy got a faceful and his nose began to swell like a balloon; Goyle blundered around, his hands over his eyes, which had expanded to the size of a dinner plate — Snape was trying to restore calm and find out what had happened. Through the confusion, Harry saw Hermione slip quietly into Snape's office.

"Silence! SILENCE!" Snape roared. "Anyone who has been splashed, come here for a Deflating Draught — when I find out who did this —"

Harry tried not to laugh as he watched Malfoy hurry forward, his head drooping with the weight of a nose like a small melon. As half the class lumbered up to Snape's desk, some weighted down with arms like clubs, others unable to talk through gigantic puffed-up lips, Harry saw Hermione slide back into the dungeon, the front of her robes bulging.

When everyone had taken a swig of antidote and the various swellings had subsided, Snape swept over to Goyle's cauldron and scooped out the twisted black remains of the firework. There was a sudden hush.

"If I ever find out who threw this," Snape whispered, "I shall *make sure* that person is expelled."

Harry arranged his face into what he hoped was a puzzled expression. Snape was looking right at him, and the bell that rang ten minutes later could not have been more welcome.

"He knew it was me," Harry told Ron and Hermione as they hurried back to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. "I could tell."

Hermione threw the new ingredients into the cauldron and began to stir feverishly.

"It'll be ready in two weeks," she said happily.

"Snape can't prove it was you," said Ron reassuringly to Harry. "What can he do?"

"Knowing Snape, something foul," said Harry as the potion frothed and bubbled.

A week later, Harry, Ron, and Hermione were walking across the entrance hall when they saw a small knot of people gathered around the notice board, reading a piece of parchment that had just been pinned up. Seamus Finnigan and Dean Thomas beckoned them over, looking excited.

"They're starting a Dueling Club!" said Seamus. "First meeting tonight! I wouldn't mind dueling lessons; they might come in handy one of these days. . . ."

"What, you reckon Slytherin's monster can duel?" said Ron, but he, too, read the sign with interest.

"Could be useful," he said to Harry and Hermione as they went into dinner. "Shall we go?"

Harry and Hermione were all for it, so at eight o'clock that

evening they hurried back to the Great Hall. The long dining tables had vanished and a golden stage had appeared along one wall, lit by thousands of candles floating overhead. The ceiling was velvety black once more and most of the school seemed to be packed beneath it, all carrying their wands and looking excited.

"I wonder who'll be teaching us?" said Hermione as they edged into the chattering crowd. "Someone told me Flitwick was a dueling champion when he was young — maybe it'll be him."

"As long as it's not —" Harry began, but he ended on a groan: Gilderoy Lockhart was walking onto the stage, resplendent in robes of deep plum and accompanied by none other than Snape, wearing his usual black.

Lockhart waved an arm for silence and called, "Gather round, gather round! Can everyone see me? Can you all hear me? Excellent!

"Now, Professor Dumbledore has granted me permission to start this little dueling club, to train you all in case you ever need to defend yourselves as I myself have done on countless occasions — for full details, see my published works.

"Let me introduce my assistant, Professor Snape," said Lockhart, flashing a wide smile. "He tells me he knows a tiny little bit about dueling himself and has sportingly agreed to help me with a short demonstration before we begin. Now, I don't want any of you youngsters to worry — you'll still have your Potions master when I'm through with him, never fear!"

"Wouldn't it be good if they finished each other off?" Ron muttered in Harry's ear.

Snape's upper lip was curling. Harry wondered why Lockhart

was still smiling; if Snape had been looking at *him* like that he'd have been running as fast as he could in the opposite direction.

Lockhart and Snape turned to face each other and bowed; at least, Lockhart did, with much twirling of his hands, whereas Snape jerked his head irritably. Then they raised their wands like swords in front of them.

"As you see, we are holding our wands in the accepted combative position," Lockhart told the silent crowd. "On the count of three, we will cast our first spells. Neither of us will be aiming to kill, of course."

"I wouldn't bet on that," Harry murmured, watching Snape baring his teeth.

"One — two — three —"

Both of them swung their wands above their heads and pointed them at their opponent; Snape cried: "*Expelliarmus*!" There was a dazzling flash of scarlet light and Lockhart was blasted off his feet: He flew backward off the stage, smashed into the wall, and slid down it to sprawl on the floor.

Malfoy and some of the other Slytherins cheered. Hermione was dancing on tiptoes. "Do you think he's all right?" she squealed through her fingers.

"Who cares?" said Harry and Ron together.

Lockhart was getting unsteadily to his feet. His hat had fallen off and his wavy hair was standing on end.

"Well, there you have it!" he said, tottering back onto the platform. "That was a Disarming Charm — as you see, I've lost my wand — ah, thank you, Miss Brown — yes, an excellent idea to show them that, Professor Snape, but if you don't mind my saying

so, it was very obvious what you were about to do. If I had wanted to stop you it would have been only too easy — however, I felt it would be instructive to let them see . . ."

Snape was looking murderous. Possibly Lockhart had noticed, because he said, "Enough demonstrating! I'm going to come amongst you now and put you all into pairs. Professor Snape, if you'd like to help me —"

They moved through the crowd, matching up partners. Lockhart teamed Neville with Justin Finch-Fletchley, but Snape reached Harry and Ron first.

"Time to split up the dream team, I think," he sneered. "Weasley, you can partner Finnigan. Potter —"

Harry moved automatically toward Hermione.

"I don't think so," said Snape, smiling coldly. "Mr. Malfoy, come over here. Let's see what you make of the famous Potter. And you, Miss Granger — you can partner Miss Bulstrode."

Malfoy strutted over, smirking. Behind him walked a Slytherin girl who reminded Harry of a picture he'd seen in *Holidays with Hags.* She was large and square and her heavy jaw jutted aggressively. Hermione gave her a weak smile that she did not return.

"Face your partners!" called Lockhart, back on the platform. "And bow!"

Harry and Malfoy barely inclined their heads, not taking their eyes off each other.

"Wands at the ready!" shouted Lockhart. "When I count to three, cast your charms to disarm your opponents — *only* to disarm them — we don't want any accidents — one . . . two . . . three —"

Harry swung his wand high, but Malfoy had already started on "two": His spell hit Harry so hard he felt as though he'd been hit over the head with a saucepan. He stumbled, but everything still seemed to be working, and wasting no more time, Harry pointed his wand straight at Malfoy and shouted, "*Rictusempra*!"

A jet of silver light hit Malfoy in the stomach and he doubled up, wheezing.

"*I said disarm only*!" Lockhart shouted in alarm over the heads of the battling crowd, as Malfoy sank to his knees; Harry had hit him with a Tickling Charm, and he could barely move for laughing. Harry hung back, with a vague feeling it would be unsporting to bewitch Malfoy while he was on the floor, but this was a mistake; gasping for breath, Malfoy pointed his wand at Harry's knees, choked, "*Tarantallegra*!" and the next second Harry's legs began to jerk around out of his control in a kind of quickstep.

"Stop! Stop!" screamed Lockhart, but Snape took charge.

"*Finite Incantatem*!" he shouted; Harry's feet stopped dancing, Malfoy stopped laughing, and they were able to look up.

A haze of greenish smoke was hovering over the scene. Both Neville and Justin were lying on the floor, panting; Ron was holding up an ashen-faced Seamus, apologizing for whatever his broken wand had done; but Hermione and Millicent Bulstrode were still moving; Millicent had Hermione in a headlock and Hermione was whimpering in pain; both their wands lay forgotten on the floor. Harry leapt forward and pulled Millicent off. It was difficult: She was a lot bigger than he was.

"Dear, dear," said Lockhart, skittering through the crowd, looking at the aftermath of the duels. "Up you go, Macmillan. . . .

Careful there, Miss Fawcett. . . . Pinch it hard, it'll stop bleeding in a second, Boot —

"I think I'd better teach you how to *block* unfriendly spells," said Lockhart, standing flustered in the midst of the hall. He glanced at Snape, whose black eyes glinted, and looked quickly away. "Let's have a volunteer pair — Longbottom and Finch-Fletchley, how about you —"

"A bad idea, Professor Lockhart," said Snape, gliding over like a large and malevolent bat. "Longbottom causes devastation with the simplest spells. We'll be sending what's left of Finch-Fletchley up to the hospital wing in a matchbox." Neville's round, pink face went pinker. "How about Malfoy and Potter?" said Snape with a twisted smile.

"Excellent idea!" said Lockhart, gesturing Harry and Malfoy into the middle of the hall as the crowd backed away to give them room.

"Now, Harry," said Lockhart. "When Draco points his wand at you, you do *this.*"

He raised his own wand, attempted a complicated sort of wiggling action, and dropped it. Snape smirked as Lockhart quickly picked it up, saying, "Whoops — my wand is a little overexcited —"

Snape moved closer to Malfoy, bent down, and whispered something in his ear. Malfoy smirked, too. Harry looked up nervously at Lockhart and said, "Professor, could you show me that blocking thing again?"

"Scared?" muttered Malfoy, so that Lockhart couldn't hear him.

"You wish," said Harry out of the corner of his mouth.

Lockhart cuffed Harry merrily on the shoulder. "Just do what I did, Harry!"

"What, drop my wand?"

But Lockhart wasn't listening.

"Three — two — one — go!" he shouted.

Malfoy raised his wand quickly and bellowed, "*Serpensortia*!"

The end of his wand exploded. Harry watched, aghast, as a long black snake shot out of it, fell heavily onto the floor between them, and raised itself, ready to strike. There were screams as the crowd backed swiftly away, clearing the floor.

"Don't move, Potter," said Snape lazily, clearly enjoying the sight of Harry standing motionless, eye to eye with the angry snake. "I'll get rid of it. . . ."

"Allow me!" shouted Lockhart. He brandished his wand at the snake and there was a loud bang; the snake, instead of vanishing, flew ten feet into the air and fell back to the floor with a loud smack. Enraged, hissing furiously, it slithered straight toward Justin Finch-Fletchley and raised itself again, fangs exposed, poised to strike.

Harry wasn't sure what made him do it. He wasn't even aware of deciding to do it. All he knew was that his legs were carrying him forward as though he was on casters and that he had shouted stupidly at the snake, "Leave him alone!" And miraculously — inexplicably — the snake slumped to the floor, docile as a thick, black garden hose, its eyes now on Harry. Harry felt the fear drain out of him. He knew the snake wouldn't attack anyone now, though how he knew it, he couldn't have explained.

He looked up at Justin, grinning, expecting to see Justin looking

relieved, or puzzled, or even grateful — but certainly not angry and scared.

"What do you think you're playing at?" he shouted, and before Harry could say anything, Justin had turned and stormed out of the hall.

Snape stepped forward, waved his wand, and the snake vanished in a small puff of black smoke. Snape, too, was looking at Harry in an unexpected way: It was a shrewd and calculating look, and Harry didn't like it. He was also dimly aware of an ominous muttering all around the walls. Then he felt a tugging on the back of his robes.

"Come on," said Ron's voice in his ear. "Move — come *on* —"

Ron steered him out of the hall, Hermione hurrying alongside them. As they went through the doors, the people on either side drew away as though they were frightened of catching something. Harry didn't have a clue what was going on, and neither Ron nor Hermione explained anything until they had dragged him all the way up to the empty Gryffindor common room. Then Ron pushed Harry into an armchair and said, "You're a Parselmouth. Why didn't you tell us?"

"I'm a what?" said Harry.

"*A Parselmouth*!" said Ron. "You can talk to snakes!"

"I know," said Harry. "I mean, that's only the second time I've ever done it. I accidentally set a boa constrictor on my cousin Dudley at the zoo once — long story — but it was telling me it had never seen Brazil and I sort of set it free without meaning to — that was before I knew I was a wizard —"

"A boa constrictor told you it had never seen Brazil?" Ron repeated faintly.

"So?" said Harry. "I bet loads of people here can do it."

"Oh, no they can't," said Ron. "It's not a very common gift. Harry, this is bad."

"What's bad?" said Harry, starting to feel quite angry. "What's wrong with everyone? Listen, if I hadn't told that snake not to attack Justin —"

"Oh, that's what you said to it?"

"What d'you mean? You were there — you heard me —"

"I heard you speaking Parseltongue," said Ron. "Snake language. You could have been saying anything — no wonder Justin panicked, you sounded like you were egging the snake on or something — it was creepy, you know —"

Harry gaped at him.

"I spoke a different language? But — I didn't realize — how can I speak a language without knowing I can speak it?"

Ron shook his head. Both he and Hermione were looking as though someone had died. Harry couldn't see what was so terrible.

"D'you want to tell me what's wrong with stopping a massive snake biting off Justin's head?" he said. "What does it matter *how* I did it as long as Justin doesn't have to join the Headless Hunt?"

"It matters," said Hermione, speaking at last in a hushed voice, "because being able to talk to snakes was what Salazar Slytherin was famous for. That's why the symbol of Slytherin House is a serpent."

Harry's mouth fell open.

"Exactly," said Ron. "And now the whole school's going to think you're his great-great-great-great-grandson or something —"

"But I'm not," said Harry, with a panic he couldn't quite explain.

"You'll find that hard to prove," said Hermione. "He lived about a thousand years ago; for all we know, you could be."

* * *

Harry lay awake for hours that night. Through a gap in the curtains around his four-poster he watched snow starting to drift past the tower window and wondered . . .

Could he be a descendant of Salazar Slytherin? He didn't know anything about his father's family, after all. The Dursleys had always forbidden questions about his wizarding relatives.

Quietly, Harry tried to say something in Parseltongue. The words wouldn't come. It seemed he had to be face-to-face with a snake to do it.

But I'm in Gryffindor, Harry thought. *The Sorting Hat wouldn't have put me in here if I had Slytherin blood. . . .*

Ah, said a nasty little voice in his brain, *but the Sorting Hat wanted to put you in Slytherin, don't you remember*?

Harry turned over. He'd see Justin the next day in Herbology and he'd explain that he'd been calling the snake off, not egging it on, which (he thought angrily, pummeling his pillow) any fool should have realized.

By next morning, however, the snow that had begun in the night had turned into a blizzard so thick that the last Herbology lesson of the term was canceled: Professor Sprout wanted to fit socks and scarves on the Mandrakes, a tricky operation she would entrust to no one else, now that it was so important for the Mandrakes to grow quickly and revive Mrs. Norris and Colin Creevey.

Harry fretted about this next to the fire in the Gryffindor common room, while Ron and Hermione used their time off to play a game of wizard chess.

"For heaven's sake, Harry," said Hermione, exasperated, as one

of Ron's bishops wrestled her knight off his horse and dragged him off the board. "Go and *find* Justin if it's so important to you."

So Harry got up and left through the portrait hole, wondering where Justin might be.

The castle was darker than it usually was in daytime because of the thick, swirling gray snow at every window. Shivering, Harry walked past classrooms where lessons were taking place, catching snatches of what was happening within. Professor McGonagall was shouting at someone who, by the sound of it, had turned his friend into a badger. Resisting the urge to take a look, Harry walked on by, thinking that Justin might be using his free time to catch up on some work, and deciding to check the library first.

A group of the Hufflepuffs who should have been in Herbology were indeed sitting at the back of the library, but they didn't seem to be working. Between the long lines of high bookshelves, Harry could see that their heads were close together and they were having what looked like an absorbing conversation. He couldn't see whether Justin was among them. He was walking toward them when something of what they were saying met his ears, and he paused to listen, hidden in the Invisibility section.

"So anyway," a stout boy was saying, "I told Justin to hide up in our dormitory. I mean to say, if Potter's marked him down as his next victim, it's best if he keeps a low profile for a while. Of course, Justin's been waiting for something like this to happen ever since he let slip to Potter he was Muggle-born. Justin actually *told* him he'd been down for Eton. That's not the kind of thing you bandy about with Slytherin's heir on the loose, is it?"

"You definitely think it *is* Potter, then, Ernie?" said a girl with blonde pigtails anxiously.

"Hannah," said the stout boy solemnly, "he's a Parselmouth. Everyone knows that's the mark of a Dark wizard. Have you ever heard of a decent one who could talk to snakes? They called Slytherin himself Serpent-tongue."

There was some heavy murmuring at this, and Ernie went on, "Remember what was written on the wall? *Enemies of the Heir, Beware.* Potter had some sort of run-in with Filch. Next thing we know, Filch's cat's attacked. That first year, Creevey, was annoying Potter at the Quidditch match, taking pictures of him while he was lying in the mud. Next thing we know — Creevey's been attacked."

"He always seems so nice, though," said Hannah uncertainly, "and, well, he's the one who made You-Know-Who disappear. He can't be all bad, can he?"

Ernie lowered his voice mysteriously, the Hufflepuffs bent closer, and Harry edged nearer so that he could catch Ernie's words.

"No one knows how he survived that attack by You-Know-Who. I mean to say, he was only a baby when it happened. He should have been blasted into smithereens. Only a really powerful Dark wizard could have survived a curse like that." He dropped his voice until it was barely more than a whisper, and said, "*That's* probably why You-Know-Who wanted to kill him in the first place. Didn't want another Dark Lord *competing* with him. I wonder what other powers Potter's been hiding?"

Harry couldn't take anymore. Clearing his throat loudly, he stepped out from behind the bookshelves. If he hadn't been feeling so angry, he would have found the sight that greeted him funny: Every one of the Hufflepuffs looked as though they had been Petrified by the sight of him, and the color was draining out of Ernie's face.

"Hello," said Harry. "I'm looking for Justin Finch-Fletchley."

The Hufflepuffs' worst fears had clearly been confirmed. They all looked fearfully at Ernie.

"What do you want with him?" said Ernie in a quavering voice.

"I wanted to tell him what really happened with that snake at the Dueling Club," said Harry.

Ernie bit his white lips and then, taking a deep breath, said, "We were all there. We saw what happened."

"Then you noticed that after I spoke to it, the snake backed off?" said Harry.

"All I saw," said Ernie stubbornly, though he was trembling as he spoke, "was you speaking Parseltongue and chasing the snake toward Justin."

"I didn't chase it at him!" Harry said, his voice shaking with anger. "It didn't even *touch* him!"

"It was a very near miss," said Ernie. "And in case you're getting ideas," he added hastily, "I might tell you that you can trace my family back through nine generations of witches and warlocks and my blood's as pure as anyone's, so —"

"I don't care what sort of blood you've got!" said Harry fiercely. "Why would I want to attack Muggle-borns?"

"I've heard you hate those Muggles you live with," said Ernie swiftly.

"It's not possible to live with the Dursleys and not hate them," said Harry. "I'd like to see you try it."

He turned on his heel and stormed out of the library, earning himself a reproving glare from Madam Pince, who was polishing the gilded cover of a large spellbook.

Harry blundered up the corridor, barely noticing where he was going, he was in such a fury. The result was that he walked into something very large and solid, which knocked him backward onto the floor.

"Oh, hello, Hagrid," Harry said, looking up.

Hagrid's face was entirely hidden by a woolly, snow-covered balaclava, but it couldn't possibly be anyone else, as he filled most of the corridor in his moleskin overcoat. A dead rooster was hanging from one of his massive, gloved hands.

"All righ', Harry?" he said, pulling up the balaclava so he could speak. "Why aren't yeh in class?"

"Canceled," said Harry, getting up. "What're you doing in here?"

Hagrid held up the limp rooster.

"Second one killed this term," he explained. "It's either foxes or a Blood-Suckin' Bugbear, an' I need the headmaster's permission ter put a charm around the hen coop."

He peered more closely at Harry from under his thick, snow-flecked eyebrows.

"Yeh sure yeh're all righ'? Yeh look all hot an' bothered —"

Harry couldn't bring himself to repeat what Ernie and the rest of the Hufflepuffs had been saying about him.

"It's nothing," he said. "I'd better get going, Hagrid, it's Transfiguration next and I've got to pick up my books."

He walked off, his mind still full of what Ernie had said about him.

"Justin's been waiting for something like this to happen ever since he let slip to Potter he was Muggle-born. . . ."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Harry stamped up the stairs and turned along another corridor, which was particularly dark; the torches had been extinguished by a strong, icy draft that was blowing through a loose windowpane. He was halfway down the passage when he tripped headlong over something lying on the floor.

He turned to squint at what he'd fallen over and felt as though his stomach had dissolved.

Justin Finch-Fletchley was lying on the floor, rigid and cold, a look of shock frozen on his face, his eyes staring blankly at the ceiling. And that wasn't all. Next to him was another figure, the strangest sight Harry had ever seen.

It was Nearly Headless Nick, no longer pearly-white and transparent, but black and smoky, floating immobile and horizontal, six inches off the floor. His head was half off and his face wore an expression of shock identical to Justin's.

Harry got to his feet, his breathing fast and shallow, his heart doing a kind of drumroll against his ribs. He looked wildly up and down the deserted corridor and saw a line of spiders scuttling as fast as they could away from the bodies. The only sounds were the muffled voices of teachers from the classes on either side.

He could run, and no one would ever know he had been there. But he couldn't just leave them lying here. . . . He had to get help. . . . Would anyone believe he hadn't had anything to do with this?

As he stood there, panicking, a door right next to him opened with a bang. Peeves the Poltergeist came shooting out.

"Why, it's potty wee Potter!" cackled Peeves, knocking Harry's glasses askew as he bounced past him. "What's Potter up to? Why's Potter lurking —"

Peeves stopped, halfway through a midair somersault. Upside down, he spotted Justin and Nearly Headless Nick. He flipped the right way up, filled his lungs and, before Harry could stop him, screamed, "ATTACK! ATTACK! ANOTHER ATTACK! NO MORTAL OR GHOST IS SAFE! RUN FOR YOUR LIVES! ATTAAAACK!"

Crash — crash — crash — door after door flew open along the corridor and people flooded out. For several long minutes, there was a scene of such confusion that Justin was in danger of being squashed and people kept standing in Nearly Headless Nick. Harry found himself pinned against the wall as the teachers shouted for quiet. Professor McGonagall came running, followed by her own class, one of whom still had black-and-white-striped hair. She used her wand to set off a loud bang, which restored silence, and ordered everyone back into their classes. No sooner had the scene cleared somewhat than Ernie the Hufflepuff arrived, panting, on the scene.

"*Caught in the act*!" Ernie yelled, his face stark white, pointing his finger dramatically at Harry.

"That will do, Macmillan!" said Professor McGonagall sharply.

Peeves was bobbing overhead, now grinning wickedly, surveying the scene; Peeves always loved chaos. As the teachers bent over Justin and Nearly Headless Nick, examining them, Peeves broke into song:

> "*Oh, Potter, you rotter, oh, what have you done,*
> *You're killing off students, you think it's good fun* —"

"That's enough, Peeves!" barked Professor McGonagall, and Peeves zoomed away backward, with his tongue out at Harry.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Justin was carried up to the hospital wing by Professor Flitwick and Professor Sinistra of the Astronomy department, but nobody seemed to know what to do for Nearly Headless Nick. In the end, Professor McGonagall conjured a large fan out of thin air, which she gave to Ernie with instructions to waft Nearly Headless Nick up the stairs. This Ernie did, fanning Nick along like a silent black hovercraft. This left Harry and Professor McGonagall alone together.

"This way, Potter," she said.

"Professor," said Harry at once, "I swear I didn't —"

"This is out of my hands, Potter," said Professor McGonagall curtly.

They marched in silence around a corner and she stopped before a large and extremely ugly stone gargoyle.

"Lemon drop!" she said. This was evidently a password, because the gargoyle sprang suddenly to life and hopped aside as the wall behind him split in two. Even full of dread for what was coming, Harry couldn't fail to be amazed. Behind the wall was a spiral staircase that was moving smoothly upward, like an escalator. As he and Professor McGonagall stepped onto it, Harry heard the wall thud closed behind them. They rose upward in circles, higher and higher, until at last, slightly dizzy, Harry saw a gleaming oak door ahead, with a brass knocker in the shape of a griffin.

He knew now where he was being taken. This must be where Dumbledore lived.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE POLYJUICE POTION

They stepped off the stone staircase at the top, and Professor McGonagall rapped on the door. It opened silently and they entered. Professor McGonagall told Harry to wait and left him there, alone.

Harry looked around. One thing was certain: of all the teachers' offices Harry had visited so far this year, Dumbledore's was by far the most interesting. If he hadn't been scared out of his wits that he was about to be thrown out of school, he would have been very pleased to have a chance to look around it.

It was a large and beautiful circular room, full of funny little noises. A number of curious silver instruments stood on spindle-legged tables, whirring and emitting little puffs of smoke. The walls were covered with portraits of old headmasters and headmistresses, all of whom were snoozing gently in their frames. There was also an enormous, claw-footed desk, and, sitting on a shelf behind it, a shabby, tattered wizard's hat — the *Sorting Hat.*

Harry hesitated. He cast a wary eye around the sleeping witches and wizards on the walls. Surely it couldn't hurt if he took the hat down and tried it on again? Just to see . . . just to make sure it *had* put him in the right House —

He walked quietly around the desk, lifted the hat from its shelf, and lowered it slowly onto his head. It was much too large and slipped down over his eyes, just as it had done the last time he'd put it on. Harry stared at the black inside of the hat, waiting. Then a small voice said in his ear, "Bee in your bonnet, Harry Potter?"

"Er, yes," Harry muttered. "Er — sorry to bother you — I wanted to ask —"

"You've been wondering whether I put you in the right House," said the hat smartly. "Yes . . . you were particularly difficult to place. But I stand by what I said before" — Harry's heart leapt — "you *would* have done well in Slytherin —"

Harry's stomach plummeted. He grabbed the point of the hat and pulled it off. It hung limply in his hand, grubby and faded. Harry pushed it back onto its shelf, feeling sick.

"You're wrong," he said aloud to the still and silent hat. It didn't move. Harry backed away, watching it. Then a strange, gagging noise behind him made him wheel around.

He wasn't alone after all. Standing on a golden perch behind the door was a decrepit-looking bird that resembled a half-plucked turkey. Harry stared at it and the bird looked balefully back, making its gagging noise again. Harry thought it looked very ill. Its eyes were dull and, even as Harry watched, a couple more feathers fell out of its tail.

Harry was just thinking that all he needed was for Dumbledore's

pet bird to die while he was alone in the office with it, when the bird burst into flames.

Harry yelled in shock and backed away into the desk. He looked feverishly around in case there was a glass of water somewhere but couldn't see one; the bird, meanwhile, had become a fireball; it gave one loud shriek and next second there was nothing but a smoldering pile of ash on the floor.

The office door opened. Dumbledore came in, looking very somber.

"Professor," Harry gasped. "Your bird — I couldn't do anything — he just caught fire —"

To Harry's astonishment, Dumbledore smiled.

"About time, too," he said. "He's been looking dreadful for days; I've been telling him to get a move on."

He chuckled at the stunned look on Harry's face.

"Fawkes is a phoenix, Harry. Phoenixes burst into flame when it is time for them to die and are reborn from the ashes. Watch him . . ."

Harry looked down in time to see a tiny, wrinkled, newborn bird poke its head out of the ashes. It was quite as ugly as the old one.

"It's a shame you had to see him on a Burning Day," said Dumbledore, seating himself behind his desk. "He's really very handsome most of the time, wonderful red and gold plumage. Fascinating creatures, phoenixes. They can carry immensely heavy loads, their tears have healing powers, and they make highly *faithful* pets."

In the shock of Fawkes catching fire, Harry had forgotten what he was there for, but it all came back to him as Dumbledore settled

himself in the high chair behind the desk and fixed Harry with his penetrating, light-blue stare.

Before Dumbledore could speak another word, however, the door of the office flew open with an almighty bang and Hagrid burst in, a wild look in his eyes, his balaclava perched on top of his shaggy black head and the dead rooster still swinging from his hand.

"It wasn' Harry, Professor Dumbledore!" said Hagrid urgently. "I was talkin' ter him *seconds* before that kid was found, he never had time, sir —"

Dumbledore tried to say something, but Hagrid went ranting on, waving the rooster around in his agitation, sending feathers everywhere.

"— it can't've bin him, I'll swear it in front o' the Ministry o' Magic if I have to —"

"Hagrid, I —"

"— yeh've got the wrong boy, sir, I *know* Harry never —"

"*Hagrid*!" said Dumbledore loudly. "I do *not* think that Harry attacked those people."

"Oh," said Hagrid, the rooster falling limply at his side. "Right. I'll wait outside then, Headmaster."

And he stomped out looking embarrassed.

"You don't think it was me, Professor?" Harry repeated hopefully as Dumbledore brushed rooster feathers off his desk.

"No, Harry, I don't," said Dumbledore, though his face was somber again. "But I still want to talk to you."

Harry waited nervously while Dumbledore considered him, the tips of his long fingers together.

"I must ask you, Harry, whether there is anything you'd like to tell me," he said gently. "Anything at all."

Harry didn't know what to say. He thought of Malfoy shouting, "You'll be next, Mudbloods!" and of the Polyjuice Potion simmering away in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. Then he thought of the disembodied voice he had heard twice and remembered what Ron had said: *"Hearing voices no one else can hear isn't a good sign, even in the wizarding world."* He thought, too, about what everyone was saying about him, and his growing dread that he was somehow connected with Salazar Slytherin. . . .

"No," said Harry. "There isn't anything, Professor. . . ."

The double attack on Justin and Nearly Headless Nick turned what had hitherto been nervousness into real panic. Curiously, it was Nearly Headless Nick's fate that seemed to worry people most. What could possibly do that to a ghost? people asked each other; what terrible power could harm someone who was already dead? There was almost a stampede to book seats on the Hogwarts Express so that students could go home for Christmas.

"At this rate, we'll be the only ones left," Ron told Harry and Hermione. "Us, Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle. What a jolly holiday it's going to be."

Crabbe and Goyle, who always did whatever Malfoy did, had signed up to stay over the holidays, too. But Harry was glad that most people were leaving. He was tired of people skirting around him in the corridors, as though he were about to sprout fangs or spit poison; tired of all the muttering, pointing, and hissing as he passed.

Fred and George, however, found all this very funny. They went out of their way to march ahead of Harry down the corridors, shouting, "Make way for the Heir of Slytherin, seriously evil wizard coming through. . . ."

Percy was deeply disapproving of this behavior.

"It is *not* a laughing matter," he said coldly.

"Oh, get out of the way, Percy," said Fred. "Harry's in a hurry."

"Yeah, he's off to the Chamber of Secrets for a cup of tea with his fanged servant," said George, chortling.

Ginny didn't find it amusing either.

"Oh, *don't,*" she wailed every time Fred asked Harry loudly who he was planning to attack next, or when George pretended to ward Harry off with a large clove of garlic when they met.

Harry didn't mind; it made him feel better that Fred and George, at least, thought the idea of his being Slytherin's heir was quite ludicrous. But their antics seemed to be aggravating Draco Malfoy, who looked increasingly sour each time he saw them at it.

"It's because he's *bursting* to say it's really him," said Ron knowingly. "You know how he hates anyone beating him at anything, and you're getting all the credit for his dirty work."

"Not for long," said Hermione in a satisfied tone. "The Polyjuice Potion's nearly ready. We'll be getting the truth out of him any day now."

At last the term ended, and a silence deep as the snow on the grounds descended on the castle. Harry found it peaceful, rather than gloomy, and enjoyed the fact that he, Hermione, and the Weasleys had the run of Gryffindor Tower, which meant they could

play Exploding Snap loudly without bothering anyone, and practice dueling in private. Fred, George, and Ginny had chosen to stay at school rather than visit Bill in Egypt with Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. Percy, who disapproved of what he termed their childish behavior, didn't spend much time in the Gryffindor common room. He had already told them pompously that *he* was only staying over Christmas because it was his duty as a prefect to support the teachers during this troubled time.

Christmas morning dawned, cold and white. Harry and Ron, the only ones left in their dormitory, were woken very early by Hermione, who burst in, fully dressed and carrying presents for them both.

"Wake up," she said loudly, pulling back the curtains at the window.

"Hermione — you're not supposed to be in here —" said Ron, shielding his eyes against the light.

"Merry Christmas to you, too," said Hermione, throwing him his present. "I've been up for nearly an hour, adding more lacewings to the potion. It's ready."

Harry sat up, suddenly wide awake.

"Are you sure?"

"Positive," said Hermione, shirting Scabbers the rat so that she could sit down on the end of Ron's four-poster. "If we're going to do it, I say it should be tonight."

At that moment, Hedwig swooped into the room, carrying a very small package in her beak.

"Hello," said Harry happily as she landed on his bed. "Are you speaking to me again?"

She nibbled his ear in an affectionate sort of way, which was a far better present than the one that she had brought him, which turned out to be from the Dursleys. They had sent Harry a toothpick and a note telling him to find out whether he'd be able to stay at Hogwarts for the summer vacation, too.

The rest of Harry's Christmas presents were far more satisfactory. Hagrid had sent him a large tin of treacle toffee, which Harry decided to soften by the fire before eating; Ron had given him a book called *Flying with the Cannons,* a book of interesting facts about his favorite Quidditch team, and Hermione had bought him a luxury eagle-feather quill. Harry opened the last present to find a new, hand-knitted sweater from Mrs. Weasley and a large plum cake. He read her card with a fresh surge of guilt, thinking about Mr. Weasley's car (which hadn't been seen since its crash with the Whomping Willow), and the bout of rule-breaking he and Ron were planning next.

No one, not even someone dreading taking Polyjuice Potion later, could fail to enjoy Christmas dinner at Hogwarts.

The Great Hall looked magnificent. Not only were there a dozen frost-covered Christmas trees and thick streamers of holly and mistletoe crisscrossing the ceiling, but enchanted snow was falling, warm and dry, from the ceiling. Dumbledore led them in a few of his favorite carols, Hagrid booming more and more loudly with every goblet of eggnog he consumed. Percy, who hadn't noticed that Fred had bewitched his prefect badge so that it now read "Pinhead," kept asking them all what they were sniggering at. Harry didn't even care that Draco Malfoy was making loud, snide remarks

about his new sweater from the Slytherin table. With a bit of luck, Malfoy would be getting his comeuppance in a few hours' time.

Harry and Ron had barely finished their third helpings of Christmas pudding when Hermione ushered them out of the hall to finalize their plans for the evening.

"We still need a bit of the people you're changing into," said Hermione matter-of-factly, as though she were sending them to the supermarket for laundry detergent. "And obviously, it'll be best if you can get something of Crabbe's and Goyle's; they're Malfoy's best friends, he'll tell them anything. And we also need to make sure the real Crabbe and Goyle can't burst in on us while we're interrogating him.

"I've got it all worked out," she went on smoothly, ignoring Harry's and Ron's stupefied faces. She held up two plump chocolate cakes. "I've filled these with a simple Sleeping Draught. All you have to do is make sure Crabbe and Goyle find them. You know how greedy they are, they're bound to eat them. Once they're asleep, pull out a few of their hairs and hide them in a broom closet."

Harry and Ron looked incredulously at each other.

"Hermione, I don't think —"

"That could go seriously wrong —"

But Hermione had a steely glint in her eye not unlike the one Professor McGonagall sometimes had.

"The potion will be useless without Crabbe's and Goyle's hair," she said sternly. "You do *want* to investigate Malfoy, don't you?"

"Oh, all right, all right," said Harry. "But what about you? Whose hair are you ripping out?"

"I've already got mine!" said Hermione brightly, pulling a tiny bottle out of her pocket and showing them the single hair inside it. "Remember Millicent Bulstrode wrestling with me at the Dueling Club? She left this on my robes when she was trying to strangle me! And she's gone home for Christmas — so I'll just have to tell the Slytherins I've decided to come back."

When Hermione had bustled off to check on the Polyjuice Potion again, Ron turned to Harry with a doom-laden expression.

"Have you ever heard of a plan where so many things could go wrong?"

But to Harry's and Ron's utter amazement, stage one of the operation went just as smoothly as Hermione had said. They lurked in the deserted entrance hall after Christmas tea, waiting for Crabbe and Goyle who had remained alone at the Slytherin table, shoveling down fourth helpings of trifle. Harry had perched the chocolate cakes on the end of the banisters. When they spotted Crabbe and Goyle coming out of the Great Hall, Harry and Ron hid quickly behind a suit of armor next to the front door.

"How thick can you get?" Ron whispered ecstatically as Crabbe gleefully pointed out the cakes to Goyle and grabbed them. Grinning stupidly, they stuffed the cakes whole into their large mouths. For a moment, both of them chewed greedily, looks of triumph on their faces. Then, without the smallest change of expression, they both keeled over backward onto the floor.

By far the hardest part was hiding them in the closet across the hall. Once they were safely stowed among the buckets and mops, Harry yanked out a couple of the bristles that covered Goyle's fore-

head and Ron pulled out several of Crabbe's hairs. They also stole their shoes, because their own were far too small for Crabbe- and Goyle-size feet. Then, still stunned at what they had just done, they sprinted up to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom.

They could hardly see for the thick black smoke issuing from the stall in which Hermione was stirring the cauldron. Pulling their robes up over their faces, Harry and Ron knocked softly on the door.

"Hermione?"

They heard the scrape of the lock and Hermione emerged, shiny-faced and looking anxious. Behind her they heard the *gloop gloop* of the bubbling, glutinous potion. Three glass tumblers stood ready on the toilet seat.

"Did you get them?" Hermione asked breathlessly.

Harry showed her Goyle's hair.

"Good. And I sneaked these spare robes out of the laundry," Hermione said, holding up a small sack. "You'll need bigger sizes once you're Crabbe and Goyle."

The three of them stared into the cauldron. Close up, the potion looked like thick, dark mud, bubbling sluggishly.

"I'm sure I've done everything right," said Hermione, nervously rereading the splotched page of *Moste Potente Potions.* "It looks like the book says it should . . . once we've drunk it, we'll have exactly an hour before we change back into ourselves."

"Now what?" Ron whispered.

"We separate it into three glasses and add the hairs."

Hermione ladled large dollops of the potion into each of the glasses. Then, her hand trembling, she shook Millicent Bulstrode's hair out of its bottle into the first glass.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The potion hissed loudly like a boiling kettle and frothed madly. A second later, it had turned a sick sort of yellow.

"Urgh — essence of Millicent Bulstrode," said Ron, eyeing it with loathing. "Bet it tastes disgusting."

"Add yours, then," said Hermione.

Harry dropped Goyle's hair into the middle glass and Ron put Crabbe's into the last one. Both glasses hissed and frothed: Goyle's turned the khaki color of a booger, Crabbe's a dark, murky brown.

"Hang on," said Harry as Ron and Hermione reached for their glasses. "We'd better not all drink them in here. . . . Once we turn into Crabbe and Goyle we won't fit. And Millicent Bulstrode's no pixie."

"Good thinking," said Ron, unlocking the door. "We'll take separate stalls."

Careful not to spill a drop of his Polyjuice Potion, Harry slipped into the middle stall.

"Ready?" he called.

"Ready," came Ron's and Hermione's voices.

"One — two — three —"

Pinching his nose, Harry drank the potion down in two large gulps. It tasted like overcooked cabbage.

Immediately, his insides started writhing as though he'd just swallowed live snakes — doubled up, he wondered whether he was going to be sick — then a burning sensation spread rapidly from his stomach to the very ends of his fingers and toes — next, bringing him gasping to all fours, came a horrible melting feeling, as the skin all over his body bubbled like hot wax — and before his eyes, his hands began to grow, the fingers thickened, the nails broadened,

the knuckles were bulging like bolts — his shoulders stretched painfully and a prickling on his forehead told him that hair was creeping down toward his eyebrows — his robes ripped as his chest expanded like a barrel bursting its hoops — his feet were agony in shoes four sizes too small —

As suddenly as it had started, everything stopped. Harry lay facedown on the stone-cold floor, listening to Myrtle gurgling morosely in the end toilet. With difficulty, he kicked off his shoes and stood up. So this was what it felt like, being Goyle. His large hand trembling, he pulled off his old robes, which were hanging a foot above his ankles, pulled on the spare ones, and laced up Goyle's boatlike shoes. He reached up to brush his hair out of his eyes and met only the short growth of wiry bristles, low on his forehead. Then he realized that his glasses were clouding his eyes because Goyle obviously didn't need them — he took them off and called, "Are you two okay?" Goyle's low rasp of a voice issued from his mouth.

"Yeah," came the deep grunt of Crabbe from his right.

Harry unlocked his door and stepped in front of the cracked mirror. Goyle stared back at him out of dull, deepset eyes. Harry scratched his ear. So did Goyle.

Ron's door opened. They stared at each other. Except that he looked pale and shocked, Ron was indistinguishable from Crabbe, from the pudding-bowl haircut to the long, gorilla arms.

"This is unbelievable," said Ron, approaching the mirror and prodding Crabbe's flat nose. "*Unbelievable.*"

"We'd better get going," said Harry, loosening the watch that was cutting into Goyle's thick wrist. "We've still got to find out

where the Slytherin common room is. I only hope we can find someone to follow . . ."

Ron, who had been gazing at Harry, said, "You don't know how bizarre it is to see Goyle *thinking*." He banged on Hermione's door. "C'mon, we need to go —"

A high-pitched voice answered him.

"I — I don't think I'm going to come after all. You go on without me."

"Hermione, we know Millicent Bulstrode's ugly, no one's going to know it's you —"

"No — really — I don't think I'll come. You two hurry up, you're wasting time —"

Harry looked at Ron, bewildered.

"*That* looks more like Goyle," said Ron. "That's how he looks every time a teacher asks him a question."

"Hermione, are you okay?" said Harry through the door.

"Fine — I'm fine — go on —"

Harry looked at his watch. Five of their precious sixty minutes had already passed.

"We'll meet you back here, all right?" he said.

Harry and Ron opened the door of the bathroom carefully, checked that the coast was clear, and set off.

"Don't swing your arms like that," Harry muttered to Ron.

"Eh?"

"Crabbe holds them sort of stiff. . . ."

"How's this?"

"Yeah, that's better. . . ."

They went down the marble staircase. All they needed now was

a Slytherin that they could follow to the Slytherin common room, but there was nobody around.

"Any ideas?" muttered Harry.

"The Slytherins always come up to breakfast from over there," said Ron, nodding at the entrance to the dungeons. The words had barely left his mouth when a girl with long, curly hair emerged from the entrance.

"Excuse me," said Ron, hurrying up to her. "We've forgotten the way to our common room."

"I beg your pardon?" said the girl stiffly. "*Our* common room? *I'm* a Ravenclaw."

She walked away, looking suspiciously back at them.

Harry and Ron hurried down the stone steps into the darkness, their footsteps echoing particularly loudly as Crabbe's and Goyle's huge feet hit the floor, feeling that this wasn't going to be as easy as they had hoped.

The labyrinthine passages were deserted. They walked deeper and deeper under the school, constantly checking their watches to see how much time they had left. After a quarter of an hour, just when they were getting desperate, they heard a sudden movement ahead.

"Ha!" said Ron excitedly. "There's one of them now!"

The figure was emerging from a side room. As they hurried nearer, however, their hearts sank. It wasn't a Slytherin, it was Percy.

"What're you doing down here?" said Ron in surprise.

Percy looked affronted.

"That," he said stiffly, "is none of your business. It's Crabbe, isn't it?"

"Wh — oh, yeah," said Ron.

"Well, get off to your dormitories," said Percy sternly. "It's not safe to go wandering around dark corridors these days."

"*You* are," Ron pointed out.

"I," said Percy, drawing himself up, "am a prefect. Nothing's about to attack *me*."

A voice suddenly echoed behind Harry and Ron. Draco Malfoy was strolling toward them, and for the first time in his life, Harry was pleased to see him.

"There you are," he drawled, looking at them. "Have you two been pigging out in the Great Hall all this time? I've been looking for you; I want to show you something really funny."

Malfoy glanced witheringly at Percy.

"And what're you doing down here, Weasley?" he sneered.

Percy looked outraged.

"You want to show a bit more respect to a school prefect!" he said. "I don't like your attitude!"

Malfoy sneered and motioned for Harry and Ron to follow him. Harry almost said something apologetic to Percy but caught himself just in time. He and Ron hurried after Malfoy, who said as they turned into the next passage, "That Peter Weasley —"

"Percy," Ron corrected him automatically.

"Whatever," said Malfoy. "I've noticed him sneaking around a lot lately. And I bet I know what he's up to. He thinks he's going to catch Slytherin's heir single-handed."

He gave a short, derisive laugh. Harry and Ron exchanged excited looks.

Malfoy paused by a stretch of bare, damp stone wall.

"What's the new password again?" he said to Harry.

"Er —" said Harry.

"Oh, yeah — *pure-blood*!" said Malfoy, not listening, and a stone door concealed in the wall slid open. Malfoy marched through it, and Harry and Ron followed him.

The Slytherin common room was a long, low underground room with rough stone walls and ceiling from which round, greenish lamps were hanging on chains. A fire was crackling under an elaborately carved mantelpiece ahead of them, and several Slytherins were silhouetted around it in high-backed chairs.

"Wait here," said Malfoy to Harry and Ron, motioning them to a pair of empty chairs set back from the fire. "I'll go and get it — my father's just sent it to me —"

Wondering what Malfoy was going to show them, Harry and Ron sat down, doing their best to look at home.

Malfoy came back a minute later, holding what looked like a newspaper clipping. He thrust it under Ron's nose.

"That'll give you a laugh," he said.

Harry saw Ron's eyes widen in shock. He read the clipping quickly, gave a very forced laugh, and handed it to Harry.

It had been clipped out of the *Daily Prophet,* and it said:

INQUIRY AT THE MINISTRY OF MAGIC

Arthur Weasley, Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, was today fined fifty Galleons for bewitching a Muggle car.

Mr. Lucius Malfoy, a governor of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, where the

> enchanted car crashed earlier this year, called today for Mr. Weasley's resignation.
>
> "Weasley has brought the Ministry into disrepute," Mr. Malfoy told our reporter. "He is clearly unfit to draw up our laws and his ridiculous Muggle Protection Act should be scrapped immediately."
>
> Mr. Weasley was unavailable for comment, although his wife told reporters to clear off or she'd set the family ghoul on them.

"Well?" said Malfoy impatiently as Harry handed the clipping back to him. "Don't you think it's funny?"

"Ha, ha," said Harry bleakly.

"Arthur Weasley loves Muggles so much he should snap his wand in half and go and join them," said Malfoy scornfully. "You'd never know the Weasleys were purebloods, the way they behave."

Ron's — or rather, Crabbe's — face was contorted with fury.

"What's up with you, Crabbe?" snapped Malfoy.

"Stomachache," Ron grunted.

"Well, go up to the hospital wing and give all those Mudbloods a kick from me," said Malfoy, snickering. "You know, I'm surprised the *Daily Prophet* hasn't reported all these attacks yet," he went on thoughtfully. "I suppose Dumbledore's trying to hush it all up. He'll be sacked if it doesn't stop soon. Father's always said old Dumbledore's the worst thing that's ever happened to this place. He loves Muggle-borns. A decent headmaster would never've let slime like that Creevey in."

Malfoy started taking pictures with an imaginary camera and did a cruel but accurate impression of Colin: " 'Potter, can I have your picture, Potter? Can I have your autograph? Can I lick your shoes, please, Potter?' "

He dropped his hands and looked at Harry and Ron.

"What's the *matter* with you two?"

Far too late, Harry and Ron forced themselves to laugh, but Malfoy seemed satisfied; perhaps Crabbe and Goyle were always slow on the uptake.

"Saint Potter, the Mudbloods' friend," said Malfoy slowly. "He's another one with no proper wizard feeling, or he wouldn't go around with that jumped-up Granger Mudblood. And people think *he's* Slytherin's heir!"

Harry and Ron waited with bated breath: Malfoy was surely seconds away from telling them it was him — but then —

"I *wish* I knew who it *is*," said Malfoy petulantly. "I could help them."

Ron's jaw dropped so that Crabbe looked even more clueless than usual. Fortunately, Malfoy didn't notice, and Harry, thinking fast, said, "You must have some idea who's behind it all. . . ."

"You know I haven't, Goyle, how many times do I have to tell you?" snapped Malfoy. "And Father won't tell me *anything* about the last time the Chamber was opened either. Of course, it was fifty years ago, so it was before his time, but he knows all about it, and he says that it was all kept quiet and it'll look suspicious if I know too much about it. But I know one thing — last time the Chamber of Secrets was opened, a Mudblood *died.* So I bet it's a matter of time before one of them's killed this time. . . . I hope it's Granger," he said with relish.

Ron was clenching Crabbe's gigantic fists. Feeling that it would be a bit of a giveaway if Ron punched Malfoy, Harry shot him a warning look and said, "D'you know if the person who opened the Chamber last time was caught?"

"Oh, yeah . . . whoever it was was expelled," said Malfoy. "They're probably still in Azkaban."

"Azkaban?" said Harry, puzzled.

"Azkaban — *the wizard prison,* Goyle," said Malfoy, looking at him in disbelief. "Honestly, if you were any slower, you'd be going backward."

He shifted restlessly in his chair and said, "Father says to keep my head down and let the Heir of Slytherin get on with it. He says the school needs ridding of all the Mudblood filth, but not to get mixed up in it. Of course, he's got a lot on his plate at the moment. You know the Ministry of Magic raided our manor last week?"

Harry tried to force Goyle's dull face into a look of concern.

"Yeah . . ." said Malfoy. "Luckily, they didn't find much. Father's got some *very* valuable Dark Arts stuff. But luckily, we've got our own secret chamber under the drawing-room floor —"

"Ho!" said Ron.

Malfoy looked at him. So did Harry. Ron blushed. Even his hair was turning red. His nose was also slowly lengthening — their hour was up, Ron was turning back into himself, and from the look of horror he was suddenly giving Harry, he must be, too.

They both jumped to their feet.

"Medicine for my stomach," Ron grunted, and without further ado they sprinted the length of the Slytherin common room, hurled themselves at the stone wall, and dashed up the passage, hoping against hope that Malfoy hadn't noticed anything. Harry

could feel his feet slipping around in Goyle's huge shoes and had to hoist up his robes as he shrank; they crashed up the steps into the dark entrance hall, which was full of a muffled pounding coming from the closet where they'd locked Crabbe and Goyle. Leaving their shoes outside the closet door, they sprinted in their socks up the marble staircase toward Moaning Myrtle's bathroom.

"Well, it wasn't a complete waste of time," Ron panted, closing the bathroom door behind them. "I know we still haven't found out who's doing the attacks, but I'm going to write to Dad tomorrow and tell him to check under the Malfoys' drawing room."

Harry checked his face in the cracked mirror. He was back to normal. He put his glasses on as Ron hammered on the door of Hermione's stall.

"Hermione, come out, we've got loads to tell you —"

"Go away!" Hermione squeaked.

Harry and Ron looked at each other.

"What's the matter?" said Ron. "You must be back to normal by now, we are —"

But Moaning Myrtle glided suddenly through the stall door. Harry had never seen her looking so happy.

"Ooooooh, wait till you see," she said. "It's *awful* —"

They heard the lock slide back and Hermione emerged, sobbing, her robes pulled up over her head.

"What's up?" said Ron uncertainly. "Have you still got Millicent's nose or something?"

Hermione let her robes fall and Ron backed into the sink.

Her face was covered in black fur. Her eyes had turned yellow and there were long, pointed ears poking through her hair.

"It was a c-cat hair!" she howled. "M-Millicent Bulstrode

m-must have a cat! And the p-potion isn't supposed to be used for animal transformations!"

"Uh-oh," said Ron.

"You'll be teased something *dreadful,*" said Myrtle happily.

"It's okay, Hermione," said Harry quickly. "We'll take you up to the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey never asks too many questions. . . ."

It took a long time to persuade Hermione to leave the bathroom. Moaning Myrtle sped them on their way with a hearty guffaw. "Wait till everyone finds out you've got a *tail*!"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE VERY SECRET DIARY

Hermione remained in the hospital wing for several weeks. There was a flurry of rumor about her disappearance when the rest of the school arrived back from their Christmas holidays, because of course everyone thought that she had been attacked. So many students filed past the hospital wing trying to catch a glimpse of her that Madam Pomfrey took out her curtains again and placed them around Hermione's bed, to spare her the shame of being seen with a furry face.

Harry and Ron went to visit her every evening. When the new term started, they brought her each day's homework.

"If I'd sprouted whiskers, I'd take a break from work," said Ron, tipping a stack of books onto Hermione's bedside table one evening.

"Don't be silly, Ron, I've got to keep up," said Hermione briskly. Her spirits were greatly improved by the fact that all the hair had

gone from her face and her eyes were turning slowly back to brown. "I don't suppose you've got any new leads?" she added in a whisper, so that Madam Pomfrey couldn't hear her.

"Nothing," said Harry gloomily.

"I was so *sure* it was Malfoy," said Ron, for about the hundredth time.

"What's that?" asked Harry, pointing to something gold sticking out from under Hermione's pillow.

"Just a get well card," said Hermione hastily, trying to poke it out of sight, but Ron was too quick for her. He pulled it out, flicked it open, and read aloud:

"*To Miss Granger, wishing you a speedy recovery, from your concerned teacher, Professor Gilderoy Lockhart, Order of Merlin, Third Class, Honorary Member of the Dark Force Defense League, and five-time winner of* Witch Weekly's *Most-Charming-Smile Award.*"

Ron looked up at Hermione, disgusted.

"You sleep with this under your *pillow*?"

But Hermione was spared answering by Madam Pomfrey sweeping over with her evening dose of medicine.

"Is Lockhart the smarmiest bloke you've ever met, or what?" Ron said to Harry as they left the infirmary and started up the stairs toward Gryffindor Tower. Snape had given them so much homework, Harry thought he was likely to be in the sixth year before he finished it. Ron was just saying he wished he had asked Hermione how many rat tails you were supposed to add to a Hair-Raising Potion when an angry outburst from the floor above reached their ears.

"That's Filch," Harry muttered as they hurried up the stairs and paused, out of sight, listening hard.

"You don't think someone else's been attacked?" said Ron tensely.

They stood still, their heads inclined toward Filch's voice, which sounded quite hysterical.

"*— even more work for me! Mopping all night, like I haven't got enough to do! No, this is the final straw, I'm going to Dumbledore —*"

His footsteps receded along the out-of-sight corridor and they heard a distant door slam.

They poked their heads around the corner. Filch had clearly been manning his usual lookout post: They were once again on the spot where Mrs. Norris had been attacked. They saw at a glance what Filch had been shouting about. A great flood of water stretched over half the corridor, and it looked as though it was still seeping from under the door of Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. Now that Filch had stopped shouting, they could hear Myrtle's wails echoing off the bathroom walls.

"*Now* what's up with her?" said Ron.

"Let's go and see," said Harry, and holding their robes over their ankles they stepped through the great wash of water to the door bearing its OUT OF ORDER sign, ignored it as always, and entered.

Moaning Myrtle was crying, if possible, louder and harder than ever before. She seemed to be hiding down her usual toilet. It was dark in the bathroom because the candles had been extinguished in the great rush of water that had left both walls and floor soaking wet.

"What's up, Myrtle?" said Harry.

"Who's that?" glugged Myrtle miserably. "Come to throw something else at me?"

Harry waded across to her stall and said, "Why would I throw something at you?"

"Don't ask me," Myrtle shouted, emerging with a wave of yet more water, which splashed onto the already sopping floor. "Here I am, minding my own business, and someone thinks it's funny to throw a book at me. . . ."

"But it can't hurt you if someone throws something at you," said Harry, reasonably. "I mean, it'd just go right through you, wouldn't it?"

He had said the wrong thing. Myrtle puffed herself up and shrieked, "Let's all throw books at Myrtle, because *she* can't feel it! Ten points if you can get it through her stomach! Fifty points if it goes through her head! Well, ha, ha, ha! What a lovely game, I *don't* think!"

"Who threw it at you, anyway?" asked Harry.

"*I* don't know. . . . I was just sitting in the U-bend, thinking about death, and it fell right through the top of my head," said Myrtle, glaring at them. "It's over there, it got washed out. . . ."

Harry and Ron looked under the sink where Myrtle was pointing. A small, thin book lay there. It had a shabby black cover and was as wet as everything else in the bathroom. Harry stepped forward to pick it up, but Ron suddenly flung out an arm to hold him back.

"What?" said Harry.

"Are you crazy?" said Ron. "It could be dangerous."

"*Dangerous*?" said Harry, laughing. "Come off it, how could it be dangerous?"

"You'd be surprised," said Ron, who was looking apprehensively at the book. "Some of the books the Ministry's confiscated — Dad's told me — there was one that burned your eyes out. And

everyone who read *Sonnets of a Sorcerer* spoke in limericks for the rest of their lives. And some old witch in Bath had a book that you could *never stop reading*! You just had to wander around with your nose in it, trying to do everything one-handed. And —"

"All right, I've got the point," said Harry.

The little book lay on the floor, nondescript and soggy.

"Well, we won't find out unless we look at it," he said, and he ducked around Ron and picked it up off the floor.

Harry saw at once that it was a diary, and the faded year on the cover told him it was fifty years old. He opened it eagerly. On the first page he could just make out the name "T. M. Riddle" in smudged ink.

"Hang on," said Ron, who had approached cautiously and was looking over Harry's shoulder. "I know that name. . . . T. M. Riddle got an award for special services to the school fifty years ago."

"How on earth d'you know that?" said Harry in amazement.

"Because Filch made me polish his shield about fifty times in detention," said Ron resentfully. "That was the one I burped slugs all over. If you'd wiped slime off a name for an hour, you'd remember it, too."

Harry peeled the wet pages apart. They were completely blank. There wasn't the faintest trace of writing on any of them, not even *Auntie Mabel's birthday,* or *dentist, half-past three.*

"He never wrote in it," said Harry, disappointed.

"I wonder why someone wanted to flush it away?" said Ron curiously.

Harry turned to the back cover of the book and saw the printed name of a variety store on Vauxhall Road, London.

"He must've been Muggle-born," said Harry thoughtfully. "To have bought a diary from Vauxhall Road. . . ."

"Well, it's not much use to you," said Ron. He dropped his voice. "Fifty points if you can get it through Myrtle's nose."

Harry, however, pocketed it.

Hermione left the hospital wing, de-whiskered, tail-less, and fur-free, at the beginning of February. On her first evening back in Gryffindor Tower, Harry showed her T. M. Riddle's diary and told her the story of how they had found it.

"Oooh, it might have hidden powers," said Hermione enthusiastically, taking the diary and looking at it closely.

"If it has, it's hiding them very well," said Ron. "Maybe it's shy. I don't know why you don't chuck it, Harry."

"I wish I knew why someone *did* try to chuck it," said Harry. "I wouldn't mind knowing how Riddle got an award for special services to Hogwarts either."

"Could've been anything," said Ron. "Maybe he got thirty O.W.L.s or saved a teacher from the giant squid. Maybe he murdered Myrtle; that would've done everyone a favor. . . ."

But Harry could tell from the arrested look on Hermione's face that she was thinking what he was thinking.

"What?" said Ron, looking from one to the other.

"Well, the Chamber of Secrets was opened fifty years ago, wasn't it?" he said. "That's what Malfoy said."

"Yeah . . ." said Ron slowly.

"And *this diary* is fifty years old," said Hermione, tapping it excitedly.

"So?"

"Oh, Ron, wake up," snapped Hermione. "We know the person who opened the Chamber last time was expelled *fifty years ago.* We know T. M. Riddle got an award for special services to the school *fifty years ago.* Well, what if Riddle got his special award for *catching the Heir of Slytherin*? His diary would probably tell us everything — where the Chamber is, and how to open it, and what sort of creature lives in it — the person who's behind the attacks this time wouldn't want that lying around, would they?"

"That's a *brilliant* theory, Hermione," said Ron, "with just one tiny little flaw. *There's nothing written in his diary.*"

But Hermione was pulling her wand out of her bag.

"It might be invisible ink!" she whispered.

She tapped the diary three times and said, "*Aparecium*!"

Nothing happened. Undaunted, Hermione shoved her hand back into her bag and pulled out what appeared to be a bright red eraser.

"It's a Revealer, I got it in Diagon Alley," she said.

She rubbed hard on *January first.* Nothing happened.

"I'm telling you, there's nothing to find in there," said Ron. "Riddle just got a diary for Christmas and couldn't be bothered filling it in."

Harry couldn't explain, even to himself, why he didn't just throw Riddle's diary away. The fact was that even though he *knew* the diary was blank, he kept absentmindedly picking it up and turning the pages, as though it were a story he wanted to finish. And while Harry was sure he had never heard the name T. M. Riddle before, it still seemed to mean something to him, almost as though

Riddle was a friend he'd had when he was very small, and had half-forgotten. But this was absurd. He'd never had friends before Hogwarts, Dudley had made sure of that.

Nevertheless, Harry was determined to find out more about Riddle, so next day at break, he headed for the trophy room to examine Riddle's special award, accompanied by an interested Hermione and a thoroughly unconvinced Ron, who told them he'd seen enough of the trophy room to last him a lifetime.

Riddle's burnished gold shield was tucked away in a corner cabinet. It didn't carry details of why it had been given to him ("Good thing, too, or it'd be even bigger and I'd still be polishing it," said Ron). However, they did find Riddle's name on an old Medal for Magical Merit, and on a list of old Head Boys.

"He sounds like Percy," said Ron, wrinkling his nose in disgust. "Prefect, Head Boy . . . probably top of every class —"

"You say that like it's a bad thing," said Hermione in a slightly hurt voice.

The sun had now begun to shine weakly on Hogwarts again. Inside the castle, the mood had grown more hopeful. There had been no more attacks since those on Justin and Nearly Headless Nick, and Madam Pomfrey was pleased to report that the Mandrakes were becoming moody and secretive, meaning that they were fast leaving childhood.

"The moment their acne clears up, they'll be ready for repotting again," Harry heard her telling Filch kindly one afternoon. "And after that, it won't be long until we're cutting them up and stewing them. You'll have Mrs. Norris back in no time."

Perhaps the Heir of Slytherin had lost his or her nerve, thought Harry. It must be getting riskier and riskier to open the Chamber of Secrets, with the school so alert and suspicious. Perhaps the monster, whatever it was, was even now settling itself down to hibernate for another fifty years. . . .

Ernie Macmillan of Hufflepuff didn't take this cheerful view. He was still convinced that Harry was the guilty one, that he had "given himself away" at the Dueling Club. Peeves wasn't helping matters; he kept popping up in the crowded corridors singing "Oh, Potter, you rotter . . ." now with a dance routine to match.

Gilderoy Lockhart seemed to think he himself had made the attacks stop. Harry overheard him telling Professor McGonagall so while the Gryffindors were lining up for Transfiguration.

"I don't think there'll be any more trouble, Minerva," he said, tapping his nose knowingly and winking. "I think the Chamber has been locked for good this time. The culprit must have known it was only a matter of time before I caught him. Rather sensible to stop now, before I came down hard on him.

"You know, what the school needs now is a morale-booster. Wash away the memories of last term! I won't say any more just now, but I think I know just the thing. . . ."

He tapped his nose again and strode off.

Lockhart's idea of a morale-booster became clear at breakfast time on February fourteenth. Harry hadn't had much sleep because of a late-running Quidditch practice the night before, and he hurried down to the Great Hall, slightly late. He thought, for a moment, that he'd walked through the wrong doors.

The walls were all covered with large, lurid pink flowers. Worse

still, heart-shaped confetti was falling from the pale blue ceiling. Harry went over to the Gryffindor table, where Ron was sitting looking sickened, and Hermione seemed to have been overcome with giggles.

"What's going on?" Harry asked them, sitting down and wiping confetti off his bacon.

Ron pointed to the teachers' table, apparently too disgusted to speak. Lockhart, wearing lurid pink robes to match the decorations, was waving for silence. The teachers on either side of him were looking stony-faced. From where he sat, Harry could see a muscle going in Professor McGonagall's cheek. Snape looked as though someone had just fed him a large beaker of Skele-Gro.

"Happy Valentine's Day!" Lockhart shouted. "And may I thank the forty-six people who have so far sent me cards! Yes, I have taken the liberty of arranging this little surprise for you all — and it doesn't end here!"

Lockhart clapped his hands and through the doors to the entrance hall marched a dozen surly-looking dwarfs. Not just any dwarfs, however. Lockhart had them all wearing golden wings and carrying harps.

"My friendly, card-carrying cupids!" beamed Lockhart. "They will be roving around the school today delivering your valentines! And the fun doesn't stop here! I'm sure my colleagues will want to enter into the spirit of the occasion! Why not ask Professor Snape to show you how to whip up a Love Potion! And while you're at it, Professor Flitwick knows more about Entrancing Enchantments than any wizard I've ever met, the sly old dog!"

Professor Flitwick buried his face in his hands. Snape was look-

ing as though the first person to ask him for a Love Potion would be force-fed poison.

"Please, Hermione, tell me you weren't one of the forty-six," said Ron as they left the Great Hall for their first lesson. Hermione suddenly became very interested in searching her bag for her schedule and didn't answer.

All day long, the dwarfs kept barging into their classes to deliver valentines, to the annoyance of the teachers, and late that afternoon as the Gryffindors were walking upstairs for Charms, one of the dwarfs caught up with Harry.

"Oy, you! 'Arry Potter!" shouted a particularly grim-looking dwarf, elbowing people out of the way to get to Harry.

Hot all over at the thought of being given a valentine in front of a line of first years, which happened to include Ginny Weasley, Harry tried to escape. The dwarf, however, cut his way through the crowd by kicking people's shins, and reached him before he'd gone two paces.

"I've got a musical message to deliver to 'Arry Potter in person," he said, twanging his harp in a threatening sort of way.

"*Not here,*" Harry hissed, trying to escape.

"Stay *still*!" grunted the dwarf, grabbing hold of Harry's bag and pulling him back.

"Let me go!" Harry snarled, tugging.

With a loud ripping noise, his bag split in two. His books, wand, parchment, and quill spilled onto the floor and his ink bottle smashed over everything.

Harry scrambled around, trying to pick it all up before the dwarf started singing, causing something of a holdup in the corridor.

"What's going on here?" came the cold, drawling voice of Draco Malfoy. Harry started stuffing everything feverishly into his ripped bag, desperate to get away before Malfoy could hear his musical valentine.

"What's all this commotion?" said another familiar voice as Percy Weasley arrived.

Losing his head, Harry tried to make a run for it, but the dwarf seized him around the knees and brought him crashing to the floor.

"Right," he said, sitting on Harry's ankles. "Here is your singing valentine:

His eyes are as green as a fresh pickled toad,
His hair is as dark as a blackboard.
I wish he was mine, he's really divine,
The hero who conquered the Dark Lord."

Harry would have given all the gold in Gringotts to evaporate on the spot. Trying valiantly to laugh along with everyone else, he got up, his feet numb from the weight of the dwarf, as Percy Weasley did his best to disperse the crowd, some of whom were crying with mirth.

"Off you go, off you go, the bell rang five minutes ago, off to class, now," he said, shooing some of the younger students away. "*And* you, Malfoy —"

Harry, glancing over, saw Malfoy stoop and snatch up something. Leering, he showed it to Crabbe and Goyle, and Harry realized that he'd got Riddle's diary.

"Give that back," said Harry quietly.

"Wonder what Potter's written in this?" said Malfoy, who obvi-

ously hadn't noticed the year on the cover and thought he had Harry's own diary. A hush fell over the onlookers. Ginny was staring from the diary to Harry, looking terrified.

"Hand it over, Malfoy," said Percy sternly.

"When I've had a look," said Malfoy, waving the diary tauntingly at Harry.

Percy said, "As a school prefect —" but Harry had lost his temper. He pulled out his wand and shouted, "*Expelliarmus*!" and just as Snape had disarmed Lockhart, so Malfoy found the diary shooting out of his hand into the air. Ron, grinning broadly, caught it.

"Harry!" said Percy loudly. "No magic in the corridors. I'll have to report this, you know!"

But Harry didn't care, he was one-up on Malfoy, and that was worth five points from Gryffindor any day. Malfoy was looking furious, and as Ginny passed him to enter her classroom, he yelled spitefully after her, "I don't think Potter liked your valentine much!"

Ginny covered her face with her hands and ran into class. Snarling, Ron pulled out his wand, too, but Harry pulled him away. Ron didn't need to spend the whole of Charms belching slugs.

It wasn't until they had reached Professor Flitwick's class that Harry noticed something rather odd about Riddle's diary. All his other books were drenched in scarlet ink. The diary, however, was as clean as it had been before the ink bottle had smashed all over it. He tried to point this out to Ron, but Ron was having trouble with his wand again; large purple bubbles were blossoming out of the end, and he wasn't much interested in anything else.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

* * *

Harry went to bed before anyone else in his dormitory that night. This was partly because he didn't think he could stand Fred and George singing, "His eyes are as green as a fresh pickled toad" one more time, and partly because he wanted to examine Riddle's diary again, and knew that Ron thought he was wasting his time.

Harry sat on his four-poster and flicked through the blank pages, not one of which had a trace of scarlet ink on it. Then he pulled a new bottle out of his bedside cabinet, dipped his quill into it, and dropped a blot onto the first page of the diary.

The ink shone brightly on the paper for a second and then, as though it was being sucked into the page, vanished. Excited, Harry loaded up his quill a second time and wrote, "My name is Harry Potter."

The words shone momentarily on the page and they, too, sank without trace. Then, at last, something happened.

Oozing back out of the page, in his very own ink, came words Harry had never written.

"*Hello, Harry Potter. My name is Tom Riddle. How did you come by my diary*?"

These words, too, faded away, but not before Harry had started to scribble back.

"Someone tried to flush it down a toilet."

He waited eagerly for Riddle's reply.

"*Lucky that I recorded my memories in some more lasting way than ink. But I always knew that there would be those who would not want this diary read.*"

"What do you mean?" Harry scrawled, blotting the page in his excitement.

"I mean that this diary holds memories of terrible things. Things that were covered up. Things that happened at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

"That's where I am now," Harry wrote quickly. "I'm at Hogwarts, and horrible stuff's been happening. Do you know anything about the Chamber of Secrets?"

His heart was hammering. Riddle's reply came quickly, his writing becoming untidier, as though he was hurrying to tell all he knew.

"Of course I know about the Chamber of Secrets. In my day, they told us it was a legend, that it did not exist. But this was a lie. In my fifth year, the Chamber was opened and the monster attacked several students, finally killing one. I caught the person who'd opened the Chamber and he was expelled. But the headmaster, Professor Dippet, ashamed that such a thing had happened at Hogwarts, forbade me to tell the truth. A story was given out that the girl had died in a freak accident. They gave me a nice, shiny, engraved trophy for my trouble and warned me to keep my mouth shut. But I knew it could happen again. The monster lived on, and the one who had the power to release it was not imprisoned."

Harry nearly upset his ink bottle in his hurry to write back.

"It's happening again now. There have been three attacks and no one seems to know who's behind them. Who was it last time?"

"I can show you, if you like," came Riddle's reply. *"You don't have to take my word for it. I can take you inside my memory of the night when I caught him."*

Harry hesitated, his quill suspended over the diary. What did Riddle mean? How could he be taken inside somebody else's memory? He glanced nervously at the door to the dormitory, which was

growing dark. When he looked back at the diary, he saw fresh words forming.

"Let me show you."

Harry paused for a fraction of a second and then wrote two letters.

"OK."

The pages of the diary began to blow as though caught in a high wind, stopping halfway through the month of June. Mouth hanging open, Harry saw that the little square for June thirteenth seemed to have turned into a minuscule television screen. His hands trembling slightly, he raised the book to press his eye against the little window, and before he knew what was happening, he was tilting forward; the window was widening, he felt his body leave his bed, and he was pitched headfirst through the opening in the page, into a whirl of color and shadow.

He felt his feet hit solid ground, and stood, shaking, as the blurred shapes around him came suddenly into focus.

He knew immediately where he was. This circular room with the sleeping portraits was Dumbledore's office — but it wasn't Dumbledore who was sitting behind the desk. A wizened, frail-looking wizard, bald except for a few wisps of white hair, was reading a letter by candlelight. Harry had never seen this man before.

"I'm sorry," he said shakily. "I didn't mean to butt in —"

But the wizard didn't look up. He continued to read, frowning slightly. Harry drew nearer to his desk and stammered, "Er — I'll just go, shall I?"

Still the wizard ignored him. He didn't seem even to have heard him. Thinking that the wizard might be deaf, Harry raised his voice.

"Sorry I disturbed you. I'll go now," he half-shouted.

The wizard folded up the letter with a sigh, stood up, walked past Harry without glancing at him, and went to draw the curtains at his window.

The sky outside the window was ruby-red; it seemed to be sunset. The wizard went back to the desk, sat down, and twiddled his thumbs, watching the door.

Harry looked around the office. No Fawkes the phoenix — no whirring silver contraptions. This was Hogwarts as Riddle had known it, meaning that this unknown wizard was headmaster, not Dumbledore, and he, Harry, was little more than a phantom, completely invisible to the people of fifty years ago.

There was a knock on the office door.

"Enter," said the old wizard in a feeble voice.

A boy of about sixteen entered, taking off his pointed hat. A silver prefect's badge was glinting on his chest. He was much taller than Harry, but he, too, had jet-black hair.

"Ah, Riddle," said the headmaster.

"You wanted to see me, Professor Dippet?" said Riddle. He looked nervous.

"Sit down," said Dippet. "I've just been reading the letter you sent me."

"Oh," said Riddle. He sat down, gripping his hands together very tightly.

"My dear boy," said Dippet kindly, "I cannot possibly let you stay at school over the summer. Surely you want to go home for the holidays?"

"No," said Riddle at once. "I'd much rather stay at Hogwarts than go back to that — to that —"

“You live in a Muggle orphanage during the holidays, I believe?” said Dippet curiously.

“Yes, sir,” said Riddle, reddening slightly.

“You are Muggle-born?”

“Half-blood, sir,” said Riddle. “Muggle father, witch mother.”

“And are both your parents — ?”

“My mother died just after I was born, sir. They told me at the orphanage she lived just long enough to name me — Tom after my father, Marvolo after my grandfather.”

Dippet clucked his tongue sympathetically.

“The thing is, Tom,” he sighed, “special arrangements might have been made for you, but in the current circumstances. . . .”

“You mean all these attacks, sir?” said Riddle, and Harry’s heart leapt, and he moved closer, scared of missing anything.

“Precisely,” said the headmaster. “My dear boy, you must see how foolish it would be of me to allow you to remain at the castle when term ends. Particularly in light of the recent tragedy . . . the death of that poor little girl. . . . You will be safer by far at your orphanage. As a matter of fact, the Ministry of Magic is even now talking about closing the school. We are no nearer locating the — er — source of all this unpleasantness. . . .”

Riddle’s eyes had widened.

“Sir — if the person was caught — if it all stopped —”

“What do you mean?” said Dippet with a squeak in his voice, sitting up in his chair. “Riddle, do you mean you know something about these attacks?”

“No, sir,” said Riddle quickly.

But Harry was sure it was the same sort of “no” that he himself had given Dumbledore.

Dippet sank back, looking faintly disappointed.

"You may go, Tom. . . ."

Riddle slid off his chair and slouched out of the room. Harry followed him.

Down the moving spiral staircase they went, emerging next to the gargoyle in the darkening corridor. Riddle stopped, and so did Harry, watching him. Harry could tell that Riddle was doing some serious thinking. He was biting his lip, his forehead furrowed.

Then, as though he had suddenly reached a decision, he hurried off, Harry gliding noiselessly behind him. They didn't see another person until they reached the entrance hall, when a tall wizard with long, sweeping auburn hair and a beard called to Riddle from the marble staircase.

"What are you doing, wandering around this late, Tom?"

Harry gaped at the wizard. He was none other than a fifty-year-younger Dumbledore.

"I had to see the headmaster, sir," said Riddle.

"Well, hurry off to bed," said Dumbledore, giving Riddle exactly the kind of penetrating stare Harry knew so well. "Best not to roam the corridors these days. Not since . . ."

He sighed heavily, bade Riddle good night, and strode off. Riddle watched him walk out of sight and then, moving quickly, headed straight down the stone steps to the dungeons, with Harry in hot pursuit.

But to Harry's disappointment, Riddle led him not into a hidden passageway or a secret tunnel but to the very dungeon in which Harry had Potions with Snape. The torches hadn't been lit, and when Riddle pushed the door almost closed, Harry could only just

see him, standing stock-still by the door, watching the passage outside.

It felt to Harry that they were there for at least an hour. All he could see was the figure of Riddle at the door, staring through the crack, waiting like a statue. And just when Harry had stopped feeling expectant and tense and started wishing he could return to the present, he heard something move beyond the door.

Someone was creeping along the passage. He heard whoever it was pass the dungeon where he and Riddle were hidden. Riddle, quiet as a shadow, edged through the door and followed, Harry tiptoeing behind him, forgetting that he couldn't be heard.

For perhaps five minutes they followed the footsteps, until Riddle stopped suddenly, his head inclined in the direction of new noises. Harry heard a door creak open, and then someone speaking in a hoarse whisper.

"C'mon . . . gotta get yeh outta here. . . . C'mon now . . . in the box . . ."

There was something familiar about that voice. . . .

Riddle suddenly jumped around the corner. Harry stepped out behind him. He could see the dark outline of a huge boy who was crouching in front of an open door, a very large box next to it.

" 'Evening, Rubeus," said Riddle sharply.

The boy slammed the door shut and stood up.

"What yer doin' down here, Tom?"

Riddle stepped closer.

"It's all over," he said. "I'm going to have to turn you in, Rubeus. They're talking about closing Hogwarts if the attacks don't stop."

"What d'yeh —"

"I don't think you meant to kill anyone. But monsters don't make good pets. I suppose you just let it out for exercise and —"

"It never killed no one!" said the large boy, backing against the closed door. From behind him, Harry could hear a funny rustling and clicking.

"Come on, Rubeus," said Riddle, moving yet closer. "The dead girl's parents will be here tomorrow. The least Hogwarts can do is make sure that the thing that killed their daughter is slaughtered. . . ."

"It wasn't him!" roared the boy, his voice echoing in the dark passage. "He wouldn'! He never!"

"Stand aside," said Riddle, drawing out his wand.

His spell lit the corridor with a sudden flaming light. The door behind the large boy flew open with such force it knocked him into the wall opposite. And out of it came something that made Harry let out a long, piercing scream unheard by anyone —

A vast, low-slung, hairy body and a tangle of black legs; a gleam of many eyes and a pair of razor-sharp pincers — Riddle raised his wand again, but he was too late. The thing bowled him over as it scuttled away, tearing up the corridor and out of sight. Riddle scrambled to his feet, looking after it; he raised his wand, but the huge boy leapt on him, seized his wand, and threw him back down, yelling, "NOOOOOOO!"

The scene whirled, the darkness became complete; Harry felt himself falling and, with a crash, he landed spread-eagled on his four-poster in the Gryffindor dormitory, Riddle's diary lying open on his stomach.

Before he had had time to regain his breath, the dormitory door opened and Ron came in.

"There you are," he said.

Harry sat up. He was sweating and shaking.

"What's up?" said Ron, looking at him with concern.

"It was Hagrid, Ron. Hagrid opened the Chamber of Secrets fifty years ago."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CORNELIUS FUDGE

Harry, Ron, and Hermione had always known that Hagrid had an unfortunate liking for large and monstrous creatures. During their first year at Hogwarts he had tried to raise a dragon in his little wooden house, and it would be a long time before they forgot the giant, three-headed dog he'd christened "Fluffy." And if, as a boy, Hagrid had heard that a monster was hidden somewhere in the castle, Harry was sure he'd have gone to any lengths for a glimpse of it. He'd probably thought it was a shame that the monster had been cooped up so long, and thought it deserved the chance to stretch its many legs; Harry could just imagine the thirteen-year-old Hagrid trying to fit a leash and collar on it. But he was equally certain that Hagrid would never have meant to kill anybody.

Harry half wished he hadn't found out how to work Riddle's diary. Again and again Ron and Hermione made him recount what

he'd seen, until he was heartily sick of telling them and sick of the long, circular conversations that followed.

"Riddle *might* have got the wrong person," said Hermione. "Maybe it was some other monster that was attacking people. . . ."

"How many monsters d'you think this place can hold?" Ron asked dully.

"We always knew Hagrid had been expelled," said Harry miserably. "And the attacks must've stopped after Hagrid was kicked out. Otherwise, Riddle wouldn't have got his award."

Ron tried a different tack.

"Riddle *does* sound like Percy — who asked him to squeal on Hagrid, anyway?"

"But the monster had *killed* someone, Ron," said Hermione.

"And Riddle was going to go back to some Muggle orphanage if they closed Hogwarts," said Harry. "I don't blame him for wanting to stay here. . . ."

"You met Hagrid down Knockturn Alley, didn't you, Harry?"

"He was buying a Flesh-Eating Slug Repellent," said Harry quickly.

The three of them fell silent. After a long pause, Hermione voiced the knottiest question of all in a hesitant voice.

"Do you think we should go and *ask* Hagrid about it all?"

"That'd be a cheerful visit," said Ron. " 'Hello, Hagrid. Tell us, have you been setting anything mad and hairy loose in the castle lately?' "

In the end, they decided that they would not say anything to Hagrid unless there was another attack, and as more and more days went by with no whisper from the disembodied voice, they became

hopeful that they would never need to talk to him about why he had been expelled. It was now nearly four months since Justin and Nearly Headless Nick had been Petrified, and nearly everybody seemed to think that the attacker, whoever it was, had retired for good. Peeves had finally got bored of his "Oh, Potter, you rotter" song, Ernie Macmillan asked Harry quite politely to pass a bucket of leaping toadstools in Herbology one day, and in March several of the Mandrakes threw a loud and raucous party in greenhouse three. This made Professor Sprout very happy.

"The moment they start trying to move into each other's pots, we'll know they're fully mature," she told Harry. "Then we'll be able to revive those poor people in the hospital wing."

The second years were given something new to think about during their Easter holidays. The time had come to choose their subjects for the third year, a matter that Hermione, at least, took very seriously.

"It could affect our whole future," she told Harry and Ron as they pored over lists of new subjects, marking them with checks.

"I just want to give up Potions," said Harry.

"We can't," said Ron gloomily. "We keep all our old subjects, or I'd've ditched Defense Against the Dark Arts."

"But that's very important!" said Hermione, shocked.

"Not the way Lockhart teaches it," said Ron. "I haven't learned anything from him except not to set pixies loose."

Neville Longbottom had been sent letters from all the witches and wizards in his family, all giving him different advice on what to choose. Confused and worried, he sat reading the subject lists with

his tongue poking out, asking people whether they thought Arithmancy sounded more difficult than the study of Ancient Runes. Dean Thomas, who, like Harry, had grown up with Muggles, ended up closing his eyes and jabbing his wand at the list, then picking the subjects it landed on. Hermione took nobody's advice but signed up for everything.

Harry smiled grimly to himself at the thought of what Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia would say if he tried to discuss his career in wizardry with them. Not that he didn't get any guidance: Percy Weasley was eager to share his experience.

"Depends where you want to *go,* Harry," he said. "It's never too early to think about the future, so I'd recommend Divination. People say Muggle Studies is a soft option, but I personally think wizards should have a thorough understanding of the non-magical community, particularly if they're thinking of working in close contact with them — look at my father, he has to deal with Muggle business all the time. My brother Charlie was always more of an outdoor type, so he went for Care of Magical Creatures. Play to your strengths, Harry."

But the only thing Harry felt he was really good at was Quidditch. In the end, he chose the same new subjects as Ron, feeling that if he was lousy at them, at least he'd have someone friendly to help him.

Gryffindor's next Quidditch match would be against Hufflepuff. Wood was insisting on team practices every night after dinner, so that Harry barely had time for anything but Quidditch and homework. However, the training sessions were getting better, or at least

drier, and the evening before Saturday's match he went up to his dormitory to drop off his broomstick feeling Gryffindor's chances for the Quidditch Cup had never been better.

But his cheerful mood didn't last long. At the top of the stairs to the dormitory, he met Neville Longbottom, who was looking frantic.

"Harry — I don't know who did it — I just found —"

Watching Harry fearfully, Neville pushed open the door.

The contents of Harry's trunk had been thrown everywhere. His cloak lay ripped on the floor. The bedclothes had been pulled off his four-poster and the drawer had been pulled out of his bedside cabinet, the contents strewn over the mattress.

Harry walked over to the bed, openmouthed, treading on a few loose pages of *Travels with Trolls.* As he and Neville pulled the blankets back onto his bed, Ron, Dean, and Seamus came in. Dean swore loudly.

"What happened, Harry?"

"No idea," said Harry. But Ron was examining Harry's robes. All the pockets were hanging out.

"Someone's been looking for something," said Ron. "Is there anything missing?"

Harry started to pick up all his things and throw them into his trunk. It was only as he threw the last of the Lockhart books back into it that he realized what wasn't there.

"Riddle's diary's gone," he said in an undertone to Ron.

"*What*?"

Harry jerked his head toward the dormitory door and Ron followed him out. They hurried down to the Gryffindor common

room, which was half-empty, and joined Hermione, who was sitting alone, reading a book called *Ancient Runes Made Easy.*

Hermione looked aghast at the news.

"But — only a Gryffindor could have stolen — nobody else knows our password —"

"Exactly," said Harry.

They woke the next day to brilliant sunshine and a light, refreshing breeze.

"Perfect Quidditch conditions!" said Wood enthusiastically at the Gryffindor table, loading the team's plates with scrambled eggs. "Harry, buck up there, you need a decent breakfast."

Harry had been staring down the packed Gryffindor table, wondering if the new owner of Riddle's diary was right in front of his eyes. Hermione had been urging him to report the robbery, but Harry didn't like the idea. He'd have to tell a teacher all about the diary, and how many people knew why Hagrid had been expelled fifty years ago? He didn't want to be the one who brought it all up again.

As he left the Great Hall with Ron and Hermione to go and collect his Quidditch things, another very serious worry was added to Harry's growing list. He had just set foot on the marble staircase when he heard it yet again —

"Kill this time . . . let me rip . . . tear . . ."

He shouted aloud and Ron and Hermione both jumped away from him in alarm.

"The voice!" said Harry, looking over his shoulder. "I just heard it again — didn't you?"

Ron shook his head, wide-eyed. Hermione, however, clapped a hand to her forehead.

"Harry — I think I've just understood something! I've got to go to the library!"

And she sprinted away, up the stairs.

"*What* does she understand?" said Harry distractedly, still looking around, trying to tell where the voice had come from.

"Loads more than I do," said Ron, shaking his head.

"But why's she got to go to the library?"

"Because that's what Hermione does," said Ron, shrugging. "When in doubt, go to the library."

Harry stood, irresolute, trying to catch the voice again, but people were now emerging from the Great Hall behind him, talking loudly, exiting through the front doors on their way to the Quidditch pitch.

"You'd better get moving," said Ron. "It's nearly eleven — the match —"

Harry raced up to Gryffindor Tower, collected his Nimbus Two Thousand, and joined the large crowd swarming across the grounds, but his mind was still in the castle along with the bodiless voice, and as he pulled on his scarlet robes in the locker room, his only comfort was that everyone was now outside to watch the game.

The teams walked onto the field to tumultuous applause. Oliver Wood took off for a warm-up flight around the goal posts; Madam Hooch released the balls. The Hufflepuffs, who played in canary yellow, were standing in a huddle, having a last-minute discussion of tactics.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Harry was just mounting his broom when Professor McGonagall came half marching, half running across the pitch, carrying an enormous purple megaphone.

Harry's heart dropped like a stone.

"This match has been canceled," Professor McGonagall called through the megaphone, addressing the packed stadium. There were boos and shouts. Oliver Wood, looking devastated, landed and ran toward Professor McGonagall without getting off his broomstick.

"But, Professor!" he shouted. "We've got to play — the Cup — *Gryffindor* —"

Professor McGonagall ignored him and continued to shout through her megaphone:

"All students are to make their way back to the House common rooms, where their Heads of Houses will give them further information. As quickly as you can, please!"

Then she lowered the megaphone and beckoned Harry over to her.

"Potter, I think you'd better come with me. . . ."

Wondering how she could possibly suspect him this time, Harry saw Ron detach himself from the complaining crowd; he came running up to them as they set off toward the castle. To Harry's surprise, Professor McGonagall didn't object.

"Yes, perhaps you'd better come, too, Weasley. . . ."

Some of the students swarming around them were grumbling about the match being canceled; others looked worried. Harry and Ron followed Professor McGonagall back into the school and up the marble staircase. But they weren't taken to anybody's office this time.

"This will be a bit of a shock," said Professor McGonagall in a surprisingly gentle voice as they approached the infirmary. "There has been another attack . . . another *double* attack."

Harry's insides did a horrible somersault. Professor McGonagall pushed the door open and he and Ron entered.

Madam Pomfrey was bending over a sixth-year girl with long, curly hair. Harry recognized her as the Ravenclaw they'd accidentally asked for directions to the Slytherin common room. And on the bed next to her was —

"Hermione!" Ron groaned.

Hermione lay utterly still, her eyes open and glassy.

"They were found near the library," said Professor McGonagall. "I don't suppose either of you can explain this? It was on the floor next to them. . . ."

She was holding up a small, circular mirror.

Harry and Ron shook their heads, both staring at Hermione.

"I will escort you back to Gryffindor Tower," said Professor McGonagall heavily. "I need to address the students in any case."

"All students will return to their House common rooms by six o'clock in the evening. No student is to leave the dormitories after that time. You will be escorted to each lesson by a teacher. No student is to use the bathroom unaccompanied by a teacher. All further Quidditch training and matches are to be postponed. There will be no more evening activities."

The Gryffindors packed inside the common room listened to Professor McGonagall in silence. She rolled up the parchment

from which she had been reading and said in a somewhat choked voice, "I need hardly add that I have rarely been so distressed. It is likely that the school will be closed unless the culprit behind these attacks is caught. I would urge anyone who thinks they might know anything about them to come forward."

She climbed somewhat awkwardly out of the portrait hole, and the Gryffindors began talking immediately.

"That's two Gryffindors down, not counting a Gryffindor ghost, one Ravenclaw, and one Hufflepuff," said the Weasley twins' friend Lee Jordan, counting on his fingers. "Haven't *any* of the teachers noticed that the Slytherins are all safe? Isn't it *obvious* all this stuff's coming from Slytherin? The *Heir* of Slytherin, the *monster* of Slytherin — why don't they just chuck all the Slytherins out?" he roared, to nods and scattered applause.

Percy Weasley was sitting in a chair behind Lee, but for once he didn't seem keen to make his views heard. He was looking pale and stunned.

"Percy's in shock," George told Harry quietly. "That Ravenclaw girl — Penelope Clearwater — she's a prefect. I don't think he thought the monster would dare attack a *prefect.*"

But Harry was only half-listening. He didn't seem to be able to get rid of the picture of Hermione, lying on the hospital bed as though carved out of stone. And if the culprit wasn't caught soon, he was looking at a lifetime back with the Dursleys. Tom Riddle had turned Hagrid in because he was faced with the prospect of a Muggle orphanage if the school closed. Harry now knew exactly how he had felt.

"What're we going to do?" said Ron quietly in Harry's ear. "D'you think they suspect Hagrid?"

"We've got to go and talk to him," said Harry, making up his mind. "I can't believe it's him this time, but if he set the monster loose last time he'll know how to get inside the Chamber of Secrets, and that's a start."

"But McGonagall said we've got to stay in our tower unless we're in class —"

"I think," said Harry, more quietly still, "it's time to get my dad's old cloak out again."

Harry had inherited just one thing from his father: a long and silvery Invisibility Cloak. It was their only chance of sneaking out of the school to visit Hagrid without anyone knowing about it. They went to bed at the usual time, waited until Neville, Dean, and Seamus had stopped discussing the Chamber of Secrets and finally fallen asleep, then got up, dressed again, and threw the cloak over themselves.

The journey through the dark and deserted castle corridors wasn't enjoyable. Harry, who had wandered the castle at night several times before, had never seen it so crowded after sunset. Teachers, prefects, and ghosts were marching the corridors in pairs, staring around for any unusual activity. Their Invisibility Cloak didn't stop them making any noise, and there was a particularly tense moment when Ron stubbed his toe only yards from the spot where Snape stood standing guard. Thankfully, Snape sneezed at almost exactly the moment Ron swore. It was with relief that they reached the oak front doors and eased them open.

It was a clear, starry night. They hurried toward the lit windows of Hagrid's house and pulled off the cloak only when they were right outside his front door.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Seconds after they had knocked, Hagrid flung it open. They found themselves face-to-face with him aiming a crossbow at them. Fang the boarhound barked loudly behind him.

"Oh," he said, lowering the weapon and staring at them. "What're you two doin' here?"

"What's that for?" said Harry, pointing at the crossbow as they stepped inside.

"Nothin' — nothin' — " Hagrid muttered. "I've bin expectin' — doesn' matter — Sit down — I'll make tea —"

He hardly seemed to know what he was doing. He nearly extinguished the fire, spilling water from the kettle on it, and then smashed the teapot with a nervous jerk of his massive hand.

"Are you okay, Hagrid?" said Harry. "Did you hear about Hermione?"

"Oh, I heard, all righ'," said Hagrid, a slight break in his voice.

He kept glancing nervously at the windows. He poured them both large mugs of boiling water (he had forgotten to add tea bags) and was just putting a slab of fruitcake on a plate when there was a loud knock on the door.

Hagrid dropped the fruitcake. Harry and Ron exchanged panic-stricken looks, then threw the Invisibility Cloak back over themselves and retreated into a corner. Hagrid checked that they were hidden, seized his crossbow, and flung open his door once more.

"Good evening, Hagrid."

It was Dumbledore. He entered, looking deadly serious, and was followed by a second, very odd-looking man.

The stranger had rumpled gray hair and an anxious expression, and was wearing a strange mixture of clothes: a pinstriped suit, a

scarlet tie, a long black cloak, and pointed purple boots. Under his arm he carried a lime-green bowler.

"That's Dad's boss!" Ron breathed. "Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic!"

Harry elbowed Ron hard to make him shut up.

Hagrid had gone pale and sweaty. He dropped into one of his chairs and looked from Dumbledore to Cornelius Fudge.

"Bad business, Hagrid," said Fudge in rather clipped tones. "Very bad business. Had to come. Four attacks on Muggle-borns. Things've gone far enough. Ministry's got to act."

"I never," said Hagrid, looking imploringly at Dumbledore. "You know I never, Professor Dumbledore, sir —"

"I want it understood, Cornelius, that Hagrid has my full confidence," said Dumbledore, frowning at Fudge.

"Look, Albus," said Fudge, uncomfortably. "Hagrid's record's against him. Ministry's got to do something — the school governors have been in touch —"

"Yet again, Cornelius, I tell you that taking Hagrid away will not help in the slightest," said Dumbledore. His blue eyes were full of a fire Harry had never seen before.

"Look at it from my point of view," said Fudge, fidgeting with his bowler. "I'm under a lot of pressure. Got to be seen to be doing something. If it turns out it wasn't Hagrid, he'll be back and no more said. But I've got to take him. Got to. Wouldn't be doing my duty —"

"Take me?" said Hagrid, who was trembling. "Take me where?"

"For a short stretch only," said Fudge, not meeting Hagrid's eyes. "Not a punishment, Hagrid, more a precaution. If someone else is caught, you'll be let out with a full apology —"

"Not Azkaban?" croaked Hagrid.

Before Fudge could answer, there was another loud rap on the door.

Dumbledore answered it. It was Harry's turn for an elbow in the ribs; he'd let out an audible gasp.

Mr. Lucius Malfoy strode into Hagrid's hut, swathed in a long black traveling cloak, smiling a cold and satisfied smile. Fang started to growl.

"Already here, Fudge," he said approvingly. "Good, good . . ."

"What're you doin' here?" said Hagrid furiously. "Get outta my house!"

"My dear man, please believe me, I have no pleasure at all in being inside your — er — d'you call this a house?" said Lucius Malfoy, sneering as he looked around the small cabin. "I simply called at the school and was told that the headmaster was here."

"And what exactly did you want with me, Lucius?" said Dumbledore. He spoke politely, but the fire was still blazing in his blue eyes.

"*Dreadful* thing, Dumbledore," said Malfoy lazily, taking out a long roll of parchment, "but the governors feel it's time for you to step aside. This is an Order of Suspension — you'll find all twelve signatures on it. I'm afraid we feel you're losing your touch. How many attacks have there been now? Two more this afternoon, wasn't it? At this rate, there'll be no Muggle-borns left at Hogwarts, and we all know what an *awful* loss that would be to the school."

"Oh, now, see here, Lucius," said Fudge, looking alarmed, "Dumbledore suspended — no, no — last thing we want just now —"

"The appointment — or suspension — of the headmaster is a matter for the governors, Fudge," said Mr. Malfoy smoothly. "And as Dumbledore has failed to stop these attacks —"

"See here, Malfoy, if *Dumbledore* can't stop them," said Fudge, whose upper lip was sweating now, "I mean to say, who *can*?"

"That remains to be seen," said Mr. Malfoy with a nasty smile. "But as all twelve of us have voted —"

Hagrid leapt to his feet, his shaggy black head grazing the ceiling.

"An' how many did yeh have ter threaten an' blackmail before they agreed, Malfoy, eh?" he roared.

"Dear, dear, you know, that temper of yours will lead you into trouble one of these days, Hagrid," said Mr. Malfoy. "I would advise you not to shout at the Azkaban guards like that. They won't like it at all."

"Yeh can' take Dumbledore!" yelled Hagrid, making Fang the boarhound cower and whimper in his basket. "Take him away, an' the Muggle-borns won' stand a chance! There'll be killin' next!"

"Calm yourself, Hagrid," said Dumbledore sharply. He looked at Lucius Malfoy.

"If the governors want my removal, Lucius, I shall of course step aside —"

"But —" stuttered Fudge.

"*No*!" growled Hagrid.

Dumbledore had not taken his bright blue eyes off Lucius Malfoy's cold gray ones.

"However," said Dumbledore, speaking very slowly and clearly so that none of them could miss a word, "you will find that I will

only *truly* have left this school when none here are loyal to me. You will also find that help will always be given at Hogwarts to those who ask for it."

For a second, Harry was almost sure Dumbledore's eyes flickered toward the corner where he and Ron stood hidden.

"Admirable sentiments," said Malfoy, bowing. "We shall all miss your — er — highly individual way of running things, Albus, and only hope that your successor will manage to prevent any — ah — *killins.*"

He strode to the cabin door, opened it, and bowed Dumbledore out. Fudge, fiddling with his bowler, waited for Hagrid to go ahead of him, but Hagrid stood his ground, took a deep breath, and said carefully, "If anyone wanted ter find out some *stuff,* all they'd have ter do would be ter follow the *spiders.* That'd lead 'em right! That's all I'm sayin'."

Fudge stared at him in amazement.

"All right, I'm comin'," said Hagrid, pulling on his moleskin overcoat. But as he was about to follow Fudge through the door, he stopped again and said loudly, "An' someone'll need ter feed Fang while I'm away."

The door banged shut and Ron pulled off the Invisibility Cloak.

"We're in trouble now," he said hoarsely. "No Dumbledore. They might as well close the school tonight. There'll be an attack a day with him gone."

Fang started howling, scratching at the closed door.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ARAGOG

Summer was creeping over the grounds around the castle; sky and lake alike turned periwinkle blue and flowers large as cabbages burst into bloom in the greenhouses. But with no Hagrid visible from the castle windows, striding the grounds with Fang at his heels, the scene didn't look right to Harry; no better, in fact, than the inside of the castle, where things were so horribly wrong.

Harry and Ron had tried to visit Hermione, but visitors were now barred from the hospital wing.

"We're taking no more chances," Madam Pomfrey told them severely through a crack in the infirmary door. "No, I'm sorry, there's every chance the attacker might come back to finish these people off. . . ."

With Dumbledore gone, fear had spread as never before, so that the sun warming the castle walls outside seemed to stop at the mullioned windows. There was barely a face to be seen in the school

that didn't look worried and tense, and any laughter that rang through the corridors sounded shrill and unnatural and was quickly stifled.

Harry constantly repeated Dumbledore's final words to himself. "*I will only truly have left this school when none here are loyal to me. . . . Help will always be given at Hogwarts to those who ask for it.*" But what good were these words? Who exactly were they supposed to ask for help, when everyone was just as confused and scared as they were?

Hagrid's hint about the spiders was far easier to understand — the trouble was, there didn't seem to be a single spider left in the castle to follow. Harry looked everywhere he went, helped (rather reluctantly) by Ron. They were hampered, of course, by the fact that they weren't allowed to wander off on their own but had to move around the castle in a pack with the other Gryffindors. Most of their fellow students seemed glad that they were being shepherded from class to class by teachers, but Harry found it very irksome.

One person, however, seemed to be thoroughly enjoying the atmosphere of terror and suspicion. Draco Malfoy was strutting around the school as though he had just been appointed Head Boy. Harry didn't realize what he was so pleased about until the Potions lesson about two weeks after Dumbledore and Hagrid had left, when, sitting right behind Malfoy, Harry overheard him gloating to Crabbe and Goyle.

"I always thought Father might be the one who got rid of Dumbledore," he said, not troubling to keep his voice down. "I told you he thinks Dumbledore's the worst headmaster the school's ever

had. Maybe we'll get a decent headmaster now. Someone who won't *want* the Chamber of Secrets closed. McGonagall won't last long, she's only filling in. . . ."

Snape swept past Harry, making no comment about Hermione's empty seat and cauldron.

"Sir," said Malfoy loudly. "Sir, why don't *you* apply for the headmaster's job?"

"Now, now, Malfoy," said Snape, though he couldn't suppress a thin-lipped smile. "Professor Dumbledore has only been suspended by the governors. I daresay he'll be back with us soon enough."

"Yeah, right," said Malfoy, smirking. "I expect you'd have Father's vote, sir, if you wanted to apply for the job — *I'll* tell Father you're the best teacher here, sir —"

Snape smirked as he swept off around the dungeon, fortunately not spotting Seamus Finnigan, who was pretending to vomit into his cauldron.

"I'm quite surprised the Mudbloods haven't all packed their bags by now," Malfoy went on. "Bet you five Galleons the next one dies. Pity it wasn't Granger —"

The bell rang at that moment, which was lucky; at Malfoy's last words, Ron had leapt off his stool, and in the scramble to collect bags and books, his attempts to reach Malfoy went unnoticed.

"Let me at him," Ron growled as Harry and Dean hung onto his arms. "I don't care, I don't need my wand, I'm going to kill him with my bare hands —"

"Hurry up, I've got to take you all to Herbology," barked Snape over the class's heads, and off they marched, with Harry, Ron, and Dean bringing up the rear, Ron still trying to get loose. It was only

safe to let go of him when Snape had seen them out of the castle and they were making their way across the vegetable patch toward the greenhouses.

The Herbology class was very subdued; there were now two missing from their number, Justin and Hermione.

Professor Sprout set them all to work pruning the Abyssinian Shrivelfigs. Harry went to tip an armful of withered stalks onto the compost heap and found himself face-to-face with Ernie Macmillan. Ernie took a deep breath and said, very formally, "I just want to say, Harry, that I'm sorry I ever suspected you. I know you'd never attack Hermione Granger, and I apologize for all the stuff I said. We're all in the same boat now, and, well —"

He held out a pudgy hand, and Harry shook it.

Ernie and his friend Hannah came to work at the same Shrivelfig as Harry and Ron.

"That Draco Malfoy character," said Ernie, breaking off dead twigs, "he seems very pleased about all this, doesn't he? D'you know, I think *he* might be Slytherin's heir."

"That's clever of you," said Ron, who didn't seem to have forgiven Ernie as readily as Harry.

"Do you think it's Malfoy, Harry?" Ernie asked.

"No," said Harry, so firmly that Ernie and Hannah stared.

A second later, Harry spotted something.

Several large spiders were scuttling over the ground on the other side of the glass, moving in an unnaturally straight line as though taking the shortest route to a prearranged meeting. Harry hit Ron over the hand with his pruning shears.

"*Ouch*! What're you —"

Harry pointed out the spiders, following their progress with his eyes screwed up against the sun.

"Oh, yeah," said Ron, trying, and failing, to look pleased. "But we can't follow them now —"

Ernie and Hannah were listening curiously.

Harry's eyes narrowed as he focused on the spiders. If they pursued their fixed course, there could be no doubt about where they would end up.

"Looks like they're heading for the Forbidden Forest. . . ."

And Ron looked even unhappier about that.

At the end of the lesson Professor Sprout escorted the class to their Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson. Harry and Ron lagged behind the others so they could talk out of earshot.

"We'll have to use the Invisibility Cloak again," Harry told Ron. "We can take Fang with us. He's used to going into the forest with Hagrid, he might be some help."

"Right," said Ron, who was twirling his wand nervously in his fingers. "Er — aren't there — aren't there supposed to be werewolves in the forest?" he added as they took their usual places at the back of Lockhart's classroom.

Preferring not to answer that question, Harry said, "There are good things in there, too. The centaurs are all right, and the unicorns . . ."

Ron had never been into the Forbidden Forest before. Harry had entered it only once and had hoped never to do so again.

Lockhart bounded into the room and the class stared at him. Every other teacher in the place was looking grimmer than usual, but Lockhart appeared nothing short of buoyant.

"Come now," he cried, beaming around him. "Why all these long faces?"

People swapped exasperated looks, but nobody answered.

"Don't you people realize," said Lockhart, speaking slowly, as though they were all a bit dim, "the danger has passed! The culprit has been taken away —"

"Says who?" said Dean Thomas loudly.

"My dear young man, the Minister of Magic wouldn't have taken Hagrid if he hadn't been one hundred percent sure that he was guilty," said Lockhart, in the tone of someone explaining that one and one made two.

"Oh, yes he would," said Ron, even more loudly than Dean.

"I flatter myself I know a *touch* more about Hagrid's arrest than you do, Mr. Weasley," said Lockhart in a self-satisfied tone.

Ron started to say that he didn't think so, somehow, but stopped in midsentence when Harry kicked him hard under the desk.

"We weren't there, remember?" Harry muttered.

But Lockhart's disgusting cheeriness, his hints that he had always thought Hagrid was no good, his confidence that the whole business was now at an end, irritated Harry so much that he yearned to throw *Gadding with Ghouls* right in Lockhart's stupid face. Instead he contented himself with scrawling a note to Ron: *Let's do it tonight.*

Ron read the message, swallowed hard, and looked sideways at the empty seat usually filled by Hermione. The sight seemed to stiffen his resolve, and he nodded.

The Gryffindor common room was always very crowded these days, because from six o'clock onward the Gryffindors had no-

where else to go. They also had plenty to talk about, with the result that the common room often didn't empty until past midnight.

Harry went to get the Invisibility Cloak out of his trunk right after dinner, and spent the evening sitting on it, waiting for the room to clear. Fred and George challenged Harry and Ron to a few games of Exploding Snap, and Ginny sat watching them, very subdued in Hermione's usual chair. Harry and Ron kept losing on purpose, trying to finish the games quickly, but even so, it was well past midnight when Fred, George, and Ginny finally went to bed.

Harry and Ron waited for the distant sounds of two dormitory doors closing before seizing the cloak, throwing it over themselves, and climbing through the portrait hole.

It was another difficult journey through the castle, dodging all the teachers. At last they reached the entrance hall, slid back the lock on the oak front doors, squeezed between them, trying to stop any creaking, and stepped out into the moonlit grounds.

"'Course," said Ron abruptly as they strode across the black grass, "we might get to the forest and find there's nothing to follow. Those spiders might not've been going there at all. I know it looked like they were moving in that sort of general direction, but . . ."

His voice trailed away hopefully.

They reached Hagrid's house, sad and sorry-looking with its blank windows. When Harry pushed the door open, Fang went mad with joy at the sight of them. Worried he might wake everyone at the castle with his deep, booming barks, they hastily fed him treacle toffee from a tin on the mantelpiece, which glued his teeth together.

Harry left the Invisibility Cloak on Hagrid's table. There would be no need for it in the pitch-dark forest.

"C'mon, Fang, we're going for a walk," said Harry, patting his leg, and Fang bounded happily out of the house behind them, dashed to the edge of the forest, and lifted his leg against a large sycamore tree.

Harry took out his wand, murmured, "*Lumos*!" and a tiny light appeared at the end of it, just enough to let them watch the path for signs of spiders.

"Good thinking," said Ron. "I'd light mine, too, but you know — it'd probably blow up or something. . . ."

Harry tapped Ron on the shoulder, pointing at the grass. Two solitary spiders were hurrying away from the wandlight into the shade of the trees.

"Okay," Ron sighed as though resigned to the worst, "I'm ready. Let's go."

So, with Fang scampering around them, sniffing tree roots and leaves, they entered the forest. By the glow of Harry's wand, they followed the steady trickle of spiders moving along the path. They walked behind them for about twenty minutes, not speaking, listening hard for noises other than breaking twigs and rustling leaves. Then, when the trees had become thicker than ever, so that the stars overhead were no longer visible, and Harry's wand shone alone in the sea of dark, they saw their spider guides leaving the path.

Harry paused, trying to see where the spiders were going, but everything outside his little sphere of light was pitch-black. He had never been this deep into the forest before. He could vividly remember Hagrid advising him not to leave the forest path last time he'd been in here. But Hagrid was miles away now, probably sitting in a cell in Azkaban, and he had also said to follow the spiders.

Something wet touched Harry's hand and he jumped backward, crushing Ron's foot, but it was only Fang's nose.

"What d'you reckon?" Harry said to Ron, whose eyes he could just make out, reflecting the light from his wand.

"We've come this far," said Ron.

So they followed the darting shadows of the spiders into the trees. They couldn't move very quickly now; there were tree roots and stumps in their way, barely visible in the near blackness. Harry could feel Fang's hot breath on his hand. More than once, they had to stop, so that Harry could crouch down and find the spiders in the wandlight.

They walked for what seemed like at least half an hour, their robes snagging on low-slung branches and brambles. After a while, they noticed that the ground seemed to be sloping downward, though the trees were as thick as ever.

Then Fang suddenly let loose a great, echoing bark, making both Harry and Ron jump out of their skins.

"What?" said Ron loudly, looking around into the pitch-dark, and gripping Harry's elbow very hard.

"There's something moving over there," Harry breathed. "Listen . . . sounds like something big. . . ."

They listened. Some distance to their right, the something big was snapping branches as it carved a path through the trees.

"Oh, no," said Ron. "Oh, no, oh, no, oh —"

"Shut up," said Harry frantically. "It'll hear you."

"Hear *me*?" said Ron in an unnaturally high voice. "It's already heard Fang!"

The darkness seemed to be pressing on their eyeballs as they

stood, terrified, waiting. There was a strange rumbling noise and then silence.

"What d'you think it's doing?" said Harry.

"Probably getting ready to pounce," said Ron.

They waited, shivering, hardly daring to move.

"D'you think it's gone?" Harry whispered.

"Dunno —"

Then, to their right, came a sudden blaze of light, so bright in the darkness that both of them flung up their hands to shield their eyes. Fang yelped and tried to run, but got lodged in a tangle of thorns and yelped even louder.

"Harry!" Ron shouted, his voice breaking with relief. "Harry, it's our car!"

"*What*?"

"Come on!"

Harry blundered after Ron toward the light, stumbling and tripping, and a moment later they had emerged into a clearing.

Mr. Weasley's car was standing, empty, in the middle of a circle of thick trees under a roof of dense branches, its headlights ablaze. As Ron walked, openmouthed, toward it, it moved slowly toward him, exactly like a large, turquoise dog greeting its owner.

"It's been here all the time!" said Ron delightedly, walking around the car. "Look at it. The forest's turned it wild. . . ."

The sides of the car were scratched and smeared with mud. Apparently it had taken to trundling around the forest on its own. Fang didn't seem at all keen on it; he kept close to Harry, who could feel him quivering. His breathing slowing down again, Harry stuffed his wand back into his robes.

"And we thought it was going to attack us!" said Ron, leaning against the car and patting it. "I wondered where it had gone!"

Harry squinted around on the floodlit ground for signs of more spiders, but they had all scuttled away from the glare of the headlights.

"We've lost the trail," he said. "C'mon, let's go and find them."

Ron didn't speak. He didn't move. His eyes were fixed on a point some ten feet above the forest floor, right behind Harry. His face was livid with terror.

Harry didn't even have time to turn around. There was a loud clicking noise and suddenly he felt something long and hairy seize him around the middle and lift him off the ground, so that he was hanging facedown. Struggling, terrified, he heard more clicking, and saw Ron's legs leave the ground, too, heard Fang whimpering and howling — next moment, he was being swept away into the dark trees.

Head hanging, Harry saw that what had hold of him was marching on six immensely long, hairy legs, the front two clutching him tightly below a pair of shining black pincers. Behind him, he could hear another of the creatures, no doubt carrying Ron. They were moving into the very heart of the forest. Harry could hear Fang fighting to free himself from a third monster, whining loudly, but Harry couldn't have yelled even if he had wanted to; he seemed to have left his voice back with the car in the clearing.

He never knew how long he was in the creature's clutches; he only knew that the darkness suddenly lifted enough for him to see that the leaf-strewn ground was now swarming with spiders. Craning his neck sideways, he realized that they had reached the ridge of

a vast hollow, a hollow that had been cleared of trees, so that the stars shone brightly onto the worst scene he had ever laid eyes on.

Spiders. Not tiny spiders like those surging over the leaves below. Spiders the size of carthorses, eight-eyed, eight-legged, black, hairy, gigantic. The massive specimen that was carrying Harry made its way down the steep slope toward a misty, domed web in the very center of the hollow, while its fellows closed in all around it, clicking their pincers excitedly at the sight of its load.

Harry fell to the ground on all fours as the spider released him. Ron and Fang thudded down next to him. Fang wasn't howling anymore, but cowering silently on the spot. Ron looked exactly like Harry felt. His mouth was stretched wide in a kind of silent scream and his eyes were popping.

Harry suddenly realized that the spider that had dropped him was saying something. It had been hard to tell, because he clicked his pincers with every word he spoke.

"Aragog!" it called. "Aragog!"

And from the middle of the misty, domed web, a spider the size of a small elephant emerged, very slowly. There was gray in the black of his body and legs, and each of the eyes on his ugly, pincered head was milky white. He was blind.

"What is it?" he said, clicking his pincers rapidly.

"Men," clicked the spider who had caught Harry.

"Is it Hagrid?" said Aragog, moving closer, his eight milky eyes wandering vaguely.

"Strangers," clicked the spider who had brought Ron.

"Kill them," clicked Aragog fretfully. "I was sleeping. . . ."

"We're friends of Hagrid's," Harry shouted. His heart seemed to have left his chest to pound in his throat.

Click, click, click went the pincers of the spiders all around the hollow.

Aragog paused.

"Hagrid has never sent men into our hollow before," he said slowly.

"Hagrid's in trouble," said Harry, breathing very fast. "That's why we've come."

"In trouble?" said the aged spider, and Harry thought he heard concern beneath the clicking pincers. "But why has he sent you?"

Harry thought of getting to his feet but decided against it; he didn't think his legs would support him. So he spoke from the ground, as calmly as he could.

"They think, up at the school, that Hagrid's been setting a — a — something on students. They've taken him to Azkaban."

Aragog clicked his pincers furiously, and all around the hollow the sound was echoed by the crowd of spiders; it was like applause, except applause didn't usually make Harry feel sick with fear.

"But that was years ago," said Aragog fretfully. "Years and years ago. I remember it well. That's why they made him leave the school. They believed that *I* was the monster that dwells in what they call the Chamber of Secrets. They thought that Hagrid had opened the Chamber and set me free."

"And you . . . you didn't come from the Chamber of Secrets?" said Harry, who could feel cold sweat on his forehead.

"I!" said Aragog, clicking angrily. "I was not born in the castle. I come from a distant land. A traveler gave me to Hagrid when I was an egg. Hagrid was only a boy, but he cared for me, hidden in a cupboard in the castle, feeding me on scraps from the table. Hagrid

is my good friend, and a good man. When I was discovered, and blamed for the death of a girl, he protected me. I have lived here in the forest ever since, where Hagrid still visits me. He even found me a wife, Mosag, and you see how our family has grown, all through Hagrid's goodness. . . ."

Harry summoned what remained of his courage.

"So you never — never attacked anyone?"

"Never," croaked the old spider. "It would have been my instinct, but out of respect for Hagrid, I never harmed a human. The body of the girl who was killed was discovered in a bathroom. I never saw any part of the castle but the cupboard in which I grew up. Our kind like the dark and the quiet. . . ."

"But then . . . Do you know what *did* kill that girl?" said Harry. "Because whatever it is, it's back and attacking people again —"

His words were drowned by a loud outbreak of clicking and the rustling of many long legs shifting angrily; large black shapes shifted all around him.

"The thing that lives in the castle," said Aragog, "is an ancient creature we spiders fear above all others. Well do I remember how I pleaded with Hagrid to let me go, when I sensed the beast moving about the school."

"What is it?" said Harry urgently.

More loud clicking, more rustling; the spiders seemed to be closing in.

"We do not speak of it!" said Aragog fiercely. "We do not name it! I never even told Hagrid the name of that dread creature, though he asked me, many times."

Harry didn't want to press the subject, not with the spiders

pressing closer on all sides. Aragog seemed to be tired of talking. He was backing slowly into his domed web, but his fellow spiders continued to inch slowly toward Harry and Ron.

"We'll just go, then," Harry called desperately to Aragog, hearing leaves rustling behind him.

"Go?" said Aragog slowly. "I think not. . . ."

"But — but —"

"My sons and daughters do not harm Hagrid, on my command. But I cannot deny them fresh meat, when it wanders so willingly into our midst. Good-bye, friend of Hagrid."

Harry spun around. Feet away, towering above him, was a solid wall of spiders, clicking, their many eyes gleaming in their ugly black heads.

Even as he reached for his wand, Harry knew it was no good, there were too many of them, but as he tried to stand, ready to die fighting, a loud, long note sounded, and a blaze of light flamed through the hollow.

Mr. Weasley's car was thundering down the slope, headlights glaring, its horn screeching, knocking spiders aside; several were thrown onto their backs, their endless legs waving in the air. The car screeched to a halt in front of Harry and Ron and the doors flew open.

"Get Fang!" Harry yelled, diving into the front seat; Ron seized the boarhound around the middle and threw him, yelping, into the back of the car — the doors slammed shut — Ron didn't touch the accelerator but the car didn't need him; the engine roared and they were off, hitting more spiders. They sped up the slope, out of the hollow, and they were soon crashing through the forest, branches

whipping the windows as the car wound its way cleverly through the widest gaps, following a path it obviously knew.

Harry looked sideways at Ron. His mouth was still open in the silent scream, but his eyes weren't popping anymore.

"Are you okay?"

Ron stared straight ahead, unable to speak.

They smashed their way through the undergrowth, Fang howling loudly in the back seat, and Harry saw the side mirror snap off as they squeezed past a large oak. After ten noisy, rocky minutes, the trees thinned, and Harry could again see patches of sky.

The car stopped so suddenly that they were nearly thrown into the windshield. They had reached the edge of the forest. Fang flung himself at the window in his anxiety to get out, and when Harry opened the door, he shot off through the trees to Hagrid's house, tail between his legs. Harry got out too, and after a minute or so, Ron seemed to regain the feeling in his limbs and followed, still stiff-necked and staring. Harry gave the car a grateful pat as it reversed back into the forest and disappeared from view.

Harry went back into Hagrid's cabin to get the Invisibility Cloak. Fang was trembling under a blanket in his basket. When Harry got outside again, he found Ron being violently sick in the pumpkin patch.

"Follow the spiders," said Ron weakly, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. "I'll never forgive Hagrid. We're lucky to be alive."

"I bet he thought Aragog wouldn't hurt friends of his," said Harry.

"That's exactly Hagrid's problem!" said Ron, thumping the wall of the cabin. "He always thinks monsters aren't as bad as they're

made out, and look where it's got him! A cell in Azkaban!" He was shivering uncontrollably now. "What was the point of sending us in there? What have we found out, I'd like to know?"

"That Hagrid never opened the Chamber of Secrets," said Harry, throwing the cloak over Ron and prodding him in the arm to make him walk. "He was innocent."

Ron gave a loud snort. Evidently, hatching Aragog in a cupboard wasn't his idea of being innocent.

As the castle loomed nearer Harry twitched the cloak to make sure their feet were hidden, then pushed the creaking front doors ajar. They walked carefully back across the entrance hall and up the marble staircase, holding their breath as they passed corridors where watchful sentries were walking. At last they reached the safety of the Gryffindor common room, where the fire had burned itself into glowing ash. They took off the cloak and climbed the winding stair to their dormitory.

Ron fell onto his bed without bothering to get undressed. Harry, however, didn't feel very sleepy. He sat on the edge of his four-poster, thinking hard about everything Aragog had said.

The creature that was lurking somewhere in the castle, he thought, sounded like a sort of monster Voldemort — even other monsters didn't want to name it. But he and Ron were no closer to finding out what it was, or how it Petrified its victims. Even Hagrid had never known what was in the Chamber of Secrets.

Harry swung his legs up onto his bed and leaned back against his pillows, watching the moon glinting at him through the tower window.

He couldn't see what else they could do. They had hit dead ends

everywhere. Riddle had caught the wrong person, the Heir of Slytherin had got off, and no one could tell whether it was the same person, or a different one, who had opened the Chamber this time. There was nobody else to ask. Harry lay down, still thinking about what Aragog had said.

He was becoming drowsy when what seemed like their very last hope occurred to him, and he suddenly sat bolt upright.

"Ron," he hissed through the dark, "Ron —"

Ron woke with a yelp like Fang's, stared wildly around, and saw Harry.

"Ron — that girl who died. Aragog said she was found in a bathroom," said Harry, ignoring Neville's snuffling snores from the corner. "What if she never left the bathroom? What if she's still there?"

Ron rubbed his eyes, frowning through the moonlight. And then he understood, too.

"You *don't* think — not *Moaning Myrtle*?"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS

"All those times we were in that bathroom, and she was just three toilets away," said Ron bitterly at breakfast next day, "and we could've asked her, and now . . ."

It had been hard enough trying to look for spiders. Escaping their teachers long enough to sneak into a girls' bathroom, the girls' bathroom, moreover, right next to the scene of the first attack, was going to be almost impossible.

But something happened in their first lesson, Transfiguration, that drove the Chamber of Secrets out of their minds for the first time in weeks. Ten minutes into the class, Professor McGonagall told them that their exams would start on the first of June, one week from today.

"*Exams*?" howled Seamus Finnigan. "We're still getting *exams*?"

There was a loud bang behind Harry as Neville Longbottom's wand slipped, vanishing one of the legs on his desk. Professor

McGonagall restored it with a wave of her own wand, and turned, frowning, to Seamus.

"The whole point of keeping the school open at this time is for you to receive your education," she said sternly. "The exams will therefore take place as usual, and I trust you are all studying hard."

Studying hard! It had never occurred to Harry that there would be exams with the castle in this state. There was a great deal of mutinous muttering around the room, which made Professor McGonagall scowl even more darkly.

"Professor Dumbledore's instructions were to keep the school running as normally as possible," she said. "And that, I need hardly point out, means finding out how much you have learned this year."

Harry looked down at the pair of white rabbits he was supposed to be turning into slippers. What had he learned so far this year? He couldn't seem to think of anything that would be useful in an exam.

Ron looked as though he'd just been told he had to go and live in the Forbidden Forest.

"Can you imagine me taking exams with this?" he asked Harry, holding up his wand, which had just started whistling loudly.

Three days before their first exam, Professor McGonagall made another announcement at breakfast.

"I have good news," she said, and the Great Hall, instead of falling silent, erupted.

"Dumbledore's coming back!" several people yelled joyfully.

"You've caught the Heir of Slytherin!" squealed a girl at the Ravenclaw table.

"Quidditch matches are back on!" roared Wood excitedly.

When the hubbub had subsided, Professor McGonagall said, "Professor Sprout has informed me that the Mandrakes are ready for cutting at last. Tonight, we will be able to revive those people who have been Petrified. I need hardly remind you all that one of them may well be able to tell us who, or what, attacked them. I am hopeful that this dreadful year will end with our catching the culprit."

There was an explosion of cheering. Harry looked over at the Slytherin table and wasn't at all surprised to see that Draco Malfoy hadn't joined in. Ron, however, was looking happier than he'd looked in days.

"It won't matter that we never asked Myrtle, then!" he said to Harry. "Hermione'll probably have all the answers when they wake her up! Mind you, she'll go crazy when she finds out we've got exams in three days' time. She hasn't studied. It might be kinder to leave her where she is till they're over."

Just then, Ginny Weasley came over and sat down next to Ron. She looked tense and nervous, and Harry noticed that her hands were twisting in her lap.

"What's up?" said Ron, helping himself to more porridge.

Ginny didn't say anything, but glanced up and down the Gryffindor table with a scared look on her face that reminded Harry of someone, though he couldn't think who.

"Spit it out," said Ron, watching her.

Harry suddenly realized who Ginny looked like. She was rocking backward and forward slightly in her chair, exactly like Dobby did when he was teetering on the edge of revealing forbidden information.

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"I've got to tell you something," Ginny mumbled, carefully not looking at Harry.

"What is it?" said Harry.

Ginny looked as though she couldn't find the right words.

"*What*?" said Ron.

Ginny opened her mouth, but no sound came out. Harry leaned forward and spoke quietly, so that only Ginny and Ron could hear him.

"Is it something about the Chamber of Secrets? Have you seen something? Someone acting oddly?"

Ginny drew a deep breath and, at that precise moment, Percy Weasley appeared, looking tired and wan.

"If you've finished eating, I'll take that seat, Ginny. I'm starving, I've only just come off patrol duty."

Ginny jumped up as though her chair had just been electrified, gave Percy a fleeting, frightened look, and scampered away. Percy sat down and grabbed a mug from the center of the table.

"Percy!" said Ron angrily. "She was just about to tell us something important!"

Halfway through a gulp of tea, Percy choked.

"What sort of thing?" he said, coughing.

"I just asked her if she'd seen anything odd, and she started to say —"

"Oh — that — that's nothing to do with the Chamber of Secrets," said Percy at once.

"How do you know?" said Ron, his eyebrows raised.

"Well, er, if you must know, Ginny, er, walked in on me the other day when I was — well, never mind — the point is, she spot-

ted me doing something and I, um, I asked her not to mention it to anybody. I must say, I did think she'd keep her word. It's nothing, really, I'd just rather —"

Harry had never seen Percy look so uncomfortable.

"What were you doing, Percy?" said Ron, grinning. "Go on, tell us, we won't laugh."

Percy didn't smile back.

"Pass me those rolls, Harry, I'm starving."

Harry knew the whole mystery might be solved tomorrow without their help, but he wasn't about to pass up a chance to speak to Myrtle if it turned up — and to his delight it did, midmorning, when they were being led to History of Magic by Gilderoy Lockhart.

Lockhart, who had so often assured them that all danger had passed, only to be proved wrong right away, was now wholeheartedly convinced that it was hardly worth the trouble to see them safely down the corridors. His hair wasn't as sleek as usual; it seemed he had been up most of the night, patrolling the fourth floor.

"Mark my words," he said, ushering them around a corner. "The first words out of those poor Petrified people's mouths will be '*It was Hagrid.*' Frankly, I'm astounded Professor McGonagall thinks all these security measures are necessary."

"I agree, sir," said Harry, making Ron drop his books in surprise.

"Thank you, Harry," said Lockhart graciously while they waited for a long line of Hufflepuffs to pass. "I mean, we teachers have quite enough to be getting on with, without walking students to classes and standing guard all night. . . ."

"That's right," said Ron, catching on. "Why don't you leave us here, sir, we've only got one more corridor to go —"

"You know, Weasley, I think I will," said Lockhart. "I really should go and prepare my next class —"

And he hurried off.

"Prepare his class," Ron sneered after him. "Gone to curl his hair, more like."

They let the rest of the Gryffindors draw ahead of them, then darted down a side passage and hurried off toward Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. But just as they were congratulating each other on their brilliant scheme —

"Potter! Weasley! What are you doing?"

It was Professor McGonagall, and her mouth was the thinnest of thin lines.

"We were — we were —" Ron stammered. "We were going to — to go and see —"

"Hermione," said Harry. Ron and Professor McGonagall both looked at him.

"We haven't seen her for ages, Professor," Harry went on hurriedly, treading on Ron's foot, "and we thought we'd sneak into the hospital wing, you know, and tell her the Mandrakes are nearly ready and, er, not to worry —"

Professor McGonagall was still staring at him, and for a moment, Harry thought she was going to explode, but when she spoke, it was in a strangely croaky voice.

"Of course," she said, and Harry, amazed, saw a tear glistening in her beady eye. "Of course, I realize this has all been hardest on the friends of those who have been . . . I quite understand. Yes,

Potter, of course you may visit Miss Granger. I will inform Professor Binns where you've gone. Tell Madam Pomfrey I have given my permission."

Harry and Ron walked away, hardly daring to believe that they'd avoided detention. As they turned the corner, they distinctly heard Professor McGonagall blow her nose.

"That," said Ron fervently, "was the best story you've ever come up with."

They had no choice now but to go to the hospital wing and tell Madam Pomfrey that they had Professor McGonagall's permission to visit Hermione.

Madam Pomfrey let them in, but reluctantly.

"There's just no *point* talking to a Petrified person," she said, and they had to admit she had a point when they'd taken their seats next to Hermione. It was plain that Hermione didn't have the faintest inkling that she had visitors, and that they might just as well tell her bedside cabinet not to worry for all the good it would do.

"Wonder if she did see the attacker, though?" said Ron, looking sadly at Hermione's rigid face. "Because if he sneaked up on them all, no one'll ever know. . . ."

But Harry wasn't looking at Hermione's face. He was more interested in her right hand. It lay clenched on top of her blankets, and bending closer, he saw that a piece of paper was scrunched inside her fist.

Making sure that Madam Pomfrey was nowhere near, he pointed this out to Ron.

"Try and get it out," Ron whispered, shifting his chair so that he blocked Harry from Madam Pomfrey's view.

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It was no easy task. Hermione's hand was clamped so tightly around the paper that Harry was sure he was going to tear it. While Ron kept watch he tugged and twisted, and at last, after several tense minutes, the paper came free.

It was a page torn from a very old library book. Harry smoothed it out eagerly and Ron leaned close to read it, too.

Of the many fearsome beasts and monsters that roam our land, there is none more curious or more deadly than the Basilisk, known also as the King of Serpents. This snake, which may reach gigantic size and live many hundreds of years, is born from a chicken's egg, hatched beneath a toad. Its methods of killing are most wondrous, for aside from its deadly and venomous fangs, the Basilisk has a murderous stare, and all who are fixed with the beam of its eye shall suffer instant death. Spiders flee before the Basilisk, for it is their mortal enemy, and the Basilisk flees only from the crowing of the rooster, which is fatal to it.

And beneath this, a single word had been written, in a hand Harry recognized as Hermione's. *Pipes.*

It was as though somebody had just flicked a light on in his brain.

"Ron," he breathed. "This is it. This is the answer. The monster in the Chamber's a *basilisk* — a giant serpent! *That's* why I've been hearing that voice all over the place, and nobody else has heard it. It's because I understand Parseltongue. . . ."

Harry looked up at the beds around him.

"The basilisk kills people by looking at them. But no one's died — because no one looked it straight in the eye. Colin saw it through his camera. The basilisk burned up all the film inside it, but Colin just got Petrified. Justin . . . Justin must've seen the basilisk through Nearly Headless Nick! Nick got the full blast of it, but he couldn't die *again* . . . and Hermione and that Ravenclaw prefect were found with a mirror next to them. Hermione had just realized the monster was a basilisk. I bet you anything she warned the first person she met to look around corners with a mirror first! And that girl pulled out her mirror — and —"

Ron's jaw had dropped.

"And Mrs. Norris?" he whispered eagerly.

Harry thought hard, picturing the scene on the night of Halloween.

"The water . . ." he said slowly. "The flood from Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. I bet you Mrs. Norris only saw the reflection. . . ."

He scanned the page in his hand eagerly. The more he looked at it, the more it made sense.

". . . *The crowing of the rooster* . . . *is fatal to it*!" he read aloud. "Hagrid's roosters were killed! The Heir of Slytherin didn't want one anywhere near the castle once the Chamber was opened! *Spiders flee before it*! It all fits!"

"But how's the basilisk been getting around the place?" said Ron. "A giant snake . . . Someone would've seen . . ."

Harry, however, pointed at the word Hermione had scribbled at the foot of the page.

"Pipes," he said. "Pipes . . . Ron, it's been using the plumbing. I've been hearing that voice inside the walls. . . ."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Ron suddenly grabbed Harry's arm.

"The entrance to the Chamber of Secrets!" he said hoarsely. "What if it's a bathroom? What if it's in —"

"— *Moaning Myrtle's bathroom,*" said Harry.

They sat there, excitement coursing through them, hardly able to believe it.

"This means," said Harry, "I can't be the only Parselmouth in the school. The Heir of Slytherin's one, too. That's how he's been controlling the basilisk."

"What're we going to do?" said Ron, whose eyes were flashing. "Should we go straight to McGonagall?"

"Let's go to the staffroom," said Harry, jumping up. "She'll be there in ten minutes. It's nearly break."

They ran downstairs. Not wanting to be discovered hanging around in another corridor, they went straight into the deserted staffroom. It was a large, paneled room full of dark, wooden chairs. Harry and Ron paced around it, too excited to sit down.

But the bell to signal break never came.

Instead, echoing through the corridors came Professor McGonagall's voice, magically magnified.

"*All students to return to their House dormitories at once. All teachers return to the staffroom. Immediately, please.*"

Harry wheeled around to stare at Ron.

"Not another attack? Not now?"

"What'll we do?" said Ron, aghast. "Go back to the dormitory?"

"No," said Harry, glancing around. There was an ugly sort of wardrobe to his left, full of the teachers' cloaks. "In here. Let's hear what it's all about. Then we can tell them what we've found out."

They hid themselves inside it, listening to the rumbling of hundreds of people moving overhead, and the staffroom door banging open. From between the musty folds of the cloaks, they watched the teachers filtering into the room. Some of them were looking puzzled, others downright scared. Then Professor McGonagall arrived.

"It has happened," she told the silent staffroom. "A student has been taken by the monster. Right into the Chamber itself."

Professor Flitwick let out a squeal. Professor Sprout clapped her hands over her mouth. Snape gripped the back of a chair very hard and said, "How can you be sure?"

"The Heir of Slytherin," said Professor McGonagall, who was very white, "left another message. Right underneath the first one. '*Her skeleton will lie in the Chamber forever.*' "

Professor Flitwick burst into tears.

"Who is it?" said Madam Hooch, who had sunk, weak-kneed, into a chair. "Which student?"

"Ginny Weasley," said Professor McGonagall.

Harry felt Ron slide silently down onto the wardrobe floor beside him.

"We shall have to send all the students home tomorrow," said Professor McGonagall. "This is the end of Hogwarts. Dumbledore always said . . ."

The staffroom door banged open again. For one wild moment, Harry was sure it would be Dumbledore. But it was Lockhart, and he was beaming.

"So sorry — dozed off — what have I missed?"

He didn't seem to notice that the other teachers were looking at him with something remarkably like hatred. Snape stepped forward.

"Just the man," he said. "The very man. A girl has been snatched by the monster, Lockhart. Taken into the Chamber of Secrets itself. Your moment has come at last."

Lockhart blanched.

"That's right, Gilderoy," chipped in Professor Sprout. "Weren't you saying just last night that you've known all along where the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets is?"

"I — well, I —" sputtered Lockhart.

"Yes, didn't you tell me you were sure you knew what was inside it?" piped up Professor Flitwick.

"D-did I? I don't recall —"

"I certainly remember you saying you were sorry you hadn't had a crack at the monster before Hagrid was arrested," said Snape. "Didn't you say that the whole affair had been bungled, and that you should have been given a free rein from the first?"

Lockhart stared around at his stony-faced colleagues.

"I — I really never — you may have misunderstood —"

"We'll leave it to you, then, Gilderoy," said Professor McGonagall. "Tonight will be an excellent time to do it. We'll make sure everyone's out of your way. You'll be able to tackle the monster all by yourself. A free rein at last."

Lockhart gazed desperately around him, but nobody came to the rescue. He didn't look remotely handsome anymore. His lip was trembling, and in the absence of his usually toothy grin, he looked weak-chinned and feeble.

"V-very well," he said. "I'll — I'll be in my office, getting — getting ready."

And he left the room.

"Right," said Professor McGonagall, whose nostrils were flared,

"that's got *him* out from under our feet. The Heads of Houses should go and inform their students what has happened. Tell them the Hogwarts Express will take them home first thing tomorrow. Will the rest of you please make sure no students have been left outside their dormitories."

The teachers rose and left, one by one.

It was probably the worst day of Harry's entire life. He, Ron, Fred, and George sat together in a corner of the Gryffindor common room, unable to say anything to each other. Percy wasn't there. He had gone to send an owl to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, then shut himself up in his dormitory.

No afternoon ever lasted as long as that one, nor had Gryffindor Tower ever been so crowded, yet so quiet. Near sunset, Fred and George went up to bed, unable to sit there any longer.

"She knew something, Harry," said Ron, speaking for the first time since they had entered the wardrobe in the staffroom. "That's why she was taken. It wasn't some stupid thing about Percy at all. She'd found out something about the Chamber of Secrets. That must be why she was —" Ron rubbed his eyes frantically. "I mean, she was a pureblood. There can't be any other reason."

Harry could see the sun sinking, blood-red, below the skyline. This was the worst he had ever felt. If only there was something they could do. Anything.

"Harry," said Ron. "D'you think there's any chance at all she's not — you know —"

Harry didn't know what to say. He couldn't see how Ginny could still be alive.

"D'you know what?" said Ron. "I think we should go and see

Lockhart. Tell him what we know. He's going to try and get into the Chamber. We can tell him where we think it is, and tell him it's a basilisk in there."

Because Harry couldn't think of anything else to do, and because he wanted to be doing something, he agreed. The Gryffindors around them were so miserable, and felt so sorry for the Weasleys, that nobody tried to stop them as they got up, crossed the room, and left through the portrait hole.

Darkness was falling as they walked down to Lockhart's office. There seemed to be a lot of activity going on inside it. They could hear scraping, thumps, and hurried footsteps.

Harry knocked and there was a sudden silence from inside. Then the door opened the tiniest crack and they saw one of Lockhart's eyes peering through it.

"Oh — Mr. Potter — Mr. Weasley —" he said, opening the door a bit wider. "I'm rather busy at the moment — if you would be quick —"

"Professor, we've got some information for you," said Harry. "We think it'll help you."

"Er — well — it's not terribly —" The side of Lockhart's face that they could see looked very uncomfortable. "I mean — well — all right —"

He opened the door and they entered.

His office had been almost completely stripped. Two large trunks stood open on the floor. Robes, jade-green, lilac, midnight-blue, had been hastily folded into one of them; books were jumbled untidily into the other. The photographs that had covered the walls were now crammed into boxes on the desk.

"Are you going somewhere?" said Harry.

"Er, well, yes," said Lockhart, ripping a life-size poster of himself from the back of the door as he spoke and starting to roll it up. "Urgent call — unavoidable — got to go —"

"What about my sister?" said Ron jerkily.

"Well, as to that — most unfortunate —" said Lockhart, avoiding their eyes as he wrenched open a drawer and started emptying the contents into a bag. "No one regrets more than I —"

"You're the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher!" said Harry. "You can't go now! Not with all the Dark stuff going on here!"

"Well — I must say — when I took the job —" Lockhart muttered, now piling socks on top of his robes. "nothing in the job description — didn't expect —"

"You mean you're *running away*? said Harry disbelievingly. "After all that stuff you did in your books —"

"Books can be misleading," said Lockhart delicately.

"You wrote them!" Harry shouted.

"My dear boy," said Lockhart, straightening up and frowning at Harry. "Do use your common sense. My books wouldn't have sold half as well if people didn't think *I'd* done all those things. No one wants to read about some ugly old Armenian warlock, even if he did save a village from werewolves. He'd look dreadful on the front cover. No dress sense at all. And the witch who banished the Bandon Banshee had a hairy chin. I mean, come on —"

"So you've just been taking credit for what a load of other people have done?" said Harry incredulously.

"Harry, Harry," said Lockhart, shaking his head impatiently, "it's not nearly as simple as that. There was work involved. I had

to track these people down. Ask them exactly how they managed to do what they did. Then I had to put a Memory Charm on them so they wouldn't remember doing it. If there's one thing I pride myself on, it's my Memory Charms. No, it's been a lot of work, Harry. It's not all book signings and publicity photos, you know. You want fame, you have to be prepared for a long hard slog."

He banged the lids of his trunks shut and locked them.

"Let's see," he said. "I think that's everything. Yes. Only one thing left."

He pulled out his wand and turned to them.

"Awfully sorry, boys, but I'll have to put a Memory Charm on you now. Can't have you blabbing my secrets all over the place. I'd never sell another book —"

Harry reached his wand just in time. Lockhart had barely raised his, when Harry bellowed, "*Expelliarmus*!"

Lockhart was blasted backward, falling over his trunk; his wand flew high into the air; Ron caught it, and flung it out of the open window.

"Shouldn't have let Professor Snape teach us that one," said Harry furiously, kicking Lockhart's trunk aside. Lockhart was looking up at him, feeble once more. Harry was still pointing his wand at him.

"What d'you want me to do?" said Lockhart weakly. "I don't know where the Chamber of Secrets is. There's nothing I can do."

"You're in luck," said Harry, forcing Lockhart to his feet at wandpoint. "We think *we* know where it is. *And* what's inside it. Let's go."

They marched Lockhart out of his office and down the nearest stairs, along the dark corridor where the messages shone on the wall, to the door of Moaning Myrtle's bathroom.

They sent Lockhart in first. Harry was pleased to see that he was shaking.

Moaning Myrtle was sitting on the tank of the end toilet.

"Oh, it's you," she said when she saw Harry. "What do you want this time?"

"To ask you how you died," said Harry.

Myrtle's whole aspect changed at once. She looked as though she had never been asked such a flattering question.

"Ooooh, it was dreadful," she said with relish. "It happened right in here. I died in this very stall. I remember it so well. I'd hidden because Olive Hornby was teasing me about my glasses. The door was locked, and I was crying, and then I heard somebody come in. They said something funny. A different language, I think it must have been. Anyway, what really got me was that it was a *boy* speaking. So I unlocked the door, to tell him to go and use his own toilet, and then —" Myrtle swelled importantly, her face shining. "I *died*."

"How?" said Harry.

"No idea," said Myrtle in hushed tones. "I just remember seeing a pair of great, big, yellow eyes. My whole body sort of seized up, and then I was floating away. . . ." She looked dreamily at Harry. "And then I came back again. I was determined to haunt Olive Hornby, you see. Oh, she was sorry she'd ever laughed at my glasses."

"Where exactly did you see the eyes?" said Harry.

"Somewhere there," said Myrtle, pointing vaguely toward the sink in front of her toilet.

Harry and Ron hurried over to it. Lockhart was standing well back, a look of utter terror on his face.

It looked like an ordinary sink. They examined every inch of it, inside and out, including the pipes below. And then Harry saw it: Scratched on the side of one of the copper taps was a tiny snake.

"That tap's never worked," said Myrtle brightly as he tried to turn it.

"Harry," said Ron. "Say something. Something in Parseltongue."

"But —" Harry thought hard. The only times he'd ever managed to speak Parseltongue were when he'd been faced with a real snake. He stared hard at the tiny engraving, trying to imagine it was real.

"Open up," he said.

He looked at Ron, who shook his head.

"English," he said.

Harry looked back at the snake, willing himself to believe it was alive. If he moved his head, the candlelight made it look as though it were moving.

"Open up," he said.

Except that the words weren't what he heard; a strange hissing had escaped him, and at once the tap glowed with a brilliant white light and began to spin. Next second, the sink began to move; the sink, in fact, sank, right out of sight, leaving a large pipe exposed, a pipe wide enough for a man to slide into.

Harry heard Ron gasp and looked up again. He had made up his mind what he was going to do.

"I'm going down there," he said.

He couldn't not go, not now they had found the entrance to the Chamber, not if there was even the faintest, slimmest, wildest chance that Ginny might be alive.

"Me too," said Ron.

There was a pause.

"Well, you hardly seem to need me," said Lockhart, with a shadow of his old smile. "I'll just —"

He put his hand on the door knob, but Ron and Harry both pointed their wands at him.

"You can go first," Ron snarled.

White-faced and wandless, Lockhart approached the opening.

"Boys," he said, his voice feeble. "Boys, what good will it do?"

Harry jabbed him in the back with his wand. Lockhart slid his legs into the pipe.

"I really don't think —" he started to say, but Ron gave him a push, and he slid out of sight. Harry followed quickly. He lowered himself slowly into the pipe, then let go.

It was like rushing down an endless, slimy, dark slide. He could see more pipes branching off in all directions, but none as large as theirs, which twisted and turned, sloping steeply downward, and he knew that he was falling deeper below the school than even the dungeons. Behind him he could hear Ron, thudding slightly at the curves.

And then, just as he had begun to worry about what would happen when he hit the ground, the pipe leveled out, and he shot out of the end with a wet thud, landing on the damp floor of a dark stone tunnel large enough to stand in. Lockhart was getting to his

feet a little ways away, covered in slime and white as a ghost. Harry stood aside as Ron came whizzing out of the pipe, too.

"We must be miles under the school," said Harry, his voice echoing in the black tunnel.

"Under the lake, probably," said Ron, squinting around at the dark, slimy walls.

All three of them turned to stare into the darkness ahead.

"*Lumos*!" Harry muttered to his wand and it lit again. "C'mon," he said to Ron and Lockhart, and off they went, their footsteps slapping loudly on the wet floor.

The tunnel was so dark that they could only see a little distance ahead. Their shadows on the wet walls looked monstrous in the wandlight.

"Remember," Harry said quietly as they walked cautiously forward, "any sign of movement, close your eyes right away. . . ."

But the tunnel was quiet as the grave, and the first unexpected sound they heard was a loud *crunch* as Ron stepped on what turned out to be a rat's skull. Harry lowered his wand to look at the floor and saw that it was littered with small animal bones. Trying very hard not to imagine what Ginny might look like if they found her, Harry led the way forward, around a dark bend in the tunnel.

"Harry — there's something up there —" said Ron hoarsely, grabbing Harry's shoulder.

They froze, watching. Harry could just see the outline of something huge and curved, lying right across the tunnel. It wasn't moving.

"Maybe it's asleep," he breathed, glancing back at the other two. Lockhart's hands were pressed over his eyes. Harry turned back to look at the thing, his heart beating so fast it hurt.

Very slowly, his eyes as narrow as he could make them and still see, Harry edged forward, his wand held high.

The light slid over a gigantic snake skin, of a vivid, poisonous green, lying curled and empty across the tunnel floor. The creature that had shed it must have been twenty feet long at least.

"Blimey," said Ron weakly.

There was a sudden movement behind them. Gilderoy Lockhart's knees had given way.

"Get up," said Ron sharply, pointing his wand at Lockhart.

Lockhart got to his feet — then he dived at Ron, knocking him to the ground.

Harry jumped forward, but too late — Lockhart was straightening up, panting, Ron's wand in his hand and a gleaming smile back on his face.

"The adventure ends here, boys!" he said. "I shall take a bit of this skin back up to the school, tell them I was too late to save the girl, and that you two *tragically* lost your minds at the sight of her mangled body — say good-bye to your memories!"

He raised Ron's Spellotaped wand high over his head and yelled, "*Obliviate*!"

The wand exploded with the force of a small bomb. Harry flung his arms over his head and ran, slipping over the coils of snake skin, out of the way of great chunks of tunnel ceiling that were thundering to the floor. Next moment, he was standing alone, gazing at a solid wall of broken rock.

"Ron!" he shouted. "Are you okay? Ron!"

"I'm here!" came Ron's muffled voice from behind the rockfall. "I'm okay — this git's not, though — he got blasted by the wand —"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

There was a dull thud and a loud "ow!" It sounded as though Ron had just kicked Lockhart in the shins.

"What now?" Ron's voice said, sounding desperate. "We can't get through — it'll take ages. . . ."

Harry looked up at the tunnel ceiling. Huge cracks had appeared in it. He had never tried to break apart anything as large as these rocks by magic, and now didn't seem a good moment to try — what if the whole tunnel caved in?

There was another thud and another "ow!" from behind the rocks. They were wasting time. Ginny had already been in the Chamber of Secrets for hours. . . . Harry knew there was only one thing to do.

"Wait there," he called to Ron. "Wait with Lockhart. I'll go on. . . . If I'm not back in an hour . . ."

There was a very pregnant pause.

"I'll try and shift some of this rock," said Ron, who seemed to be trying to keep his voice steady. "So you can — can get back through. And, Harry —"

"See you in a bit," said Harry, trying to inject some confidence into his shaking voice.

And he set off alone past the giant snake skin.

Soon the distant noise of Ron straining to shift the rocks was gone. The tunnel turned and turned again. Every nerve in Harry's body was tingling unpleasantly. He wanted the tunnel to end, yet dreaded what he'd find when it did. And then, at last, as he crept around yet another bend, he saw a solid wall ahead on which two entwined serpents were carved, their eyes set with great, glinting emeralds.

Harry approached, his throat very dry. There was no need to pretend these stone snakes were real; their eyes looked strangely alive.

He could guess what he had to do. He cleared his throat, and the emerald eyes seemed to flicker.

"*Open,*" said Harry, in a low, faint hiss.

The serpents parted as the wall cracked open, the halves slid smoothly out of sight, and Harry, shaking from head to foot, walked inside.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE HEIR OF SLYTHERIN

He was standing at the end of a very long, dimly lit chamber. Towering stone pillars entwined with more carved serpents rose to support a ceiling lost in darkness, casting long, black shadows through the odd, greenish gloom that filled the place.

His heart beating very fast, Harry stood listening to the chill silence. Could the basilisk be lurking in a shadowy corner, behind a pillar? And where was Ginny?

He pulled out his wand and moved forward between the serpentine columns. Every careful footstep echoed loudly off the shadowy walls. He kept his eyes narrowed, ready to clamp them shut at the smallest sign of movement. The hollow eye sockets of the stone snakes seemed to be following him. More than once, with a jolt of the stomach, he thought he saw one stir.

Then, as he drew level with the last pair of pillars, a statue high as the Chamber itself loomed into view, standing against the back wall.

Harry had to crane his neck to look up into the giant face above: It was ancient and monkeyish, with a long, thin beard that fell almost to the bottom of the wizard's sweeping stone robes, where two enormous gray feet stood on the smooth Chamber floor. And between the feet, facedown, lay a small, black-robed figure with flaming-red hair.

"*Ginny*!" Harry muttered, sprinting to her and dropping to his knees. "Ginny — don't be dead — please don't be dead —" He flung his wand aside, grabbed Ginny's shoulders, and turned her over. Her face was white as marble, and as cold, yet her eyes were closed, so she wasn't Petrified. But then she must be —

"Ginny, please wake up," Harry muttered desperately, shaking her. Ginny's head lolled hopelessly from side to side.

"She won't wake," said a soft voice.

Harry jumped and spun around on his knees.

A tall, black-haired boy was leaning against the nearest pillar, watching. He was strangely blurred around the edges, as though Harry were looking at him through a misted window. But there was no mistaking him —

"Tom — *Tom Riddle*?"

Riddle nodded, not taking his eyes off Harry's face.

"What d'you mean, she won't wake?" Harry said desperately. "She's not — she's not — ?"

"She's still alive," said Riddle. "But only just."

Harry stared at him. Tom Riddle had been at Hogwarts fifty years ago, yet here he stood, a weird, misty light shining about him, not a day older than sixteen.

"Are you a ghost?" Harry said uncertainly.

"A memory," said Riddle quietly. "Preserved in a diary for fifty years."

He pointed toward the floor near the statue's giant toes. Lying open there was the little black diary Harry had found in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. For a second, Harry wondered how it had got there — but there were more pressing matters to deal with.

"You've got to help me, Tom," Harry said, raising Ginny's head again. "We've got to get her out of here. There's a basilisk . . . I don't know where it is, but it could be along any moment. . . . Please, help me —"

Riddle didn't move. Harry, sweating, managed to hoist Ginny half off the floor, and bent to pick up his wand again.

But his wand had gone.

"Did you see — ?"

He looked up. Riddle was still watching him — twirling Harry's wand between his long fingers.

"Thanks," said Harry, stretching out his hand for it.

A smile curled the corners of Riddle's mouth. He continued to stare at Harry, twirling the wand idly.

"Listen," said Harry urgently, his knees sagging with Ginny's dead weight. "*We've got to go*! If the basilisk comes —"

"It won't come until it is called," said Riddle calmly.

Harry lowered Ginny back onto the floor, unable to hold her up any longer.

"What d'you mean?" he said. "Look, give me my wand, I might need it —"

Riddle's smile broadened.

"You won't be needing it," he said.

Harry stared at him.

"What d'you mean, I won't be — ?"

"I've waited a long time for this, Harry Potter," said Riddle. "For the chance to see you. To speak to you."

"Look," said Harry, losing patience, "I don't think you get it. We're in the *Chamber of Secrets.* We can talk later —"

"We're going to talk now," said Riddle, still smiling broadly, and he pocketed Harry's wand.

Harry stared at him. There was something very funny going on here. . . .

"How did Ginny get like this?" he asked slowly.

"Well, that's an interesting question," said Riddle pleasantly. "And quite a long story. I suppose the real reason Ginny Weasley's like this is because she opened her heart and spilled all her secrets to an invisible stranger."

"What are you talking about?" said Harry.

"The diary," said Riddle. "*My* diary. Little Ginny's been writing in it for months and months, telling me all her pitiful worries and woes — how her brothers *tease* her, how she had to come to school with secondhand robes and books, how" — Riddle's eyes glinted — "how she didn't think famous, good, great Harry Potter would *ever* like her. . . ."

All the time he spoke, Riddle's eyes never left Harry's face. There was an almost hungry look in them.

"It's very *boring,* having to listen to the silly little troubles of an eleven-year-old girl," he went on. "But I was patient. I wrote back. I was sympathetic, I was kind. Ginny simply *loved* me. *No one's ever understood me like you, Tom. . . . I'm so glad I've got this diary to*

confide in. . . . It's like having a friend I can carry around in my pocket. . . ."

Riddle laughed, a high, cold laugh that didn't suit him. It made the hairs stand up on the back of Harry's neck.

"If I say it myself, Harry, I've always been able to charm the people I needed. So Ginny poured out her soul to me, and her soul happened to be exactly what I wanted. . . . I grew stronger and stronger on a diet of her deepest fears, her darkest secrets. I grew powerful, far more powerful than little Miss Weasley. Powerful enough to start feeding Miss Weasley a few of *my* secrets, to start pouring a little of *my* soul back into *her* . . ."

"What d'you mean?" said Harry, whose mouth had gone very dry.

"Haven't you guessed yet, Harry Potter?" said Riddle softly. "Ginny Weasley opened the Chamber of Secrets. She strangled the school roosters and daubed threatening messages on the walls. She set the Serpent of Slytherin on four Mudbloods, and the Squib's cat."

"No," Harry whispered.

"Yes," said Riddle, calmly. "Of course, she didn't *know* what she was doing at first. It was very amusing. I wish you could have seen her new diary entries . . . far more interesting, they became. . . . *Dear Tom,*" he recited, watching Harry's horrified face, "*I think I'm losing my memory. There are rooster feathers all over my robes and I don't know how they got there. Dear Tom, I can't remember what I did on the night of Halloween, but a cat was attacked and I've got paint all down my front. Dear Tom, Percy keeps telling me I'm pale and I'm not myself. I think he suspects me. . . . There was another attack today*

and I don't know where I was. Tom, what am I going to do? I think I'm going mad. . . . I think I'm the one attacking everyone, Tom!"

Harry's fists were clenched, the nails digging deep into his palms.

"It took a very long time for stupid little Ginny to stop trusting her diary," said Riddle. "But she finally became suspicious and tried to dispose of it. And that's where *you* came in, Harry. You found it, and I couldn't have been more delighted. Of all the people who could have picked it up, it was *you,* the very person I was most anxious to meet. . . ."

"And why did you want to meet me?" said Harry. Anger was coursing through him, and it was an effort to keep his voice steady.

"Well, you see, Ginny told me all about you, Harry," said Riddle. "Your whole *fascinating* history." His eyes roved over the lightning scar on Harry's forehead, and their expression grew hungrier. "I knew I must find out more about you, talk to you, meet you if I could. So I decided to show you my famous capture of that great oaf, Hagrid, to gain your trust —"

"Hagrid's my friend," said Harry, his voice now shaking. "And you framed him, didn't you? I thought you made a mistake, but —"

Riddle laughed his high laugh again.

"It was my word against Hagrid's, Harry. Well, you can imagine how it looked to old Armando Dippet. On the one hand, Tom Riddle, poor but brilliant, parentless but so *brave,* school prefect, model student . . . on the other hand, big, blundering Hagrid, in trouble every other week, trying to raise werewolf cubs under his bed, sneaking off to the Forbidden Forest to wrestle trolls . . . but I

admit, even *I* was surprised how well the plan worked. I thought *someone* must realize that Hagrid couldn't possibly be the Heir of Slytherin. It had taken *me* five whole years to find out everything I could about the Chamber of Secrets and discover the secret entrance . . . as though Hagrid had the brains, or the power!

"Only the Transfiguration teacher, Dumbledore, seemed to think Hagrid was innocent. He persuaded Dippet to keep Hagrid and train him as gamekeeper. Yes, I think Dumbledore might have guessed. . . . Dumbledore never seemed to like me as much as the other teachers did. . . ."

"I bet Dumbledore saw right through you," said Harry, his teeth gritted.

"Well, he certainly kept an annoyingly close watch on me after Hagrid was expelled," said Riddle carelessly. "I knew it wouldn't be safe to open the Chamber again while I was still at school. But I wasn't going to waste those long years I'd spent searching for it. I decided to leave behind a diary, preserving my sixteen-year-old self in its pages, so that one day, with luck, I would be able to lead another in my footsteps, and finish Salazar Slytherin's noble work."

"Well, you haven't finished it," said Harry triumphantly. "No one's died this time, not even the cat. In a few hours the Mandrake Draught will be ready and everyone who was Petrified will be all right again —"

"Haven't I already told you," said Riddle quietly, "that killing Mudbloods doesn't matter to me anymore? For many months now, my new target has been — *you.*"

Harry stared at him.

"Imagine how angry I was when the next time my diary was

opened, it was Ginny who was writing to me, not you. She saw you with the diary, you see, and panicked. What if you found out how to work it, and I repeated all her secrets to you? What if, even worse, I told you who'd been strangling roosters? So the foolish little brat waited until your dormitory was deserted and stole it back. But I knew what I must do. It was clear to me that you were on the trail of Slytherin's heir. From everything Ginny had told me about you, I knew you would go to any lengths to solve the mystery — particularly if one of your best friends was attacked. And Ginny had told me the whole school was buzzing because you could speak Parseltongue. . . .

"So I made Ginny write her own farewell on the wall and come down here to wait. She struggled and cried and became *very* boring. But there isn't much life left in her. . . . She put too much into the diary, into me. Enough to let me leave its pages at last. . . . I have been waiting for you to appear since we arrived here. I knew you'd come. I have many questions for you, Harry Potter."

"Like what?" Harry spat, fists still clenched.

"Well," said Riddle, smiling pleasantly, "how is it that *you* — a skinny boy with no extraordinary magical talent — managed to defeat the greatest wizard of all time? How did *you* escape with nothing but a scar, while Lord Voldemort's powers were destroyed?"

There was an odd red gleam in his hungry eyes now.

"Why do you care how I escaped?" said Harry slowly. "Voldemort was after your time. . . ."

"Voldemort," said Riddle softly, "is my past, present, and future, Harry Potter. . . ."

He pulled Harry's wand from his pocket and began to trace it through the air, writing three shimmering words:

TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE

Then he waved the wand once, and the letters of his name rearranged themselves:

I AM LORD VOLDEMORT

"You see?" he whispered. "It was a name I was already using at Hogwarts, to my most intimate friends only, of course. You think I was going to use my filthy Muggle father's name forever? I, in whose veins runs the blood of Salazar Slytherin himself, through my mother's side? I, keep the name of a foul, common Muggle, who abandoned me even before I was born, just because he found out his wife was a witch? No, Harry — I fashioned myself a new name, a name I knew wizards everywhere would one day fear to speak, when I had become the greatest sorcerer in the world!"

Harry's brain seemed to have jammed. He stared numbly at Riddle, at the orphaned boy who had grown up to murder Harry's own parents, and so many others. . . . At last he forced himself to speak.

"You're not," he said, his quiet voice full of hatred.

"Not what?" snapped Riddle.

"Not the greatest sorcerer in the world," said Harry, breathing fast. "Sorry to disappoint you and all that, but the greatest wizard in the world is Albus Dumbledore. Everyone says so. Even when you were strong, you didn't dare try and take over at Hogwarts. Dumbledore saw through you when you were at school and he still frightens you now, wherever you're hiding these days —"

The smile had gone from Riddle's face, to be replaced by a very ugly look.

"Dumbledore's been driven out of this castle by the mere *memory* of me!" he hissed.

"He's not as gone as you might think!" Harry retorted. He was speaking at random, wanting to scare Riddle, wishing rather than believing it to be true —

Riddle opened his mouth, but froze.

Music was coming from somewhere. Riddle whirled around to stare down the empty Chamber. The music was growing louder. It was eerie, spine-tingling, unearthly; it lifted the hair on Harry's scalp and made his heart feel as though it was swelling to twice its normal size. Then, as the music reached such a pitch that Harry felt it vibrating inside his own ribs, flames erupted at the top of the nearest pillar.

A crimson bird the size of a swan had appeared, piping its weird music to the vaulted ceiling. It had a glittering golden tail as long as a peacock's and gleaming golden talons, which were gripping a ragged bundle.

A second later, the bird was flying straight at Harry. It dropped the ragged thing it was carrying at his feet, then landed heavily on his shoulder. As it folded its great wings, Harry looked up and saw it had a long, sharp golden beak and a beady black eye.

The bird stopped singing. It sat still and warm next to Harry's cheek, gazing steadily at Riddle.

"That's a phoenix. . . ." said Riddle, staring shrewdly back at it.

"*Fawkes*?" Harry breathed, and he felt the bird's golden claws squeeze his shoulder gently.

"And *that* —" said Riddle, now eyeing the ragged thing that Fawkes had dropped, "that's the old school Sorting Hat —"

So it was. Patched, frayed, and dirty, the hat lay motionless at Harry's feet.

Riddle began to laugh again. He laughed so hard that the dark Chamber rang with it, as though ten Riddles were laughing at once —

"This is what Dumbledore sends his defender! A songbird and an old hat! Do you feel brave, Harry Potter? Do you feel safe now?"

Harry didn't answer. He might not see what use Fawkes or the Sorting Hat were, but he was no longer alone, and he waited for Riddle to stop laughing with his courage mounting.

"To business, Harry," said Riddle, still smiling broadly. "Twice — in *your* past, in *my* future — we have met. And twice I failed to kill you. *How did you survive*? Tell me everything. The longer you talk," he added softly, "the longer you stay alive."

Harry was thinking fast, weighing his chances. Riddle had the wand. He, Harry, had Fawkes and the Sorting Hat, neither of which would be much good in a duel. It looked bad, all right . . . but the longer Riddle stood there, the more life was dwindling out of Ginny . . . and in the meantime, Harry noticed suddenly, Riddle's outline was becoming clearer, more solid. . . . If it had to be a fight between him and Riddle, better sooner than later.

"No one knows why you lost your powers when you attacked me," said Harry abruptly. "I don't know myself. But I know why you couldn't *kill* me. Because my mother died to save me. My common *Muggle-born* mother," he added, shaking with suppressed rage. "She stopped you killing me. And I've seen the real you, I saw you last year. You're a wreck. You're barely alive. That's where all your power got you. You're in hiding. You're ugly, you're foul —"

Riddle's face contorted. Then he forced it into an awful smile.

"So. Your mother died to save you. Yes, that's a powerful counter-charm. I can see now . . . there is nothing special about you, after all. I wondered, you see. There are strange likenesses between us, after all. Even you must have noticed. Both half-bloods, orphans, raised by Muggles. Probably the only two Parselmouths to come to Hogwarts since the great Slytherin himself. We even *look* something alike . . . but after all, it was merely a lucky chance that saved you from me. That's all I wanted to know."

Harry stood, tense, waiting for Riddle to raise his wand. But Riddle's twisted smile was widening again.

"Now, Harry, I'm going to teach you a little lesson. Let's match the powers of Lord Voldemort, Heir of Salazar Slytherin, against famous Harry Potter, and the best weapons Dumbledore can give him. . . ."

He cast an amused eye over Fawkes and the Sorting Hat, then walked away. Harry, fear spreading up his numb legs, watched Riddle stop between the high pillars and look up into the stone face of Slytherin, high above him in the half-darkness. Riddle opened his mouth wide and hissed — but Harry understood what he was saying. . . .

"Speak to me, Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts Four."

Harry wheeled around to look up at the statue, Fawkes swaying on his shoulder.

Slytherin's gigantic stone face was moving. Horrorstruck, Harry saw his mouth opening, wider and wider, to make a huge black hole.

And something was stirring inside the statue's mouth. Something was slithering up from its depths.

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Harry backed away until he hit the dark Chamber wall, and as he shut his eyes tight he felt Fawkes' wing sweep his cheek as he took flight. Harry wanted to shout, "Don't leave me!" but what chance did a phoenix have against the king of serpents?

Something huge hit the stone floor of the Chamber. Harry felt it shudder — he knew what was happening, he could sense it, could almost see the giant serpent uncoiling itself from Slytherin's mouth. Then he heard Riddle's hissing voice:

"*Kill him.*"

The basilisk was moving toward Harry; he could hear its heavy body slithering heavily across the dusty floor. Eyes still tightly shut, Harry began to run blindly sideways, his hands outstretched, feeling his way — Voldemort was laughing —

Harry tripped. He fell hard onto the stone and tasted blood — the serpent was barely feet from him, he could hear it coming —

There was a loud, explosive spitting sound right above him, and then something heavy hit Harry so hard that he was smashed into the wall. Waiting for fangs to sink through his body he heard more mad hissing, something thrashing wildly off the pillars —

He couldn't help it — he opened his eyes wide enough to squint at what was going on.

The enormous serpent, bright, poisonous green, thick as an oak trunk, had raised itself high in the air and its great blunt head was weaving drunkenly between the pillars. As Harry trembled, ready to close his eyes if it turned, he saw what had distracted the snake.

Fawkes was soaring around its head, and the basilisk was snapping furiously at him with fangs long and thin as sabers —

Fawkes dived. His long golden beak sank out of sight and a

sudden shower of dark blood spattered the floor. The snake's tail thrashed, narrowly missing Harry, and before Harry could shut his eyes, it turned — Harry looked straight into its face and saw that its eyes, both its great, bulbous yellow eyes, had been punctured by the phoenix; blood was streaming to the floor, and the snake was spitting in agony.

"NO!" Harry heard Riddle screaming. *"LEAVE THE BIRD! LEAVE THE BIRD! THE BOY IS BEHIND YOU! YOU CAN STILL SMELL HIM! KILL HIM!"*

The blinded serpent swayed, confused, still deadly. Fawkes was circling its head, piping his eerie song, jabbing here and there at its scaly nose as the blood poured from its ruined eyes.

"Help me, help me," Harry muttered wildly, "someone — anyone —"

The snake's tail whipped across the floor again. Harry ducked. Something soft hit his face.

The basilisk had swept the Sorting Hat into Harry's arms. Harry seized it. It was all he had left, his only chance — he rammed it onto his head and threw himself flat onto the floor as the basilisk's tail swung over him again.

Help me — help me — Harry thought, his eyes screwed tight under the hat. *Please help me —*

There was no answering voice. Instead, the hat contracted, as though an invisible hand was squeezing it very tightly.

Something very hard and heavy thudded onto the top of Harry's head, almost knocking him out. Stars winking in front of his eyes, he grabbed the top of the hat to pull it off and felt something long and hard beneath it.

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A gleaming silver sword had appeared inside the hat, its handle glittering with rubies the size of eggs.

"KILL THE BOY! LEAVE THE BIRD! THE BOY IS BEHIND YOU! SNIFF — SMELL HIM!"

Harry was on his feet, ready. The basilisk's head was falling, its body coiling around, hitting pillars as it twisted to face him. He could see the vast, bloody eye sockets, see the mouth stretching wide, wide enough to swallow him whole, lined with fangs long as his sword, thin, glittering, venomous —

It lunged blindly — Harry dodged and it hit the Chamber wall. It lunged again, and its forked tongue lashed Harry's side. He raised the sword in both his hands —

The basilisk lunged again, and this time its aim was true — Harry threw his whole weight behind the sword and drove it to the hilt into the roof of the serpent's mouth —

But as warm blood drenched Harry's arms, he felt a searing pain just above his elbow. One long, poisonous fang was sinking deeper and deeper into his arm and it splintered as the basilisk keeled over sideways and fell, twitching, to the floor.

Harry slid down the wall. He gripped the fang that was spreading poison through his body and wrenched it out of his arm. But he knew it was too late. White-hot pain was spreading slowly and steadily from the wound. Even as he dropped the fang and watched his own blood soaking his robes, his vision went foggy. The Chamber was dissolving in a whirl of dull color.

A patch of scarlet swam past, and Harry heard a soft clatter of claws beside him.

"Fawkes," said Harry thickly. "You were fantastic, Fawkes. . . ."

He felt the bird lay its beautiful head on the spot where the serpent's fang had pierced him.

He could hear echoing footsteps and then a dark shadow moved in front of him.

"You're dead, Harry Potter," said Riddle's voice above him. "Dead. Even Dumbledore's bird knows it. Do you see what he's doing, Potter? He's crying."

Harry blinked. Fawkes's head slid in and out of focus. Thick, pearly tears were trickling down the glossy feathers.

"I'm going to sit here and watch you die, Harry Potter. Take your time. I'm in no hurry."

Harry felt drowsy. Everything around him seemed to be spinning.

"So ends the famous Harry Potter," said Riddle's distant voice. "Alone in the Chamber of Secrets, forsaken by his friends, defeated at last by the Dark Lord he so unwisely challenged. You'll be back with your dear Mudblood mother soon, Harry. . . . She bought you twelve years of borrowed time . . . but Lord Voldemort got you in the end, as you knew he must. . . ."

If this is dying, thought Harry, *it's not so bad.*

Even the pain was leaving him. . . .

But was this dying? Instead of going black, the Chamber seemed to be coming back into focus. Harry gave his head a little shake and there was Fawkes, still resting his head on Harry's arm. A pearly patch of tears was shining all around the wound — except that there *was* no wound —

"Get away, bird," said Riddle's voice suddenly. "Get away from him — I said, *get away* —"

Harry raised his head. Riddle was pointing Harry's wand at

Fawkes; there was a bang like a gun, and Fawkes took flight again in a whirl of gold and scarlet.

"Phoenix tears . . ." said Riddle quietly, staring at Harry's arm. "Of course . . . healing powers . . . I forgot . . ."

He looked into Harry's face. "But it makes no difference. In fact, I prefer it this way. Just you and me, Harry Potter . . . you and me. . . ."

He raised the wand —

Then, in a rush of wings, Fawkes had soared back overhead and something fell into Harry's lap — *the diary.*

For a split second, both Harry and Riddle, wand still raised, stared at it. Then, without thinking, without considering, as though he had meant to do it all along, Harry seized the basilisk fang on the floor next to him and plunged it straight into the heart of the book.

There was a long, dreadful, piercing scream. Ink spurted out of the diary in torrents, streaming over Harry's hands, flooding the floor. Riddle was writhing and twisting, screaming and flailing and then —

He had gone. Harry's wand fell to the floor with a clatter and there was silence. Silence except for the steady *drip drip* of ink still oozing from the diary. The basilisk venom had burned a sizzling hole right through it.

Shaking all over, Harry pulled himself up. His head was spinning as though he'd just traveled miles by Floo powder. Slowly, he gathered together his wand and the Sorting Hat, and, with a huge tug, retrieved the glittering sword from the roof of the basilisk's mouth.

Then came a faint moan from the end of the Chamber. Ginny was stirring. As Harry hurried toward her, she sat up. Her bemused

eyes traveled from the huge form of the dead basilisk, over Harry, in his blood-soaked robes, then to the diary in his hand. She drew a great, shuddering gasp and tears began to pour down her face.

"Harry — oh, Harry — I tried to tell you at b-breakfast, but I c-*couldn't* say it in front of Percy — it was *me,* Harry — but I — I s-swear I d-didn't mean to — R-Riddle made me, he t-took me over — and — *how* did you kill that — that thing? W-where's Riddle? The last thing I r-remember is him coming out of the diary —"

"It's all right," said Harry, holding up the diary, and showing Ginny the fang hole, "Riddle's finished. Look! Him *and* the basilisk. C'mon, Ginny, let's get out of here —"

"I'm going to be expelled!" Ginny wept as Harry helped her awkwardly to her feet. "I've looked forward to coming to Hogwarts ever since B-Bill came and n-now I'll have to leave and — *w-what'll Mum and Dad say*?"

Fawkes was waiting for them, hovering in the Chamber entrance. Harry urged Ginny forward; they stepped over the motionless coils of the dead basilisk, through the echoing gloom, and back into the tunnel. Harry heard the stone doors close behind them with a soft hiss.

After a few minutes' progress up the dark tunnel, a distant sound of slowly shifting rock reached Harry's ears.

"Ron!" Harry yelled, speeding up. "Ginny's okay! I've got her!"

He heard Ron give a strangled cheer, and they turned the next bend to see his eager face staring through the sizable gap he had managed to make in the rockfall.

"*Ginny*!" Ron thrust an arm through the gap in the rock to pull

her through first. "You're alive! I don't believe it! What happened? How — what — where did that bird come from?"

Fawkes had swooped through the gap after Ginny.

"He's Dumbledore's," said Harry, squeezing through himself.

"How come you've got a *sword*?" said Ron, gaping at the glittering weapon in Harry's hand.

"I'll explain when we get out of here," said Harry with a sideways glance at Ginny, who was crying harder than ever.

"But —"

"Later," Harry said shortly. He didn't think it was a good idea to tell Ron yet who'd been opening the Chamber, not in front of Ginny, anyway. "Where's Lockhart?"

"Back there," said Ron, still looking puzzled but jerking his head up the tunnel toward the pipe. "He's in a bad way. Come and see."

Led by Fawkes, whose wide scarlet wings emitted a soft golden glow in the darkness, they walked all the way back to the mouth of the pipe. Gilderoy Lockhart was sitting there, humming placidly to himself.

"His memory's gone," said Ron. "The Memory Charm backfired. Hit him instead of us. Hasn't got a clue who he is, or where he is, or who we are. I told him to come and wait here. He's a danger to himself."

Lockhart peered good-naturedly up at them all.

"Hello," he said. "Odd sort of place, this, isn't it? Do you live here?"

"No," said Ron, raising his eyebrows at Harry.

Harry bent down and looked up the long, dark pipe.

"Have you thought how we're going to get back up this?" he said to Ron.

Ron shook his head, but Fawkes the phoenix had swooped past Harry and was now fluttering in front of him, his beady eyes bright in the dark. He was waving his long golden tail feathers. Harry looked uncertainly at him.

"He looks like he wants you to grab hold . . ." said Ron, looking perplexed. "But you're much too heavy for a bird to pull up there —"

"Fawkes," said Harry, "isn't an ordinary bird." He turned quickly to the others. "We've got to hold on to each other. Ginny, grab Ron's hand. Professor Lockhart —"

"He means you," said Ron sharply to Lockhart.

"You hold Ginny's other hand —"

Harry tucked the sword and the Sorting Hat into his belt, Ron took hold of the back of Harry's robes, and Harry reached out and took hold of Fawkes's strangely hot tail feathers.

An extraordinary lightness seemed to spread through his whole body and the next second, in a rush of wings, they were flying upward through the pipe. Harry could hear Lockhart dangling below him, saying, "Amazing! Amazing! This is just like magic!" The chill air was whipping through Harry's hair, and before he'd stopped enjoying the ride, it was over — all four of them were hitting the wet floor of Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, and as Lockhart straightened his hat, the sink that hid the pipe was sliding back into place.

Myrtle goggled at them.

"You're alive," she said blankly to Harry.

"There's no need to sound so disappointed," he said grimly, wiping flecks of blood and slime off his glasses.

"Oh, well . . . I'd just been thinking . . . if you had died, you'd have been welcome to share my toilet," said Myrtle, blushing silver.

"Urgh!" said Ron as they left the bathroom for the dark, deserted corridor outside. "Harry! I think Myrtle's grown *fond* of you! You've got competition, Ginny!"

But tears were still flooding silently down Ginny's face.

"Where now?" said Ron, with an anxious look at Ginny. Harry pointed.

Fawkes was leading the way, glowing gold along the corridor. They strode after him, and moments later, found themselves outside Professor McGonagall's office.

Harry knocked and pushed the door open.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

DOBBY'S REWARD

For a moment there was silence as Harry, Ron, Ginny, and Lockhart stood in the doorway, covered in muck and slime and (in Harry's case) blood. Then there was a scream.

"*Ginny*!"

It was Mrs. Weasley, who had been sitting crying in front of the fire. She leapt to her feet, closely followed by Mr. Weasley, and both of them flung themselves on their daughter.

Harry, however, was looking past them. Professor Dumbledore was standing by the mantelpiece, beaming, next to Professor McGonagall, who was taking great, steadying gasps, clutching her chest. Fawkes went whooshing past Harry's ear and settled on Dumbledore's shoulder, just as Harry found himself and Ron being swept into Mrs. Weasley's tight embrace.

"You saved her! You saved her! *How* did you do it?"

"I think we'd all like to know that," said Professor McGonagall weakly.

Mrs. Weasley let go of Harry, who hesitated for a moment, then walked over to the desk and laid upon it the Sorting Hat, the ruby-encrusted sword, and what remained of Riddle's diary.

Then he started telling them everything. For nearly a quarter of an hour he spoke into the rapt silence: He told them about hearing the disembodied voice, how Hermione had finally realized that he was hearing a basilisk in the pipes; how he and Ron had followed the spiders into the forest, that Aragog had told them where the last victim of the basilisk had died; how he had guessed that Moaning Myrtle had been the victim, and that the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets might be in her bathroom. . . .

"Very well," Professor McGonagall prompted him as he paused, "so you found out where the entrance was — breaking a hundred school rules into pieces along the way, I might add — but how on *earth* did you all get out of there alive, Potter?"

So Harry, his voice now growing hoarse from all this talking, told them about Fawkes's timely arrival and about the Sorting Hat giving him the sword. But then he faltered. He had so far avoided mentioning Riddle's diary — or Ginny. She was standing with her head against Mrs. Weasley's shoulder, and tears were still coursing silently down her cheeks. *What if they expelled her*? Harry thought in panic. Riddle's diary didn't work anymore. . . . How could they prove it had been *he* who'd made her do it all?

Instinctively, Harry looked at Dumbledore, who smiled faintly, the firelight glancing off his half-moon spectacles.

"What interests *me* most," said Dumbledore gently, "is how Lord Voldemort managed to enchant Ginny, when my sources tell me he is currently in hiding in the forests of Albania."

Relief — warm, sweeping, glorious relief — swept over Harry.

"W-what's that?" said Mr. Weasley in a stunned voice. "*You-Know-Who*? En-enchant *Ginny*? But Ginny's not . . . Ginny hasn't been . . . has she?"

"It was this diary," said Harry quickly, picking it up and showing it to Dumbledore. "Riddle wrote it when he was sixteen. . . ."

Dumbledore took the diary from Harry and peered keenly down his long, crooked nose at its burnt and soggy pages.

"Brilliant," he said softly. "Of course, he was probably the most brilliant student Hogwarts has ever seen." He turned around to the Weasleys, who were looking utterly bewildered.

"Very few people know that Lord Voldemort was once called Tom Riddle. I taught him myself, fifty years ago, at Hogwarts. He disappeared after leaving the school . . . traveled far and wide . . . sank so deeply into the Dark Arts, consorted with the very worst of our kind, underwent so many dangerous, magical transformations, that when he resurfaced as Lord Voldemort, he was barely recognizable. Hardly anyone connected Lord Voldemort with the clever, handsome boy who was once Head Boy here."

"But, Ginny," said Mrs. Weasley. "What's our Ginny got to do with — with — *him*?"

"His d-diary!" Ginny sobbed. "I've b-been writing in it, and he's been w-writing back all year —"

"*Ginny*!" said Mr. Weasley, flabbergasted. "Haven't I taught you *anything*? What have I always told you? Never trust anything that can think for itself *if you can't see where it keeps its brain.* Why didn't you show the diary to me, or your mother? A suspicious object like that, it was *clearly* full of Dark Magic —"

"I d-didn't know," sobbed Ginny. "I found it inside one of the books Mum got me. I th-thought someone had just left it in there and forgotten about it —"

"Miss Weasley should go up to the hospital wing right away," Dumbledore interrupted in a firm voice. "This has been a terrible ordeal for her. There will be no punishment. Older and wiser wizards than she have been hoodwinked by Lord Voldemort." He strode over to the door and opened it. "Bed rest and perhaps a large, steaming mug of hot chocolate. I always find that cheers me up," he added, twinkling kindly down at her. "You will find that Madam Pomfrey is still awake. She's just giving out Mandrake juice — I daresay the basilisk's victims will be waking up any moment."

"So Hermione's okay!" said Ron brightly.

"There has been no lasting harm done, Ginny," said Dumbledore.

Mrs. Weasley led Ginny out, and Mr. Weasley followed, still looking deeply shaken.

"You know, Minerva," Professor Dumbledore said thoughtfully to Professor McGonagall, "I think all this merits a good *feast.* Might I ask you to go and alert the kitchens?"

"Right," said Professor McGonagall crisply, also moving to the door. "I'll leave you to deal with Potter and Weasley, shall I?"

"Certainly," said Dumbledore.

She left, and Harry and Ron gazed uncertainly at Dumbledore. What exactly had Professor McGonagall meant, *deal* with them? Surely — *surely* — they weren't about to be punished?

"I seem to remember telling you both that I would have to expel you if you broke any more school rules," said Dumbledore.

Ron opened his mouth in horror.

"Which goes to show that the best of us must sometimes eat our words," Dumbledore went on, smiling. "You will both receive Special Awards for Services to the School and — let me see — yes, I think two hundred points apiece for Gryffindor."

Ron went as brightly pink as Lockhart's valentine flowers and closed his mouth again.

"But one of us seems to be keeping mightily quiet about his part in this dangerous adventure," Dumbledore added. "Why so modest, Gilderoy?"

Harry gave a start. He had completely forgotten about Lockhart. He turned and saw that Lockhart was standing in a corner of the room, still wearing his vague smile. When Dumbledore addressed him, Lockhart looked over his shoulder to see who he was talking to.

"Professor Dumbledore," Ron said quickly, "there was an accident down in the Chamber of Secrets. Professor Lockhart —"

"Am I a professor?" said Lockhart in mild surprise. "Goodness. I expect I was hopeless, was I?"

"He tried to do a Memory Charm and the wand backfired," Ron explained quietly to Dumbledore.

"Dear me," said Dumbledore, shaking his head, his long silver mustache quivering. "Impaled upon your own sword, Gilderoy!"

"Sword?" said Lockhart dimly. "Haven't got a sword. That boy has, though." He pointed at Harry. "He'll lend you one."

"Would you mind taking Professor Lockhart up to the infirmary, too?" Dumbledore said to Ron. "I'd like a few more words with Harry. . . ."

Lockhart ambled out. Ron cast a curious look back at Dumbledore and Harry as he closed the door.

Dumbledore crossed to one of the chairs by the fire.

"Sit down, Harry," he said, and Harry sat, feeling unaccountably nervous.

"First of all, Harry, I want to thank you," said Dumbledore, eyes twinkling again. "You must have shown me real loyalty down in the Chamber. Nothing but that could have called Fawkes to you."

He stroked the phoenix, which had fluttered down onto his knee. Harry grinned awkwardly as Dumbledore watched him.

"And so you met Tom Riddle," said Dumbledore thoughtfully. "I imagine he was *most* interested in you. . . ."

Suddenly, something that was nagging at Harry came tumbling out of his mouth.

"Professor Dumbledore . . . Riddle said I'm like him. Strange likenesses, he said. . . ."

"*Did* he, now?" said Dumbledore, looking thoughtfully at Harry from under his thick silver eyebrows. "And what do you think, Harry?"

"I don't think I'm like him!" said Harry, more loudly than he'd intended. "I mean, I'm — I'm in *Gryffindor,* I'm . . ."

But he fell silent, a lurking doubt resurfacing in his mind.

"Professor," he started again after a moment. "The Sorting Hat told me I'd — I'd have done well in Slytherin. Everyone thought *I* was Slytherin's heir for a while . . . because I can speak Parseltongue. . . ."

"You can speak Parseltongue, Harry," said Dumbledore calmly, "because Lord Voldemort — who *is* the last remaining descendant

of Salazar Slytherin — can speak Parseltongue. Unless I'm much mistaken, he transferred some of his own powers to you the night he gave you that scar. Not something he intended to do, I'm sure. . . ."

"Voldemort put a bit of himself in *me*?" Harry said, thunderstruck.

"It certainly seems so."

"So I *should* be in Slytherin," Harry said, looking desperately into Dumbledore's face. "The Sorting Hat could see Slytherin's power in me, and it —"

"Put you in Gryffindor," said Dumbledore calmly. "Listen to me, Harry. You happen to have many qualities Salazar Slytherin prized in his hand-picked students. His own very rare gift, Parseltongue — resourcefulness — determination — a certain disregard for rules," he added, his mustache quivering again. "Yet the Sorting Hat placed you in Gryffindor. You know why that was. Think."

"It only put me in Gryffindor," said Harry in a defeated voice, "because I asked not to go in Slytherin. . . ."

"*Exactly,*" said Dumbledore, beaming once more. "Which makes you *very different* from Tom Riddle. It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities." Harry sat motionless in his chair, stunned. "If you want proof, Harry, that you belong in Gryffindor, I suggest you look more closely at *this.*"

Dumbledore reached across to Professor McGonagall's desk, picked up the blood-stained silver sword, and handed it to Harry. Dully, Harry turned it over, the rubies blazing in the firelight. And then he saw the name engraved just below the hilt.

Godric Gryffindor.

"Only a true Gryffindor could have pulled *that* out of the hat, Harry," said Dumbledore simply.

For a minute, neither of them spoke. Then Dumbledore pulled open one of the drawers in Professor McGonagall's desk and took out a quill and a bottle of ink.

"What you need, Harry, is some food and sleep. I suggest you go down to the feast, while I write to Azkaban — we need our gamekeeper back. And I must draft an advertisement for the *Daily Prophet,* too," he added thoughtfully. "We'll be needing a new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. . . . Dear me, we do seem to run through them, don't we?"

Harry got up and crossed to the door. He had just reached for the handle, however, when the door burst open so violently that it bounced back off the wall.

Lucius Malfoy stood there, fury in his face. And cowering behind his legs, heavily wrapped in bandages, was *Dobby.*

"Good evening, Lucius," said Dumbledore pleasantly.

Mr. Malfoy almost knocked Harry over as he swept into the room. Dobby went scurrying in after him, crouching at the hem of his cloak, a look of abject terror on his face.

The elf was carrying a stained rag with which he was attempting to finish cleaning Mr. Malfoy's shoes. Apparently Mr. Malfoy had set out in a great hurry, for not only were his shoes half-polished, but his usually sleek hair was disheveled. Ignoring the elf bobbing apologetically around his ankles, he fixed his cold eyes upon Dumbledore.

"So!" he said "You've come back. The governors suspended you, but you still saw fit to return to Hogwarts."

"Well, you see, Lucius," said Dumbledore, smiling serenely, "the other eleven governors contacted me today. It was something like being caught in a hailstorm of owls, to tell the truth. They'd heard that Arthur Weasley's daughter had been killed and wanted me back here at once. They seemed to think I was the best man for the job after all. Very strange tales they told me, too. . . . Several of them seemed to think that you had threatened to curse their families if they didn't agree to suspend me in the first place."

Mr. Malfoy went even paler than usual, but his eyes were still slits of fury.

"So — have you stopped the attacks yet?" he sneered. "Have you caught the culprit?"

"We have," said Dumbledore, with a smile.

"*Well*?" said Mr. Malfoy sharply. "Who is it?"

"The same person as last time, Lucius," said Dumbledore. "But this time, Lord Voldemort was acting through somebody else. By means of this diary."

He held up the small black book with the large hole through the center, watching Mr. Malfoy closely. Harry, however, was watching Dobby.

The elf was doing something very odd. His great eyes fixed meaningfully on Harry, he kept pointing at the diary, then at Mr. Malfoy, and then hitting himself hard on the head with his fist.

"I see . . ." said Mr. Malfoy slowly to Dumbledore.

"A clever plan," said Dumbledore in a level voice, still staring Mr. Malfoy straight in the eye. "Because if Harry here" — Mr. Malfoy shot Harry a swift, sharp look — "and his friend Ron hadn't discovered this book, why — Ginny Weasley might have taken all

the blame. No one would ever have been able to prove she hadn't acted of her own free will. . . ."

Mr. Malfoy said nothing. His face was suddenly masklike.

"And imagine," Dumbledore went on, "what might have happened then. . . . The Weasleys are one of our most prominent pure-blood families. Imagine the effect on Arthur Weasley and his Muggle Protection Act, if his own daughter was discovered attacking and killing Muggle-borns. . . . Very fortunate the diary was discovered, and Riddle's memories wiped from it. Who knows what the consequences might have been otherwise. . . ."

Mr. Malfoy forced himself to speak.

"Very fortunate," he said stiffly.

And still, behind his back, Dobby was pointing, first to the diary, then to Lucius Malfoy, then punching himself in the head.

And Harry suddenly understood. He nodded at Dobby, and Dobby backed into a corner, now twisting his ears in punishment.

"Don't you want to know how Ginny got hold of that diary, Mr. Malfoy?" said Harry.

Lucius Malfoy rounded on him.

"How should I know how the stupid little girl got hold of it?" he said.

"Because you gave it to her," said Harry. "In Flourish and Blotts. You picked up her old Transfiguration book and slipped the diary inside it, didn't you?"

He saw Mr. Malfoy's white hands clench and unclench.

"Prove it," he hissed.

"Oh, no one will be able to do that," said Dumbledore, smiling at Harry. "Not now that Riddle has vanished from the book. On

the other hand, I would advise you, Lucius, not to go giving out any more of Lord Voldemort's old school things. If any more of them find their way into innocent hands, I think Arthur Weasley, for one, will make sure they are traced back to you. . . ."

Lucius Malfoy stood for a moment, and Harry distinctly saw his right hand twitch as though he was longing to reach for his wand. Instead, he turned to his house-elf.

"We're going, Dobby!"

He wrenched open the door and as the elf came hurrying up to him, he kicked him right through it. They could hear Dobby squealing with pain all the way along the corridor. Harry stood for a moment, thinking hard. Then it came to him —

"Professor Dumbledore," he said hurriedly. "Can I give that diary *back* to Mr. Malfoy, please?"

"Certainly, Harry," said Dumbledore calmly. "But hurry. The feast, remember. . . ."

Harry grabbed the diary and dashed out of the office. He could hear Dobby's squeals of pain receding around the corner. Quickly, wondering if this plan could possibly work, Harry took off one of his shoes, pulled off his slimy, filthy sock, and stuffed the diary into it. Then he ran down the dark corridor.

He caught up with them at the top of the stairs.

"Mr. Malfoy," he gasped, skidding to a halt, "I've got something for you —"

And he forced the smelly sock into Lucius Malfoy's hand.

"What the — ?"

Mr. Malfoy ripped the sock off the diary, threw it aside, then looked furiously from the ruined book to Harry.

"You'll meet the same sticky end as your parents one of these days, Harry Potter," he said softly. "They were meddlesome fools, too."

He turned to go.

"Come, Dobby. I said, *come.*"

But Dobby didn't move. He was holding up Harry's disgusting, slimy sock, and looking at it as though it were a priceless treasure.

"Master has given a sock," said the elf in wonderment. "Master gave it to Dobby."

"What's that?" spat Mr. Malfoy. "What did you say?"

"Got a sock," said Dobby in disbelief. "Master threw it, and Dobby caught it, and Dobby — Dobby is *free.*"

Lucius Malfoy stood frozen, staring at the elf. Then he lunged at Harry.

"You've lost me my servant, boy!"

But Dobby shouted, "You shall not harm Harry Potter!"

There was a loud bang, and Mr. Malfoy was thrown backward. He crashed down the stairs, three at a time, landing in a crumpled heap on the landing below. He got up, his face livid, and pulled out his wand, but Dobby raised a long, threatening finger.

"You shall go now," he said fiercely, pointing down at Mr. Malfoy. "You shall not touch Harry Potter. You shall go now."

Lucius Malfoy had no choice. With a last, incensed stare at the pair of them, he swung his cloak around him and hurried out of sight.

"Harry Potter freed Dobby!" said the elf shrilly, gazing up at Harry, moonlight from the nearest window reflected in his orb-like eyes. "Harry Potter set Dobby free!"

"Least I could do, Dobby," said Harry, grinning. "Just promise never to try and save my life again."

The elf's ugly brown face split suddenly into a wide, toothy smile.

"I've just got one question, Dobby," said Harry as Dobby pulled on Harry's sock with shaking hands. "You told me all this had nothing to do with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, remember? Well —"

"It was a clue, sir," said Dobby, his eyes widening, as though this was obvious. "Was giving you a clue. The Dark Lord, before he changed his name, could be freely named, you see?"

"Right," said Harry weakly. "Well, I'd better go. There's a feast, and my friend Hermione should be awake by now. . . ."

Dobby threw his arms around Harry's middle and hugged him.

"Harry Potter is greater by far than Dobby knew!" he sobbed. "Farewell, Harry Potter!"

And with a final loud crack, Dobby disappeared.

Harry had been to several Hogwarts feasts, but never one quite like this. Everybody was in their pajamas, and the celebration lasted all night. Harry didn't know whether the best bit was Hermione running toward him, screaming "You solved it! You solved it!" or Justin hurrying over from the Hufflepuff table to wring his hand and apologize endlessly for suspecting him, or Hagrid turning up at half past three, cuffing Harry and Ron so hard on the shoulders that they were knocked into their plates of trifle, or his and Ron's four hundred points for Gryffindor securing the House Cup for the second year running, or Professor McGonagall standing up to

tell them all that the exams had been canceled as a school treat ("Oh, *no*!" said Hermione), or Dumbledore announcing that, unfortunately, Professor Lockhart would be unable to return next year, owing to the fact that he needed to go away and get his memory back. Quite a few of the teachers joined in the cheering that greeted this news.

"Shame," said Ron, helping himself to a jam doughnut. "He was starting to grow on me."

The rest of the final term passed in a haze of blazing sunshine. Hogwarts was back to normal with only a few, small differences — Defense Against the Dark Arts classes were canceled ("but we've had plenty of practice at that anyway," Ron told a disgruntled Hermione) and Lucius Malfoy had been sacked as a school governor. Draco was no longer strutting around the school as though he owned the place. On the contrary, he looked resentful and sulky. On the other hand, Ginny Weasley was perfectly happy again.

Too soon, it was time for the journey home on the Hogwarts Express. Harry, Ron, Hermione, Fred, George, and Ginny got a compartment to themselves. They made the most of the last few hours in which they were allowed to do magic before the holidays. They played Exploding Snap, set off the very last of Fred and George's Filibuster fireworks, and practiced disarming each other by magic. Harry was getting very good at it.

They were almost at King's Cross when Harry remembered something.

"Ginny — what did you see Percy doing, that he didn't want you to tell anyone?"

"Oh, that," said Ginny, giggling. "Well — Percy's got a *girlfriend.*"

Fred dropped a stack of books on George's head.

"*What*?"

"It's that Ravenclaw prefect, Penelope Clearwater," said Ginny. "That's who he was writing to all last summer. He's been meeting her all over the school in secret. I walked in on them *kissing* in an empty classroom one day. He was so upset when she was — you know — attacked. You won't tease him, will you?" she added anxiously.

"Wouldn't dream of it," said Fred, who was looking like his birthday had come early.

"Definitely not," said George, sniggering.

The Hogwarts Express slowed and finally stopped.

Harry pulled out his quill and a bit of parchment and turned to Ron and Hermione.

"This is called a telephone number," he told Ron, scribbling it twice, tearing the parchment in two, and handing it to them. "I told your dad how to use a telephone last summer — he'll know. Call me at the Dursleys', okay? I can't stand another two months with only Dudley to talk to. . . ."

"Your aunt and uncle will be proud, though, won't they?" said Hermione as they got off the train and joined the crowd thronging toward the enchanted barrier. "When they hear what you did this year?

"Proud?" said Harry. "Are you crazy? All those times I could've died, and I didn't manage it? They'll be furious. . . ."

And together they walked back through the gateway to the Muggle world.

This

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Harry Potter

and the Prisoner of Azkaban

by

J.K. Rowling

Chapter One

Owl Post

Harry Potter was a highly unusual boy in many ways. For one thing, he hated the summer holidays more than any other time of year. For another, he really wanted to do his homework but was forced to do it in secret, in the dead of night. And he also happened to be a wizard.

It was nearly midnight, and he was lying on his stomach in bed, the blankets drawn right over his head like a tent, a flashlight in one hand and a large leather-bound book (*A History of Magic* by Bathilda Bagshot) propped open against the pillow. Harry moved the tip of his eagle-feather quill down the page, frowning as he looked for something that would help him write his essay, 'Witch Burning in the Fourteenth Century Was Completely Pointless — discuss.'

The quill paused at the top of a likely looking paragraph. Harry pushed his round glasses up the bridge of his nose, moved his flashlight closer to the book, and read:

Non-magic people (more commonly known as Muggles) were particularly afraid of magic in medieval times, but not very good at recognizing it. On the rare occasion that they did catch a real witch or wizard, burning had no effect whatsoever. The witch or wizard would perform a basic Flame-Freezing Charm and then pretend to shriek with pain while enjoying a gentle, tickling sensation. Indeed, Wendelin the Weird enjoyed being burned so much that she allowed herself to be caught no less than forty-seven times in various disguises.

Harry put his quill between his teeth and reached underneath his pillow for his inkbottle and a roll of parchment. Slowly and very carefully he unscrewed the ink bottle, dipped his quill into it, and began to write, pausing every now and then to listen, because if any of the Dursleys heard the

scratching of his quill on their way to the bathroom, he'd probably find himself locked in the cupboard under the stairs for the rest of the summer.

The Dursley family of Number Four, Privet Drive, was the reason that Harry never enjoyed his summer holidays. Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, and their son, Dudley, were Harry's only living relatives. They were Muggles, and they had a very medieval attitude toward magic. Harry's dead parents, who had been a witch and wizard themselves, were never mentioned under the Dursleys' roof. For years, Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon had hoped that if they kept Harry as downtrodden as possible, they would be able to squash the magic out of him. To their fury, they had not been unsuccessful. These days they lived in terror of anyone finding out that Harry had spent most of the last two years at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The most they could do, however, was to lock away Harry's spell books, wand, cauldron, and broomstick at the start of the summer break, and forbid him to talk to the neighbors.

This separation from his spell books had been a real problem for Harry, because his teachers at Hogwarts had given him a lot of holiday work. One of the essays, a particularly nasty one about shrinking potions, was for Harry's least favorite teacher, Professor Snape, who would be delighted to have an excuse to give Harry detention for a month. Harry had therefore seized his chance in the first week of the holidays. While Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, and Dudley had gone out into the front garden to admire Uncle Vernon's new company car (in very loud voices, so that the rest of the street would notice it too), Harry had crept downstairs, picked the lock on the cupboard under the stairs, grabbed some of his books, and hidden them in his bedroom. As long as he didn't leave spots of ink on the sheets, the Dursleys need never know that he was studying magic by night.

Harry was particularly keen to avoid trouble with his aunt and uncle at the moment, as they were already in an especially bad mood with him, all because he'd received a telephone call from a fellow wizard one week into the school vacation.

Ron Weasley, who was one of Harry's best friends at Hogwarts, came from a whole family of wizards. This meant that he knew a lot of things Harry didn't, but had never used a telephone before. Most unluckily, it had been Uncle Vernon who had answered the call.

"Vernon Dursley speaking."

Harry, who happened to be in the room at the time, froze as he heard Ron's voice answer.

"HELLO? HELLO? CAN YOU HEAR ME? I — WANT — TO — TALK — TO — HARRY — POTTER!"

Ron was yelling so loudly that Uncle Vernon jumped and held the receiver a foot away from his ear, staring at it with an expression of mingled fury and alarm.

"WHO IS THIS?" he roared in the direction of the mouthpiece. "WHO ARE YOU?"

"RON — WEASLEY!" Ron bellowed back, as though he and Uncle Vernon were speaking from opposite ends of a football field. "I'M — A — FRIEND — OF — HARRY'S — FROM — SCHOOL —"

Uncle Vernon's small eyes swiveled around to Harry, who was rooted to the spot.

"THERE IS NO HARRY POTTER HERE!" he roared, now holding the receiver at arm's length, as though frightened it might explode. "I DON'T KNOW WHAT SCHOOL YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT! NEVER CONTACT ME AGAIN! DON'T YOU COME NEAR MY FAMILY!"

And he threw the receiver back onto the telephone as if dropping a poisonous spider.

The fight that had followed had been one of the worst ever.

"HOW DARE YOU GIVE THIS NUMBER TO PEOPLE LIKE — PEOPLE LIKE *YOU*!" Uncle Vernon had roared, spraying Harry with spit.

Ron obviously realized that he'd gotten Harry into trouble, because he hadn't called again. Harry's other best friend from Hogwarts, Hermione Granger, hadn't been in touch either. Harry suspected that Ron had warned Hermione not to call, which was a pity, because Hermione, the cleverest witch in Harry's year, had Muggle parents, knew perfectly well how to use a telephone, and would probably have had enough sense not to say that she went to Hogwarts.

So Harry had had no word from any of his wizarding friends for five long weeks, and this summer was turning out to be almost as bad as the last one. There was just one very small improvement — after swearing that he wouldn't use her to send letters to any of his friends, Harry had been allowed to let his owl, Hedwig, out at night. Uncle Vernon had given in because of the racket Hedwig made if she was locked in her cage all the time.

Harry finished writing about Wendelin the Weird and paused to listen again. The silence in the dark house was broken only by the distant, grunting snores of his enormous cousin, Dudley. It must be very late, Harry thought. His eyes were itching with tiredness. Perhaps he'd finish this essay tomorrow night…

He replaced the top of the ink bottle; pulled an old pillowcase from under his bed; put the flashlight, *A History of Magic*, his essay, quill, and ink inside it; got out of bed; and hid the lot under

a loose floorboard under his bed. Then he stood up, stretched, and checked the time on the luminous alarm clock on his bedside table.

It was one o'clock in the morning. Harry's stomach gave a funny jolt. He had been thirteen years old, without realizing it, for a whole hour.

Yet another unusual thing about Harry was how little he looked forward to his birthdays. He had never received a birthday card in his life. The Dursleys had completely ignored his last two birthdays, and he had no reason to suppose they would remember this one.

Harry walked across the dark room, past Hedwig's large, empty cage, to the open window. He leaned on the sill, the cool night air pleasant on his face after a long time under the blankets. Hedwig had been absent for two nights now. Harry wasn't worried about her: she'd been gone this long before. But he hoped she'd be back soon — she was the only living creature in this house who didn't flinch at the sight of him.

Harry, though still rather small and skinny for his age, had grown a few inches over the last year. His jet-black hair, however, was just as it always had been — stubbornly untidy, whatever he did to it. The eyes behind his glasses were bright green, and on his forehead, clearly visible through his hair, was a thin scar, shaped like a bolt of lightning.

Of all the unusual things about Harry, this scar was the most extraordinary of all. It was not, as the Dursleys had pretended for ten years, a souvenir of the car crash that had killed Harry's parents, because Lily and James Potter had not died in a car crash. They had been murdered, murdered by the most feared Dark wizard for a hundred years, Lord Voldemort. Harry had escaped from the same attack with nothing more than a scar on his forehead, where Voldemort's curse, instead of killing him, had rebounded upon its originator. Barely alive, Voldemort had fled…

But Harry had come face-to-face with him at Hogwarts. Remembering their last meeting as he stood at the dark window, Harry had to admit he was lucky even to have reached his thirteenth birthday.

He scanned the starry sky for a sign of Hedwig, perhaps soaring back to him with a dead mouse dangling from her beak, expecting praise. Gazing absently over the rooftops, it was a few seconds before Harry realized what he was seeing.

Silhouetted against the golden moon, and growing larger every moment, was a large, strangely lopsided creature, and it was flapping in Harry's direction. He stood quite still, watching it sink lower and lower. For a split second he hesitated, his hand on the window latch, wondering whether

to slam it shut. But then the bizarre creature soared over one of the street lamps of Privet Drive, and Harry, realizing what it was, leapt aside.

Through the window soared three owls, two of them holding up the third, which appeared to be unconscious. They landed with a soft *flump* on Harry's bed, and the middle owl, which was large and gray, keeled right over and lay motionless. There was a large package tied to its legs.

Harry recognized the unconscious owl at once — his name was Errol, and he belonged to the Weasley family. Harry dashed to the bed, untied the cords around Errol's legs, took off the parcel, and then carried Errol to Hedwig's cage. Errol opened one bleary eye, gave a feeble hoot of thanks, and began to gulp some water.

Harry turned back to the remaining owls. One of them, the large snowy female, was his own Hedwig. She, too, was carrying a parcel and looked extremely pleased with herself. She gave Harry an affectionate nip with her beak as he removed her burden, then flew across the room to join Errol.

Harry didn't recognize the third owl, a handsome tawny one, but he knew at once where it had come from, because in addition to a third package, it was carrying a letter bearing the Hogwarts crest. When Harry relieved this owl of its burden, it ruffled its feathers importantly, stretched its wings, and took off through the window into the night.

Harry sat down on his bed and grabbed Errol's package, ripped off the brown paper, and discovered a present wrapped in gold and his first ever birthday card. Fingers trembling slightly, he opened the envelope. Two pieces of paper fell out — a letter and a newspaper clipping.

The clipping had clearly come out of the wizarding newspaper, the *Daily Prophet*, because the people in the black-and-white picture were moving. Harry picked up the clipping, smoothed it out, and read:

MINISTRY OF MAGIC EMPLOYEE SCOOPS GRAND PRIZE

Arthur Weasley, Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office at the Ministry of Magic, has won the annual Daily Prophet Grand Prize Galleon Draw.

A delighted Mr. Weasley told the Daily Prophet, "We will be spending the gold on a summer holiday in Egypt, where our eldest son, Bill, works as a curse breaker for Gringotts Wizarding Bank."

The Weasley family will be spending a month in Egypt, returning for the start of the new school year at Hogwarts, which five of the Weasley children currently attend.

Harry scanned the moving photograph, and a grin spread across his face as he saw all nine of the Weasleys waving furiously at him, standing in front of a large pyramid. Plump little Mrs. Weasley; tall, balding Mr. Weasley; six sons; and one daughter, all (though the black-and-white picture didn't

show it) with flaming-red hair. Right in the middle of the picture was Ron, tall and gangling, with his pet rat, Scabbers, on his shoulder and his arm around his little sister, Ginny.

Harry couldn't think of anyone who deserved to win a large pile of gold more than the Weasleys, who were very nice and extremely poor. He picked up Ron's letter and unfolded it.

Dear Harry,

Happy birthday!

Look, I'm really sorry about that telephone call. I hope the Muggles didn't give you a hard time. I asked Dad, and he reckons I shouldn't have shouted.

It's amazing here in Egypt. Bill's taken us around all the tombs and you wouldn't believe the curses those old Egyptian wizards put on them. Mum wouldn't let Ginny come in the last one. There were all these mutant skeletons in there, of Muggles who'd broken in and grown extra heads and stuff.

I couldn't believe it when Dad won the Daily Prophet Draw. Seven hundred galleons! Most of it's gone on this trip, but they're going to buy me a new wand for next year.

Harry remembered only too well the occasion when Ron's old wand had snapped. It had happened when the car the two of them had been flying to Hogwarts had crashed into a tree on the school grounds.

We'll be back about a week before term starts and we'll be going up to London to get my wand and our new books. Any chance of meeting you there?

Don't let the Muggles get you down!

Try and come to London,

Ron

P.S. Percy's Head Boy. He got the letter last week.

Harry glanced back at the photograph. Percy, who was in his seventh and final year at Hogwarts, was looking particularly smug. He had pinned his Head Boy badge to the fez perched jauntily on top of his neat hair, his horn-rimmed glasses flashing in the Egyptian sun.

Harry now turned to his present and unwrapped it. Inside was what looked like a miniature glass spinning top. There was another note from Ron beneath it.

Harry — this is a Pocket Sneakoscope. If there's someone untrustworthy around, it's supposed to light up and spin. Bill says it's rubbish sold for wizard tourists and isn't reliable, because it kept lighting up at dinner last night. But he didn't realize Fred and George had put beetles in his soup.

Bye — Ron

Harry put the Pocket Sneakoscope on his bedside table, where it stood quite still, balanced on its point, reflecting the luminous hands of his clock. He looked at it happily for a few seconds, then picked up the parcel Hedwig had brought.

Inside this, too, there was a wrapped present, a card, and a letter, this time from Hermione.

Dear Harry,

Ron wrote to me and told me about his phone call to your Uncle Vernon. I do hope you're all right.

I'm on holiday in France at the moment and I didn't know how I was going to send this to you — what if they'd opened it at customs? — but then Hedwig turned up! I think she wanted to make sure you got something for your birthday for a change. I bought your present by owl-order; there was an advertisement in the Daily Prophet (I've been getting it delivered; it's so good to keep up with what's going on in the wizarding world). Did you see that picture of Ron and his family a week ago? I bet he's learning loads. I'm really jealous — the ancient Egyptian wizards were fascinating.

There's some interesting local history of witchcraft here, too. I've rewritten my whole History of Magic essay to include some of the things I've found out, I hope it's not too long — it's two rolls of parchment more than Professor Binns asked for.

Ron says he's going to be in London in the last week of the holidays. Can you make it? Will your aunt and uncle let you come? I really hope you can. If not, I'll see you on the Hogwarts Express on September first!

Love from Hermione

P.S. Ron says Percy's Head Boy. I'll bet Percy's really pleased. Ron doesn't seem too happy about it.

Harry laughed as he put Hermione's letter aside and picked up her present. It was very heavy. Knowing Hermione, he was sure it would be a large book full of very difficult spells — but it wasn't. His heart gave a huge bound as he ripped back the paper and saw a sleek black leather case, with silver words stamped across it, reading *Broomstick Servicing Kit.*

"Wow, Hermione!" Harry whispered, unzipping the case to look inside.

There was a large jar of Fleetwood's High-Finish Handle Polish, a pair of gleaming silver Tail-Twig Clippers, a tiny brass compass to clip on your broom for long journeys, and a *Handbook of Do-It-Yourself Broomcare.*

Apart from his friends, the thing that Harry missed most about Hogwarts was Quidditch, the most popular sport in the magical world — highly dangerous, very exciting, and played on broomsticks. Harry happened to be a very good Quidditch player; he had been the youngest person in a century to be picked for one of the Hogwarts House teams. One of Harry's most prized possessions was his Nimbus Two Thousand racing broom.

Harry put the leather case aside and picked up his last parcel. He recognized the untidy scrawl on the brown paper at once: this was from Hagrid, the Hogwarts gamekeeper. He tore off the top layer of paper and glimpsed something green and leathery, but before he could unwrap it properly, the parcel gave a strange quiver, and whatever was inside it snapped loudly — as though it had jaws.

Harry froze. He knew that Hagrid would never send him anything dangerous on purpose, but then, Hagrid didn't have a normal person's view of what was dangerous. Hagrid had been known to befriend giant spiders, buy vicious, three-headed dogs from men in pubs, and sneak illegal dragon eggs into his cabin.

Harry poked the parcel nervously. It snapped loudly again. Harry reached for the lamp on his bedside table, gripped it firmly in one hand, and raised it over his head, ready to strike. Then he seized the rest of the wrapping paper in his other hand and pulled.

And out fell — a book. Harry just had time to register its handsome green cover, emblazoned with the golden title *The Monster Book of Monsters*, before it flipped onto its edge and scuttled sideways along the bed like some weird crab.

"Uh-oh," Harry muttered.

The book toppled off the bed with a loud clunk and shuffled rapidly across the room. Harry followed it stealthily. The book was hiding in the dark space under his desk. Praying that the Dursleys were still fast asleep, Harry got down on his hands and knees and reached toward it.

"Ouch!"

The book snapped shut on his hand and then flapped past him, still scuttling on its covers. Harry scrambled around, threw himself forward, and managed to flatten it. Uncle Vernon gave a loud, sleepy grunt in the room next door.

Hedwig and Errol watched interestedly as Harry clamped the struggling book tightly in his arms, hurried to his chest of drawers, and pulled out a belt, which he buckled tightly around it. The Monster Book shuddered angrily, but could no longer flap and snap, so Harry threw it down on the bed and reached for Hagrid's card.

Dear Harry,

Happy Birthday!

Think you might find this useful for next year. Won't say no more here. Tell you when I see you.

Hope the Muggles are treating you right.

All the best,

Hagrid

It struck Harry as ominous that Hagrid thought a biting book would come in useful, but he put Hagrid's card up next to Ron's and Hermione's, grinning more broadly than ever. Now there was only the letter from Hogwarts left.

Noticing that it was rather thicker than usual, Harry slit open the envelope, pulled out the first page of parchment within, and read:

Dear Mr. Potter,

Please note that the new school year will begin on September the first. The Hogwarts Express will leave from King's Cross station, platform nine and three-quarters, at eleven o'clock.

Third years are permitted to visit the village of Hogsmeade on certain weekends. Please give the enclosed permission form to your parent or guardian to sign.

A list of books for next year is enclosed.

Yours sincerely,

Professor M. McGonagall

Deputy Headmistress

Harry pulled out the Hogsmeade permission form and looked at it, no longer grinning. It would be wonderful to visit Hogsmeade on weekends; he knew it was an entirely wizarding village, and he had never set foot there. But how on earth was he going to persuade Uncle Vernon or Aunt Petunia to sign the form?

He looked over at the alarm clock. It was now two o'clock in the morning.

Deciding that he'd worry about the Hogsmeade form when he woke up, Harry got back into bed and reached up to cross off another day on the chart he'd made for himself, counting down the days left until his return to Hogwarts. Then he took off his glasses and lay down; eyes open, facing his three birthday cards.

Extremely unusual though he was, at that moment Harry Potter felt just like everyone else — glad, for the first time in his life, that it was his birthday.

CHAPTER TWO

AUNT MARGE'S BIG MISTAKE

Harry went down to breakfast the next morning to find the three Dursleys already sitting around the kitchen table. They were watching a brand-new television, a welcome-home-for-the-summer present for Dudley, who had been complaining loudly about the long walk between the fridge and the television in the living room. Dudley had spent most of the summer in the kitchen, his piggy little eyes fixed on the screen and his five chins wobbling as he ate continually.

Harry sat down between Dudley and Uncle Vernon, a large, beefy man with very little neck and a lot of mustache. Far from wishing Harry a happy birthday, none of the Dursleys made any sign that they had noticed Harry enter the room, but Harry was far too used to this to care. He helped himself to a piece of toast and then looked up at the reporter on the television, who was halfway through a report on an escaped convict.

"…the public is warned that Black is armed and extremely dangerous. A special hot line has been set up, and any sighting of Black should be reported immediately."

"No need to tell us *he's* no good," snorted Uncle Vernon, staring over the top of his newspaper at the prisoner. "Look at the state of him, the filthy layabout! Look at his hair!"

He shot a nasty look sideways at Harry, whose untidy hair had always been a source of great annoyance to Uncle Vernon. Compared to the man on the television, however, whose gaunt face was surrounded by a matted, elbow-length tangle, Harry felt very well groomed indeed.

The reporter had reappeared.

"The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries will announce today —"

"Hang on!" barked Uncle Vernon, staring furiously at the reporter. "You didn't tell us where that maniac's escaped from! What use is that? Lunatic could be coming up the street right now!"

Aunt Petunia, who was bony and horse-faced, whipped around and peered intently out of the kitchen window. Harry knew Aunt Petunia would simply love to be the one to call the hot line number. She was the nosiest woman in the world and spent most of her life spying on the boring, law-abiding neighbors.

"When will they *learn*," said Uncle Vernon, pounding the table with his large purple fist, "that hanging's the only way to deal with these people?"

"Very true," said Aunt Petunia, who was still squinting into next door's runner-beans.

Uncle Vernon drained his teacup, glanced at his watch, and added, "I'd better be off in a minute, Petunia. Marge's train gets in at ten."

Harry, whose thoughts had been upstairs with the Broomstick Servicing Kit, was brought back to earth with an unpleasant bump.

"Aunt Marge?" he blurted out. "Sh-*she's* not coming here, is she?"

Aunt Marge was Uncle Vernon's sister. Even though she was not a blood relative of Harry's (whose mother had been Aunt Petunia's sister), he had been forced to call her 'Aunt' all his life. Aunt Marge lived in the country, in a house with a large garden, where she bred bulldogs. She didn't often stay at Privet Drive, because she couldn't bear to leave her precious dogs, but each of her visits stood out horribly vividly in Harry's mind.

At Dudley's fifth birthday party, Aunt Marge had whacked Harry around the shins with her walking stick to stop him from beating Dudley at musical statues. A few years later, she had turned up at Christmas with a computerized robot for Dudley and a box of dog biscuits for Harry. On her last visit, the year before Harry started at Hogwarts, Harry had accidentally trodden on the tail of her favorite dog. Ripper had chased Harry out into the garden and up a tree, and Aunt Marge had refused to call him off until past midnight. The memory of this incident still brought tears of laughter to Dudley's eyes.

"Marge'll be here for a week," Uncle Vernon snarled, "and while we're on the subject," he pointed a fat finger threateningly at Harry, "we need to get a few things straight before I go and collect her."

Dudley smirked and withdrew his gaze from the television. Watching Harry being bullied by Uncle Vernon was Dudley's favorite form of entertainment.

"Firstly," growled Uncle Vernon, "you'll keep a civil tongue in your head when you're talking to Marge."

"All right," said Harry bitterly, "if she does when she's talking to me."

"Secondly," said Uncle Vernon, acting as though he had not heard Harry's reply, "as Marge doesn't know anything about your *abnormality*, I don't want any — any *funny* stuff while she's here. You behave yourself, got me?"

"I will if she does," said Harry through gritted teeth.

"And thirdly," said Uncle Vernon, his mean little eyes now slits in his great purple face, "we've told Marge you attend St. Brutus's Secure Center for Incurably Criminal Boys."

"What?" Harry yelled.

"And you'll be sticking to that story, boy, or there'll be trouble," spat Uncle Vernon.

Harry sat there, white-faced and furious, staring at Uncle Vernon, hardly able to believe it. Aunt Marge coming for a weeklong visit — it was the worst birthday present the Dursleys had ever given him, including that pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks.

"Well, Petunia," said Uncle Vernon, getting heavily to his feet, "I'll be off to the station, then. Want to come along for the ride, Dudders?"

"No," said Dudley, whose attention had returned to the television now that Uncle Vernon had finished threatening Harry.

"Duddy's got to make himself smart for his auntie," said Aunt Petunia, smoothing Dudley's thick blond hair. "Mummy's bought him a lovely new bow-tie."

Uncle Vernon clapped Dudley on his porky shoulder.

"See you in a bit, then," he said, and he left the kitchen.

Harry, who had been sitting in a kind of horrified trance, had a sudden idea. Abandoning his toast, he got quickly to his feet and followed Uncle Vernon to the front door.

Uncle Vernon was pulling on his car coat.

"I'm not taking *you*," he snarled as he turned to see Harry watching him.

"Like I wanted to come," said Harry coldly. "I want to ask you something."

Uncle Vernon eyed him suspiciously.

"Third years at Hog — at my school are allowed to visit the village sometimes," said Harry.

"So?" snapped Uncle Vernon, taking his car keys from a hook next to the door.

"I need you to sign the permission form," said Harry in a rush.

"And why should I do that?" sneered Uncle Vernon.

"Well," said Harry, choosing his words carefully, "it'll be hard work, pretending to Aunt Marge I go to that St. Whatsits…"

"St. Brutus's Secure Center for Incurably Criminal Boys!" bellowed Uncle Vernon, and Harry was pleased to hear a definite note of panic in Uncle Vernon's voice.

"Exactly," said Harry, looking calmly up into Uncle Vernon's large, purple face. "It's a lot to remember. I'll have to make it sound convincing, won't I? What if I accidentally let something slip?"

"You'll get the stuffing knocked out of you, won't you?" roared Uncle Vernon, advancing on Harry with his fist raised. But Harry stood his ground.

"Knocking the stuffing out of me won't make Aunt Marge forget what I could tell her," he said grimly.

Uncle Vernon stopped, his fist still raised, his face an ugly puce.

“But if you sign my permission form,” Harry went on quickly, “I swear I’ll remember where I’m supposed to go to school, and I’ll act like a Mug — like I’m normal and everything.”

Harry could tell that Uncle Vernon was thinking it over, even if his teeth were bared and a vein was throbbing in his temple.

“Right,” he snapped finally. “I shall monitor your behavior carefully during Marge’s visit. If, at the end of it, you’ve toed the line and kept to the story, I’ll sign your ruddy form.”

He wheeled around, pulled open the front door, and slammed it so hard that one of the little panes of glass at the top fell out.

Harry didn’t return to the kitchen. He went back upstairs to his bedroom. If he was going to act like a real Muggle, heed better start now. Slowly and sadly he gathered up all his presents and his birthday cards and hid them under the loose floorboard with his homework. Then he went to Hedwig’s cage. Errol seemed to have recovered; he and Hedwig were both asleep, heads under their wings. Harry sighed, then poked them both awake.

“Hedwig,” he said gloomily, “you’re going to have to clear off for a week. Go with Errol. Ron’ll look after you. I’ll write him a note, explaining. And don’t look at me like that” — Hedwig’s large amber eyes were reproachful — “it’s not my fault. It’s the only way I’ll be allowed to visit Hogsmeade with Ron and Hermione.”

Ten minutes later, Errol and Hedwig (who had a note to Ron bound to her leg) soared out of the window and out of sight. Harry, now feeling thoroughly miserable, put the empty cage away inside the wardrobe.

But Harry didn’t have long to brood. In next to no time, Aunt Petunia was shrieking up the stairs for Harry to come down and get ready to welcome their guest.

“Do something about your hair!” Aunt Petunia snapped as he reached the hall.

Harry couldn’t see the point of trying to make his hair lie flat. Aunt Marge loved criticizing him, so the untidier he looked, the happier she would be.

All too soon, there was a crunch of gravel outside as Uncle Vernon’s car pulled back into the driveway, then the clunk of the car doors and footsteps on the garden path.

“Get the door!” Aunt Petunia hissed at Harry.

A feeling of great gloom in his stomach, Harry pulled the door open.

On the threshold stood Aunt Marge. She was very like Uncle Vernon: large, beefy, and purple-faced, she even had a mustache, though not as bushy as his. In one hand she held an enormous suitcase, and tucked under the other was an old and evil-tempered bulldog.

“Where’s my Dudders?” roared Aunt Marge. “Where’s my neffy poo?”

Dudley came waddling down the hall, his blond hair plastered flat to his fat head, a bow tie just visible under his many chins. Aunt Marge thrust the suitcase into Harry’s stomach, knocking the wind out of him, seized Dudley in a tight one-armed hug, and planted a large kiss on his cheek.

Harry knew perfectly well that Dudley only put up with Aunt Marge’s hugs because he was well paid for it, and sure enough, when they broke apart, Dudley had a crisp twenty-pound note clutched in his fat fist.

“Petunia!” shouted Aunt Marge, striding past Harry as though he was a hat-stand. Aunt Marge and Aunt Petunia kissed, or rather, Aunt Marge bumped her large jaw against Aunt Petunias bony cheekbone.

Uncle Vernon now came in, smiling jovially as he shut the door.

“Tea, Marge?” he said. “And what will Ripper take?”

“Ripper can have some tea out of my saucer,” said Aunt Marge as they all proceeded into the kitchen, leaving Harry alone in the hall with the suitcase. But Harry wasn’t complaining; any excuse not to be with Aunt Marge was fine by him, so he began to heave the case upstairs into the spare bedroom, taking as long as he could.

By the time he got back to the kitchen, Aunt Marge had been supplied with tea and fruitcake, and Ripper was lapping noisily in the corner. Harry saw Aunt Petunia wince slightly as specks of tea and drool flecked her clean floor. Aunt Petunia hated animals.

“Who’s looking after the other dogs, Marge?” Uncle Vernon asked.

“Oh, I’ve got Colonel Fubster managing them,” boomed Aunt Marge. “He’s retired now, good for him to have something to do. But I couldn’t leave poor old Ripper. He pines if he’s away from me.”

Ripper began to growl again as Harry sat down. This directed Aunt Marge’s attention to Harry for the first time.

“So!” she barked. “Still here, are you?”

“Yes,” said Harry.

“Don’t you say ‘yes’ in that ungrateful tone,” Aunt Marge growled. “It’s damn good of Vernon and Petunia to keep you. Wouldn’t have done it myself. You’d have gone straight to an orphanage if you’d been dumped on *my* doorstep.”

Harry was bursting to say that he’d rather live in an orphanage than with the Dursleys, but the thought of the Hogsmeade form stopped him. He forced his face into a painful smile.

“Don’t you smirk at me!” boomed Aunt Marge. “I can see you haven’t improved since I last saw you. I hoped school would knock some manners into you.” She took a large gulp of tea, wiped her mustache, and said, “Where is it that you send him, again, Vernon?”

“St. Brutus’s,” said Uncle Vernon promptly. “It’s a first-rate institution for hopeless cases.”

“I see,” said Aunt Marge. “Do they use the cane at St. Brutus’s, boy?” she barked across the table.

“Er —”

Uncle Vernon nodded curtly behind Aunt Marge’s back.

“Yes,” said Harry. Then, feeling he might as well do the thing properly, he added, “All the time.”

“Excellent,” said Aunt Marge. “I won’t have this namby-pamby, wishy-washy nonsense about not hitting people who deserve it. A good thrashing is what’s needed in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred. Have *you* been beaten often?”

“Oh, yeah,” said Harry, “loads of times.”

Aunt Marge narrowed her eyes.

“I still don’t like your tone, boy,” she said. “If you can speak of your beatings in that casual way, they clearly aren’t hitting you hard enough. Petunia, I’d write if I were you. Make it clear that you approve the use of extreme force in this boy’s case.”

Perhaps Uncle Vernon was worried that Harry might forget their bargain; in any case, he changed the subject abruptly.

“Heard the news this morning, Marge? What about that escaped prisoner, eh?”

As Aunt Marge started to make herself at home, Harry caught himself thinking almost longingly of life at number four without her. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia usually encouraged Harry to stay out of their way, which Harry was only too happy to do. Aunt Marge, on the other hand, wanted Harry under her eye at all times, so that she could boom out suggestions for his improvement. She delighted in comparing Harry with Dudley, and took huge pleasure in buying Dudley expensive presents while glaring at Harry, as though daring him to ask why he hadn’t got a present too. She also kept throwing out dark hints about what made Harry such an unsatisfactory person.

“You mustn’t blame yourself for the way the boy’s turned out, Vernon,” she said over lunch on the third day. “If there’s something rotten on the *inside*, there’s nothing anyone can do about it.”

Harry tried to concentrate on his food, but his hands shook and his face was starting to burn with anger. *Remember the form,* he told himself. *Think about Hogsmeade. Don’t say anything. Don’t rise —*

Aunt Marge reached for her glass of wine.

"It's one of the basic rules of breeding," she said. "You see it all the time with dogs. If there's something wrong with the bitch, there'll be something wrong with the pup —"

At that moment, the wineglass Aunt Marge was holding exploded in her hand. Shards of glass flew in every direction and Aunt Marge sputtered and blinked, her great ruddy face dripping.

"Marge!" squealed Aunt Petunia. "Marge, are you all right?"

"Not to worry," grunted Aunt Marge, mopping her face with her napkin. "Must have squeezed it too hard. Did the same thing at Colonel Fubster's the other day. No need to fuss, Petunia, I have a very firm grip…"

But Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon were both looking at Harry suspiciously, so he decided he'd better skip dessert and escape from the table as soon as he could.

Outside in the hall, he leaned against the wall, breathing deeply. It had been a long time since he'd lost control and made something explode. He couldn't afford to let it happen again. The Hogsmeade form wasn't the only thing at stake — if he carried on like that, he'd be in trouble with the Ministry of Magic.

Harry was still an underage wizard, and he was forbidden by wizard law to do magic outside school. His record wasn't exactly clean either. Only last summer he'd gotten an official warning that had stated quite clearly that if the Ministry got wind of any more magic in Privet Drive, Harry would face expulsion from Hogwarts.

He heard the Dursleys leaving the table and hurried upstairs out of the way.

Harry got through the next three days by forcing himself to think about his *Handbook of Do-It-Yourself Broomcare* whenever Aunt Marge started on him. This worked quite well, though it seemed to give him a glazed look, because Aunt Marge started voicing the opinion that he was mentally subnormal.

At last, at long last, the final evening of Marge's stay arrived. Aunt Petunia cooked a fancy dinner and Uncle Vernon uncorked several bottles of wine. They got all the way through the soup and the salmon without a single mention of Harry's faults; during the lemon meringue pie, Uncle Vernon bored them a with a long talk about Grunnings, his drill-making company; then Aunt Petunia made coffee and Uncle Vernon brought out a bottle of brandy.

"Can I tempt you, Marge?"

Aunt Marge had already had quite a lot of wine. Her huge face was very red.

"Just a small one, then," she chuckled. "A bit more than that…and a bit more…that's the ticket."

Dudley was eating his fourth slice of pie. Aunt Petunia was sipping coffee with her little finger sticking out. Harry really wanted to disappear into his bedroom, but he met Uncle Vernon's angry little eyes and knew he would have to sit it out.

"Aah," said Aunt Marge, smacking her lips and putting the empty brandy glass back down. "Excellent nosh, Petunia. It's normally just a fry-up for me of an evening, with twelve dogs to look after…" She burped richly and patted her great tweed stomach. "Pardon me. But I do like to see a healthy-sized boy," she went on, winking at Dudley. "You'll be a proper-sized man, Dudders, like your father. Yes, I'll have a spot more brandy, Vernon…"

"Now, this one here —"

She jerked her head at Harry, who felt his stomach clench. *The Handbook*, he thought quickly.

"This one's got a mean, runty look about him. You get that with dogs. I had Colonel Fubster drown one last year. Ratty little thing it was. Weak. Underbred."

Harry was trying to remember page twelve of his book: *A Charm to Cure Reluctant Reversers.*

"It all comes down to blood, as I was saying the other day. Bad blood will out. Now, I'm saying nothing against your family, Petunia" — she patted Aunt Petunia's bony hand with her shovel-like one "but your sister was a bad egg. They turn up in the best families. Then she ran off with a wastrel and here's the result right in front of us."

Harry was staring at his plate, a funny ringing in his ears. *Grasp your broom firmly by the tail*, he thought. But he couldn't remember what came next. Aunt Marge's voice seemed to be boring into him like one of Uncle Vernon's drills.

"This Potter," said Aunt Marge loudly, seizing the brandy bottle and splashing more into her glass and over the tablecloth, "you never told me what he did?"

Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia were looking extremely tense. Dudley had even looked up from his pie to gape at his parents.

"He — didn't work," said Uncle Vernon, with half a glance at Harry. "Unemployed."

"As I expected!" said Aunt Marge, taking a huge swig of brandy and wiping her chin on her sleeve. "A no-account, good-for-nothing, lazy scrounger who —"

"He was not," said Harry suddenly. The table went very quiet. Harry was shaking all over. He had never felt so angry in his life.

“MORE BRANDY!” yelled Uncle Vernon, who had gone very white. He emptied the bottle into Aunt Marge’s glass. “You, boy,” he snarled at Harry. “Go to bed, go on —”

“No, Vernon,” hiccupped Aunt Marge, holding up a hand, her tiny bloodshot eyes fixed on Harry’s. “Go on, boy, go on. Proud of your parents, are you? They go and get themselves killed in a car crash (drunk, I expect) —”

“They didn’t die in a car crash!” said Harry, who found himself on his feet.

“They died in a car crash, you nasty little liar, and left you to be a burden on their decent, hardworking relatives!” screamed Aunt Marge, swelling with fury. “You are an insolent, ungrateful little —”

But Aunt Marge suddenly stopped speaking. For a moment, it looked as though words had failed her. She seemed to be swelling with inexpressible anger — but the swelling didn’t stop. Her great red face started to expand, her tiny eyes bulged, and her mouth stretched too tightly for speech — next second, several buttons had just burst from her tweed jacket and pinged off the walls — she was inflating like a monstrous balloon, her stomach bursting free of her tweed waistband, each of her fingers blowing up like a salami…

“MARGE!” yelled Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia together as Aunt Marge’s whole body began to rise off her chair toward the ceiling. She was entirely round, now, like a vast life buoy with piggy eyes, and her hands and feet stuck out weirdly as she drifted up into the air, making apoplectic popping noises. Ripper came skidding into the room, barking madly.

“NOOOOOOO!”

Uncle Vernon seized one of Marge’s feet and tried to pull her down again, but was almost lifted from the floor himself. A second later, Ripper leapt forward and sank his teeth into Uncle Vernon’s leg.

Harry tore from the dining room before anyone could stop him, heading for the cupboard under the stairs. The cupboard door burst magically open as he reached it. In seconds, he had heaved his trunk to the front door. He sprinted upstairs and threw himself under the bed, wrenching up the loose floorboard, and grabbed the pillowcase full of his books and birthday presents. He wriggled out, seized Hedwig’s empty cage, and dashed back downstairs to his trunk, just as Uncle Vernon burst out of the dining room, his trouser leg in bloody tatters.

“COME BACK IN HERE!” he bellowed. “COME BACK AND PUT HER RIGHT!”

But a reckless rage had come over Harry. He kicked his trunk open, pulled out his wand, and pointed it at Uncle Vernon.

"She deserved it," Harry said, breathing very fast. "She deserved what she got. You keep away from me."

He fumbled behind him for the latch on the door.

"I'm going," Harry said. "I've had enough."

And in the next moment, he was out in the dark, quiet street, heaving his heavy trunk behind him, Hedwig's cage under his arm.

CHAPTER THREE

THE KNIGHT BUS

Harry was several streets away before he collapsed onto a low wall in Magnolia Crescent, panting from the effort of dragging his trunk. He sat quite still, anger still surging through him, listening to the frantic thumping of his heart.

But after ten minutes alone in the dark street, a new emotion overtook him: panic. Whichever way he looked at it, he had never been in a worse fix. He was stranded, quite alone, in the dark Muggle world, with absolutely nowhere to go. And the worst of it was, he had just done serious magic, which meant that he was almost certainly expelled from Hogwarts. He had broken the Decree for the Restriction of Underage Wizardry so badly, he was surprised Ministry of Magic representatives weren't swooping down on him where he sat.

Harry shivered and looked up and down Magnolia Crescent.

What, was going to happen to him? Would he be arrested, or would he simply be outlawed from the wizarding world? He thought of Ron and Hermione, and his heart sank even lower. Harry was sure that, criminal or not, Ron and Hermione would want to help him now, but they were both abroad, and with Hedwig gone, he had no means of contacting them.

He didn't have any Muggle money, either. There was a little wizard gold in the money bag at the bottom of his trunk, but the rest of the fortune his parents had left him was stored in a vault at Gringotts Wizarding Bank in London. He'd never be able to drag his trunk all the way to London. Unless…

He looked down at his wand, which he was still clutching in his hand. If he was already expelled (his heart was now thumping painfully fast), a bit more magic couldn't hurt. He had the Invisibility Cloak he had inherited from his father — what if he bewitched the trunk to make it feather-light, tied it to his broomstick, covered himself in the cloak, and flew to London? Then he could get the rest of his money out of his vault and…begin his life as an outcast. It was a horrible prospect, but he couldn't sit on this wall forever, or he'd find himself trying to explain to Muggle police why he was out in the dead of night with a trunk full of spell books and a broomstick.

Harry opened his trunk again and pushed the contents aside, looking for the Invisibility Cloak — but before he had found it, he straightened up suddenly, looking around him once more.

A funny prickling on the back of his neck had made Harry feel he was being watched, but the street appeared to be deserted, and no lights shone from any of the large square houses.

He bent over his trunk again, but almost immediately stood up once more, his hand clenched on his wand. He had sensed rather than heard it: someone or something was standing in the narrow gap

between the garage and the fence behind him. Harry squinted at the black alleyway. If only it would move, then he'd know whether it was just a stray cat or — something else.

"*Lumos,*" Harry muttered, and a light appeared at the end of his wand, almost dazzling him. He held it high over his head, and the pebble-dashed walls of number two suddenly sparkled; the garage door gleamed, and between them Harry saw, quite distinctly, the hulking outline of something very big, with wide, gleaming eyes.

Harry stepped backward. His legs hit his trunk and he tripped. His wand flew out of his hand as he flung out an arm to break his fall, and he landed, hard, in the gutter.

There was a deafening BANG, and Harry threw up his hands to shield his eyes against a sudden blinding light…

With a yell, he rolled back onto the pavement, just in time. A second later, a gigantic pair of wheels and headlights screeched to a halt exactly where Harry had just been lying. They belonged, as Harry saw when he raised his head, to a triple-decker, violently purple bus, which had appeared out of thin air. Gold lettering over the windshield spelled *The Knight Bus*.

For a split second, Harry wondered if he had been knocked silly by his fall. Then a conductor in a purple uniform leapt out of the bus and began to speak loudly to the night.

"Welcome to the Knight Bus, emergency transport for the stranded witch or wizard just stick out your wand hand, step on board, and we can take you anywhere you want to go. My name is Stan Shunpike, and I will be your conductor this eve—"

The conductor stopped abruptly. He had just caught sight of Harry, who was still sitting on the ground. Harry snatched up his wand again and scrambled to his feet. Close up, he saw that Stan Shunpike was only a few years older than he was, eighteen or nineteen at most, with large, protruding ears and quite a few pimples.

"What were you doin' down there?" said Stan, dropping his professional manner.

"Fell over," said Harry.

"'Choo fall over for?" sniggered Stan.

"I didn't do it on purpose," said Harry, annoyed. One of the knees in his jeans was torn, and the hand he had thrown out to break his fall was bleeding. He suddenly remembered why he had fallen over and turned around quickly to stare at the alleyway between the garage and fence. The Knight Bus's headlamps were flooding it with light, and it was empty.

"'Choo lookin' at?" said Stan.

“There was a big black thing,” said Harry, pointing uncertainly into the gap. “Like a dog…but massive…”

He looked around at Stan, whose mouth was slightly open. With a feeling of unease, Harry saw Stan’s eyes move to the scar on Harry’s forehead.

“Woss that on your ’ead?” said Stan abruptly.

“Nothing,” said Harry quickly, flattening his hair over his scar. If the Ministry of Magic was looking for him, he didn’t want to make it too easy for them.

“Woss your name?” Stan persisted.

“Neville Longbottom,” said Harry, saying the first name that came into his head. “So — so this bus,” he went on quickly, hoping to distract Stan, “did you say it goes *anywhere*?”

“Yep,” said Stan proudly, “anywhere you like, ’long it’s on land. Can’t do nuffink underwater.

“Ere,” he said, looking suspicious again, “you *did* flag us down, dincha? Stuck out your wand ’and, dincha?”

“Yes,” said Harry quickly. “Listen, how much would it be to get to London?”

“Eleven Sickles,” said Stan, “but for firteen you get ’ot chocolate, and for fifteen you get an ’ot-water bottle an’ a toofbrush in the color of your choice.”

Harry rummaged once more in his trunk, extracted his money bag, and shoved some gold into Stan’s hand. He and Stan then lifted his trunk, with Hedwig’s cage balanced on top, up the steps of the bus.

There were no seats; instead, half a dozen brass bedsteads stood beside the curtained windows. Candles were burning in brackets beside each bed, illuminating the wood-paneled walls. A tiny wizard in a nightcap at the rear of the bus muttered, “Not now, thanks, I’m pickling some slugs” and rolled over in his sleep.

“You ’ave this one,” Stan whispered, shoving Harry’s trunk under the bed right behind the driver, who was sitting in an armchair in front of the steering wheel. “This is our driver, Ernie Prang. This is Neville Longbottom, Ern.”

Ernie Prang, an elderly wizard wearing very thick glasses, nodded to Harry, who nervously flattened his bangs again and sat down on his bed.

“Take’er away, Ern,” said Stan, sitting down in the armchair next to Ernie’s.

There was another tremendous BANG, and the next moment Harry found himself flat on his bed, thrown backward by the speed of the Knight Bus. Pulling himself up, Harry stared out of the

dark window and saw that they were now bowling along a completely different street. Stan was watching Harry's stunned face with great enjoyment.

"This is where we was before you flagged us down," he said. "Where are we, Ern? Somewhere in Wales?"

"Ar," said Ernie.

"How come the Muggles don't hear the bus?" said Harry.

"Them!" said Stan contemptuously. "Don' listen properly, do they? Don' look properly either. Never notice nuffink, they don'."

"Best go wake up Madam Marsh, Stan," said Ern. "We'll be in Abergavenny in a minute."

Stan passed Harry's bed and disappeared up a narrow wooden staircase. Harry was still looking out of the window, feeling increasingly nervous. Ernie didn't seem to have mastered the use of a steering wheel. The Knight Bus kept mounting the pavement, but it didn't hit anything; lines of lampposts, mailboxes, and trash cans jumped out of its way as it approached and back into position once it had passed.

Stan came back downstairs, followed by a faintly green witch wrapped in a traveling cloak.

"'Ere you go, Madam Marsh," said Stan happily as Ern stamped on the brake and the beds slid a foot or so toward the front of the bus. Madam Marsh clamped a handkerchief to her mouth and tottered down the steps. Stan threw her bag out after her and rammed the doors shut; there was another loud BANG, and they were thundering down a narrow country lane, trees leaping out of the way.

Harry wouldn't have been able to sleep even if he had been traveling on a bus that didn't keep banging loudly and jumping a hundred miles at a time. His stomach churned as he fell back to wondering what was going to happen to him, and whether the Dursleys had managed to get Aunt Marge off the ceiling yet.

Stan had unfurled a copy of the *Daily Prophet* and was now reading with his tongue between his teeth. A large photograph of a sunken-faced man with long, matted hair blinked slowly at Harry from the front page. He looked strangely familiar.

"That man!" Harry said, forgetting his troubles for a moment. "He was on the Muggle news!"

Stanley turned to the front page and chuckled.

"Sirius Black," he said, nodding. "'Course 'e was on the Muggle news, Neville. Where you been?"

He gave a superior sort of chuckle at the blank look on Harry's face, removed the front page, and handed it to Harry.

"You oughta read the papers more, Neville."

Harry held the paper up to the candlelight and read:

BLACK STILL AT LARGE

Sirius Black, possibly the most infamous prisoner ever to be held in Azkaban fortress, is still eluding capture, the Ministry of Magic confirmed today.

"We are doing all we can to recapture Black," said the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, this morning, "and we beg the magical community to remain calm."

Fudge has been criticized by some members of the International Federation of Warlocks for informing the Muggle Prime Minister of the crisis.

"Well, really, I had to, don't you know," said an irritable Fudge. "Black is mad. He's a danger to anyone who crosses him, magic or Muggle. I have the Prime Minister's assurance that he will not breathe a word of Black's true identity to anyone. And let's face it — who'd believe him if he did?"

While Muggles have been told that Black is carrying a gun (a kind of metal wand that Muggles use to kill each other), the magical community lives in fear of a massacre like that of twelve years ago, when Black murdered thirteen people with a single curse.

Harry looked into the shadowed eyes of Sirius Black, the only part of the sunken face that seemed alive. Harry had never met a vampire, but he had seen pictures of them in his Defense Against the Dark Arts classes, and Black, with his waxy white skin, looked just like one.

"Scary-lookin' fing, inee?" said Stan, who had been watching Harry read.

"He murdered *thirteen people*?" said Harry, handing the page back to Stan, "with *one curse*?"

"Yep," said Stan, "in front of witnesses an' all. Broad daylight. Big trouble it caused, dinnit, Ern?"

"Ar," said Ern darkly.

Stan swiveled in his armchair, his hands on the back, the better to look at Harry.

"Black woz a big supporter of You-Know-'Oo," he said.

"What, Voldemort?" said Harry, without thinking.

Even Stan's pimples went white; Ern jerked the steering wheel so hard that a whole farmhouse had to jump aside to avoid the bus.

"You outta your tree?" yelped Stan. "'Choo say 'is name for?"

"Sorry," said Harry hastily. "Sorry, I — I forgot —"

"Forgot!" said Stan weakly. "Blimey, my 'eart's goin' that fast…"

"So — so Black was a supporter of You-Know-Who?" Harry prompted apologetically.

"Yeah," said Stan, still rubbing his chest. "Yeah, that's right. Very close to You-Know-'Oo, they say…anyway, when little 'Arry Potter got the better of You-Know-'Oo" — Harry nervously flattened his bangs down again — "all You-Know-'Oo's supporters was tracked down, wasn't they, Ern? Most of 'em knew it was all over, wiv You-Know-'Oo gone, and they came quiet. But not Sirius Black. I 'eard he thought 'e'd be second-in-command once You-Know-'Oo 'ad taken over.

"Anyway, they cornered Black in the middle of a street full of Muggles an' Black took out 'is wand and 'e blasted 'alf the street apart, an' a wizard got it, an' so did a dozen Muggles what got in the way. 'Orrible, eh? An' you know what Black did then?" Stan continued in a dramatic whisper.

"What?" said Harry.

"Laughed," said Stan. "Jus' stood there an' laughed. An' when reinforcements from the Ministry of Magic got there, 'e went wiv em quiet as anyfink, still laughing 'is 'ead off. 'Cos 'e's mad, inee, Ern? Inee mad?"

"If he weren't when he went to Azkaban, he will be now," said Ern in his slow voice. "I'd blow meself up before I set foot in that place. Serves him right, mind you…after what he did…"

"They 'ad a job coverin' it up, din' they, Ern?" Stan said. "'Ole street blown up an' all them Muggles dead. What was it they said 'ad 'appened, Ern?"

"Gas explosion," grunted Ernie.

"An' now 'e's out," said Stan, examining the newspaper picture of Black's gaunt face again. "Never been a breakout from Azkaban before, 'as there, Ern? Beats me 'ow 'e did it. Frightenin', eh? Mind, I don't fancy 'is chances against them Azkaban guards, eh, Ern?"

Ernie suddenly shivered. "Talk about summat else, Stan, there's a good lad. Them Azkaban guards give me the collywobbles."

Stan put the paper away reluctantly, and Harry leaned against the window of the Knight Bus, feeling worse than ever. He couldn't help imagining what Stan might be telling his passengers in a few nights' time.

"'Ear about that 'Arry Potter? Blew up 'is aunt! We 'ad 'im 'ere on the Knight Bus, di'n't we, Ern? 'E was tryin' to run for it…"

He, Harry, had broken wizard law just like Sirius Black. Was inflating Aunt Marge bad enough to land him in Azkaban? Harry didn't know anything about the wizard prison, though everyone he'd ever heard speak of it did so in the same fearful tone. Hagrid, the Hogwarts gamekeeper, had spent

two months there only last year. Harry wouldn't soon forget the look of terror on Hagrid's face when he had been told where he was going, and Hagrid was one of the bravest people Harry knew.

The Knight Bus rolled through the darkness, scattering bushes and wastebaskets, telephone booths and trees, and Harry lay, restless and miserable, on his feather bed. After a while, Stan remembered that Harry had paid for hot chocolate, but poured it all over Harry's pillow when the bus moved abruptly from Anglesey to Aberdeen. One by one, wizards and witches in dressing gowns and slippers descended from the upper floors to leave the bus. They all looked very pleased to go.

Finally, Harry was the only passenger left.

"Right then, Neville," said Stan, clapping his hands, "whereabouts in London?"

"Diagon Alley," said Harry.

"Righto," said Stan. "'Old tight, then."

BANG.

They were thundering along Charing Cross Road. Harry sat up and watched buildings and benches squeezing themselves out of the Knight Bus's way. The sky was getting a little lighter. He would lie low for a couple of hours, go to Gringotts the moment it opened, then set off — where, he didn't know.

Ern slammed on the brakes and the Knight Bus skidded to a halt in front of a small and shabby-looking pub, the Leaky Cauldron, behind which lay the magical entrance to Diagon Alley.

"Thanks," Harry said to Ern.

He jumped down the steps and helped Stan lower his trunk and Hedwig's cage onto the pavement.

"Well," said Harry. "Bye then!"

But Stan wasn't paying attention. Still standing in the doorway to the bus he was goggling at the shadowy entrance to the Leaky Cauldron.

"There you are, Harry," said a voice.

Before Harry could turn, he felt a hand on his shoulder. At the same time, Stan shouted, "Blimey! Ern, come 'ere! Come 'ere!"

Harry looked up at the owner of the hand on his shoulder and felt a bucketful of ice cascade into his stomach — he had walked right into Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic himself.

Stan leapt onto the pavement beside them.

"What didja call Neville, Minister?" he said excitedly.

Fudge, a portly little man in a long, pinstriped cloak, looked cold and exhausted.

"Neville?" he repeated, frowning. "This is Harry Potter."

"I knew it!" Stan shouted gleefully. "Ern! Ern! Guess 'oo Neville is, Ern! 'E's 'Arry Potter! I can see 'is scar!"

"Yes," said Fudge testily, "well, I'm very glad the Knight Bus picked Harry up, but he and I need to step inside the Leaky Cauldron now…"

Fudge increased the pressure on Harry's shoulder, and Harry found himself being steered inside the pub. A stooping figure bearing a lantern appeared through the door behind the bar. It was Tom, the wizened, toothless landlord.

"You've got him, Minister!" said Tom. "Will you be wanting anything? Beer? Brandy?"

"Perhaps a pot of tea," said Fudge, who still hadn't let go of Harry.

There was a loud scraping and puffing from behind them, and Stan and Ern appeared, carrying Harry's trunk and Hedwig's cage and looking around excitedly.

"'Ow come you di'n't tell us 'oo you are, eh, Neville?" said Stan, beaming at Harry, while Ernie's owlish face peered interestedly over Stan's shoulder.

"And a private parlor, please, Tom," said Fudge pointedly.

"Bye," Harry said miserably to Stan and Ern as Tom beckoned Fudge toward the passage that led from the bar.

"Bye, Neville!" called Stan.

Fudge marched Harry along the narrow passage after Tom's lantern, and then into a small parlor. Tom clicked his fingers, a fire burst into life in the grate, and he bowed himself out of the room.

"Sit down, Harry," said Fudge, indicating a chair by the fire.

Harry sat down, feeling goose bumps rising up his arms despite the glow of the fire. Fudge took off his pinstriped cloak and tossed it aside, then hitched up the trousers of his bottle-green suit and sat down opposite Harry.

"I am Cornelius Fudge, Harry. The Minister of Magic."

Harry already knew this, of course; he had seen Fudge once before, but as he had been wearing his father's Invisibility Cloak at the time, Fudge wasn't to know that.

Tom the innkeeper reappeared, wearing an apron over his nightshirt and bearing a tray of tea and crumpets. He placed the tray on a table between Fudge and Harry and left the parlor, closing the door behind him.

"Well, Harry," said Fudge, pouring out tea, "you've had us all in a right flap, I don't mind telling you. Running away from your aunt and uncle's house like that! I'd started to think…but you're safe, and that's what matters."

Fudge buttered himself a crumpet and pushed the plate toward Harry.

"Eat, Harry, you look dead on your feet. Now then…You will be pleased to hear that we have dealt with the unfortunate blowing-up of Miss Marjorie Dursley. Two members of the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad were dispatched to Privet Drive a few hours ago. Miss Dursley has been punctured and her memory has been modified. She has no recollection of the incident at all. So that's that, and no harm done."

Fudge smiled at Harry over the rim of his teacup, rather like an uncle surveying a favorite nephew. Harry, who couldn't believe his ears, opened his mouth to speak, couldn't think of anything to say, and closed it again.

"Ah, you're worrying about the reaction of your aunt and uncle?" said Fudge. "Well, I won't deny that they are extremely angry, Harry, but they are prepared to take you back next summer as long as you stay at Hogwarts for the Christmas and Easter holidays."

Harry unstuck his throat.

"I always stay at Hogwarts for the Christmas and Easter holidays," he said, "and I don't ever want to go back to Privet Drive."

"Now, now, I'm sure you'll feel differently once you've calmed down," said Fudge in a worried tone. "They are your family, after all, and I'm sure you are fond of each other — er — very deep down."

It didn't occur to Harry to put Fudge right. He was still waiting to hear what was going to happen to him now.

"So all that remains," said Fudge, now buttering himself a second crumpet, "is to decide where you're going to spend the last two weeks of your vacation. I suggest you take a room here at the Leaky Cauldron and…"

"Hang on," blurted Harry. "What about my punishment?"

Fudge blinked. "Punishment?"

"I broke the law!" Harry said. "The Decree for the Restriction of Underage Wizardry!"

"Oh, my dear boy, we're not going to punish you for a little thing like that!" cried Fudge, waving his crumpet impatiently. "It was an accident! We don't send people to Azkaban just for blowing up their aunts!"

But this didn't tally at all with Harry's past dealings with the Ministry of Magic.

"Last year, I got an official warning just because a house-elf smashed a pudding in my uncle's house!" he told Fudge, frowning. "The Ministry of Magic said I'd be expelled from Hogwarts if there was any more magic there!"

Unless Harry's eyes were deceiving him, Fudge was suddenly looking awkward.

"Circumstances change, Harry…We have to take into account…in the present climate…Surely you don't want to be expelled?"

"Of course I don't," said Harry.

"Well then, what's all the fuss about?" laughed Fudge. "Now, have a crumpet, Harry, while I go and see if Tom's got a room for you."

Fudge strode out of the parlor and Harry stared after him. There was something extremely odd going on. Why had Fudge been waiting for him at the Leaky Cauldron, if not to punish him for what he'd done? And now Harry came to think of it, surely it wasn't usual for the Minister of Magic himself to get involved in matters of underage magic?

Fudge came back, accompanied by Tom the innkeeper.

"Room eleven's free, Harry," said Fudge. "I think you'll be very comfortable just one thing, and I'm sure you'll understand…I don't want you wandering off into Muggle London, all right? Keep to Diagon Alley. And you're to be back here before dark each night. Sure you'll understand. Tom will be keeping an eye on you for me."

"Okay," said Harry slowly, "but why?"

"Don't want to lose you again, do we?" said Fudge with a hearty laugh. "No, no…best we know where you are…I mean…"

Fudge cleared his throat loudly and picked up his pinstriped cloak.

"Well, I'll be off, plenty to do, you know…"

"Have you had any luck with Black yet?" Harry asked.

Fudge's finger slipped on the silver fastenings of his cloak.

"What's that? Oh, you've heard - well, no, not yet, but it's only a matter of time. The Azkaban guards have never yet failed…and they are angrier than I've ever seen them."

Fudge shuddered slightly.

"So, I'll say good-bye."

He held out his hand and Harry, shaking it, had a sudden idea.

"Er — Minister? Can I ask you something?"

“Certainly,” said Fudge with a smile.

“Well, third years at Hogwarts are allowed to visit Hogsmeade, but my aunt and uncle didn’t sign the permission form. D’you think you could —?”

Fudge was looking uncomfortable.

“Ah,” he said. “No, no, I’m very sorry, Harry, but as I’m not your parent or guardian —”

“But you’re the Minister of Magic,” said Harry eagerly. “If you gave me permission…”

“No, I’m sorry, Harry, but rules are rules,” said Fudge flatly.

“Perhaps you’ll be able to visit Hogsmeade next year. In fact, I think it’s best if you don’t…yes…well, I’ll be off. Enjoy your stay, Harry.”

And with a last smile and shake of Harry’s hand, Fudge left the room. Tom now moved forward, beaming at Harry.

“If you’ll follow me, Mr. Potter,” he said, “I’ve already taken your things up…”

Harry followed Tom up a handsome wooden staircase to a door with a brass number eleven on it, which Tom unlocked and opened for him.

Inside was a very comfortable-looking bed, some highly polished oak furniture, a cheerfully crackling fire and, perched on top of the wardrobe —

“Hedwig!” Harry gasped.

The snowy owl clicked her beak and fluttered down onto Harry’s arm.

“Very smart owl you’ve got there,” chuckled Tom. “Arrived about five minutes after you did. If there’s anything you need, Mr. Potter, don’t hesitate to ask.”

He gave another bow and left.

Harry sat on his bed for a long time, absentmindedly stroking Hedwig. The sky outside the window was changing rapidly from deep, velvety blue to cold, steely gray and then, slowly, to pink shot with gold. Harry could hardly believe that he’d left Privet Drive only a few hours ago, that he wasn’t expelled, and that he was now facing three completely Dursley-free weeks.

“It’s been a very weird night, Hedwig,” he yawned.

And without even removing his glasses, he slumped back onto his pillows and fell asleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE LEAKY CAULDRON

It took Harry several days to get used to his strange new freedom. Never before had he been able to get up whenever he wanted or eat whatever he fancied. He could even go wherever he pleased, as long as it was in Diagon Alley, and as this long cobbled street was packed with the most fascinating wizarding shops in the world, Harry felt no desire to break his word to Fudge and stray back into the Muggle world.

Harry ate breakfast each morning in the Leaky Cauldron, where he liked watching the other guests: funny little witches from the country, up for a day's shopping; venerable-looking wizards arguing over the latest article in Transfiguration Today; wild-looking warlocks; raucous dwarfs; and once, what looked suspiciously like a hag, who ordered a plate of raw liver from behind a thick woolen balaclava.

After breakfast Harry would go out into the backyard, take out his wand, tap the third brick from the left above the trash bin, and stand back as the archway into Diagon Alley opened in the wall.

Harry spent the long sunny days exploring the shops and eating under the brightly colored umbrellas outside cafes, where his fellow diners were showing one another their purchases ("It's a lunascope, old boy — no more messing around with moon charts, see?") or else discussing the case of Sirius Black ("Personally, I won't let any of the children out alone until he's back in Azkaban"). Harry didn't have to do his homework under the blankets by flashlight anymore; now he could sit in the bright sunshine outside Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor, finishing all his essays with occasional help from Florean Fortescue himself, who, apart from knowing a great deal about medieval witch burnings, gave Harry free sundaes every half an hour.

Once Harry had refilled his money bag with gold Galleons, silver Sickles, and bronze Knuts from his vault at Gringotts, he had to exercise a lot of self-control not to spend the whole lot at once. He had to keep reminding himself that he had five years to go at Hogwarts, and how it would feel to ask the Dursleys for money for spellbooks, to stop himself from buying a handsome set of solid gold Gobstones (a wizarding game rather like marbles, in which the stones squirt a nasty-smelling liquid into the other player's face when they lose a point). He was sorely tempted, too, by the perfect, moving model of the galaxy in a large glass ball, which would have meant he never had to take another Astronomy lesson. But the thing that tested Harry's resolution most appeared in his favorite shop, Quality Quidditch Supplies, a week after he'd arrived at the Leaky Cauldron.

Curious to know what the crowd in the shop was staring at, Harry edged his way inside and squeezed in among the excited witches and wizards until he glimpsed a newly erected podium, on which was mounted the most magnificent broom he had ever seen in his life.

"Just come out — prototype —" a square-jawed wizard was telling his companion.

"It's the fastest broom in the world, isn't it, Dad?" squeaked a boy younger than Harry, who was swinging off his father's arm.

"Irish International Side's just put in an order for seven of these beauties!" the proprietor of the shop told the crowd. "And they're favorites for the World Cup!"

A large witch in front of Harry moved, and he was able to read the sign next to the broom:

*** THE FIREBOLT ***

THIS STATE-OF-THE-ART RACING BROOM SPORTS A STREAM-LINED, SUPERFINE HANDLE OF ASH, TREATED WITH A DIAMOND-HARD POLISH AND HAND-NUMBERED WITH ITS OWN REGISTRATION NUMBER. EACH INDIVIDUALLY SELECTED BIRCH TWIG IN THE BROOMTAIL HAS BEEN HONED TO AERODYNAMIC PERFECTION, GIVING THE FIREBOLT UNSURPASSABLE BALANCE AND PINPOINT PRECISION. THE FIREBOLT HAS AN ACCELERATION OF 150 MILES AN HOUR IN TEN SECONDS AND INCORPORATES AN UNBREAKABLE BRAKING CHARM. PRICE ON REQUEST.

Price on request…Harry didn't like to think how much gold the Firebolt would cost. He had never wanted anything as much in his whole life — but he had never lost a Quidditch match on his Nimbus Two Thousand, and what was the point in emptying his Gringotts vault for the Firebolt, when he had a very good broom already? Harry didn't ask for the price, but he returned, almost every day after that, just to look at the Firebolt.

There were, however, things that Harry needed to buy. He went to the Apothecary to replenish his store of potions ingredients, and as his school robes were now several inches too short in the arm and leg, he visited Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions and bought new ones. Most important of all, he had to buy his new schoolbooks, which would include those for his two new subjects, Care of Magical Creatures and Divination.

Harry got a surprise as he looked in at the bookshop window. Instead of the usual display of gold-embossed spellbooks the size of paving slabs, there was a large iron cage behind the glass that held about a hundred copies of The Monster Book of Monsters. Torn pages were flying everywhere as the books grappled with each other, locked together in furious wrestling matches and snapping aggressively.

Harry pulled his booklist out of his pocket and consulted it for the first time. *The Monster Book of Monsters* was listed as the required book for Care of Magical Creatures. Now Harry understood why Hagrid had said it would come in useful. He felt relieved; he had been wondering whether Hagrid wanted help with some terrifying new pet.

As Harry entered Flourish and Blotts, the manager came hurrying toward him.

"Hogwarts?" he said abruptly. "Come to get your new books?"

"Yes," said Harry, "I need —"

"Get out of the way," said the manager impatiently, brushing Harry aside. He drew on a pair of very thick gloves, picked up a large, knobbly walking stick, and proceeded toward the door of the Monster Books' cage.

"Hang on," said Harry quickly, "I've already got one of those."

"Have you?" A look of enormous relief spread over the manager's face. "Thank heavens for that. I've been bitten five times already this morning —"

A loud ripping noise rent the air; two of the Monster Books had seized a third and were pulling it apart.

"Stop it! Stop it!" cried the manager, poking the walking stick through the bars and knocking the books apart. "I'm never stocking them again, never! It's been bedlam! I thought we'd seen the worst when we bought two hundred copies of the *Invisible Book of Invisibility* — cost a fortune, and we never found them…Well…is there anything else I can help you with?"

"Yes," said Harry, looking down his booklist, "I need *Unfogging the Future* by Cassandra Vablatsky."

"Ah, starting Divination, are you?" said the manager, stripping off his gloves and leading Harry into the back of the shop, where there was a corner devoted to fortune-telling. A small table was stacked with volumes such as *Predicting the Unpredictable: Insulate Yourself Against Shocks and Broken Balls: When Fortunes Turn Foul.*

"Here you are," said the manager, who had climbed a set of steps to take down a thick, black-bound book. "*Unfogging the Future*. Very good guide to all your basic fortune-telling methods — palmistry, crystal balls, bird entrails."

But Harry wasn't listening. His eyes had fallen on another book, which was among a display on a small table: *Death Omens — What to Do When You Know the Worst Is Coming.*

"Oh, I wouldn't read that if I were you," said the manager lightly, looking to see what Harry was staring at. "You'll start seeing death omens everywhere. It's enough to frighten anyone to death."

But Harry continued to stare at the front cover of the book; it showed a black dog large as a bear, with gleaming eyes. It looked oddly familiar…

The manager pressed *Unfogging the Future* into Harry's hands.

"Anything else?" he said.

"Yes," said Harry, tearing his eyes away from the dog's and dazedly consulting his booklist. "Er — I need *Intermediate Transfiguration* and *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade Three."*

Harry emerged from Flourish and Blotts ten minutes later with his new books under his arms and made his way back to the Leaky Cauldron, hardly noticing where he was going and bumping into several people.

He tramped up the stairs to his room, went inside, and tipped his books onto his bed. Somebody had been in to tidy; the windows were open and sun was pouring inside. Harry could hear the buses rolling by in the unseen Muggle street behind him and the sound of the invisible crowd below in Diagon Alley. He caught sight of himself in the mirror over the basin.

"It can't have been a death omen," he told his reflection defiantly. "I was panicking when I saw that thing in Magnolia Crescent…It was probably just a stray dog…"

He raised his hand automatically and tried to make his hair lie flat

"You're fighting a losing battle there, dear," said his mirror in a wheezy voice.

As the days slipped by, Harry started looking wherever he went for a sign of Ron or Hermione. Plenty of Hogwarts students were arriving in Diagon Alley now, with the start of term so near. Harry met Seamus Finnigan and Dean Thomas, his fellow Gryffindors, in Quality Quidditch Supplies, where they too were ogling the Firebolt; he also ran into the real Neville Longbottom, a round-faced, forgetful boy, outside Flourish and Blotts. Harry didn't stop to chat; Neville appeared to have mislaid his booklist and was being told off by his very formidable-looking grandmother. Harry hoped she never found out that he'd pretended to be Neville while on the run from the Ministry of Magic.

Harry woke on the last day of the holidays, thinking that he would at least meet Ron and Hermione tomorrow, on the Hogwarts Express. He got up, dressed, went for a last look at the Firebolt, and was just wondering where he'd have lunch, when someone yelled his name and he turned.

"Harry! HARRY!"

They were there, both of them, sitting outside Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor — Ron looking incredibly freckly, Hermione very brown, both waving frantically at him.

“Finally!” said Ron, grinning at Harry as he sat down. “We went to the Leaky Cauldron, but they said you’d left, and we went to Flourish and Blotts, and Madam Malkin’s, and —”

“I got all my school stuff last week,” Harry explained. “And how come you knew I’m staying at the Leaky Cauldron?”

“Dad,” said Ron simply.

Mr. Weasley, who worked at the Ministry of Magic, would of course have heard the whole story of what had happened to Aunt Marge.

“Did you really blow up your aunt, Harry?” said Hermione in a very serious voice.

“I didn’t mean to,” said Harry, while Ron roared with laughter. “I just — lost control.”

“It’s not funny, Ron,” said Hermione sharply. “Honestly, I’m amazed Harry wasn’t expelled.”

“So am I,” admitted Harry. “Forget expelled, I thought I was going to be arrested.” He looked at Ron. “Your dad doesn’t know why Fudge let me off, does he?”

“Probably ‘cause it’s you, isn’t it?” shrugged Ron, still chuckling. “Famous Harry Potter and all that. I’d hate to see what the Ministry’d do to me if I blew up an aunt. Mind you, they’d have to dig me up first, because Mum would’ve killed me. Anyway, you can ask Dad yourself this evening. We’re staying at the Leaky Cauldron tonight too! So you can come to King’s Cross with us tomorrow! Hermione’s there as well!”

Hermione nodded, beaming. “Mum and Dad dropped me off this morning with all my Hogwarts things.”

“Excellent!” said Harry happily. “So, have you got all your new books and stuff?”

“Look at this,” said Ron, pulling a long thin box out of a bag and opening it. “Brand-new wand. Fourteen inches, willow, containing one unicorn tail-hair. And we’ve got all our books —” He pointed at a large bag under his chair. “What about those Monster Books, eh? The assistant nearly cried when we said we wanted two.”

“What’s all that, Hermione?” Harry asked, pointing at not one but three bulging bags in the chair next to her.

“Well, I’m taking more new subjects than you, aren’t I,” said Hermione. “Those are my books for Arithmancy, Care of Magical Creatures, Divination, the Study of Ancient Runes, Muggle Studies —”

“What are you doing Muggle Studies for?” said Ron, rolling his eyes at Harry. “You’re Muggle-born! Your mum and dad are Muggles! You already know all about Muggles!”

"But it'll be fascinating to study them from the wizarding point of view," said Hermione earnestly.

"Are you planning to eat or sleep at all this year, Hermione?" asked Harry, while Ron sniggered. Hermione ignored them.

"I've still got ten Galleons," she said, checking her purse. "It's my birthday in September, and Mum and Dad gave me some money to get myself an early birthday present."

"How about a nice *book*? said Ron innocently.

"No, I don't think so," said Hermione composedly. "I really want an owl. I mean, Harry's got Hedwig and you've got Errol —"

"I haven't," said Ron. "Errol's a family owl. All I've got is Scabbers." He pulled his pet rat out of his pocket. "And I want to get him checked over," he added, placing Scabbers on the table in front of them. "I don't think Egypt agreed with him."

Scabbers was looking thinner than usual, and there was a definite droop to his whiskers.

"There's a magical creature shop just over there," said Harry, who knew Diagon Alley very well by now. "You could see if they've got anything for Scabbers, and Hermione can get her owl."

So they paid for their ice cream and crossed the street to the Magical Menagerie.

There wasn't much room inside. Every inch of wall was hidden by cages. It was smelly and very noisy because the occupants of these cages were all squeaking, squawking, jabbering, or hissing. The witch behind the counter was already advising a wizard on the care of double-ended newts, so Harry, Ron, and Hermione waited, examining the cages.

A pair of enormous purple toads sat gulping wetly and feasting on dead blowflies. A gigantic tortoise with a jewel-encrusted shell was glittering near the window. Poisonous orange snails were oozing slowly up the side of their glass tank, and a fat white rabbit kept changing into a silk top hat and back again with a loud popping noise. Then there were cats of every color, a noisy cage of ravens, a basket of funny custard-colored furballs that were humming loudly, and on the counter, a vast cage of sleek black rats that were playing some sort of skipping game using their long, bald tails.

The double-ended newt wizard left, and Ron approached the counter.

"It's my rat," he told the witch. "He's been a bit off-color ever since I brought him back from Egypt."

"Bang him on the counter," said the witch, pulling a pair of heavy black spectacles out of her pocket.

Ron lifted Scabbers out of his inside pocket and placed him next to the cage of his fellow rats, who stopped their skipping tricks and scuffled to the wire for a better took.

Like nearly everything Ron owned, Scabbers the rat was secondhand (he had once belonged to Ron's brother Percy) and a bit battered. Next to the glossy rats in the cage, he looked especially woebegone.

"Hm," said the witch, picking up Scabbers. "How old is this rat?"

"Dunno," said Ron. "Quite old. He used to belong to my brother."

"What powers does he have?" said the witch, examining Scabbers closely.

"Er —" The truth was that Scabbers had never shown the faintest trace of interesting powers. The witch's eyes moved from Scabbers's tattered left ear to his front paw, which had a toe missing, and tutted loudly.

"He's been through the mill, this one," she said.

"He was like that when Percy gave him to me," said Ron defensively.

"An ordinary common or garden rat like this can't be expected to live longer than three years or so," said the witch. "Now, if you were looking for something a bit more hard-wearing, you might like one of these —"

She indicated the black rats, who promptly started skipping again. Ron muttered, "Show-offs."

"Well, if you don't want a replacement, you can try this rat tonic," said the witch, reaching under the counter and bringing out a small red bottle.

"Okay," said Ron. "How much — OUCH!"

Ron buckled as something huge and orange came soaring from the top of the highest cage, landed on his head, and then propelled itself, spitting madly, at Scabbers.

"NO, CROOKSHANKS, NO!" cried the witch, but Scabbers shot from between her hands like a bar of soap, landed splay-legged on the floor, and then scampered for the door.

"Scabbers!" Ron shouted, racing out of the shop after him; Harry followed.

It took them nearly ten minutes to catch Scabbers, who had taken refuge under a wastepaper bin outside Quality Quidditch Supplies. Ron stuffed the trembling rat back into his pocket and straightened up, massaging his head.

"What *was* that?"

"It was either a very big cat or quite a small tiger," said Harry.

"Where's Hermione?"

"Probably getting her owl."

They made their way back up the crowded street to the Magical Menagerie. As they reached it, Hermione came out, but she wasn't carrying an owl. Her arms were clamped tightly around the enormous ginger cat.

"You *bought* that monster?" said Ron, his mouth hanging open.

"He's *gorgeous*, isn't he?" said Hermione, glowing.

That was a matter of opinion, thought Harry. The cat's ginger fur was thick and fluffy, but it was definitely a bit bowlegged and its face looked grumpy and oddly squashed, as though it had run headlong into a brick wall. Now that Scabbers was out of sight, however, the cat was purring contentedly in Hermione's arms.

"Hermione, that thing nearly scalped me!" said Ron.

"He didn't mean to, did you, Crookshanks?" said Hermione.

"And what about Scabbers?" said Ron, pointing at the lump in his chest pocket. "He needs rest and relaxation! How's he going to get it with that thing around?"

"That reminds me, you forgot your rat tonic," said Hermione, slapping the small red bottle into Ron's hand. "And stop worrying, Crookshanks will be sleeping in my dormitory and Scabbers in yours, what's the problem? Poor Crookshanks, that witch said he'd been in there for ages; no one wanted him."

"Wonder why," said Ron sarcastically as they set off toward the Leaky Cauldron.

They found Mr. Weasley sitting in the bar, reading the *Daily Prophet*.

"Harry!" he said, smiling as he looked up. "How are you?"

"Fine, thanks," said Harry as he, Ron, and Hermione joined Mr. Weasley with their shopping.

Mr. Weasley put down his paper, and Harry saw the now familiar picture of Sirius Black staring up at him.

"They still haven't caught him, then?" he asked.

"No," said Mr. Weasley, looking extremely grave. "They've pulled us all off our regular jobs at the Ministry to try and find him, but no luck so far."

"Would we get a reward if we caught him?" asked Ron. "It'd be good to get some more money —"

"Don't be ridiculous, Ron," said Mr. Weasley, who on closer inspection looked very strained. "Black's not going to be caught by a thirteen-year-old wizard. It's the Azkaban guards who'll get him back, you mark my words."

At that moment Mrs. Weasley entered the bar, laden with shopping bags and followed by the twins, Fred and George, who were about to start their fifth year at Hogwarts; the newly elected Head Boy, Percy; and the Weasleys' youngest child and only girl, Ginny.

Ginny, who had always been very taken with Harry, seemed even more heartily embarrassed than usual when she saw him, perhaps because he had saved her life during their previous year at Hogwarts. She went very red and muttered "hello" without looking at him. Percy, however, held out his hand solemnly as though he and Harry had never met and said, "Harry. How nice to see you."

"Hello, Percy," said Harry, trying not to laugh.

"I hope you're well?" said Percy pompously, shaking hands. It was rather like being introduced to the mayor.

"Very well, thanks —"

"Harry!" said Fred, elbowing Percy out of the way and bowing deeply. "Simply *splendid* to see you, old boy —"

"Marvelous," said George, pushing Fred aside and seizing Harry's hand in turn. "Absolutely spiffing."

Percy scowled.

"That's enough, now," said Mrs. Weasley.

"Mum!" said Fred, as though he'd only just spotted her and seizing her hand, too. "How really corking to see you —"

"I said, that's enough," said Mrs. Weasley, depositing her shopping in an empty chair. "Hello, Harry, dear. I suppose you've heard our exciting news?" She pointed to the brand-new silver badge on Percy's chest. "Second Head Boy in the family!" she said, swelling with pride.

"And last," Fred muttered under his breath.

"I don't doubt that," said Mrs. Weasley, frowning suddenly. "I notice they haven't made you two prefects."

"What do we want to be prefects for?" said George, looking revolted at the very idea. "It'd take all the fun out of life."

Ginny giggled.

"You want to set a better example for your sister!" snapped Mrs. Weasley.

"Ginny's got other brothers to set her an example, Mother," said Percy loftily. "I'm going up to change for dinner…"

He disappeared and George heaved a sigh.

“We tried to shut him in a pyramid,” he told Harry. “But Mum spotted us.”

Dinner that night was a very enjoyable affair. Tom the innkeeper put three tables together in the parlor, and the seven Weasleys, Harry, and Hermione ate their way through five delicious courses.

“How’re we getting to King’s Cross tomorrow, Dad?” asked Fred as they dug into a sumptuous chocolate pudding.

“The Ministry’s providing a couple of cars,” said Mr. Weasley.

Everyone looked up at him.

“Why?” said Percy curiously.

“It’s because of you, Perce,” said George seriously. “And there’ll be little flags on the hoods, with HB on them—”

“— for Humongous Bighead,” said Fred.

Everyone except Percy and Mrs. Weasley snorted into their pudding.

“Why are the Ministry providing cars, Father?” Percy asked again, in a dignified voice.

“Well, as we haven’t got one anymore,” said Mr. Weasley, “and as I work there, they’re doing me a favor…”

His voice was casual, but Harry couldn’t help noticing that Mr. Wesley’s ears had gone red, just like Ron’s did when he was under pressure.

“Good thing, too,” said Mrs. Weasley briskly. “Do you realize how much luggage you’ve all got between you? A nice sight you’d be on the Muggle Underground…You are all packed, aren’t you?”

“Ron hasn’t put all his new things in his trunk yet,” said Percy, in a long-suffering voice. “He’s dumped them on my bed.”

“You’d better go and pack properly, Ron, because we won’t have much time in the morning,” Mrs. Weasley called down the table. Ron scowled at Percy.

After dinner everyone felt very full and sleepy. One by one they made their way upstairs to their rooms to check their things for the next day. Ron and Percy were next door to Harry. He had just closed and locked his own trunk when he heard angry voices through the wall, and went to see what was going on.

The door of number twelve was ajar and Percy was shouting.

“It was *here*, on the bedside table, I took it off for polishing —”

“I haven’t touched it, all right?” Ron roared back.

“What’s up?” said Harry.

“My Head Boy badge is gone,” said Percy, rounding on Harry.

"So's Scabbers's Rat Tonic," said Ron, throwing things out of his trunk to look. "I think I might've left it in the bar —"

"You're not going anywhere till you've found my badge!" yelled Percy.

"I'll get Scabbers's stuff, I'm packed," Harry said to Ron, and he went downstairs.

Harry was halfway along the passage to the bar, which was now very dark, when he heard another pair of angry voices coming from the parlor. A second later, he recognized them as Mr. and Mrs. Weasleys'. He hesitated, not wanting them to know he'd heard them arguing, when the sound of his own name made him stop, then move closer to the parlor door.

"…makes no sense not to tell him," Mr. Weasley was saying heatedly. "Harry's got a right to know. I've tried to tell Fudge, but he insists on treating Harry like a child. He's thirteen years old and —"

"Arthur, the truth would terrify him!" said Mrs. Weasley shrilly. "Do you really want to send Harry back to school with that hanging over him? For heaven's sake, he's *happy* not knowing!"

"I don't want to make him miserable, I want to put him on his guard!" retorted Mr. Weasley. "You know what Harry and Ron are like, wandering off by themselves — they've even ended up in the Forbidden Forest! But Harry mustn't do that this year! When I think what could have happened to him that night he ran away from home! If the Knight Bus hadn't picked him up, I'm prepared to bet he would have been dead before the Ministry found him."

"But he's *not* dead, he's fine, so what's the point —"

"Molly, they say Sirius Black's mad, and maybe he is, but he was clever enough to escape from Azkaban, and that's supposed to be impossible. It's been three weeks, and no one's seen hide nor hair of him, and I don't care what Fudge keeps telling the *Daily Prophet*, we're no nearer catching Black than inventing self-spelling wands. The only thing we know for sure is what Black's after —"

"But Harry will be perfectly safe at Hogwarts."

"We thought Azkaban was perfectly safe. If Black can break out of Azkaban, he can break into Hogwarts."

"But no one's really sure that Black's after Harry —"

There was a thud on wood, and Harry was sure Mr. Weasley had banged his fist on the table.

"Molly, how many times do I have to tell you? They didn't report it in the press because Fudge wanted it kept quiet, but Fudge went out to Azkaban the night Black escaped. The guards told Fudge that Blacks been talking in his sleep for a while now. Always the same words: 'He's at Hogwarts…he's at Hogwarts.' Black is deranged, Molly, and he wants Harry dead. If you ask me, he

thinks murdering Harry will bring You-Know-Who back to power. Black lost everything the night Harry stopped You-Know-Who, and he's had twelve years alone in Azkaban to brood on that…"

There was a silence. Harry leaned still closer to the door, desperate to hear more.

"Well, Arthur, you must do what you think is right. But you're forgetting Albus Dumbledore. I don't think anything could hurt Harry at Hogwarts while Dumbledore's Headmaster. I suppose he knows about all this?"

"Of course he knows. We had to ask him if he minds the Azkaban guards stationing themselves around the entrances to the school grounds. He wasn't happy about it, but he agreed."

"Not happy? Why shouldn't he be happy, if they're there to catch Black?"

"Dumbledore isn't fond of the Azkaban guards," said Mr. Weasley heavily. "Nor am I, if it comes to that…but when you're dealing with a wizard like Black, you sometimes have to join forces with those you'd rather avoid."

"If they save Harry —"

"– then I will never say another word against them," said Mr. Weasley wearily. "It's late, Molly, we'd better go up…"

Harry heard chairs move. As quietly as he could, he hurried down the passage to the bar and out of sight. The parlor door opened, and a few seconds later footsteps told him that Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were climbing the stairs.

The bottle of rat tonic was lying under the table they had sat at earlier. Harry waited until he heard Mr. and Mrs. Wesley's bedroom door close, then headed back upstairs with the bottle.

Fred and George were crouching in the shadows on the landing, heaving with laughter as they listened to Percy dismantling his and Ron's room in search of his badge.

"We've got it," Fred whispered to Harry. "We've been improving it."

The badge now read *Bighead Boy*.

Harry forced a laugh, went to give Ron the rat tonic, then shut himself in his room and lay down on his bed.

So Sirius Black was after him. This explained everything. Fudge had been lenient with him because he was so relieved to find him alive. He'd made Harry promise to stay in Diagon Alley where there were plenty of wizards to keep an eye on him. And he was sending two Ministry cars to take them all to the station tomorrow, so that the Weasleys could look after Harry until he was on the train.

Harry lay listening to the muffled shouting next door and wondered why he didn't feel more scared. Sirius Black had murdered thirteen people with one curse; Mr. and Mrs. Weasley obviously thought Harry would be panic-stricken if he knew the truth. But Harry happened to agree wholeheartedly with Mrs. Weasley that the safest place on earth was wherever Albus Dumbledore happened to be. Didn't people always say that Dumbledore was the only person Lord Voldemort had ever been afraid of? Surely Black, as Voldemort's right-hand man, would be just as frightened of him?

And then there were these Azkaban guards everyone kept talking about. They seemed to scare most people senseless, and if they were stationed all around the school, Black's chances of getting inside seemed very remote.

No, all in all, the thing that bothered Harry most was the fact that his chances of visiting Hogsmeade now looked like zero. Nobody would want Harry to leave the safety of the castle until Black was caught; in fact, Harry suspected his every move would be carefully watched until the danger had passed.

He scowled at the dark ceiling. Did they think he couldn't look after himself? He'd escaped Lord Voldemort three times; he wasn't completely useless…

Unbidden, the image of the beast in the shadows of Magnolia Crescent crossed his mind. *What to do when you know the worst is coming…*

"I'm *not* going to be murdered," Harry said out loud.

"That's the spirit, dear," said his mirror sleepily.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE DEMENTOR

Tom woke Harry the next morning with his usual toothless grin and a cup of tea. Harry got dressed and was just persuading a disgruntled Hedwig to get back into her cage when Ron banged his way into the room, pulling a sweatshirt over his head and looking irritable.

"The sooner we get on the train, the better," he said. "At least I can get away from Percy at Hogwarts. Now he's accusing me of dripping tea on his photo of Penelope Clearwater. You know," Ron grimaced, "his girlfriend. She's hidden her face under the frame because her nose has gone all blotchy…"

"I've got something to tell you," Harry began, but they were interrupted by Fred and George, who had looked in to congratulate Ron on infuriating Percy again.

They headed down to breakfast, where Mr. Weasley was reading the front page of the *Daily Prophet* with a furrowed brow and Mrs. Weasley was telling Hermione and Ginny about a love potion she'd made as a young girl. All three of them were rather giggly.

"What were you saying?" Ron asked Harry as they sat down.

"Later," Harry muttered as Percy stormed in.

Harry had no chance to speak to Ron or Hermione in the chaos of leaving; they were too busy heaving all their trunks down the Leaky Cauldron's narrow staircase and piling them up near the door, with Hedwig and Hermes, Percy's screech owl, perched on top in their cages. A small wickerwork basket stood beside the heap of trunks, spitting loudly.

"It's all right, Crookshanks," Hermione cooed through the wickerwork. "I'll let you out on the train."

"You won't," snapped Ron. "What about poor Scabbers, eh?"

He pointed at his chest, where a large lump indicated that Scabbers was curled up in his pocket.

Mr. Weasley, who had been outside waiting for the Ministry cars, stuck his head inside.

"They're here," he said. "Harry, come on."

Mr. Weasley marched Harry across the short stretch of pavement toward the first of two old-fashioned dark green cars, each of which was driven by a furtive-looking wizard wearing a suit of emerald velvet.

"In you get, Harry," said Mr. Weasley, glancing up and down the crowded street.

Harry got into the back of the car and was shortly joined by Hermione, Ron, and, to Ron's disgust, Percy.

The journey to King's Cross was very uneventful compared with Harry's trip on the Knight Bus. The Ministry of Magic cars seemed almost ordinary. though Harry noticed that they could slide through gaps that Uncle Vernon's new company car certainly couldn't have managed. They reached King's Cross with twenty minutes to spare; the Ministry drivers found them trolleys, unloaded their trunks, touched their hats in salute to Mr. Weasley, and drove away, somehow managing to jump to the head of an unmoving line at the traffic lights.

Mr. Weasley kept close to Harry's elbow all the way into the station.

"Right then," he said, glancing around them. "Let's do this in pairs, as there are so many of us. I'll go through first with Harry."

Mr. Weasley strolled toward the barrier between platforms nine and ten, pushing Harry's trolley and apparently very interested in the InterCity 125 that had just arrived at platform nine. With a meaningful look at Harry, he leaned casually against the barrier. Harry imitated him.

In a moment, they had fallen sideways through the solid metal onto platform nine and three-quarters and looked up to see the Hogwarts Express, a scarlet steam engine, puffing smoke over a platform packed with witches and wizards seeing their children onto the train.

Percy and Ginny suddenly appeared behind Harry. They were panting and had apparently taken the barrier at a run.

"Ah, there's Penelope!" said Percy, smoothing his hair and going pink again. Ginny caught Harry's eye, and they both turned away to hide their laughter as Percy strode over to a girl with long, curly hair, walking with his chest thrown out so that she couldn't miss his shiny badge.

Once the remaining Weasleys and Hermione had joined them, Harry and Mr. Weasley led the way to the end of the train, past packed compartments, to a carriage that looked quite empty. They loaded the trunks onto it, stowed Hedwig and Crookshanks in the luggage rack, then went back outside to say goodbye to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

Mrs. Weasley kissed all her children, then Hermione, and finally Harry. He was embarrassed, but really quite pleased, when she gave him an extra hug.

"Do take care, won't you Harry?" she said as she straightened up, her eyes oddly bright. Then she opened her enormous handbag and said, "I've made you all sandwiches. Here you are, Ron…no, they're not corned beef…Fred? Where's Fred? Here you are dear…"

"Harry," said Mr. Weasley quietly, "come over here for a moment."

He jerked his head towards a pillar, and Harry followed him behind it, leaving the others crowded around Mrs. Weasley.

"There's something I've got to tell you before you leave —" said Mr. Weasley in a tense voice.

"It's all right, Mr. Weasley," said Harry, "I already know."

"You know? How could you know?"

"I — er — I heard you and Mrs. Wesley talking last night. I couldn't help hearing," Harry added quickly. "Sorry —"

"That's not the way I'd have chosen for you to find out," said Mr. Weasley looking anxious..

"No — honestly it'sokay. This way, you haven't broken your word to Fudge and I know what's going on."

"Harry, you must be scared — "

"I'm not," said Harry sincerely. "*Really*," he added, because Mr. Weasley was looking disbelieving. "I'm not trying to be a hero, but seriously, Sirius Black can't be worse than Lord Voldemort, can he?"

Mr. Weasley flinched at the sound of the name, but overlooked it.

"Harry, I knew you were, well, made of stronger stuff than Fudge seems to think, and I'm obviously pleased that you're not scared, but —"

"Arthur!" called Mrs. Weasley, who was now shepherding the rest onto the train. "Arthur, what are you doing? It's about to go!"

"He's coming Molly!" said Mr. Weasley, but he turned back to Harry and kept talking in a lower and more hurried voice, "Listen, I want you to give me your word —"

" — that I'll be a good boy and stay in the castle?" said Harry gloomily.

"Not entirely," said Mr. Weasley, who looked more serious than Harry had ever seen him. "Harry, swear to me you won't go *looking* for Black."

Harry stared, "What!"

There was a loud whistle. Guards were walking along the train, slamming all the doors shut.

"Promise me, Harry," said Mr. Weasley, talking more quickly still, "that whatever happens —"

"Why would I go looking for someone I know wants to kill me?" said Harry blankly.

"Swear to me that whatever you might hear —"

"Arthur, quickly!" cried Mrs. Weasley.

Steam was billowing from the train it had started to move. Harry ran to the compartment door and Ron threw it open and stood back to let him on. They leaned out of the window and waved at Mr. and Mrs. Weasley until the train turned a corner and blocked them from view.

“I need to talk to you in private,” Harry muttered to Ron and Hermione as the train picked up speed.

“Go away, Ginny,” said Ron.

“Oh, that’s nice,” said Ginny huffily, and she stalked off.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione set off down the corridor, looking for an empty compartment, but all were full except for the one at the very end of the train.

This had only one occupant, a man sitting fast asleep next to the window. Harry, Ron, and Hermione checked on the threshold. The Hogwarts Express was usually reserved for students and they had never seen an adult there before, except for the witch who pushed the food cart.

The stranger was wearing an extremely shabby set of wizard’s robes that had been darned in several places. He looked ill and exhausted. Though quite young, his light brown hair was flecked with gray.

“Who d’you reckon he is?” Ron hissed as they sat down and slid the door shut, taking the seats farthest away from the window.

“Professor R. J. Lupin.” whispered Hermione at once.

“How’d you know that?”

“It’s on his case,” she replied, pointing at the luggage rack over the man’s head, where there was a small, battered case held together with a large quantity of neatly knotted string. The name Professor R. J. Lupin was stamped across one corner in peeling letters.

“Wonder what he teaches?” said Ron, frowning at Professor Lupin’s pallid profile.

“That’s obvious,” whispered Hermione. “There’s only one vacancy, isn’t there? Defense Against the Dark Arts.”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione had already had two Defense Against the Dark Arts teachers, both of whom had lasted only one year. There were rumors that the job was jinxed.

“Well, I hope he’s up to it,” said Ron doubtfully. “He looks like one good hex would finish him off, doesn’t he? Anyway…” he turned to Harry, “what were you going to tell us?”

Harry explained all about Mr. and Mrs. Wesley’s argument and the warning Mr. Weasley had just given him. When he’d finished, Ron looked thunderstruck, and Hermione had her hands over her mouth. She finally lowered them to say, “Sirius Black escaped to come after *you*? Oh, Harry…you’ll have to be really, really careful. don’t go looking for trouble, Harry…”

“I don’t go looking for trouble,” said Harry, nettled. “Trouble usually finds *me*.”

"How thick would Harry have to be, to go looking for a nutter who wants to kill him?" said Ron shakily.

They were taking the news worse than Harry had expected. Both Ron and Hermione seemed to be much more frightened of Black than he was.

"No one knows how he got out of Azkaban," said Ron uncomfortably. "No one's ever done it before. And he was a top-security prisoner too."

"But they'll catch him, won't they?" said Hermione earnestly. "I mean, they've got all the Muggles looking out for him too…"

"What's that noise?" said Ron suddenly.

A faint, tinny sort of whistle was coming from somewhere. They looked all around the compartment.

"It's coming from your trunk, Harry," said Ron, standing up and reaching into the luggage rack. A moment later he had pulled the Pocket Sneakoscope out from between Harry's robes. It was spinning very fast in the palm of Ron's hand and glowing brilliantly.

"Is that a *Sneakoscope*?" said Hermione interestedly, standing up for a better look.

"Yeah…mind you, it's a very cheap one," Ron said. "It went haywire just as I was tying it to Errol's leg to send it to Harry."

"Were you doing anything untrustworthy at the time?" said Hermione shrewdly.

"No! Well…I wasn't supposed to be using Errol. You know he's not really up to long journeys…but how else was I supposed to get Harry's present to him?"

"Stick it back in the trunk," Harry advised as the Sneakoscope whistled piercingly, "or it'll wake him up."

He nodded toward Professor Lupin. Ron stuffed the Sneakoscope into a particularly horrible pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks, which deadened the sound, then closed the lid of the trunk on it.

"We could get it checked in Hogsmeade," said Ron, sitting back down. "They sell that sort of thing in Dervish and Banges, magical instruments and stuff. Fred and George told me."

"Do you know much about Hogsmeade?" asked Hermione keenly. "I've read it's the only entirely non-Muggle settlement in Britain —"

"Yeah, I think it is," said Ron in an offhand sort of way. "but that's not why I want to go. I just want to get inside Honeydukes!"

"What's that?" said Hermione.

"It's this sweetshop," said Ron, a dreamy look coming over his face, "where they've got *everything*…Pepper Imps — they make you smoke at the mouth — and great fat Chocoballs full of strawberry mousse and clotted cream, and really excellent sugar quills, which you can suck in class and just look like you're thinking what to write next–"

"But Hogsmeade's a very interesting place, isn't it?" Hermione pressed on eagerly. "In *Sites of Historical Sorcery* it says the inn was the headquarters for the 1612 goblin rebellion, and the Shrieking Shack's supposed to be the most severely haunted building in Britain —"

"– and massive sherbet balls that make you levitate a few inches off the ground while you're sucking them," said Ron, who was plainly not listening to a word Hermione was saying.

Hermione looked around at Harry.

"Won't it be nice to get out of school for a bit and explore Hogsmeade?"

"'Spect it will," said Harry heavily. "You'll have to tell me when you've found out."

"What d'you mean?" said Ron.

"I can't go. The Dursleys didn't sign my permission form, and Fudge wouldn't either."

Ron looked horrified.

"*You're not allowed to come*? But—no way—McGonagall or someone will give you permission—"

Harry gave a hollow laugh. Professor McGonagall, head of Gryffindor house, was very strict.

"– or we can ask Fred and George, they know every secret passage out of the castle —"

"Ron!" said Hermione sharply. "I don't think Harry should be sneaking out of the school with Black on the loose —"

"Yeah, I expect that's what McGonagall will say when I ask of permission," said Harry bitterly.

"But if *we're* with him," said Ron spiritedly to Hermione. "Black wouldn't dare —"

"Oh, Ron, don't talk rubbish," snapped Hermione. "Black's already murdered a whole bunch of people in the middle of a crowded street, do you really think he's going to worry about attacking Harry just because *we're* there?"

She was fumbling with the straps of Crookshanks's basket as she spoke.

"Don't let that thing out!" Ron said, but too late; Crookshanks leapt lightly from the basket, stretched, yawned, and sprang onto Ron's knees; the lump in Ron's pocket trembled and he shoved Crookshanks angrily away.

"Get out of it!"

"Ron, don't!" said Hermione angrily.

Ron was about to answer back when Professor Lupin stirred. They watched him apprehensively, but he simply turned his head the other way, mouth slightly open, and slept on.

The Hogwarts Express moved steadily north and the scenery outside the window became wilder and darker while the clouds overhead thickened overhead. People were chasing backwards and forwards past the door of their compartment. Crookshanks had now settled in an empty seat, his squashed face turned towards Ron, his yellow eyes on Ron's top pocket.

At one o'clock the plump witch with the food cart arrived at the compartment door.

"D'you think we should wake him up?" Ron asked awkwardly, nodding towards Professor Lupin. "He looks like he could do with some food."

Hermione approached Professor Lupin cautiously.

"Er — Professor?" she said. "Excuse me — Professor?"

He didn't move.

"Don't worry, dear," said the witch, as she handed a large stack of cauldron cakes. "If he's hungry when he wakes, I'll be up front with the driver."

"I suppose he *is* asleep?" said Ron quietly, as the witch slid the compartment door closed. "I mean — he hasn't died, has he?"

"No, no, he's breathing," whispered Hermione, taking the cauldron cake Harry passed her.

He might not be very good company, but Professor Lupin's presence in their compartment had its uses. Mid-afternoon, just as it had started to rain, blurring the rolling hills outside the window, they heard footsteps outside in the corridor again, and their three least favorite people appeared at the door: Draco Malfoy, flanked by his cronies, Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle.

Draco Malfoy and Harry had been enemies ever since they had met on their very first journey to Hogwarts. Malfoy, who had a pale, pointed, sneering face, was in Slytherin house; he played Seeker on the Slytherin Quidditch team, the same position that Harry played on the Gryffindor team. Crabbe and Goyle seemed to exist to do Malfoy's bidding. They were both wide and muscley; Crabbe was taller, with a pudding-bowl haircut and a very thick neck; Goyle had short, bristly hair and long, gorilla arms.

"Well, look who it is," said Malfoy in his usual lazy drawl, pulling open the compartment door. "Potty and the Weasel."

Crabbe and Goyle chuckled trollishly.

"I heard your father finally got his hands on some gold this summer, Weasley," said Malfoy. "Did your mother die of shock?"

Ron stood up so quickly he knocked Crookshanks's basket to the floor. Professor Lupin gave a snort.

"Who's that?" said Malfoy, taking an automatic step backward as he spotted Lupin.

"New teacher," said Harry, who got to his feet, too, in case he needed to hold Ron back. "What were you saying, Malfoy?"

Malfoy's pale eyes narrowed; he wasn't fool enough to pick a fight right under a teacher's nose.

"C'mon," he muttered resentfully to Crabbe and Goyle, and they disappeared.

Harry and Ron sat down again, Ron massaging his knuckles.

"I'm not going to take any crap from Malfoy this year," he said angrily. "I mean it. If he makes one more crack about my family, I'm going to get hold of his head and —"

Ron made a violent gesture in midair.

"Ron," hissed Hermione, pointing at Professor Lupin, "be *careful*…"

But Professor Lupin was still fast asleep.

The rain thickened as the train sped yet farther north; the windows were now a solid, shimmering gray, which gradually darkened until lanterns flickered into life all along the corridors and over the luggage racks. The train rattled, the rain hammered, the wind roared, but still, Professor Lupin slept.

"We must be nearly there," said Ron, leaning forward to look past Professor Lupin at the now completely black window.

The words had hardly left him when the train started to slow down.

"Great," said Ron, getting up and walking carefully past Professor Lupin to try and see outside. "I'm starving. I want to get to the feast…"

"We can't be there yet," said Hermione, checking her watch.

"So why're we stopping?"

The train was getting slower and slower. As the noise of the pistons fell away, the wind and rain sounded louder than ever against the windows.

Harry, who was nearest the door, got up to look into the corridor. All along the carriage, heads were sticking curiously out of their compartments.

The train came to a stop with a jolt, and distant thuds and bangs told them that luggage had fallen out of the racks. Then, without warning, all the lamps went out and they were plunged into total darkness.

"What's going on?" said Ron's voice from behind Harry.

"Ouch!" gasped Hermione. "Ron, that was my foot!"

Harry felt his way back to his seat.

"D'you think we've broken down?"

"Dunno…"

There was a squeaking sound, and Harry saw the dim black outline of Ron, wiping a patch clean on the window and peering out.

"There's something moving out there," Ron said. "I think people are coming aboard…"

The compartment door suddenly opened and someone fell painfully over Harry's legs.

"Sorry! D'you know what's going on? Ouch! Sorry —"

"Hullo, Neville," said Harry, feeling around in the dark and pulling Neville up by his cloak.

"Harry? Is that you? What's happening?"

"No idea! Sit down —"

There was a loud hissing and a yelp of pain; Neville had tried to sit on Crookshanks.

"I'm going to go and ask the driver what's going on," came Hermione's voice. Harry felt her pass him, heard the door slide open again, and then a thud and two loud squeals of pain.

"Who's that?"

"Who's *that*?"

"Ginny?"

"Hermione?"

"What are you doing?"

"I was looking for Ron —"

"Come in and sit down —"

"Not here!" said Harry hurriedly. "I'm here!"

"Ouch!" said Neville.

"Quiet!" said a hoarse voice suddenly.

Professor Lupin appeared to have woken up at last. Harry could hear movements in his corner.

None of them spoke.

There was a soft, crackling noise, and a shivering light filled the compartment. Professor Lupin appeared to be holding a handful of flames. They illuminated his tired, gray face, but his eyes looked alert and wary.

"Stay where you are." he said in the same hoarse voice, and he got slowly to his feet with his handful of fire held out in front of him.

But the door slid slowly open before Lupin could reach it.

Standing in the doorway, illuminated by the shivering flames in Lupin's hand, was a cloaked figure that towered to the ceiling. Its face was completely hidden beneath its hood. Harry's eyes darted downward, and what he saw made his stomach contract. There was a hand protruding from the cloak and it was glistening, grayish, slimy-looking, and scabbed, like something dead that had decayed in water…

But it was visible only for a split second. As though the creature beneath the cloak sensed Harry's gaze, the hand was suddenly withdrawn into the folds of its black cloak.

And then the thing beneath the hood, whatever it was, drew a long, slow, rattling breath, as though it were trying to suck something more than air from its surroundings.

An intense cold swept over them all. Harry felt his own breath catch in his chest. The cold went deeper than his skin. It was inside his chest, it was inside his very heart…

Harry's eyes rolled up into his head. He couldn't see. He was drowning in cold. There was a rushing in his ears as though of water. He was being dragged downward, the roaring growing louder…

And then, from far away, he heard screaming, terrible, terrified, pleading screams. He wanted to help whoever it was, he tried to move his arms, but couldn't…a thick white fog was swirling around him, inside him —

"Harry! Harry! Are you all right?"

Someone was slapping his face.

"W-what?"

Harry opened his eyes; there were lanterns above him, and the floor was shaking — the Hogwarts Express was moving again and the lights had come back on. He seemed to have slid out of his seat onto the floor. Ron and Hermione were kneeling next to him, and above them he could see Neville and Professor Lupin watching. Harry felt very sick; when he put up his hand to push his glasses back on, he felt cold sweat on his face.

Ron and Hermione heaved him back onto his seat.

"Are you okay?" Ron asked nervously.

"Yeah," said Harry, looking quickly toward the door. The hooded creature had vanished. "What happened? Where's that — that thing? Who screamed?"

"No one screamed," said Ron, more nervously still.

Harry looked around the bright compartment. Ginny and Neville looked back at him, both very pale.

"But I heard screaming —"

A loud snap made them all jump. Professor Lupin was breaking an enormous slab of chocolate into pieces.

"Here," he said to Harry, handing him a particularly large piece. "Eat it. It'll help."

Harry took the chocolate but didn't eat it.

"What was that thing?" he asked Lupin.

"A Dementor," said Lupin, who was now giving chocolate to everyone else. "One of the Dementors of Azkaban."

Everyone stared at him. Professor Lupin crumpled up the empty chocolate wrapper and put it in his pocket.

"Eat," he repeated. "It'll help. I need to speak to the driver, excuse me…"

He strolled past Harry and disappeared into the corridor.

"Are you sure you're okay, Harry?" said Hermione, watching Harry anxiously.

"I don't get it…what happened?" said Harry, wiping more sweat off his face.

"Well — that thing — the Dementor — stood there and looked around (I mean, I think it did, I couldn't see its face) — and you — you —"

"I thought you were having a fit or something," said Ron, who still looked scared. "You went sort of rigid and fell out of your seat and started twitching—"

"And Professor Lupin stepped over you, and walked toward the Dementor, and pulled out his wand," said Hermione, "and he said, 'None of us is hiding Sirius Black under our cloaks. Go.' But the Dementor didn't move, so Lupin muttered something, and a silvery thing shot out of his wand at it, and it turned around and sort of glided away…"

"It was horrible," said Neville, in a higher voice than usual. "Did you feel how cold it got when it came in?"

"I felt weird," said Ron, shifting his shoulders uncomfortably. "Like I'd never be cheerful again…"

Ginny, who was huddled in her corner looking nearly as bad as Harry felt, gave a small sob; Hermione went over and put a comforting arm around her.

"But didn't any of you — fall off your seats?" said Harry awkwardly.

"No," said Ron, looking anxiously at Harry again. "Ginny was shaking like mad, though…"

Harry didn't understand. He felt weak and shivery, as though he were recovering from a bad bout of flu; he also felt the beginnings of shame. Why had he gone to pieces like that, when no one else had?

Professor Lupin had come back. He paused as he entered, looked around, and said, with a small smile, "I haven't poisoned that chocolate, you know…"

Harry took a bite and to his great surprise felt warmth spread suddenly to the tips of his fingers and toes.

"We'll be at Hogwarts in ten minutes," said Professor Lupin. "Are you all right, Harry?"

Harry didn't ask how Professor Lupin knew his name.

"Fine," he muttered, embarrassed.

They didn't talk much during the remainder of the journey. At long last, the train stopped at Hogsmeade station, and there was a great scramble to get outside; owls hooted, cats meowed, and Neville's pet toad croaked loudly from under his hat. It was freezing on the tiny platform; rain was driving down in icy sheets.

"Firs' years this way!" called a familiar voice. Harry, Ron, and Hermione turned and saw the gigantic outline of Hagrid at the other end of the platform, beckoning the terrified-looking new students forward for their traditional journey across the lake.

"All right, you three?" Hagrid yelled over the heads of the crowd. They waved at him, but had no chance to speak to him because the mass of people around them was shunting them away along the platform. Harry, Ron, and Hermione followed the rest of the school along the platform and out onto a rough mud track, where at least a hundred stagecoaches awaited the remaining students, each pulled, Harry could only assume, by an invisible horse, because when they climbed inside and shut the door, the coach set off all by itself, bumping and swaying in procession.

The coach smelled faintly of mold and straw. Harry felt better since the chocolate, but still weak. Ron and Hermione kept looking at him sideways, as though frightened he might collapse again.

As the carriage trundled toward a pair of magnificent wrought iron gates, flanked with stone columns topped with winged boars, Harry saw two more towering, hooded Dementors, standing guard on either side. A wave of cold sickness threatened to engulf him again; he leaned back into the lumpy seat and closed his eyes until they had passed the gates. The carriage picked up speed on the long, sloping drive up to the castle; Hermione was leaning out of the tiny window, watching the many turrets and towers draw nearer. At last, the carriage swayed to a halt, and Hermione and Ron got out.

As Harry stepped down, a drawling, delighted voice sounded in his ear.

"You fainted, Potter? Is Longbottorn telling the truth? You actually fainted?"

Malfoy elbowed past Hermione to block Harry's way up the stone steps to the castle, his face gleeful and his pale eyes glinting maliciously.

"Shove off, Malfoy," said Ron, whose jaw was clenched.

"Did you faint as well, Weasley?" said Malfoy loudly. "Did the scary old Dementor frighten you too, Weasley?"

"Is there a problem?" said a mild voice. Professor Lupin had just gotten out of the next carriage.

Malfoy gave Professor Lupin an insolent stare, which took in the patches on his robes and the dilapidated suitcase. With a tiny hint of sarcasm in his voice, he said, "Oh, no — er —*Professor*," then he smirked at Crabbe and Goyle and led them up the steps into the castle.

Hermione prodded Ron in the back to make him hurry, and the three of them joined the crowd swarming up the steps, through the giant oak front doors, into the cavernous Entrance Hall, which was lit with flaming torches, and housed a magnificent marble staircase that led to the upper floors.

The door into the Great Hall stood open at the right; Harry followed the crowd toward it, but had barely glimpsed the enchanted ceiling, which was black and cloudy tonight, when a voice called, "Potter! Granger! I want to see you both!"

Harry and Hermione turned around, surprised. Professor McGonagall, Transfiguration teacher and head of Gryffindor House, was calling over the heads of the crowd. She was a stern looking witch who wore her hair in a tight bun; her sharp eyes were framed with square spectacles. Harry fought his way over to her with a feeling of foreboding: Professor McGonagall had a way of making him feel he must have done something wrong.

"There's no need to look so worried — I just want a word in my office," she told them. "Move along there, Weasley."

Ron stared as Professor McGonagall ushered Harry and Hermione away from the chattering crowd; they accompanied her across the entrance hall, up the marble staircase, and along a corridor.

Once they were in her office, a small room with a large, welcoming fire, Professor McGonagall motioned Harry and Hermione to sit down. She settled herself behind her desk and said abruptly, "Professor Lupin sent an owl ahead to say that you were taken ill on the train, Potter."

Before Harry could reply, there was a soft knock on the door and Madam Pomfrey, the nurse, came bustling in.

Harry felt himself going red in the face. It was bad enough that he'd passed out, or whatever he had done, without everyone making all this fuss.

"I'm fine," he said, "I don't need anything —"

"Oh, it's you, is it?" said Madam Pomfrey, ignoring this and bending down to stare closely at him. "I suppose you've been doing something dangerous again?"

"It was a Dementor, Poppy," said Professor McGonagall.

They exchanged a dark look, and Madam Pomfrey clucked disapprovingly.

"Setting Dementors around a school," she muttered, pushing back Harry's hair and feeling his forehead. "He won't be the last one who collapses. Yes, he's all clammy. Terrible things, they are, and the effect they have on people who are already delicate —"

"I'm not delicate!" said Harry crossly.

"Of course you're not," said Madam Pomfrey absentmindedly, now taking his pulse.

"What does he need?" said Professor McGonagall crisply. "Bed rest? Should he perhaps spend tonight in the hospital wing?"

"I'm *fine*!" said Harry, jumping up. The thought of what Draco Malfoy would say if he had to go to the hospital wing was torture.

"Well, he should have some chocolate, at the very least," said Madam Pomfrey, who was now trying to peer into Harry's eyes.

"I've already had some," said Harry. "Professor Lupin gave me some. He gave it to all of us."

"Did he, now?" said Madam Pomfrey approvingly. "So we've finally got a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher who knows his remedies?"

"Are you sure you feel all right, Potter?" Professor McGonagall said sharply.

"Yes," said Harry.

"Very well. Kindly wait outside while I have a quick word with Miss Granger about her course schedule, then we can go down to the feast together."

Harry went back into the corridor with Madam Pomfrey, who left for the hospital wing, muttering to herself. He had to wait only a few minutes; then Hermione emerged looking very happy about something, followed by Professor McGonagall, and the three of them made their way back down the marble staircase to the Great Hall.

It was a sea of pointed black hats; each of the long House tables was lined with students, their faces glimmering by the light of thousands of candles, which were floating over the tables in midair.

Professor Flitwick, who was a tiny little wizard with a shock of white hair, was carrying an ancient hat and a three-legged stool out of the hall.

"Oh," said Hermione softly, "we've missed the Sorting!"

New students at Hogwarts were sorted into Houses by trying on the Sorting Hat, which shouted out the House they were best suited to (Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, or Slytherin). Professor McGonagall strode off toward her empty seat at the staff table, and Harry and Hermione set off in the other direction, as quietly as possible, toward the Gryffindor table. People looked around at them as they passed along the back of the hall, and a few of them pointed at Harry. Had the story of his collapsing in front of the Dementor traveled that fast?

He and Hermione sat down on either side of Ron, who had saved them seats.

"What was all that about?" he muttered to Harry.

Harry started to explain in a whisper, but at that moment the headmaster stood up to speak, and he broke off.

Professor Dumbledore, though very old, always gave an impression of great energy. He had several feet of long silver hair and beard, half-moon spectacles, and an extremely crooked nose. He was often described as the greatest wizard of the age, but that wasn't why Harry respected him. You couldn't help trusting Albus Dumbledore, and as Harry watched him beaming around at the students, he felt really calm for the first time since the Dementor had entered the train compartment.

"Welcome!" said Dumbledore, the candlelight shimmering on his beard. "Welcome to another year at Hogwarts! I have a few things to say to you all, and as one of them is very serious, I think it best to get it out of the way before you become befuddled by our excellent feast…"

Dumbledore cleared his throat and continued, "As you will all be aware after their search of the Hogwarts Express, our school is presently playing host to some of the Dementors of Azkaban, who are here on Ministry of Magic business."

He paused, and Harry remembered what Mr. Weasley had said about Dumbledore not being happy with the Dementors guarding the school.

"They are stationed at every entrance to the grounds," Dumbledore continued, "and while they are with us, I must make it plain that nobody is to leave school without permission. Dementors are not to be fooled by tricks or disguises — or even Invisibility Cloaks," he added blandly, and Harry and Ron glanced at each other. "It is not in the nature of a Dementor to understand pleading or excuses. I therefore warn each and every one of you to give them no reason to harm you. I look to

the prefects, and our new Head Boy and Girl, to make sure that no student runs afoul of the Dementors," he said.

Percy, who was sitting a few seats down from Harry, puffed out his chest again and stared around impressively. Dumbledore paused again; he looked very seriously around the hall, and nobody moved or made a sound.

"On a happier note," he continued, "I am pleased to welcome two new teachers to our ranks this year.

"First, Professor Lupin, who has kindly consented to fill the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher."

There was some scattered, rather unenthusiastic applause. Only those who had been in the compartment on the train with Professor Lupin clapped hard, Harry among them. Professor Lupin looked particularly shabby next to all the other teachers in their best robes.

"Look at Snape!" Ron hissed in Harry's ear.

Professor Snape, the Potions master, was staring along the staff table at Professor Lupin. It was common knowledge that Snape wanted the Defense Against the Dark Arts job, but even Harry, who hated Snape, was startled at the expression twisting his thin, sallow face. it was beyond anger: it was loathing. Harry knew that expression only too well; it was the look Snape wore every time he set eyes on Harry.

"As to our second new appointment," Dumbledore continued as the lukewarm applause for Professor Lupin died away. "Well, I am sorry to tell you that Professor Kettleburn, our Care of Magical Creatures teacher, retired at the end of last year in order to enjoy more time with his remaining limbs. However, I am delighted to say that his place will be filled by none other than Rubeus Hagrid, who has agreed to take on this teaching job in addition to his gamekeeping duties."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione stared at one another, stunned. Then they joined in with the applause, which was tumultuous at the Gryffindor table in particular. Harry leaned forward to see Hagrid, who was ruby red in the face and staring down at his enormous hands, his wide grin hidden in the tangle of his black beard.

"We should've known!" Ron roared, pounding the table. "Who else would have assigned us a biting book?"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione were the last to stop clapping, and as Professor Dumbledore started speaking again, they saw that Hagrid was wiping his eyes on the tablecloth.

"Well, I think that's everything of importance," said Dumbledore. "Let the feast begin!"

The golden plates and goblets before them filled suddenly with food and drink. Harry, suddenly ravenous, helped himself to everything he could reach and began to eat.

It was a delicious feast; the hall echoed with talk, laughter, and the clatter of knives and forks. Harry, Ron, and Hermione, however, were eager for it to finish so that they could talk to Hagrid. They knew how much being made a teacher would mean to him. Hagrid wasn't a fully qualified wizard; he had been expelled from Hogwarts in his third year for a crime he had not committed. It had been Harry, Ron, and Hermione who had cleared Hagrid's name last year.

At long last, when the last morsels of pumpkin tart had melted from the golden platters, Dumbledore gave the word that it was time for them all to go to bed, and they got their chance.

"Congratulations, Hagrid!" Hermione squealed as they reached the teachers' table.

"All down ter you three," said Hagrid, wiping his shining face on his napkin as he looked up at them. "Can' believe it…great man, Dumbledore…came straight down to me hut after Professor Kettleburn said he'd had enough…It's what I always wanted…"

Overcome with emotion, he buried his face in his napkin, and Professor McGonagall shooed them away.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione joined the Gryffindors streaming up the marble staircase and, very tired now, along more corridors, up more and more stairs, to the hidden entrance to Gryffindor Tower, where a large portrait of a fat lady in a pink dress asked them, "Password?"

"Coming through, coming through!" Percy called from behind the crowd. "The new password's *Fortuna Major*!"

"Oh no," said Neville Longbottom sadly. He always had trouble remembering the passwords.

Through the portrait hole and across the common room, the girls and boys divided toward their separate staircases. Harry climbed the spiral stair with no thought in his head except how glad he was to be back. They reached their familiar, circular dormitory with its five four-poster beds, and Harry, looking around, felt he was home at last.

CHAPTER SIX

TALONS AND TEA LEAVES

When Harry, Ron, and Hermione entered the Great Hall for breakfast the next day, the first thing they saw was Draco Malfoy, who seemed to be entertaining a large group of Slytherins with a very funny story. As they passed, Malfoy did a ridiculous impression of a swooning fit and there was a roar of laughter.

"Ignore him," said Hermione, who was right behind Harry. "Just ignore him, it's not worth it…"

"Hey, Potter!" shrieked Pansy Parkinson, a Slytherin girl with a face like a pug. "Potter! The Dementors are coming, Potter! *Woooooooooo*!"

Harry dropped into a seat at the Gryffindor table, next to George Weasley.

"New third-year course schedules," said George, passing then, over. "What's up with you, Harry?"

"Malfoy," said Ron, sitting down on George's other side and glaring over at the Slytherin table.

George looked up in time to see Malfoy pretending to faint with terror again.

"That little git," he said calmly. "He wasn't so cocky last night when the Dementors were down at our end of the train. Came running into our compartment, didn't he, Fred?"

"Nearly wet himself," said Fred, with a contemptuous glance at Malfoy.

"I wasn't too happy myself," said George. "They're horrible things, those Dementors…"

"Sort of freeze your insides, don't they?" said Fred.

"You didn't pass out, though, did you?" said Harry in a low voice.

"Forget it, Harry," said George bracingly. "Dad had to go out to Azkaban one time, remember, Fred? And he said it was the worst place he'd ever been, he came back all weak and shaking…They suck the happiness out of a place, Dementors. Most of the prisoners go mad in there."

"Anyway, we'll see how happy Malfoy looks after our first Quidditch match," said Fred. "Gryffindor versus Slytherin, first game of the season, remember?"

The only time Harry and Malfoy had faced each other in a Quidditch match, Malfoy had definitely come off worse. Feeling slightly more cheerful, Harry helped himself to sausages and fried tomatoes.

Hermione was examining her new schedule.

"Ooh, good, we're starting some new subjects today," she said happily.

"Hermione," said Ron, frowning as he looked over her shoulder, "they've messed up your timetable. Look — they've got you down for about ten subjects a day. There isn't enough *time*."

"I'll manage. I've fixed it all with Professor McGonagall."

"But look," said Ron, laughing, "see this morning? Nine o'clock, Divination. And underneath, nine o'clock, Muggle Studies. And —" Ron leaned closer to the timetable, disbelieving, "*look*— underneath that, Arithmancy, *nine o'clock*. I mean, I know you're good, Hermione, but no one's *that* good. How're you supposed to be in three classes at once?"

"Don't be silly," said Hermione shortly. "Of course I won't be in three classes at once."

"Well then —"

"Pass the marmalade," said Hermione.

"But —"

"Oh, Ron, what's it to you if my timetable's a bit full?" Hermione snapped. "I told you, I've fixed it all with Professor McGonagall."

Just then, Hagrid entered the Great Hall. He was wearing his long moleskin overcoat and was absent-mindedly swinging a dead polecat from one enormous hand.

"All righ'?" he said eagerly, pausing on his way to the staff table. "Yer in my firs' ever lesson! Right after lunch! Bin up since five getting' everthin' ready…hope it'sokay…me, a teacher…hones'ly…"

He grinned broadly at them and headed off to the staff table, still swinging the polecat.

"Wonder what he's been getting ready?" said Ron, a note of anxiety in his voice.

The Hall was starting to empty as people headed off towards their first lesson. Ron checked his schedule.

"We'd better go, look, Divination's at the top of North Tower. It'll take us ten minutes to get there…"

They finished breakfast hastily, said goodbye to Fred and George and walked back through the hall. As they passed the Slytherin table, Malfoy did yet another impression of a fainting fit. The shouts of laughter followed Harry into the Entrance Hall.

The journey through the castle to North Tower was a long one. Two years at Hogwarts hadn't taught them everything about the castle, and they had never been inside North Tower before.

"There's — got — to — be — a — short — cut," Ron panted, as they climbed the seventh long staircase and emerged on an unfamiliar landing, where there was nothing but a large painting of a bare stretch of grass hanging on the stone wall.

"I think it's this way," said Hermione, peering down the empty passage to the right.

"Can't be," said Ron. "That's south. Look, you can see a bit of the lake outside the window…"

Harry was watching the painting. A fat, dappled-gray pony had just ambled onto the grass and was grazing nonchalantly. Harry was used to the subjects of Hogwarts paintings moving around and leaving their frames to visit each other, but he always enjoyed watching them. A moment later, a short, squat knight in a suit of armour had clanked into the picture after his pony. By the look of the grass stains on his metal knees, he had just fallen off.

"Aha!" he yelled, seeing Harry, Ron and Hermione. "What villains are these, that trespass upon my private lands! Come to scorn at my fall, perchance? Draw, you knaves, you dogs!"

They watched in astonishment as the little knight tugged his sword out of its scabbard and began brandishing it violently, hopping up and down in rage. But the sword was too long for him; a particularly wild swing made him overbalance, and he landed facedown in the grass.

"Are you all right?" said Harry, moving closer to the picture.

"Get back, you scurvy braggart! Back, you rogue!"

The knight seized his sword again and used it to push himself back up, but the blade sank deeply into the grass and, though he pulled with all his might, he couldn't get it out again. Finally, he had to flop back down onto the grass and push up his visor to mop his sweating face.

"Listen," said Harry, taking advantage of the knight's exhaustion, "we're looking for the North Tower. You don't know the way, do you?"

"A quest!" The knight's rage seemed to vanish instantly. He clanked to his feet and shouted, "Come follow me, dear friends, and we shall find our goal, or else shall perish bravely in the charge!"

He gave the sword another fruitless tug, tried and failed to mount the fat pony, gave up, and cried, "On foot then, good sirs and gentle lady! On! On!"

And he ran, clanking loudly, into the left side of the frame and out of sight.

They hurried after him along the corridor, following the sound of his armor. Every now and then they spotted him running through a picture ahead.

"Be of stout heart, the worst is yet to come!" yelled the knight, and they saw him reappear in front of an alarmed group of women in crinolines, whose picture hung on the wall of a narrow spiral staircase.

Puffing loudly, Harry, Ron, and Hermione climbed the tightly spiraling steps, getting dizzier and dizzier, until at last they heard the murmur of voices above them and knew they had reached the classroom.

“Farewell!” cried the knight, popping his head into a painting of some sinister-looking monks. “Farewell, my comrades-in-arms! If ever you have need of noble heart and steely sinew, call upon Sir Cadogan!”

“Yeah, we’ll call you,” muttered Ron as the knight disappeared, “if we ever need someone mental.”

They climbed the last few steps and emerged onto a tiny landing, where most of the class was already assembled. There were no doors off this landing, but Ron nudged Harry and pointed at the ceiling, where there was a circular trapdoor with a brass plaque on it.

“‘Sybill Trelawney, Divination teacher,’” Harry read. “How’re we supposed to get up there?”

As though in answer to his question, the trapdoor suddenly opened, and a silvery ladder descended right at Harry’s feet. Everyone got quiet.

“After you,” said Ron, grinning, so Harry climbed the ladder first.

He emerged into the strangest-looking classroom he had ever seen. In fact, it didn’t look like a classroom at all, more like a cross between someone’s attic and an old-fashioned tea shop. At least twenty small, circular tables were crammed inside it, all surrounded by chintz armchairs and fat little poufs. Everything was lit with a dim, crimson light; the curtains at the windows were all closed, and the many lamps were draped with dark red scarves. It was stiflingly warm, and the fire that was burning under the crowded mantelpiece was giving off a heavy, sickly sort of perfume as it heated a large copper kettle. The shelves running around the circular walls were crammed with dusty-looking feathers, stubs of candles, many packs of tattered playing cards, countless silvery crystal balls, and a huge array of teacups.

Ron appeared at Harry’s shoulder as the class assembled around them, all talking in whispers.

“Where is she?” Ron said.

A voice came suddenly out of the shadows, a soft, misty sort of voice.

“Welcome,” it said. “How nice to see you in the physical world at last.”

Harry’s immediate impression was of a large, glittering insect. Professor Trelawney moved into the firelight, and they saw that she was very thin; her large glasses magnified her eyes to several times their natural size, and she was draped in a gauzy spangled shawl. Innumerable chains and beads hung around her spindly neck, and her arms and hands were encrusted with bangles and rings.

“Sit, my children, sit,” she said, and they all climbed awkwardly into armchairs or sank onto poufs. Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat themselves around the same round table.

“Welcome to Divination,” said Professor Trelawney, who had seated herself in a winged armchair in front of the fire. “My name is Professor Trelawney. You may not have seen me before. I find that descending too often into the hustle and bustle of the main school clouds my Inner Eye.”

Nobody said anything to this extraordinary pronouncement. Professor Trelawney delicately rearranged her shawl and continued, “So you have chosen to study Divination, the most difficult of all magical arts. I must warn you at the outset that if you do not have the Sight, there is very little I will be able to teach you…Books can take you only so far in this field…”

At these words, both Harry and Ron glanced, grinning, at Hermione, who looked startled at the news that books wouldn’t be much help in this subject.

“Many witches and wizards, talented though they are in the area of loud bangs and smells and sudden disappearings, are yet unable to penetrate the veiled mysteries of the future,” Professor Trelawney went on, her enormous, gleaming eyes moving from face to nervous face. “It is a Gift granted to few. You, boy,” she said suddenly to Neville, who almost toppled off his pouf. “Is your grandmother well?”

“I think so,” said Neville tremulously.

“I wouldn’t be so sure if I were you, dear,” said Professor Trelawney, the firelight glinting on her long emerald earrings. Neville gulped. Professor Trelawney continued placidly. “We will be covering the basic methods of Divination this year. The first term will be devoted to reading the tea leaves. Next term we shall progress to palmistry. By the way, my dear,” she shot suddenly at Parvati Patil, “beware a red-haired man.”

Parvati gave a startled look at Ron, who was right behind her and edged her chair away from him.

“In the second term,” Professor Trelawney went on, “we shall progress to the crystal ball — if we have finished with fire omens, that is. Unfortunately, classes will be disrupted in February by a nasty bout of flu. I myself will lose my voice. And around Easter, one of our number will leave us for ever.”

A very tense silence followed this pronouncement, but Professor Trelawney seemed unaware of it.

“I wonder, dear,” she said to Lavender Brown, who was nearest and shrank back in her chair, “if you could pass me the largest silver teapot?”

Lavender, looking relieved, stood up, took an enormous teapot from the shelf, and put it down on the table in front of Professor Trelawney.

“Thank you, my dear. Incidentally, that thing you are dreading — it will happen on Friday the sixteenth of October.”

Lavender trembled.

“Now, I want you all to divide into pairs. Collect a teacup from the shelf, come to me, and I will fill it. Then sit down and drink, drink until only the dregs remain. Swill these around the cup three times with the left hand, then turn the cup upside down on its saucer, wait for the last of the tea to drain away, then give your cup to your partner to read. You will interpret the patterns using pages five and six of *Unfogging the Future*. I shall move among you, helping and instructing. Oh, and dear,” — she caught Neville by the arm as he made to stand up, “after you’ve broken your first cup, would you be so kind as to select one of the blue patterned ones? I’m rather attached to the pink.”

Sure enough, Neville had no sooner reached the shelf of teacups when there was a tinkle of breaking china. Professor Trelawney swept over to him holding a dustpan and brush and said, “One of the blue ones, then, dear, if you wouldn’t mind…thank you…”

When Harry and Ron had had their teacups filled, they went back to their table and tried to drink the scalding tea quickly. They swilled the dregs around as Professor Trelawney had instructed, then drained the cups and swapped over.

“Right,” said Ron as they both opened their books at pages five and six. “What can you see in mine?”

“A load of soggy brown stuff,” said Harry. The heavily perfumed smoke in the room was making him feel sleepy and stupid.

“Broaden your minds, my dears, and allow your eyes to see past the mundane!” Professor Trelawney cried through the gloom.

Harry tried to pull himself together.

“Right, you’ve got a crooked sort of cross…” He consulted *Unfogging the Future*. “That means you’re going to have ‘trials and suffering’ — sorry about that — but there’s a thing that could be the sun. Hang on…that means ‘great happiness’…so you’re going to suffer but be very happy…”

“You need your Inner Eye tested, if you ask me,” said Ron, and they both had to stifle their laughs as Professor Trelawney gazed in their direction.

“My turn…” Ron peered into Harry’s teacup, his forehead wrinkled with effort. “There’s a blob a bit like a bowler hat,” he said. “Maybe you’re going to work for the Ministry of Magic…”

He turned the teacup the other way up.

"But this way it looks more like an acorn…what's that?" He scanned his copy of *Unfogging the Future*. "'A windfall, unexpected gold.' Excellent, you can lend me some. And there's a thing here," he turned the cup again, "that looks like an animal…yeah, if that was its head…it looks like a hippo…no, a sheep…"

Professor Trelawney whirled around as Harry let out a snort of laughter.

"Let me see that, my dear," she said reprovingly to Ron, sweeping over and snatching Harry's cup from him. Everyone went quiet to watch.

Professor Trelawney was staring into the teacup, rotating it counterclockwise.

"The falcon…my dear, you have a deadly enemy."

"But everyone knows *that*," said Hermione in a loud whisper. Professor Trelawney stared at her.

"Well, they do," said Hermione. "Everybody knows about Harry and You-Know-Who."

Harry and Ron stared at her with a mixture of amazement and admiration. They had never heard Hermione speak to a teacher like that before. Professor Trelawney chose not to reply. She lowered her huge eyes to Harry's cup again and continued to turn it.

"The club…an attack. Dear, dear, this is not a happy cup…"

"I thought that was a bowler hat," said Ron sheepishly.

"The skull…danger in your path, my dear…"

Everyone was staring, transfixed, at Professor Trelawney, who gave the cup a final turn, gasped, and then screamed.

There was another tinkle of breaking china; Neville had smashed his second cup. Professor Trelawney sank into a vacant armchair, her glittering hand at her heart and her eyes closed.

"My dear boy — my poor dear boy — no — it is kinder not to say — no — don't ask me…"

"What is it, Professor?" said Dean Thomas at once. Everyone had got to their feet, and slowly they crowded around Harry and Ron's table, pressing close to Professor Trelawney's chair to get a good look at Harry's cup.

"My dear," Professor Trelawney's huge eyes opened dramatically, "you have the Grim."

"The what?" said Harry.

He could tell that he wasn't the only one who didn't understand; Dean Thomas shrugged at him and Lavender Brown looked puzzled, but nearly everybody else clapped their hands to their mouths in horror.

"The Grim, my dear, the Grim!" cried Professor Trelawney, who looked shocked that Harry hadn't understood. "The giant, spectral dog that haunts churchyards! My dear boy, it is an omen — the worst omen — of *death*!"

Harry's stomach lurched. That dog on the cover of *Death Omens* in Flourish and Blotts — the dog in the shadows of Magnolia Crescent…Lavender Brown clapped her hands to her mouth too. Everyone was looking at Harry, everyone except Hermione, who had gotten up and moved around to the back of Professor Trelawney's chair.

"I don't think it looks like a Grim," she said flatly.

Professor Trelawney surveyed Hermione with mounting dislike.

"You'll forgive me for saying so, my dear, but I perceive very little aura around you. Very little receptivity to the resonances of the future."

Seamus Finnigan was tilting his head from side to side.

"It looks like a Grim if you do this," he said, with his eyes almost shut, "but it looks more like a donkey from here," he said, leaning to the left.

"When you've all finished deciding whether I'm going to die or not!" said Harry, taking even himself by surprise. Now nobody seemed to want to look at him.

"I think we will leave the lesson here for today," said Professor Trelawney in her mistiest voice. "Yes…please pack away your things…"

Silently the class took their teacups back to Professor Trelawney, packed away their books, and closed their bags. Even Ron was avoiding Harry's eyes.

"Until we meet again," said Professor Trelawney faintly, "fair fortune be yours. Oh, and dear," — she pointed at Neville, "you'll be late next time, so mind you work extra-hard to catch up."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione descended Professor Trelawney's ladder and the winding stair in silence, then set off for Professor McGonagall's Transfiguration lesson. It took them so long to find her classroom that, early as they had left Divination, they were only just in time.

Harry chose a seat right at the back of the room, feeling as though he were sitting in a very bright spotlight; the rest of the class kept shooting furtive glances at him, as though he were about to drop dead at any moment. He hardly heard what Professor McGonagall was telling them about Animagi (wizards who could transform at will into animals), and wasn't even watching when she transformed herself in front of their eyes into a tabby cat with spectacle markings around her eyes.

"Really, what has got into you all today?" said Professor McGonagall, turning back into herself with a faint *pop*, and staring around at them all. "Not that it matters, but that's the first time my transformation's not got applause from a class."

Everybody's heads turned toward Harry again, but nobody spoke. Then Hermione raised her hand.

"Please, Professor, we've just had our first Divination class, and we were reading the tea leaves, and —"

"Ah, of course," said Professor McGonagall, suddenly frowning. "There is no need to say any more, Miss Granger. Tell me, which of you will be dying this year?"

Everyone stared at her.

"Me," said Harry, finally.

"I see," said Professor McGonagall, fixing Harry with her beady eyes. "Then you should know, Potter, that Sybill Trelawney has predicted the death of one student a year since she arrived at this school. None of them has died yet. Seeing death omens is her favorite way of greeting a new class. If it were not for the fact that I never speak ill of my colleagues —" Professor McGonagall broke off, and they saw that her nostrils had gone white. She went on, more calmly, "Divination is one of the most imprecise branches of magic. I shall not conceal from you that I have very little patience with it. True Seers are very rare, and Professor Trelawney…"

She stopped again, and then said, in a very matter-of-fact tone, "You look in excellent health to me, Potter, so you will excuse me if I don't let you off homework today. I assure you that if you die, you need not hand it in."

Hermione laughed. Harry felt a bit better. It was harder to feel scared of a lump of tea leaves away from the dim red light and befuddling perfume of Professor Trelawney's classroom. Not everyone was convinced, however. Ron still looked worried, and Lavender whispered, "But what about Neville's cup?"

When the Transfiguration class had finished, they joined the crowd thundering toward the Great Hall for lunch.

"Ron, cheer up," said Hermione, pushing a dish of stew toward him. "You heard what Professor McGonagall said."

Ron spooned stew onto his plate and picked up his fork but didn't start.

"Harry," he said, in a low, serious voice, "You *haven't* seen a great black dog anywhere, have you?"

"Yeah, I have," said Harry. "I saw one the night I left the Dursleys'."

Ron let his fork fall with a clatter.

"Probably a stray," said Hermione calmly.

Ron looked at Hermione as though she had gone mad.

"Hermione, if Harry's seen a Grim, that's — that's bad," he said. "My — my uncle Bilius saw one and — and he died twenty-four hours later!"

"Coincidence," said Hermione airily, pouring herself some pumpkin juice.

"You don't know what you're talking about!" said Ron, starting to get angry. "Grims scare the living daylights out of most wizards!"

"There you are, then," said Hermione in a superior tone. "They see the Grim and die of fright. The Grim's not an omen, it's the cause of death! And Harry's still with us because he's not stupid enough to see one and think, right, well, I'd better kick the bucket then!"

Ron mouthed wordlessly at Hermione, who opened her bag, took out her new Arithmancy book, and propped it open against the juice jug.

"I think Divination seems very woolly," she said, searching for her page. "A lot of guesswork, if you ask me."

"There was nothing woolly about the Grim in that cup!" said Ron hotly.

"You didn't seem quite so confident when you were telling Harry it was a sheep," said Hermione coolly.

"Professor Trelawney said you didn't have the right aura! You just don't like being bad at something for a change!"

He had touched a nerve. Hermione slammed her Arithmancy book down on the table so hard that bits of meat and carrot flew everywhere.

"If being good at Divination means I have to pretend to see death omens in a lump of tea leaves, I'm not sure I'll be studying it much longer! That lesson was absolute rubbish compared with my Arithmancy class!"

She snatched up her bag and stalked away.

Ron frowned after her.

"What's she talking about?" he said to Harry. "She hasn't been to an Arithmancy class yet."

Harry was pleased to get out of the castle after lunch. Yesterday's rain had cleared; the sky was a clear, pale gray, and the grass was springy and damp underfoot as they set off for their first ever Care of Magical Creatures class.

Ron and Hermione weren't speaking to each other. Harry walked beside them in silence as they went down the sloping lawns to Hagrid's hut on the edge of the Forbidden Forest. It was only when he spotted three only-too-familiar backs ahead of them that he realized they must be having these lessons with the Slytherins. Malfoy was talking animatedly to Crabbe and Goyle, who were chortling. Harry was quite sure he knew what they were talking about.

Hagrid was waiting for his class at the door of his hut. He stood in his moleskin overcoat, with Fang the boarhound at his heels, looking impatient to start.

"C'mon, now, get a move on!" he called as the class approached. "Got a real treat for yeh today! Great lesson comin' up! Everyone here? Right, follow me!"

For one nasty moment, Harry thought that Hagrid was going to lead them into the forest; Harry had had enough unpleasant experiences in there to last him a lifetime. However, Hagrid strolled off around the edge of the trees, and five minutes later, they found themselves outside a kind of paddock. There was nothing in there.

"Everyone gather 'round the fence here!" he called. "That's it — make sure yeh can see— now, firs' thing yeh'll want ter do is open yer books—"

"How?" said the cold, drawling voice of Draco Malfoy.

"Eh?" said Hagrid.

"How do we open our books?" Malfoy repeated. He took out his copy of *The Monster Book of Monsters*, which he had bound shut with a length of rope. Other people took theirs out too; some, like Harry, had belted their book shut; others had crammed them inside tight bags or clamped them together with binder clips.

"Hasn' — hasn' anyone bin able ter open their books?" said Hagrid, looking crestfallen.

The class all shook their heads.

"Yeh've got ter *stroke* 'em," said Hagrid, as though this was the most obvious thing in the world. "Look —"

He took Hermione's copy and ripped off the Spellotape that bound it. The book tried to bite, but Hagrid ran a giant forefinger down its spine, and the book shivered, and then fell open and lay quiet in his hand.

"Oh, how silly we've all been!" Malfoy sneered. "We should have stroked them! Why didn't we guess!"

"I — I thought they were funny," Hagrid said uncertainly to Hermione.

“Oh, tremendously funny!” said Malfoy. “Really witty, giving us books that try and rip our hands off!”

“Shut up, Malfoy,” said Harry quietly. Hagrid was looking downcast and Harry wanted Hagrid’s first lesson to be a success.

“Righ’ then,” said Hagrid, who seemed to have lost his thread, “so — so yeh’ve got yer books an’…an’…now yeh need the Magical Creatures. Yeah. So I’ll go an’ get ‘em. Hang on…”

He strode away from them into the forest and out of sight.

“God, this place is going to the dogs,” said Malfoy loudly. “That oaf teaching classes, my father’ll have a fit when I tell him —”

“Shut up, Malfoy,” Harry repeated.

“Careful, Potter, there’s a Dementor behind you —”

“Oooooooh!” squealed Lavender Brown, pointing toward the opposite side of the paddock.

Trotting toward them were a dozen of the most bizarre creatures Harry had ever seen. They had the bodies, hind legs, and tails of horses, but the front legs, wings, and heads of what seemed to be giant eagles, with cruel, steel-colored beaks and large, brilliantly, orange eyes. The talons on their front legs were half a foot long and deadly looking. Each of the beasts had a thick leather collar around its neck, which was attached to a long chain, and the ends of all of these were held in the vast hands of Hagrid, who came jogging into the paddock behind the creatures.

“Gee up, there!” he roared, shaking the chains and urging the creatures toward the fence where the class stood. Everyone drew back slightly as Hagrid reached them and tethered the creatures to the fence.

“Hippogriffs!” Hagrid roared happily, waving a hand at them. “Beau’iful, aren’ they?”

Harry could sort of see what Hagrid meant. Once you got over the first shock of seeing something that was half horse, half bird, you started to appreciate the Hippogriffs’ gleaming coats, changing smoothly from feather to hair, each of them a different color: stormy gray, bronze, pinkish roan, gleaming chestnut, and inky black.

“So,” said Hagrid, rubbing his hands together and beaming around, “if yeh wan’ ter come a bit nearer…”

No one seemed to want to. Harry, Ron, and Hermione, however, approached the fence cautiously.

“Now, firs’ thing yeh gotta know abou’ Hippogriffs is, they’re proud,” said Hagrid. “Easily offended, Hippogriffs are. Don’t never insult one, ‘cause it might be the last thing yeh do.”

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle weren't listening; they were talking in an undertone and Harry had a nasty feeling they were plotting how best to disrupt the lesson.

"Yeh always wait fer the Hippogriff ter make the firs' move," Hagrid continued. "It's polite, see? Yeh walk toward him, and yeh bow, an' yeh wait. If he bows back, yeh're allowed ter touch him. If he doesn' bow, then get away from him sharpish, 'cause those talons hurt."

"Right — who wants ter go first?"

Most of the class backed farther away in answer. Even Harry, Ron, and Hermione had misgivings. The Hippogriffs were tossing their fierce heads and flexing their powerful wings; they didn't seem to like being tethered like this.

"No one?" said Hagrid, with a pleading look.

"I'll do it," said Harry.

There was an intake of breath from behind him, and both Lavender and Parvati whispered, "Oooh, no, Harry, remember your tea leaves!"

Harry ignored them. He climbed over the paddock fence.

"Good man, Harry!" roared Hagrid. "Right then — let's see how yeh get on with Buckbeak."

He untied one of the chains, pulled the gray Hippogriff away from its fellows, and slipped off its leather collar. The class on the other side of the paddock seemed to be holding its breath. Malfoy's eyes were narrowed maliciously.

"Easy now, Harry," said Hagrid quietly. "Yeh've got eye contact, now try not ter blink…Hippogriffs don' trust yeh if yeh blink too much…"

Harry's eyes immediately began to water, but he didn't shut them. Buckbeak had turned his great, sharp head and was staring at Harry with one fierce orange eye. "Tha's it," said Hagrid. "Tha's it, Harry…now, bow."

Harry didn't feel much like exposing the back of his neck to Buckbeak, but he did as he was told. He gave a short bow and then looked up.

The Hippogriff was still staring haughtily at him. It didn't move.

"Ah," said Hagrid, sounding worried. "Right — back away, now, Harry, easy does it —"

But then, to Harry's enormous surprise, the Hippogriff suddenly bent its scaly front knees and sank into what was an unmistakable bow.

"Well done, Harry!" said Hagrid, ecstatic. "Right — yeh can touch him! Pat his beak, go on!"

Feeling that a better reward would have been to back away, Harry moved slowly toward the Hippogriff and reached out toward it. He patted the beak several times and the Hippogriff closed its eyes lazily, as though enjoying it.

The class broke into applause, all except for Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, who were looking deeply disappointed.

"Righ' then, Harry," said Hagrid. "I reckon he migh' let yeh ride him!"

This was more than Harry had bargained for. He was used to a broomstick; but he wasn't sure a Hippogriff would be quite the same.

"Yeh climb up there, jus' behind the wing joint," said Hagrid, "an' mind yeh don' pull any of his feathers out, he won' like that…"

Harry put his foot on the top of Buckbeak's wing and hoisted himself onto its back. Buckbeak stood up. Harry wasn't sure where to hold on; everything in front of him was covered with feathers.

"Go on, then!" roared Hagrid, slapping the Hippogriffs hindquarters.

Without warning, twelve-foot wings flapped open on either side of Harry, he just had time to seize the Hippogriff around the neck before he was soaring upward. It was nothing like a broomstick, and Harry knew which one he preferred; the Hippogriff's wings beat uncomfortably on either side of him, catching him under his legs and making him feel he was about to be thrown off; the glossy feathers slipped under his fingers and he didn't dare get a stronger grip; instead of the smooth action of his Nimbus Two Thousand, he now felt himself rocking backward and forward as the hindquarters of the Hippogriff rose and fell with its wings.

Buckbeak flew him once around the paddock and then headed back to the ground; this was the bit Harry had been dreading; he leaned back as the smooth neck lowered, feeling he was going to slip off over the beak, then felt a heavy thud as the four ill-assorted feet hit the ground. He just managed to hold on and push himself straight again.

"Good work, Harry!" roared Hagrid as everyone except Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle cheered. "Okay, who else wants a go?"

Emboldened by Harry's success, the rest of the class climbed cautiously into the paddock. Hagrid untied the Hippogriffs one by one, and soon people were bowing nervously, all over the paddock. Neville ran repeatedly backward from his, which didn't seem to want to bend its knees. Ron and Hermione practiced on the chestnut, while Harry watched.

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle had taken over Buckbeak. He had bowed to Malfoy, who was now patting his beak, looking disdainful.

“This is very easy,” Malfoy drawled, loud enough for Harry to, hear him. “I knew it must have been, if Potter could do it…I bet you’re not dangerous at all, are you?” he said to the Hippogriff. “Are you, you great ugly brute?”

It happened in a flash of steely talons; Malfoy let out a high pitched scream and next moment, Hagrid was wrestling Buckbeak back into his collar as he strained to get at Malfoy, who lay curled in the grass, blood blossoming over his robes.

“I’m dying!” Malfoy yelled as the class panicked. “I’m dying, look at me! It’s killed me!”

“Yer not dyin’!” said Hagrid, who had gone very white. “Someone help me — gotta get him outta here —”

Hermione ran to hold open the gate as Hagrid lifted Malfoy easily. As they passed, Harry saw that there was a long, deep gash on Malfoy’s arm; blood splattered the grass and Hagrid ran with him, up the slope toward the castle.

Very shaken, the Care of Magical Creatures class followed at a walk. The Slytherins were all shouting about Hagrid.

“They should sack him straight away!” said Pansy Parkinson, who was in tears.

“It was Malfoy’s fault!” snapped Dean Thomas. Crabbe and Goyle flexed their muscles threateningly.

They all climbed the stone steps into the deserted entrance hall.

“I’m going to see if he’s okay!” said Pansy, and they all watched her run up the marble staircase. The Slytherins, still muttering about Hagrid, headed away in the direction of their dungeon common room; Harry, Ron, and Hermione proceeded upstairs to Gryffindor Tower.

“You think he’ll be all right?” said Hermione nervously.

“Course he will. Madam Pomfrey can mend cuts in about a second,” said Harry, who had had far worse injuries mended magically by the nurse.

“That was a really bad thing to happen in Hagrid’s first class, though, wasn’t it?” said Ron, looking worried. “Trust Malfoy to mess things up for him…” They were among the first to reach the Great Hall at dinnertime, hoping to see Hagrid, but he wasn’t there.

“They wouldn’t fire him, would they?” said Hermione anxiously, not touching her steak-and-kidney pudding.

“They’d better not,” said Ron, who wasn’t eating either.

Harry was watching the Slytherin table. A large group including Crabbe and Goyle was huddled together, deep in conversation. Harry was sure they were cooking up their own version of how Malfoy had been injured.

"Well, you can't say it wasn't an interesting first day back," said Ron gloomily.

They went up to the crowded Gryffindor common room after dinner and tried to do the homework Professor McGonagall had given them, but all three of them kept breaking off and glancing out of the tower window.

"There's a light on in Hagrid's window," Harry said suddenly.

Ron looked at his watch.

"If we hurried, we could go down and see him. It's still quite early…"

"I don't know," Hermione said slowly, and Harry saw her glance at him.

"I'm allowed to walk across the *grounds*," he said pointedly. "Sirius Black hasn't got past the Dementors yet, has he?"

So they put their things away and headed out of the portrait hole, glad to meet nobody on their way to the front doors, as they weren't entirely sure they were supposed to be out.

The grass was still wet and looked almost black in the twilight. When they reached Hagrid's hut, they knocked, and a voice growled, "C'min."

Hagrid was sitting in his shirtsleeves at his scrubbed wooden table; his boarhound, Fang, had his head in Hagrid's lap. One look told them that Hagrid had been drinking a lot; there was a pewter tankard almost as big as a bucket in front of him, and he seemed to be having difficulty getting them into focus.

"'Spect it's a record," he said thickly, when he recognized them. "Don' reckon they've ever had a teacher who lasted on'y a day before."

"You haven't been fired, Hagrid!" gasped Hermione.

"Not yet," said Hagrid miserably, taking a huge gulp of whatever was in the tankard. "But's only a matter o' time, I'n't, after Malfoy…"

"How is he?" said Ron as they all sat down. "It wasn't serious, was it?"

"Madam Pomfrey fixed him best she could," said Hagrid dully, "but he's sayin' it's still agony…covered in bandages…moanin'…"

"He's faking it," said Harry at once. "Madam Pomfrey can mend anything. She regrew half my bones last year. Trust Malfoy to milk it for all it's worth."

“School gov’nors have bin told, o’ course,” said Hagrid miserably. “They reckon I started too big. Shoulda left Hippogriffs fer later…one flobberworms or summat…Jus’ thought it’d make a good firs’ lesson’s all my fault…”

“It’s all *Malfoy’s* fault, Hagrid!” said Hermione earnestly.

“We’re witnesses,” said Harry. “You said Hippogriffs attack if you insult them. It’s Malfoy’s problem that he wasn’t listening. We’ll tell Dumbledore what really happened.”

“Yeah, don’t worry, Hagrid, we’ll back you up,” said Ron.

Tears leaked out of the crinkled corners of Hagrid’s beetle-black eyes. He grabbed both Harry and Ron and pulled them into a bone-breaking hug.

“I think you’ve had enough to drink, Hagrid,” said Hermione firmly. She took the tankard from the table and went outside to empty it.

“Ah, maybe she’s right,” said Hagrid, letting go of Harry and Ron, who both staggered away, rubbing their ribs. Hagrid heaved himself out of his chair and followed Hermione unsteadily outside. They heard a loud splash.

“What’s he done?” said Harry nervously as Hermione came back in with the empty tankard.

“Stuck his head in the water barrel,” said Hermione, putting the tankard away.

Hagrid came back, his long hair and beard sopping wet, wiping the water out of his eyes.

“That’s better,” he said, shaking his head like a dog and drenching them all. “Listen, it was good of yeh ter come an’ see me, I really —”

Hagrid stopped dead, staring at Harry as though he’d only just realized he was there.

“WHAT D’YEH THINK YOU’RE DOIN’, EH?” he roared, so suddenly that they jumped a foot in the air. “YEH’RE NOT TO GO WANDERIN’ AROUND AFTER DARK, HARRY! AN, YOU TWO! LETTIN’ HIM!”

Hagrid strode over to Harry, grabbed his arm, and pulled him to the door.

“C’mon!” Hagrid said angrily. “I’m takin’ yer all back up ter school an’ don’ let me catch yeh walkin’ down ter see me after dark again. I’m not worth that!”

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE BOGGART IN THE WARDROBE

Malfoy didn't reappear in classes until late on Thursday morning, when the Slytherins and Gryffindors were halfway through double Potions. He swaggered into the dungeon, his right arm covered in bandages and bound up in a sling, acting, in Harry's opinion, as though he were the heroic survivor of some dreadful battle.

"How is it, Draco?" simpered Pansy Parkinson. "Does it hurt much?"

"Yeah," said Malfoy, putting on a brave sort of grimace. But Harry saw him wink at Crabbe and Goyle when Pansy had looked away.

"Settle down, settle down," said Professor Snape idly.

Harry and Ron scowled at each other; Snape wouldn't have said 'settle down' if *they'd* walked in late, he'd have given them detention. But Malfoy had always been able to get away with anything in Snape's classes; Snape was head of Slytherin House, and generally favored his own students above all others.

They were making a new potion today, a Shrinking Solution. Malfoy set up his cauldron right next to Harry and Ron, so that they were preparing their ingredients on the same table.

"Sir," Malfoy called, "sir, I'll need help cutting up these daisy roots, because of my arm —"

"Weasley, cut up Malfoy's roots for him," said Snape without looking up.

Ron went brick red.

"There's nothing wrong with your arm," he hissed at Malfoy.

Malfoy smirked across the table.

"Weasley, you heard Professor Snape; cut up these roots."

Ron seized his knife, pulled Malfoy's roots toward him, and began to chop them roughly, so that they were all different sizes.

"Professor," drawled Malfoy, "Weasley's mutilating my roots, sir."

Snape approached their table, stared down his hooked nose at the roots, then gave Ron an unpleasant smile from beneath his long, greasy black hair.

"Change roots with Malfoy, Weasley."

"But, sir —!"

Ron had spent the last quarter of an hour carefully shredding his own roots into exactly equal pieces.

"*Now*," said Snape in his most dangerous voice.

Ron shoved his own beautifully cut roots across the table at Malfoy, then took up the knife again.

"And, sir, I'll need this shrivelfig skinned," said Malfoy, his voice full of malicious laughter.

"Potter, you can skin Malfoy's shrivelfig," said Snape, giving Harry the look of loathing he always reserved just for him.

Harry took Malfoy's shrivelfig as Ron began trying to repair the damage to the roots he now had to use. Harry skinned the shrivelfig as fast as he could and flung it back across the table at Malfoy without speaking. Malfoy was smirking more broadly than ever.

"Seen your pal Hagrid lately?" he asked them quietly.

"None of your business," said Ron jerkily, without looking up.

"I'm afraid he won't be a teacher much longer," said Malfoy in a tone of mock sorrow. "Father's not very happy about my injury —"

"Keep talking, Malfoy, and I'll give you a real injury," snarled Ron.

"– he's complained to the school governors. And to the Ministry of Magic. Father's got a lot of influence, you know. And a lasting injury like this" — he gave a huge, fake sigh — "who knows if my arm'll ever be the same again?"

"So that's why you're putting it on," said Harry, accidentally beheading a dead caterpillar because his hand was shaking in anger, "To try to get Hagrid fired."

"Well," said Malfoy, lowering his voice to a whisper, "*partly*, Potter. But there are other benefits too. Weasley, slice my caterpillars for me."

A few cauldrons away, Neville was in trouble. Neville regularly went to pieces in Potions lessons; it was his worst subject, and his great fear of Professor Snape made things ten times worse. His potion, which was supposed to be a bright, acid green, had turned —

"Orange, Longbottom," said Snape, ladling some up and allowing to splash back into the cauldron, so that everyone could see.

"Orange. Tell me, boy, does anything penetrate that thick skull of yours? Didn't you hear me say, quite clearly, that only one cat spleen was needed? Didn't I state plainly that a dash of leech juice would suffice? What do I have to do to make you understand, Longbottom?"

Neville was pink and trembling. He looked as though he was on the verge of tears.

"Please, sir," said Hermione, "please, I could help Neville put it right -"

"I don't remember asking you to show off, Miss Granger," said Snape coldly, and Hermione went as pink as Neville. "Longbottom, at the end of this lesson we will feed a few drops of this potion to your toad and see what happens. Perhaps that will encourage you to do it properly."

Snape moved away, leaving Neville breathless with fear.

"Help me!" he moaned to Hermione.

"Hey, Harry," said Seamus Finnigan, leaning over to borrow Harry's brass scales, "have you heard? *Daily Prophet* this morning — they reckon Sirius Black's been sighted."

"Where?" said Harry and Ron quickly. On the other side of the table, Malfoy looked up, listening closely.

"Not too far from here," said Seamus, who looked excited. "It was a Muggle who saw him. 'Course, she didn't really understand. The Muggles think he's just an ordinary criminal, don't they? So she phoned the telephone hot line. By the time the Ministry of Magic got there, he was gone."

"Not too far from here…" Ron repeated, looking significantly at Harry. He turned around and saw Malfoy watching closely. "What, Malfoy? Need something else skinned?"

But Malfoy's eyes were shining malevolently, and they were fixed Harry. He leaned across the table.

"Thinking of trying to catch Black single-handed, Potter?"

"Yeah, that's right," said Harry offhandedly.

Malfoy's thin mouth was curving in a mean smile.

"Of course, if it was me," he said quietly, "I'd have done something before now. I wouldn't be staying in school like a good boy, I'd be out there looking for him."

"What are you talking about, Malfoy?" said Ron roughly.

"Don't you *know*, Potter?" breathed Malfoy, his pale eyes narrowed.

"Know what?"

Malfoy let out a low, sneering laugh.

"Maybe you'd rather not risk your neck," he said. "Want to leave it to the Dementors, do you? But if it was me, I'd want revenge. I'd hunt him down myself."

"*What are you talking about?*" said Harry angrily, but at that moment Snape called, "You should have finished adding your ingredients by now; this potion needs to stew before it can be drunk, so clear away while it simmers and then we'll test Longbottom's…"

Crabbe and Goyle laughed openly, watching Neville sweat as he stirred his potion feverishly. Hermione was muttering instructions to him out of the corner of her mouth, so that Snape wouldn't

see. Harry and Ron packed away their unused ingredients and went to wash their hands and ladles in the stone basin in the corner.

"What did Malfoy mean?" Harry muttered to Ron as he stuck his hands under the icy jet that poured from the gargoyle's mouth "Why would I want revenge on Black? He hasn't done anything to me — yet."

"He's making it up," said Ron savagely. "He's trying to make you do something stupid…"

The end of the lesson in sight, Snape strode over to Neville, who was cowering by his cauldron.

"Everyone gather 'round," said Snape, his black eyes glittering, "and watch what happens to Longbottom's toad. If he has managed to produce a Shrinking Solution, it will shrink to a tadpole. If, as I don't doubt, he has done it wrong, his toad is likely to be poisoned."

The Gryffindors watched fearfully. The Slytherins looked excited. Snape picked up Trevor the toad in his left hand and dipped a small spoon into Neville's potion, which was now green. He trickled a few drops down Trevor's throat.

There was a moment of hushed silence, in which Trevor gulped; then there was a small *pop*, and Trevor the tadpole was wriggling in Snape's palm.

The Gryffindors burst into applause. Snape, looking sour, pulled a small bottle from the pocket of his robe, poured a few drops on top of Trevor, and he reappeared suddenly, fully grown.

"Five points from Gryffindor," said Snape, which wiped the smiles from every face. "I told you not to help him, Miss Granger. Class dismissed."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione climbed the steps to the entrance hall. Harry was still thinking about what Malfoy had said, while Ron was seething about Snape.

"Five points from Gryffindor because the potion was all right! Why didn't you lie, Hermione? You should've said Neville did it all by himself!"

Hermione didn't answer. Ron looked around.

"Where is she?"

Harry turned too. They were at the top of the steps now, watching the rest of the class pass them, heading for the Great Hall and lunch.

"She was right behind us," said Ron, frowning.

Malfoy passed them, walking between Crabbe and Goyle. He smirked at Harry and disappeared.

"There she is," said Harry.

Hermione was panting slightly, hurrying up the stairs; one hand clutched her bag, the other seemed to be tucking something down the front of her robes.

"How did you do that?" said Ron.

"What?" said Hermione, joining them.

"One minute you were right behind us, the next moment, you were back at the bottom of the stairs again."

"What?" Hermione looked slightly confused. "Oh — I had to go back for something. Oh no —"

A seam had split on Hermione's bag. Harry wasn't surprised; he could see that it was crammed with at least a dozen large and heavy books.

"Why are you carrying all these around with you?" Ron asked her.

"You know how many subjects I'm taking," said Hermione breathlessly. "Couldn't hold these for me, could you?"

"But —" Ron was turning over the books she had handed him, looking at the covers. "You haven't got any of these subjects today. It's only Defense Against the Dark Arts this afternoon."

"Oh yes," said Hermione vaguely, but she packed all the books back into her bag just the same. "I hope there's something good for lunch, I'm starving," she added, and she marched off toward the Great Hall.

"D'you get the feeling Hermione's not telling us something?" Ron asked Harry.

Professor Lupin wasn't there when they arrived at his first Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson. They all sat down, took out their books, quills, and parchment, and were talking when he finally entered the room. Lupin smiled vaguely and placed his tatty old briefcase on the teacher's desk. He was as shabby as ever but looked healthier than he had on the train, as though he had had a few square meals.

"Good afternoon," he said. "Would you please put all your books back in your bags. Today's will be a practical lesson. You will need only your wands."

A few curious looks were exchanged as the class put away their books. They had never had a practical Defense Against the Dark Arts class before, unless you counted the memorable class last year when their old teacher had brought a cageful of pixies to class and set them loose.

"Right then," said Professor Lupin, when everyone was ready. "If you'd follow me."

Puzzled but interested, the class got to its feet and followed Professor Lupin out of the classroom. He led them along the deserted corridor and around a corner, where the first thing they saw was Peeves the Poltergeist, who was floating upside down in midair and stuffing the nearest keyhole with chewing gum.

Peeves didn't look up until Professor Lupin was two feet away; then he wiggled his curly-toed feet and broke into song.

"Loony, loopy Lupin," Peeves sang. "Loony, loopy Lupin, loony, loopy Lupin —"

Rude and unmanageable as he almost always was, Peeves usually showed some respect toward the teachers. Everyone looked quickly at Professor Lupin to see how he would take this; to their surprise, he was still smiling.

"I'd take that gum out of the keyhole if I were you, Peeves," he said pleasantly. "Mr. Filch won't be able to get in to his brooms."

Filch was the Hogwarts caretaker, a bad-tempered, failed wizard who waged a constant war against the students and, indeed, Peeves. However, Peeves paid no attention to Professor Lupin's words, except to blow a loud wet raspberry.

Professor Lupin gave a small sigh and took out his wand.

"This is a useful little spell," he told the class over his shoulder. "Please watch closely."

He raised the wand to shoulder height, said, "*Waddiwasi!*" and pointed it at Peeves.

With the force of a bullet, the wad of chewing gum shot out of the keyhole and straight down Peeves's left nostril; he whirled upright and zoomed away, cursing.

"Cool, sir!" said Dean Thomas in amazement.

"Thank you, Dean," said Professor Lupin, putting his wand away again. "Shall we proceed?"

They set off again, the class looking at shabby Professor Lupin with increased respect. He led them down a second corridor and stopped, right outside the staffroom door.

"Inside, please," said Professor Lupin, opening it and standing back.

The staffroom, a long, paneled room full of old, mismatched chairs, was empty except for one teacher. Professor Snape was sitting in a low armchair, and he looked around as the class filed in. His eyes were glittering and there was a nasty sneer playing around his mouth. As Professor Lupin came in and made to close the door behind him, Snape said, "Leave it open, Lupin. I'd rather not witness this." He got to his feet and strode past the class, his black robes billowing behind him. At the doorway he turned on his heel and said, "Possibly no one's warned you, Lupin, but this class contains Neville Longbottom. I would advise you not to entrust him with anything difficult. Not unless Miss Granger is hissing instructions in his ear."

Neville went scarlet. Harry glared at Snape; it was bad enough that he bullied Neville in his own classes, let alone doing it in front of other teachers.

Professor Lupin had raised his eyebrows.

“I was hoping that Neville would assist me with the first stage of the operation,” he said, “and I am sure he will perform it admirably.”

Neville’s face went, if possible, even redder. Snape’s lip curled, but he left, shutting the door with a snap.

“Now, then,” said Professor Lupin, beckoning the class toward the end of the room, where there was nothing but an old wardrobe where the teachers kept their spare robes. As Professor Lupin went to stand next to it, the wardrobe gave a sudden wobble, banging off the wall.

“Nothing to worry about,” said Professor Lupin calmly because a few people had jumped backward in alarm. “There’s a Boggart in there.”

Most people seemed to feel that this *was* something to worry about. Neville gave Professor Lupin a look of pure terror, and Seamus Finnigan eyed the now rattling doorknob apprehensively.

“Boggarts like dark, enclosed spaces,” said Professor Lupin. “Wardrobes, the gap beneath beds, the cupboards under sinks — I’ve even met one that had lodged itself in a grandfather clock. *This* one moved in yesterday afternoon, and I asked the headmaster if the staff would leave it to give my third years some practice.

“So, the first question we must ask ourselves is, what *is* a Boggart?”

Hermione put up her hand.

“It’s a shape-shifter,” she said. “It can take the shape of whatever it thinks will frighten us most.”

“Couldn’t have put it better myself,” said Professor Lupin, and Hermione glowed. “So the Boggart sitting in the darkness within has not yet assumed a form. He does not yet know what will frighten the person on the other side of the door. Nobody knows what a Boggart looks like when he is alone, but when I let him out, he will immediately become whatever each of us most fears.

“This means,” said Professor Lupin, choosing to ignore Neville’s small sputter of terror, “that we have a huge advantage over the Boggart before we begin. Have you spotted it, Harry?”

Trying to answer a question with Hermione next to him, bobbing up and down on the balls of her feet with her hand in the air, was very off-putting, but Harry had a go.

“Er — because there are so many of us, it won’t know what shape it should be?”

“Precisely,” said Professor Lupin, and Hermione put her hand down, looking a little disappointed. “It’s always best to have company when you’re dealing with a Boggart. He becomes confused. Which should he become, a headless corpse or a flesh-eating slug? I once saw a Boggart make that very mistake — tried to frighten two people at once and turned himself into half a slug. Not remotely frightening.

‘The charm that repels a Boggart is simple, yet it requires force of mind. You see, the thing that really finishes a Boggart is *laughter*. What you need to do is force it to assume a shape that you find amusing.

“We will practice the charm without wands first. After me, please…*Riddikulus*!”

“*Riddikulus!*” said the class together.

“Good,” said Professor Lupin. “Very good. But that was the easy part, I’m afraid. You see, the word alone is not enough. And this is where you come in, Neville.”

The wardrobe shook again, though not as much as Neville, who walked forward as though he were heading for the gallows.

“Right, Neville,” said Professor Lupin. “First things first: what would you say is the thing that frightens you most in the world?”

Neville’s lips moved, but no noise came out.

“I didn’t catch that, Neville, sorry,” said Professor Lupin cheerfully.

Neville looked around rather wildly, as though begging someone to help him, then said, in barely more than a whisper, “Professor Snape.”

Nearly everyone laughed. Even Neville grinned apologetically. Professor Lupin, however, looked thoughtful.

“Professor Snape…hmmm…Neville, I believe you live with your grandmother?”

“Er — yes,” said Neville nervously. “But — I don’t want the Boggart to turn into her either.”

“No, no, you misunderstand me,” said Professor Lupin, now smiling. “I wonder, could you tell us what sort of clothes your grandmother usually wears?”

Neville looked startled, but said, “Well…always the same hat. A tall one with a stuffed vulture on top. And a long dress…green, normally…and sometimes a fox-fur scarf.”

“And a handbag?” prompted Professor Lupin.

“A big red one,” said Neville.

“Right then,” said Professor Lupin. “Can you picture those clothes very clearly, Neville? Can you see them in your mind’s eye?”

“Yes,” said Neville uncertainty, plainly wondering what was coming next.

“When the Boggart bursts out of this wardrobe, Neville, and sees you, it will assume the form of Professor Snape,” said Lupin. “And you will raise your wand — thus — and cry ‘Riddikulus’ — and concentrate hard on your grandmother’s clothes. If all goes well, Professor Boggart Snape will be forced into that vulture-topped hat, and that green dress, with that big red handbag.”

There was a great shout of laughter. The wardrobe wobbled more violently.

"If Neville is successful, the Boggart is likely to shift his attention to each of us in turn," said Professor Lupin. "I would like all of you to take a moment now to think of the thing that scares you most, and imagine how you might force it to look comical…"

The room went quiet. Harry thought…What scared him most in the world?

His first thought was Lord Voldemort — a Voldemort returned to full strength. But before he had even started to plan a possible counterattack on a Boggart-Voldemort, a horrible image came floating to the surface of his mind…

A rotting, glistening hand, slithering back beneath a black cloak…a long, rattling breath from an unseen mouth…then a cold so penetrating it felt like drowning…

Harry shivered, then looked around, hoping no one had noticed. Many people had their eyes shut tight. Ron was muttering to himself, "Take its legs off." Harry was sure he knew what that was about. Ron's greatest fear was spiders.

"Everyone ready?" said Professor Lupin.

Harry felt a lurch of fear. He wasn't ready. How could you make a Dementor less frightening? But he didn't want to ask for more time; everyone else was nodding and rolling up their sleeves.

"Neville, we're going to back away," said Professor Lupin. "Let you have a clear field, all right? I'll call the next person forward…Everyone back, now, so Neville can get a clear shot —"

They all retreated, backed against the walls, leaving Neville alone beside the wardrobe. He looked pale and frightened, but he had pushed up the sleeves of his robes and was holding his wand ready.

"On the count of three, Neville," said Professor Lupin, who was pointing his own wand at the handle of the wardrobe. "One — two — three —*now*!"

A jet of sparks shot from the end of Professor Lupin's wand and hit the doorknob. The wardrobe burst open. Hook-nosed and menacing, Professor Snape stepped out, his eyes flashing at Neville.

Neville backed away, his wand up, mouthing wordlessly. Snape was bearing down upon him, reaching inside his robes.

"*R — r — Riddikulus!* " squeaked Neville.

There was a noise like a whip crack. Snape stumbled; he was wearing a long, lace-trimmed dress and a towering hat topped with a moth-eaten vulture, and he was swinging a huge crimson handbag.

There was a roar of laughter; the Boggart paused, confused, and Professor Lupin shouted, "Parvati! Forward!"

Parvati walked forward, her face set. Snape rounded on her. There was another crack, and where he had stood was a bloodstained, bandaged mummy; its sightless face was turned to Parvati and it began to walk toward her very slowly, dragging its feet, its stiff arms rising —

"*Riddikulus!*" cried Parvati.

A bandage unraveled at the mummy's feet; it became entangled, fell face forward, and its head rolled off.

"Seamus!" roared Professor Lupin.

Seamus darted past Parvati.

Crack! Where the mummy had been was a woman with floorlength black hair and a skeletal, green-tinged face — a banshee. She opened her mouth wide and an unearthly sound filled the room, a long, wailing shriek that made the hair on Harry's head stand on end — "*Riddikulus!*" shouted Seamus.

The banshee made a rasping noise and clutched her throat; her voice was gone.

Crack! The banshee turned into a rat, which chased its tail in a circle, then —*crack*!- became a rattlesnake, which slithered and writhed before —*crack*! — becoming a single, bloody eyeball.

"It's confused!" shouted Lupin. "We're getting there! Dean!"

Dean hurried forward.

Crack! The eyeball became a severed hand, which flipped over and began to creep along the floor like a crab.

"*Riddikulus!*" yelled Dean.

There was a snap, and the hand was trapped in a mousetrap.

"Excellent! Ron, you next!"

Ron leapt forward.

Crack!

Quite a few people screamed. A giant spider, six feet tall and covered in hair, was advancing on Ron, clicking its pincers menacingly. For a moment, Harry thought Ron had frozen. Then —

"*Riddikulus!*" bellowed Ron, and the spider's legs vanished; it rolled over and over; Lavender Brown squealed and ran out of its way and it came to a halt at Harry's feet. He raised his wand, ready, but —

"Here!" shouted Professor Lupin suddenly, hurrying forward. *Crack*!

The legless spider had vanished. For a second, everyone looked wildly around to see where it was. Then they saw a silvery-white orb hanging in the air in front of Lupin, who said, "*Riddikulus!*" almost lazily.

Crack!

"Forward, Neville, and finish him off!" said Lupin as the Boggart landed on the floor as a cockroach. *Crack*! Snape was back. This time Neville charged forward looking determined.

"*Riddikulus!*" he shouted, and they had a split second's view of Snape in his lacy dress before Neville let out a great "Ha!" of laughter, and the Boggart exploded, burst into a thousand tiny wisps of smoke, and was gone.

"Excellent!" cried Professor Lupin as the class broke into applause. "Excellent, Neville. Well done, everyone…Let me see…five points to Gryffindor for every person to tackle the Boggart — ten for Neville because he did it twice…and five each to Hermione and Harry."

"But I didn't do anything," said Harry.

"You and Hermione answered my questions correctly at the start of the class, Harry," Lupin said lightly. "Very well, everyone, an excellent lesson. Homework, kindly read the chapter on Boggarts and summarize it for me…o be handed in on Monday. That will be all."

Talking excitedly, the class left the staffroom. Harry, however, wasn't feeling cheerful. Professor Lupin had deliberately stopped him from tackling the Boggart. Why? Was it because he'd seen Harry collapse on the train, and thought he wasn't up to much? Had he thought Harry would pass out again?

But no one else seemed to have noticed anything.

"Did you see me take that banshee?" shouted Seamus.

"And the hand!" said Dean, waving his own around.

"And Snape in that hat!"

"And my mummy!"

"I wonder why Professor Lupin's frightened of crystal balls?" said Lavender thoughtfully.

"That was the best Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson we've ever had, wasn't it?" said Ron excitedly as they made their way back to the classroom to get their bags.

"He seems like a very good teacher," said Hermione approvingly. "But I wish I could have had a turn with the Boggart —"

"What would it have been for you?" said Ron, sniggering. "A piece of homework that only got nine out of ten?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

FLIGHT OF THE FAT LADY

In no time at all, Defense Against the Dark Arts had become most people's favorite class. Only Draco Malfoy and his gang of Slytherins had anything bad to say about Professor Lupin.

"Look at the state of his robes," Malfoy would say in a loud whisper as Professor Lupin passed. "He dresses like our old house elf."

But no one else cared that Professor Lupin's robes were patched and frayed. His next few lessons were just as interesting as the first. After Boggarts, they studied Red Caps, nasty little goblin-like creatures that lurked wherever there had been bloodshed: in the dungeons of castles and the potholes of deserted battlefields, waiting to bludgeon those who had gotten lost. From Red Caps they moved on to Kappas, creepy. water-dwellers that looked like scaly monkeys, with webbed hands itching to strangle unwitting waders in their ponds.

Harry only wished he was as happy with some of his other classes. Worst of all was Potions. Snape was in a particularly vindictive mood these days, and no one was in any doubt why. The story of the Boggart assuming Snape's shape, and the way that Neville had dressed it in his grandmother's clothes, had traveled through the school like wildfire. Snape didn't seem to find it funny. His eyes flashed menacingly at the very mention of Professor Lupin's name, and he was bullying Neville worse than ever.

Harry was also growing to dread the hours he spent in Professor Trelawney's stifling tower room, deciphering lopsided shapes and symbols, trying to ignore the way Professor Trelawney's enormous eyes filled with tears every time she looked at him. He couldn't like Professor Trelawney, even though she was treated with respect bordering on reverence by many of the class. Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown had taken to haunting Professor Trelawney's tower room at lunch times, and always returned with annoyingly superior looks on their faces, as though they knew things the others didn't. They had also started using hushed voices whenever they spoke to Harry, as though he were on his deathbed.

Nobody really liked Care of Magical Creatures, which, after the action-packed first class, had become extremely dull. Hagrid seemed to have lost his confidence. They were now spending lesson after lesson learning how to look after flobberworms, which had to be some of the most boring creatures in existence.

"Why would anyone *bother* looking after them?" said Ron, after yet another hour of poking shredded lettuce down the flobberworms' throats.

At the start of October, however, Harry had something else to occupy him, something so enjoyable it more than made up for his unsatisfactory classes. The Quidditch season was approaching, and O1iver Wood, Captain of the Gryffindor team, called a meeting on Thursday evening to discuss tactics for the new season.

There were seven people on a Quidditch team: three Chasers, whose job it was to score goals by putting the Quaffle (a red, soccer-sized ball) through one of the fifty-foot-high hoops at each end of the field; two Beaters, who were equipped with heavy bats to repel the Bludgers (two heavy black balls that zoomed around trying to attack the players); a Keeper, who defended the goal posts, and the Seeker, who had the hardest job of all, that of catching the Golden Snitch, a tiny, winged, walnut-sized ball, whose capture ended the game and earned the Seeker's team an extra one hundred and fifty points.

Oliver Wood was a burly seventeen-year-old, now in his seventh and final year at Hogwarts. There was a quiet sort of desperation in his voice as he addressed his six fellow team members in the chilly locker rooms on the edge of the darkening Quidditch field.

"This is our last chance —*my* last chance — to win the Quidditch Cup," he told them, striding up and down in front of them. "I'll be leaving at the end of this year. I'll never get another shot at it.

"Gryffindor hasn't won for seven years now. Okay, so we've had the worst luck in the world — injuries — then the tournament getting called off last year." Wood swallowed, as though the memory still brought a lump to his throat. "But we also know we've got the *best — ruddy — team — in — the — school*," he said, punching a fist into his other hand, the old manic glint back in his eye. "We've got three *superb* Chasers."

Wood pointed at Alicia Spinner, Angelina Johnson, and Katie Bell.

"We've got two *unbeatable* Beaters."

"Stop it, Oliver, you're embarrassing us," said Fred and George Weasley together, pretending to blush.

"And we've got a Seeker who has *never failed to win us a match*!" Wood rumbled, glaring at Harry with a kind of furious pride. "And me," he added as an afterthought.

"We think you're very good too, Oliver," said George.

"Spanking good Keeper," said Fred.

"The point is," Wood went on, resuming his pacing, "the Quidditch Cup should have had our name on it these last two years. Ever since Harry joined the team, I've thought the thing was in the

bag. But we haven't got it, and this year's the last chance we'll get to finally see our name on the thing…"

Wood spoke so dejectedly that even Fred and George looked sympathetic.

"Oliver, this year's our year," said Fred.

"We'll do it, Oliver!" said Angelina.

"Definitely," said Harry.

Full of determination, the team started training sessions, three evenings a week. The weather was getting colder and wetter, the nights darker, but no amount of mud, wind, or rain could tarnish Harry's wonderful vision of finally winning the huge, silver Quidditch Cup.

Harry returned to the Gryffindor common room one evening after training, cold and stiff but pleased with the way practice had gone, to find the room buzzing excitedly.

"What's happened?", he asked Ron and Hermione, who were sitting in two of the best chairs by the fireside and completing some star charts for Astronomy.

"First Hogsmeade weekend," said Ron, pointing at a notice that had appeared on the battered old bulletin board. "End of October. Halloween."

"Excellent," said Fred, who had followed Harry through the portrait hole. "I need to visit Zonko's. I'm nearly out of Stink Pellets."

Harry threw himself into a chair beside Ron, his high spirits ebbing away. Hermione seemed to read his mind.

"Harry, I'm sure you'll be able to go next time," she said. "They're bound to catch Black soon. He's been sighted once already."

"Black's not fool enough to try anything in Hogsmeade," said Ron. "Ask McGonagall if you can go this time, Harry. The next one might not be for ages —"

"*Ron*!" said Hermione. "Harry's supposed to stay in *school* —"

"He can't be the only third year left behind," said Ron. "Ask McGonagall, go on, Harry —"

"Yeah, I think I will," said Harry, making up his mind.

Hermione opened her mouth to argue, but at that moment Crookshanks leapt lightly onto her lap. A large, dead spider was dangling from his mouth.

"Does he have to eat that in front of us?" said Ron, scowling.

"Clever Crookshanks, did you catch that all by yourself?" said Hermione.

Crookshanks; slowly chewed up the spider, his yellow eyes fixed insolently on Ron.

“Just keep him over there, that’s all,” said Ron irritably, turning back to his star chart. “I’ve got Scabbers asleep in my bag.”

Harry yawned. He really wanted to go to bed, but he still had his own star chart to complete. He pulled his bag toward him, took out parchment, ink, and quill, and started work.

“You can copy mine, if you like,” said Ron, labeling his last star with a flourish and shoving the chart toward Harry.

Hermione, who disapproved of copying, pursed her lips but didn’t say anything. Crookshanks was still staring unblinkingly at Ron, flicking the end of his bushy tail. Then, without warning, he pounced.

“Oi!” Ron roared, seizing his bag as Crookshanks sank four sets of claws deep inside it and began tearing ferociously. “GET OFF, YOU STUPID ANIMAL!”

Ron tried to pull the bag away from Crookshanks, but Crookshanks clung on, spitting and slashing.

“Ron, don’t hurt him!” squealed Hermione; the whole common room was watching; Ron whirled the bag around, Crookshanks still clinging to it, and Scabbers came flying out of the top —

“CATCH THAT CAT!” Ron yelled as Crookshanks freed himself from the remnants of the bag, sprang over the table, and chased after the terrified Scabbers.

George Weasley made a lunge for Crookshanks but missed; Scabbers streaked through twenty pairs of legs and shot beneath an old chest of drawers. Crookshanks skidded to a halt, crouched low on his bandy legs, and started making furious swipes beneath it with his front paw.

Ron and Hermione hurried over; Hermione grabbed Crookshanks around the middle and heaved him away; Ron threw himself onto his stomach and, with great difficulty, pulled Scabbers out by the tail.

“Look at him!” he said furiously to Hermione, dangling Scabbers in front of her. “He’s skin and bone! You keep that cat away from him!”

“Crookshanks doesn’t understand it’s wrong!” said Hermione, her voice shaking. “All cats chase rats, Ron!”

“There’s something funny about that animal!” said Ron, who was trying to persuade a frantically wiggling Scabbers back into his pocket. “It heard me say that Scabbers was in my bag!”

“Oh, what rubbish,” said Hermione impatiently. “Crookshanks could *smell* him, Ron, how else d’you think —”

“That cat’s got it in for Scabbers!” said Ron, ignoring the people around him, who were starting to giggle. “And Scabbers was here first, *and* he’s ill!”

Ron marched through the common room and out of sight up the stairs to the boys’ dormitories.

Ron was still in a bad mood with Hermione next day. He barely talked to her all through Herbology, even though he, Harry, and Hermione were working together on the same Puffapod.

“How’s Scabbers?” Hermione asked timidly as they stripped fat pink pods from the plants and emptied the shining beans into a wooden pail.

“He’s hiding at the bottom of my bed, shaking,” said Ron angrily, missing the pail and scattering beans over the greenhouse floor.

“Careful, Weasley, careful!” cried Professor Sprout as the beans burst into bloom before their very eyes.

They had Transfiguration next. Harry, who had resolved to ask Professor McGonagall after the lesson whether he could go into Hogsmeade with the rest, joined the line outside the class trying to decide how he was going to argue his case. He was distracted, however, by a disturbance at the front of the line.

Lavender Brown seemed to be crying. Parvati had her arm around her and was explaining something to Seamus Finnigan and Dean Thomas, who were looking very serious.

“What’s the matter, Lavender?” said Hermione anxiously as she, Harry, and Ron went to join the group.

“She got a letter from home this morning,” Parvati whispered. “It’s her rabbit, Binky. He’s been killed by a fox.”

“Oh,” said Hermione, “I’m sorry, Lavender.”

“I should have known!” said Lavender tragically. “You know what day it is?”

“Er —”

“The sixteenth of October! ‘That thing you’re dreading, it will happen on the sixteenth of October!’ Remember? She was right, she was right!”

The whole class was gathered around Lavender now. Seamus shook his head seriously. Hermione hesitated; then she said, “You — you were dreading Binky being killed by a fox?”

“Well, not necessarily by a *fox*,” said Lavender, looking up at Hermione with streaming eyes, “but I was *obviously* dreading him dying, wasn’t I?”

“Oh,” said Hermione. She paused again. Then —

“Was Binky an *old* rabbit?”

"N — no!" sobbed Lavender. "H — he was only a baby!"

Parvati tightened her arm around Lavender's shoulders.

"But then, why would you dread him dying?" said Hermione.

Parvati glared at her.

"Well, look at it logically," said Hermione, turning to the rest of the group. "I mean, Binky didn't even die today, did he? Lavender just got the news today —" Lavender wailed loudly. "– and she *can't* have been dreading it, because it's come as a real shock —"

"Don't mind Hermione, Lavender," said Ron loudly, "she doesn't think other people's pets matter very much."

Professor McGonagall opened the classroom door at that moment, which was perhaps lucky; Hermione and Ron were looking daggers at each other, and when they got into class, they seated themselves on either side of Harry and didn't talk to each other for the whole class.

Harry still hadn't decided what he was going to say to Professor McGonagall when the bell rang at the end of the lesson, but it was she who brought up the subject of Hogsmeade first.

"One moment, please!" she called as the class made to leave. "As you're all in my House, you should hand Hogsmeade permission forms to me before Halloween. No form, no visiting the village, so don't forget!"

Neville put up his hand.

"Please, Professor, I — I think I've lost —"

"Your grandmother sent yours to me directly, Longbottom," said Professor McGonagall. "She seemed to think it was safer. Well, that's all, you may leave."

"Ask her now," Ron hissed at Harry.

"Oh. but —" Hermione began.

"Go for it, Harry," said Ron stubbornly.

Harry waited for the rest of the class to disappear, then headed nervously for Professor McGonagall's desk.

"Yes, Potter?" Harry took a deep breath.

"Professor, my aunt and uncle — er — forgot to sign my form," he said.

Professor McGonagall looked over her square spectacles at him but didn't say anything.

"So — er — d'you think it would be all right mean, will It be okay if I — if I go to Hogsmeade?"

Professor McGonagall looked down and began shuffling papers on her desk.

"I'm afraid not, Potter," she said. "You heard what I said. No form, no visiting the village. That's the rule."

"But — Professor, my aunt and uncle — you know, they're Muggles, they don't really understand about — about Hogwarts forms and stuff," Harry said, while Ron egged him on with vigorous nods. "If you said I could go —"

"But I don't say so," said Professor McGonagall, standing up and piling her papers neatly into a drawer. "The form clearly states that the parent or guardian must give permission." She turned to look at him, with an odd expression on her face. Was it pity? "I'm sorry, Potter, but that's my final word. You had better hurry, or you'll be late for your next lesson."

There was nothing to be done. Ron called Professor McGonagall a lot of names that greatly annoyed Hermione; Hermione assumed an 'all-for-the-best' expression that made Ron even angrier, and Harry had to endure everyone in the class talking loudly and happily about what they were going to do first, once they got into Hogsmeade.

"There's always the feast," said Ron, in an effort to cheer Harry up. "You know, the Halloween feast, in the evening."

"Yeah," said Harry gloomily, "great."

The Halloween feast was always good, but it would taste a lot better if he was coming to it after a day in Hogsmeade with everyone else. Nothing anyone said made him feel any better about being left behind. Dean Thomas, who was good with a quill, had offered to forge Uncle Vernon's signature on the form, but as Harry had already told Professor McGonagall he hadn't had it signed, that was no good. Ron halfheartedly suggested the Invisibility Cloak, but Hermione stamped on that one, reminding Ron what Dumbledore had told them about the Dementors being able to see through them. Percy had what were possibly the least helpful words of comfort.

"They make a fuss about Hogsmeade, but I assure you, Harry, it's not all it's cracked up to be," he said seriously. "All right, the sweetshop's rather good, and Zonko's Joke Shop's frankly dangerous, and yes, the Shrieking Shack's always worth a visit, but really, Harry, apart from that, you're not missing anything."

On Halloween morning, Harry awoke with the rest and went down to breakfast, feeling thoroughly depressed, though doing his best to act normally.

"We'll bring you lots of sweets back from Honeydukes," said Hermione, looking desperately sorry for him.

"Yeah, loads," said Ron. He and Hermione had finally forgotten their squabble about Crookshanks in the face of Harry's difficulties.

"Don't worry about me," said Harry, in what he hoped was at, offhand voice, "I'll see you at the feast. Have a good time."

He accompanied them to the entrance hall, where Filch, the caretaker, was standing inside the front doors, checking off names against a long list, peering suspiciously into every face, and making sure that no one was sneaking out who shouldn't be going.

"Staying here, Potter?" shouted Malfoy, who was standing in line with Crabbe and Goyle. "Scared of passing the Dementors?"

Harry ignored him and made his solitary way up the marble staircase, through the deserted corridors, and back to Gryffindor Tower.

"Password?" said the Fat Lady, jerking out of a doze.

"Fortuna Major," said Harry listlessly.

The portrait swung open and he climbed through the hole into the common room. It was full of chattering first-and second-years, and a few older students, who had obviously visited Hogsmeade so often the novelty had worn off.

"Harry! Harry! Hi, Harry!"

It was Colin Creevey, a second year who was deeply in awe of Harry and never missed an opportunity to speak to him.

"Aren't you going to Hogsmeade, Harry? Why not? Hey —" Colin looked eagerly around at his friends — "you can come and sit with us, if you like, Harry!"

"Er — no, thanks, Colin," said Harry, who wasn't in the mood to have a lot of people staring avidly at the scar on his forehead. "I — I've got to go to the library, got to get some work done."

After that, he had no choice but to turn right around and head back out of the portrait hole again.

"What was the point of waking me up?" the Fat Lady called grumpily after him as he walked away.

Harry wandered dispiritedly toward the library, but halfway there he changed his mind; he didn't feel like working. He turned around and came face-to-face with Filch, who had obviously just seen off the last of the Hogsmeade visitors.

"What are you doing?" Filch snarled suspiciously.

"Nothing," said Harry truthfully.

“Nothing!” spat Filch, his jowls quivering unpleasantly. “A likely story! Sneaking around on your own — why aren’t you in Hogsmeade buying Stink Pellets and Belch Powder and Whizzing Worms like the rest of your nasty little friends?”

Harry shrugged.

“Well, get back to your common room where you belong!” snapped Filch, and he stood glaring until Harry had passed out of sight.

But Harry didn’t go back to the common room; he climbed a staircase, thinking vaguely of visiting the Owlery to see Hedwig, and was walking along another corridor when a voice from inside one of the rooms said, “Harry?”

Harry doubled back to see who had spoken and met Professor Lupin, looking around his office door.

“What are you doing?” said Lupin, though in a very different voice from Filch. “Where are Ron and Hermione?”

“Hogsmeade,” said Harry, in a would-be casual voice.

“Ah,” said Lupin. He considered Harry for a moment. “Why don’t you come in? I’ve just taken delivery of a Grindylow for our next lesson.”

“A what?” said Harry.

He followed Lupin into his office. In the corner stood a very large tank of water. A sickly green creature with sharp little horns had its face pressed against the glass, pulling faces and flexing its long, spindly fingers.

“Water demon,” said Lupin, surveying the Grindylow thoughtfully. “We shouldn’t have much difficulty with him, not after the Kappas. The trick is to break his grip. You notice the abnormally long fingers? Strong, but very brittle.”

The Grindylow bared its green teeth and then buried itself in a tangle of weeds in a corner.

“Cup of tea?” Lupin said, looking around for his kettle. “I was just thinking of making one.”

“All right,” said Harry awkwardly.

Lupin tapped the kettle with his wand and a blast of steam issued suddenly from the spout.

“Sit down,” said Lupin, taking the lid off a dusty tin. “I’ve only got teabags, I’m afraid — but I daresay you’ve had enough of tea leaves?”

Harry looked at him. Lupin’s eyes were twinkling.

“How did you know about that?” Harry asked.

"Professor McGonagall told me," said Lupin, passing Harry a chipped mug of tea. "You're not worried, are you?"

"No," said Harry.

He thought for a moment of telling Lupin about the dog he'd seen in Magnolia Crescent but decided not to. He didn't want Lupin to think he was a coward, especially since Lupin already seemed to think he couldn't cope with a Boggart.

Something of Harry's thoughts seemed to have shown on his face, because Lupin said, "Anything worrying you, Harry?"

"No," Harry lied. He drank a bit of tea and watched the Grindylow brandishing a fist at him. "Yes," he said suddenly, putting his tea down on Lupin's desk. "You know that day we fought the Boggart?"

"Yes," said Lupin slowly.

"Why didn't you let me fight it?" said Harry abruptly.

Lupin raised his eyebrows.

"I would have thought that was obvious, Harry," he said, sounding surprised.

Harry, who had expected Lupin to deny that he'd done any such thing, was taken aback.

"Why?" he said again.

"Well," said Lupin, frowning slightly, "I assumed that if the Boggart faced you, it would assume the shape of Lord Voldemort."

Harry stared. Not only was this the last answer he'd expected, but Lupin had said Voldemort's name. The only person Harry had ever heard say the name aloud (apart from himself) was Professor Dumbledore.

"Clearly, I was wrong," said Lupin, still frowning at Harry. "But I didn't think it a good idea for Lord Voldemort to materialize in the staffroom. I imagined that people would panic."

"I didn't think of Voldemort," said Harry honestly. "I — I remembered those Dementors."

"I see," said Lupin thoughtfully. "Well, well…I'm impressed." He smiled slightly at the look of surprise on Harry's face. "That suggests that what you fear most of all is — fear. Very wise, Harry."

Harry didn't know what to say to that, so he drank some more tea.

"So you've been thinking that I didn't believe you capable of fighting the Boggart?" said Lupin shrewdly.

"Well…yeah," said Harry. He was suddenly feeling a lot happier. "Professor Lupin, you know the Dementors —"

He was interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Come in," called Lupin.

The door opened, and in came Snape. He was carrying a goblet, which was smoking faintly, and stopped at the sight of Harry, his black eyes narrowing.

"Ah, Severus," said Lupin, smiling. "Thanks very much. Could you leave it here on the desk for me?"

Snape set down the smoking goblet, his eyes wandering between Harry and Lupin.

"I was just showing Harry my Grindylow," said Lupin pleasantly, pointing at the tank.

"Fascinating," said Snape, without looking at it. "You should drink that directly, Lupin."

"Yes, Yes, I will," said Lupin.

"I made an entire cauldronful," Snape continued. "If you need more."

"I should probably have some again tomorrow. Thanks very much, Severus."

"Not at all," said Snape, but there was a look in his eye Harry didn't like. He backed out of the room, unsmiling and watchful.

Harry looked curiously at the goblet. Lupin smiled.

"Professor Snape has very kindly concocted a potion for me," he said. "I have never been much of a potion-brewer and this one is particularly complex." He picked up the goblet and sniffed it. "Pity sugar makes it useless," he added, taking a sip and shuddering.

"Why —?" Harry began. Lupin looked at him and answered the unfinished question.

"I've been feeling a bit off-color," he said. "This potion is the only thing that helps. I am very lucky to be working alongside Professor Snape; there aren't many wizards who are up to making it."

Professor Lupin took another sip and Harry had a crazy urge to knock the goblet out of his hands.

"Professor Snape's very interested in the Dark Arts," he blurted out.

"Really?" said Lupin, looking only mildly interested as he took another gulp of potion.

"Some people reckon —" Harry hesitated, then plunged recklessly on, "some people reckon he'd do anything to get the Defense Against the Dark Arts job."

Lupin drained the goblet and pulled a face.

"Disgusting," he said. "Well, Harry, I'd better get back to work. See you at the feast later."

"Right," said Harry, putting down his empty teacup.

The empty goblet was still smoking.

"There you go," said Ron. "We got as much as we could carry."

A shower of brilliantly colored sweets fell into Harry's lap. It was dusk, and Ron and Hermione had just turned up in the common room, pink-faced from the cold wind and looking as though they'd had the time of their lives.

"Thanks," said Harry, picking up a packet of tiny black Pepper Imps. "What's Hogsmeade like? Where did you go?"

By the sound of it — everywhere. Dervish and Banges, the wizarding equipment shop, Zonko's Joke Shop, into the Three Broomsticks for foaming mugs of hot butterbeer, and many places besides.

"The post office, Harry! About two hundred owls, all sitting on shelves, all color-coded depending on how fast you want your letter to get there!"

"Honeydukes has got a new kind of fudge; they were giving out free samples, there's a bit, look —"

"We think we saw an ogre, honestly, they get all sorts at the Three Broomsticks —"

"Wish we could have brought you some butterbeer, really warms you up —"

"What did you do?" said Hermione, looking anxious. "Did you get any work done?"

"No," said Harry. "Lupin made me a cup of tea in his office. And then Snape came in…"

He told them all about the goblet. Ron's mouth fell open.

"*Lupin drank it*?" he gasped. "Is he mad?"

Hermione checked her watch.

"We'd better go down, you know, the feast'll be starting in five minutes." They hurried through the portrait hole and into the crowd, still discussing Snape.

"But if he — you know —" Hermione dropped her voice, glancing nervously around, "if he *was* trying to — to poison Lupin — he wouldn't have done it in front of Harry."

"Yeah, maybe," said Harry as they reached the entrance hall and crossed into the Great Hall. It had been decorated with hundreds and hundreds of candle-filled pumpkins, a cloud of fluttering live bats, and many flaming orange streamers, which were swimming lazily across the stormy ceiling like brilliant watersnakes.

The food was delicious; even Hermione and Ron, who were full to bursting with Honeydukes sweets, managed second helpings of everything. Harry kept glancing at the staff table. Professor Lupin looked cheerful and as well as he ever did; he was talking animatedly to tiny little Professor Flitwick, the Charms teacher. Harry moved his eyes along the table, to the place where Snape sat. Was he imagining it, or were Snape's eyes flickering toward Lupin more often than was natural?

The feast finished with an entertainment provided by the Hogwarts ghosts. They popped out of the walls and tables to do a bit of formation gliding; Nearly Headless Nick, the Gryffindor ghost, had a great success with a reenactment of his own botched beheading.

It had been such a pleasant evening that Harry's good mood couldn't even be spoiled by Malfoy, who shouted through the crowd as they all left the hall, "The Dementors send their love, Potter!"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione followed the rest of the Gryffindors along the usual path to Gryffindor Tower, but when they reached the corridor that ended with the portrait of the Fat Lady, they found it jammed with students.

"Why isn't anyone going in?" said Ron curiously.

Harry peered over the heads in front of him. The portrait seemed to be closed.

"Let me through, please," came Percy's voice, and he came bustling importantly through the crowd. "What's the holdup here? You can't all have forgotten the password — excuse me, I'm Head Boy —"

And then a silence fell over the crowd, from the front first, so that a chill seemed to spread down the corridor. They heard Percy say, in a suddenly sharp voice, "Somebody get Professor Dumbledore. Quick."

People's heads turned; those at the back were standing on tiptoe.

"What's going on?" said Ginny, who had just arrived.

A moment later, Professor Dumbledore was there, sweeping toward the portrait; the Gryffindors squeezed together to let him through, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione moved closer to see what the trouble was.

"Oh, my —" Hermione grabbed Harry's arm.

The Fat Lady had vanished from her portrait, which had been slashed so viciously that strips of canvas littered the floor; great chunks of it had been torn away completely. Dumbledore took one quick look at the ruined painting and turned, his eyes somber, to see Professors McGonagall, Lupin, and Snape hurrying toward him.

"We need to find her," said Dumbledore. "Professor McGonagall, please go to Mr. Filch at once and tell him to search every painting in the castle for the Fat Lady."

"You'll be lucky!" said a cackling voice.

It was Peeves the Poltergeist, bobbing over the crowd and looking delighted, as he always did, at the sight of wreckage or worry.

“What do you mean, Peeves?” said Dumbledore calmly, and Peeves’s grin faded a little. He didn’t dare taunt Dumbledore. Instead he adopted an oily voice that was no better than his cackle. “Ashamed, Your Headship, sir. Doesn’t want to be seen. She’s a horrible mess. Saw her running through the landscape up on the fourth floor, sir, dodging between the trees. Crying something dreadful,” he said happily. “Poor thing.” he added unconvincingly.

“Did she say who did it?” said Dumbledore quietly.

“Oh yes, Professorhead,” said Peeves, with the air of one cradling a large bombshell in his arms. “He got very angry when she wouldn’t let him in, you see.” Peeves flipped over and grinned at Dumbledore from between his own legs. “Nasty temper he’s got, that Sirius Black.”

CHAPTER NINE

GRIM DEFEAT

Professor Dumbledore sent all the Gryffindors back to the Great Hall, where they were joined ten minutes later by the students from Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin, who all looked extremely confused.

"The teachers and I need to conduct a thorough search of the castle," Professor Dumbledore told them as Professors McGonagall and Flitwick closed all doors into the hall. "I'm afraid that, for your own safety, you will have to spend the night here. I want the prefects to stand guard over the entrances to the hall and I am leaving the Head Boy and Girl in charge. Any disturbance should be reported to me immediately," he added to Percy, who was looking immensely proud and important. "Send word with one of the ghosts."

Professor Dumbledore paused, about to leave the hall, and said, "Oh, yes, you'll be needing…"

One casual wave of his wand and the long tables flew to the edges of the hall and stood themselves against the walls; another wave, and the floor was covered with hundreds of squashy purple sleeping bags.

"Sleep well," said Professor Dumbledore, closing the door behind him.

The hall immediately began to buzz excitedly; the Gryffindors were telling the rest of the school what had just happened.

"Everyone into their sleeping bags!" shouted Percy. "Come on, now, no more talking! Lights out in ten minutes!"

"C'mon," Ron said to Harry and Hermione; they seized three sleeping bags and dragged them into a corner.

"Do you think Black's still in the castle?" Hermione whispered anxiously.

"Dumbledore obviously thinks he might be," said Ron.

"It's very lucky he picked tonight, you know," said Hermione as they climbed fully dressed into their sleeping bags and propped themselves on their elbows to talk. "The one night we weren't in the tower…"

"I reckon he's lost track of time, being on the run," said Ron. "Didn't realize it was Halloween. Otherwise he'd have come bursting in here."

Hermione shuddered.

All around them, people were asking one another the same question: "*How did he get in*?"

"Maybe he knows how to Apparate," said a Ravenclaw a few feet away, "Just appear out of thin air, you know."

"Disguised himself, probably," said a Hufflepuff fifth year.

"He could've flown in," suggested Dean Thomas.

"Honestly, am I the *only* person who's ever bothered to read *Hogwarts, A History*?" said Hermione crossly to Harry and Ron.

"Probably," said Ron. "Why?"

"Because the castle's protected by more than walls, you know," said Hermione. "There are all sorts of enchantments on it, to stop people entering by stealth. You can't just Apparate in here. And I'd like to see the disguise that could fool those Dementors. They're guarding every single entrance to the grounds. They'd have seen him fly in too. And Filch knows all the secret passages, they'll have them covered…"

"The lights are going out now!" Percy shouted. "I want everyone in their sleeping bags and no more talking!"

The candles all went out at once. The only light now came from the silvery ghosts, who were drifting about talking seriously to the prefects, and the enchanted ceiling, which, like the sky outside, was scattered with stars. What with that, and the whispering that still filled the hall, Harry felt as though he were sleeping outdoors in a light wind.

Once every hour, a teacher would reappear in the Hall to check that everything was quiet. Around three in the morning, when many students had finally fallen asleep, Professor Dumbledore came in. Harry watched him looking around for Percy, who had been prowling between the sleeping bags, telling people off for talking. Percy was only a short way away from Harry, Ron, and Hermione, who quickly pretended to be asleep as Dumbledore's footsteps drew nearer.

"Any sign of him, Professor?" asked Percy in a whisper.

"No. All well here?"

"Everything under control, sir."

"Good. There's no point moving them all now. I've found a temporary guardian for the Gryffindor portrait hole. You'll be able to move them back in tomorrow."

"And the Fat Lady, sir?"

"Hiding in a map of Argyllshire on the second floor. Apparently she refused to let Black in without the password, so he attacked. She's still very distressed, but once she's calmed down, I'll have Mr. Filch restore her."

Harry heard the door of the hall creak open again, and more footsteps.

“Headmaster?” It was Snape. Harry kept quite still, listening hard. “The whole of the third floor has been searched. He’s not there. And Filch has done the dungeons; nothing there either.”

“What about the Astronomy tower? Professor Trelawney’s room? The Owlery?”

“All searched…”

“Very well, Severus. I didn’t really expect Black to linger.”

“Have you any theory as to how he got in, Professor?” asked Snape.

Harry raised his head very slightly off his arms to free his other ear.

“Many, Severus, each of them as unlikely as the next.”

Harry opened his eyes a fraction and squinted up to where they stood; Dumbledore’s back was to him, but he could see Percy’s face, rapt with attention, and Snape’s profile, which looked angry.

“You remember the conversation we had, Headmaster, just before — ah — the start of term?” said Snape, who was barely opening his lips, as though trying to block Percy out of the conversation.

“I do, Severus,” said Dumbledore, and there was something like warning in his voice.

“It seems — almost impossible — that Black could have entered the school without inside help. I did express my concerns when you appointed —”

“I do not believe a single person inside this castle would have helped Black enter it,” said Dumbledore, and his tone made it so clear that the subject was closed that Snape didn’t reply. “I must go down to the Dementors,” said Dumbledore. “I said I would inform them when our search was complete.”

“Didn’t they want to help, sir?” said Percy.

“Oh yes,” said Dumbledore coldly. “But I’m afraid no Dementor will cross the threshold of this castle while I am Headmaster.”

Percy looked slightly abashed. Dumbledore left the hall, walking quickly and quietly. Snape stood for a moment, watching the headmaster with an expression of deep resentment on his face; then he too left.

Harry glanced sideways at Ron and Hermione. Both of them had their eyes open too, reflecting the starry ceiling.

“What was all that about?” Ron mouthed.

The school talked of nothing but Sirius Black for the next few days. The theories about how he had entered the castle became wilder and wilder; Hannah Abbott, from Hufflepuff, spent much of their next Herbology class telling anyone who’d listen that Black could turn into a flowering shrub.

The Fat Lady's ripped canvas had been taken off the wall and replaced with the portrait of Sir Cadogan and his fat gray pony. Nobody was very happy about this. Sir Cadogan spent half his time challenging people to duels, and the rest thinking up ridiculously complicated passwords, which he changed at least twice a day.

"He's a complete lunatic," said Seamus Finnigan angrily to Percy. "Can't we get anyone else?"

"None of the other pictures wanted the job," said Percy. "Frightened of what happened to the Fat Lady. Sir Cadogan was the only one brave enough to volunteer."

Sir Cadogan, however, was the least of Harry's worries. He was now being closely watched. Teachers found excuses to walk along corridors with him, and Percy Weasley (acting, Harry suspected, on his mother's orders) was tailing him everywhere like an extremely pompous guard dog. To cap it all, Professor McGonagall summoned Harry into her office, with such a somber expression on her face Harry thought someone must have died.

"There's no point hiding it from you any longer, Potter," she said in a very serious voice. "I know this will come as a shock to you, but Sirius Black —"

"I know he's after me," said Harry wearily. "I heard Ron's dad telling his mum. Mr. Weasley works for the Ministry of Magic."

Professor McGonagall seemed very taken aback. She stared at Harry for a moment or two, then said, "I see! Well, in that case, Potter, you'll understand why I don't think it's a good idea for you to be practicing Quidditch in the evenings. Out on the field with only your team members, it's very exposed, Potter —"

"We've got our first match on Saturday!" said Harry, outraged. "I've got to train, Professor!"

Professor McGonagall considered him intently. Harry knew she was deeply interested in the Gryffindor team's prospects; it had been she, after all, who'd suggested him as Seeker in the first Place. He waited, holding his breath.

"Hmm…"Professor McGonagall stood up and stared out of the window at the Quidditch field, just visible through the rain. "Well…goodness knows, I'd like to see us win the Cup at last…but all the same, Potter…I'd be happier if a teacher were present. I'll ask Madam Hooch to oversee your training sessions."

The weather worsened steadily as the first Quidditch match drew nearer. Undaunted, the Gryffindor team was training harder than ever under the eye of Madam Hooch. Then, at their final training session before Saturday's match, Oliver Wood gave his team some unwelcome news.

"We're not playing Slytherin!" he told them, looking very angry. "Flint's just been to see me. We're playing Hufflepuff instead."

"Why?" chorused the rest of the team.

"Flint's excuse is that their Seeker's arm's still injured," said Wood, grinding his teeth furiously. "But it's obvious why they're doing it. Don't want to play in this weather. Think it'll damage their chances…"

There had been strong winds and heavy rain all day, and as Wood spoke, they heard a distant rumble of thunder.

"There's nothing wrong with Malfoy's arm!" said Harry furiously. "He's faking it!"

"I know that, but we can't prove it," said Wood bitterly, "And we've been practicing all those moves assuming we're playing Slytherin, and instead it's Hufflepuff, and their style's quite different. They've got a new Captain and Seeker, Cedric Diggory —"

Angelina, Alicia, and Katie suddenly giggled.

"What?" said Wood, frowning at this lighthearted behavior.

"He's that tall, good-looking one, isn't he?" said Angelina.

"Strong and silent," said Katie, and they started to giggle again.

"He's only silent because he's too thick to string two words together," said Fred impatiently. "I don't know why you're worried, Oliver, Hufflepuff is a pushover. Last time we played them, Harry caught the Snitch in about five minutes, remember?"

"We were playing in completely different conditions!" Wood shouted, his eyes bulging slightly. "Diggory's put a very strong side together! He's an excellent Seeker! I was afraid you'd take it like this! We mustn't relax! We must keep our focus! Slytherin is trying to wrong-foot us! We *must* win!"

"Oliver, calm down!" said Fred, looking slightly alarmed. "We're taking Hufflepuff very seriously. *Seriously*."

The day before the match, the winds reached howling point and the rain fell harder than ever. It was so dark inside the corridors and classrooms that extra torches and lanterns were lit. The Slytherin team was looking very smug indeed, and none more so than Malfoy.

"Ah, if only my arm was feeling a bit better!" he sighed as the gale outside pounded the windows.

Harry had no room in his head to worry about anything except the match tomorrow. Oliver Wood kept hurrying up to him between classes and giving him tips. The third time this happened, Wood talked for so long that Harry suddenly realized he was ten minutes late for Defense Against

the Dark Arts, and set off at a run with Wood shouting after him, “Diggory’s got a very fast swerve, Harry, so you might want to try looping him —”

Harry skidded to a halt outside the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, pulled the door open, and dashed inside.

“Sorry I’m late, Professor Lupin. I —”

But it wasn’t Professor Lupin who looked up at him from the teacher’s desk; it was Snape.

“This lesson began ten minutes ago, Potter, so I think we’ll make it ten points from Gryffindor. Sit down.”

But Harry didn’t move.

“Where’s Professor Lupin?” he said.

“He says he is feeling too ill to teach today,” said Snape with a twisted smile. “I believe I told you to sit down?”

But Harry stayed where he was.

“What’s wrong with him?”

Snape’s black eyes glittered.

“Nothing life-threatening,” he said, looking as though he wished it were. “Five more points from Gryffindor, and if I have to ask you to sit down again, it will be fifty.”

Harry walked slowly to his seat and sat down. Snape looked around at the class.

“As I was saying before Potter interrupted, Professor Lupin has not left any record of the topics you have covered so far —”

“Please, sir, we’ve done Boggarts, Red Caps, Kappas, and Grindylows,” said Hermione quickly, “and we’re just about to start —”

“Be quiet,” said Snape coldly. “I did not ask for information. I was merely commenting on Professor Lupin’s lack of organization.”

“He’s the best Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher we’ve ever had,” said Dean Thomas boldly, and there was a murmur of agreement from the rest of the class. Snape looked more menacing than ever.

“You are easily satisfied. Lupin is hardly overtaxing you — I would expect first years to be able to deal with Red Caps and Grindylows. Today we shall discuss —”

Harry watched him flick through the textbook, to the very back chapter, which he must know they hadn’t covered.

“— werewolves,” said Snape.

“But, sir,” said Hermione, seemingly unable to restrain herself, “we’re not supposed to do werewolves yet, we’re due to start Hinkypunks —”

“Miss Granger,” said Snape in a voice of deadly calm, “I was under the impression that I am teaching this lesson, not you. And I am telling you all to turn to page 394.” He glanced around again. “*All of you! Now!*”

With many bitter sidelong looks and some sullen muttering, the class opened their books.

“Which of you can tell me how we distinguish between the werewolf and the true wolf?” said Snape.

Everyone sat in motionless silence; everyone except Hermione, whose hand, as it so often did, had shot straight into the air.

“Anyone?” Snape said, ignoring Hermione. His twisted smile was back. “Are you telling me that Professor Lupin hasn’t even taught you the basic distinction between —”

“We told you,” said Parvati suddenly, “we haven’t got as far as werewolves yet, we’re still on--”

“*Silence*!” snarled Snape. “Well, well, well, I never thought I’d meet a third-year class who wouldn’t even recognize a werewolf when they saw one. I shall make a point of informing Professor Dumbledore how very behind you all are…”

“Please, sir,” said Hermione, whose hand was still in the air, “the werewolf differs from the true wolf in several small ways. The snout of the werewolf —”

“That is the second time you have spoken out of turn, Miss Granger,” said Snape coolly. “Five more points from Gryffindor for being an insufferable know-it-all.”

Hermione went very red, put down her hand, and stared at the floor with her eyes full of tears. It was a mark of how much the class loathed Snape that they were all glaring at him, because every one of them had called Hermione a know-it-all at least once, and Ron, who told Hermione she was a know-it-all at least twice a week, said loudly, “You asked us a question and she knows the answer! Why ask if you don’t want to be told?”

The class knew instantly he’d gone too far. Snape advanced on Ron slowly, and the room held its breath.

“Detention, Weasley,” Snape said silkily, his face very close to Ron’s. “And if I ever hear you criticize the way I teach a class again, you will be very sorry indeed.”

No one made a sound throughout the rest of the lesson. They sat and made notes on werewolves from the textbook, while Snape prowled up and down the rows of desks, examining the work they had been doing with Professor Lupin.

“Very poorly explained…That is incorrect, the Kappa is more commonly found in Mongolia…Professor Lupin gave this eight out of ten? I wouldn’t have given it three…”

When the bell rang at last, Snape held them back.

“You will each write an essay, to be handed in to me, on the ways you recognize and kill werewolves. I want two rolls of parchment on the subject, and I want them by Monday morning. It is time somebody took this class in hand. Weasley, stay behind, we need to arrange your detention.”

Harry and Hermione left the room with the rest of the class, who waited until they were well out of earshot, then burst into a furious tirade about Snape.

“Snape’s never been like this with any of our other Defense Against the Dark Arts teachers, even if he did want the job,” Harry said to Hermione. “Why’s he got it in for Lupin? D’you think this is all because of the Boggart?”

“I don’t know,” said Hermione pensively. “But I really hope Professor Lupin gets better soon…”

Ron caught up with them five minutes later, in a towering rage.

“D’you know what that —” (he called Snape something that made Hermione say “*Ron*!”) “— is making me do? I’ve got to scrub out the bedpans in the hospital wing. *Without magic*!” He was breathing deeply, his fists clenched. “Why couldn’t Black have hidden in Snape’s office, eh? He could have finished him off for us!”

Harry woke extremely early the next morning; so early that it was still dark. For a moment he thought the roaring of the wind had woken him. Then he felt a cold breeze on the back of his neck and sat bolt upright — Peeves the Poltergeist had been floating next to him, blowing hard in his ear.

“What did you do that for?” said Harry furiously. Peeves puffed out his cheeks, blew hard, and zoomed backward out of the room, cackling.

Harry fumbled for his alarm clock and looked at it. It was half past four. Cursing Peeves, he rolled over and tried to get back to sleep, but it was very difficult, now that he was awake, to ignore the sounds of the thunder rumbling overhead, the pounding of the wind against the castle walls, and the distant creaking of the trees in the Forbidden Forest. In a few hours he would be out on the Quidditch field, battling through that gale. Finally, he gave up any thought of more sleep, got up, dressed, picked up his Nimbus Two Thousand, and walked quietly out of the dormitory.

As Harry opened the door, something brushed against his leg. He bent down just in time to grab Crookshanks by the end of his bushy tail and drag him outside.

“You know, I reckon Ron was right about you,” Harry told Crookshanks suspiciously. “There are plenty of mice around this place — go and chase them. Go on,” he added, nudging Crookshanks down the spiral staircase with his foot. “Leave Scabbers alone.”

The noise of the storm was even louder in the common room. Harry knew better than to think the match would be canceled; Quidditch matches weren’t called off for trifles like thunderstorms. Nevertheless, he was starting to feel very apprehensive. Wood had pointed out Cedric Diggory to him in the corridor; Diggory was a fifth year and a lot bigger than Harry. Seekers were usually light and speedy, but Diggory’s weight would be an advantage in this weather because he was less likely to be blown off course.

Harry whiled away the hours until dawn in front of the fire, getting up every now and then to stop Crookshanks from sneaking up the boys’ staircase again. At long last Harry thought it must be time for breakfast, so he headed through the portrait hole alone.

“Stand and fight, you mangy cur!” yelled Sir Cadogan.

“Oh, shut up,” Harry yawned.

He revived a bit over a large bowl of porridge, and by the time he’d started on toast, the rest of the team had turned up.

“It’s going to be a tough one,” said Wood, who wasn’t eating anything.

“Stop worrying, Oliver,” said Alicia soothingly, “we don’t mind a bit of rain.”

But it was considerably more than a bit of rain. Such was the popularity of Quidditch that the whole school turned out to watch the match as usual, but they ran down the lawns toward the Quidditch field, heads bowed against the ferocious wind, umbrellas being whipped out of their hands as they went. just before he entered the locker room, Harry saw Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, laughing and pointing at him from under an enormous umbrella on their way to the stadium.

The team changed into their scarlet robes and waited for Wood’s usual pre-match pep talk, but it didn’t come. He tried to speak several times, made an odd gulping noise, then shook his head hopelessly and beckoned them to follow him.

The wind was so strong that they staggered sideways as they walked out onto the field. If the crowd was cheering, they couldn’t hear it over the fresh rolls of thunder. Rain was splattering over Harry’s glasses. How on earth was he going to see the Snitch in this?

The Hufflepuffs were approaching from the opposite side of the field, wearing canary-yellow robes. The Captains walked up to each other and shook hands; Diggory smiled at Wood but Wood now looked as though he had lockjaw and merely nodded. Harry saw Madam Hooch’s mouth form

the words, "Mount Your brooms." He pulled his right foot out of the mud with a squelch and swung it over his Nimbus Two Thousand. Madam Hooch put her whistle to her lips and gave it a blast that sounded shrill and distant — they were off.

Harry rose fast, but his Nimbus was swerving slightly with the wind. He held it as steady as he could and turned, squinting into the rain.

Within five minutes Harry was soaked to his skin and frozen, hardly able to see his teammates, let alone the tiny Snitch. He flew backward and forward across the field past blurred red and yellow shapes, with no idea of what was happening in the rest of the game. He couldn't hear the commentary over the wind. The crowd was hidden beneath a sea of cloaks and battered umbrellas. Twice Harry came very close to being unseated by a Bludger; his vision was so clouded by the rain on his glasses he hadn't seen them coming.

He lost track of time. It was getting harder and harder to hold his broom straight. The sky was getting darker, as though night had decided to come early. Twice Harry nearly hit another player, without knowing whether it was a teammate or opponent; everyone was now so wet, and the rain so thick, he could hardly tell them apart…

With the first flash of lightning came the sound of Madam Hooch's whistle; Harry could just see the outline of Wood through the thick rain, gesturing him to the ground. The whole team splashed down into the mud.

"I called for time-out!" Wood roared at his team. "Come on, under here —"

They huddled at the edge of the field under a large umbrella; Harry took off his glasses and wiped them hurriedly on his robes.

"What's the score?"

"We're fifty points up," said Wood, "but unless we get the Snitch soon, we'll be playing into the night."

"I've got no chance with these on," Harry said exasperatedly, waving his glasses.

At that very moment, Hermione appeared at his shoulder; she was holding her cloak over her head and was, inexplicably, beaming.

"I've had an idea, Harry! Give me your glasses, quick!"

He handed them to her, and as the team watched in amazement, Hermione tapped them with her wand and said, "*Impervius!*"

"There!" she said, handing them back to Harry. "They'll repel water!"

Wood looked as though he could have kissed her.

“Brilliant!” he called hoarsely after her as she disappeared into the crowd. “Okay, team, let’s go for it!”

Hermione’s spell had done the trick. Harry was still numb with cold, still wetter than he’d ever been in his life, but he could see. Full of fresh determination, he urged his broom through the turbulent air, staring in every direction for the Snitch, avoiding a Bludger, ducking beneath Diggory, who was streaking in the opposite direction…

There was another clap of thunder, followed immediately by forked lightning. This was getting more and more dangerous. Harry needed to get the Snitch quickly —

He turned, intending to head back toward the middle of the field, but at that moment, another flash of lightning illuminated the stands, and Harry saw something that distracted him completely, the silhouette of an enormous shaggy black dog, clearly imprinted against the sky, motionless in the topmost, empty row of seats.

Harry’s numb hands slipped on the broom handle and his Nimbus dropped a few feet. Shaking his sodden bangs out of his eyes, he squinted back into the stands. The dog had vanished.

“Harry!” came Wood’s anguished yell from the Gryffindor goal posts. “Harry, behind you!”

Harry looked wildly around. Cedric Diggory was pelting up the field, and a tiny speck of gold was shimmering in the rain-filled air between them…

With a jolt of panic, Harry threw himself flat to the broom handle and zoomed toward the Snitch.

“Come on!” he growled at his Nimbus as the rain whipped his face. “*Faster*!”

But something odd was happening. An eerie silence was falling across the stadium. The wind, though as strong as ever, was forgetting to roar. It was as though someone had turned off the sound, as though Harry had gone suddenly deaf — what was going on?

And then a horribly familiar wave of cold swept over him, inside him, just as he became aware of something moving on the field below…

Before he’d had time to think, Harry had taken his eyes off the Snitch and looked down.

At least a hundred Dementors, their hidden faces pointing up at him, were standing beneath him. It was as though freezing water were rising in his chest, cutting at his insides. And then he heard it again…Someone was screaming, screaming inside his head…a woman…

“Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry!”

“Stand aside, you silly girl…stand aside, now…”

“Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead —”

Numbing, swirling white mist was filling Harry's brain…What was he doing? Why was he flying? He needed to help her…She was going to die…She was going to be murdered…

He was falling, falling through the icy mist.

"*Not Harry! Please…have mercy…have mercy…*"

A shrill voice was laughing, the woman was screaming, and Harry knew no more.

"Lucky the ground was so soft."

"I thought he was dead for sure."

"But he didn't even break his glasses."

Harry could hear the voices whispering, but they made no sense whatsoever. He didn't have a clue where he was, or how he'd got there, or what he'd been doing before he got there. All he knew was that every inch of him was aching as though it had been beaten.

"That was the scariest thing I've ever seen in my life."

Scariest…the scariest thing…hooded black figures…cold…screaming…

Harry's eyes snapped open. He was lying in the hospital wing. The Gryffindor Quidditch team, spattered with mud from head to foot, was gathered around his bed. Ron and Hermione were also there, looking as though they'd just climbed out of a swimming pool.

"Harry!" said Fred, who looked extremely white underneath, the mud. "How're you feeling?"

It was as though Harry's memory was on fast forward. The lightning…the Grim…the Snitch…and the Dementors…

"What happened?" he said, sitting up so suddenly they all gasped.

"You fell off," said Fred. "Must've been — what — fifty feet?"

"We thought you'd died," said Alicia, who was shaking.

Hermione made a small, squeaky noise. Her eyes were extremely bloodshot.

"But the match," said Harry. "What happened? Are we doing a replay?"

No one said anything. The horrible truth sank into Harry like a stone.

"We didn't — *lose*?"

"Diggory got the Snitch," said George. "Just after you fell. He didn't realize what had happened. When he looked back and saw you on the ground, he tried to call it off. Wanted a rematch. But they won fair and square…even Wood admits it."

"Where is Wood?" said Harry, suddenly realizing he wasn't there.

"Still in the showers," said Fred. "We think he's trying to drown himself."

Harry put his face to his knees, his hands gripping his hair. Fred grabbed his shoulder and shook it roughly.

"C'mon, Harry, you've never missed the Snitch before."

"There had to be one time you didn't get it," said George.

"It's not over yet," said Fred. "We lost by a hundred points."

"Right? So if Hufflepuff loses to Ravenclaw and we beat Ravenclaw and Slytherin…"

"Hufflepuff'll have to lose by at least two hundred points," said George.

"But if they beat Ravenclaw…"

"No way, Ravenclaw is too good. But if Slytherin loses against Hufflepuff…"

"It all depends on the points — a margin of a hundred either way —"

Harry lay there, not saying a word. They had lost…for the first time ever, he had lost a Quidditch match.

After ten minutes or so, Madam Pomfrey came over to tell the team to leave him in peace.

"We'll come and see you later," Fred told him. "Don't beat yourself up Harry, you're still the best Seeker we've ever had."

The team trooped out, trailing mud behind them. Madam Pomfrey shut the door behind them, looking disapproving. Ron and Hermione moved nearer to Harry's bed.

"Dumbledore was really angry," Hermione said in a quaking voice. "I've never seen him like that before. He ran onto the field as you fell, waved his wand, and you sort of slowed down before you hit the ground. Then he whirled his wand at the Dementors. Shot silver stuff at them. They left the stadium right away…He was furious they'd come onto the grounds. We heard him —"

"Then he magicked you onto a stretcher," said Ron. "And walked up to school with you floating on it. Everyone thought you were…"

His voice faded, but Harry hardly noticed. He was thinking about what the Dementors had done to him…about the screaming voice. He looked up and saw Ron and Hermione looking at him so anxiously that he quickly cast around for something matter-of-fact to say.

"Did someone get my Nimbus?"

Ron and Hermione looked quickly at each other.

"Er —"

"What?" said Harry, looking from one to the other.

"Well…when you fell off, it got blown away," said Hermione hesitantly.

"And?"

“And it hit — it hit — oh, Harry — it hit the Whomping Willow.”

Harry’s insides lurched. The Whomping Willow was a very violent tree that stood alone in the middle of the grounds.

“And?” he said, dreading the answer.

“Well, you know the Whomping Willow,” said Ron. “It — it doesn’t like being hit.”

“Professor Flitwick brought it back just before you came around,” said Hermione in a very small voice.

Slowly, she reached down for a bag at her feet, turned it upside down, and tipped a dozen bits of splintered wood and twig onto the bed, the only remains of Harry’s faithful, finally beaten broomstick.

CHAPTER TEN

THE MARAUDER'S MAP

Madam Pomfrey insisted on keeping Harry in the hospital wing for the rest of the weekend. He didn't argue or complain, but he wouldn't let her throw away the shattered remnants of his Nimbus Two Thousand. He knew he was being stupid, knew that the Nimbus was beyond repair, but Harry couldn't help it; he felt as though he'd lost one of his best friends.

He had a stream of visitors, all intent on cheering him up. Hagrid sent him a bunch of earwiggy flowers that looked like yellow cabbages, and Ginny Weasley, blushing furiously, turned up with a get-well card she had made herself, which sang shrilly unless Harry kept it shut under his bowl of fruit. The Gryffindor team visited again on Sunday morning, this time accompanied by Wood, who told Harry (in a hollow, dead sort of voice) that he didn't blame him in the slightest. Ron and Hermione left Harry's bedside only at night. But nothing anyone said or did could make Harry feel any better, because they knew only half of what was troubling him.

He hadn't told anyone about the Grim, not even Ron and Hermione, because he knew Ron would panic and Hermione would scoff. The fact remained, however, that it had now appeared twice, and both appearances had been followed by near-fatal accidents; the first time, he had nearly been run over by the Knight Bus; the second, fallen fifty feet from his broomstick. Was the Grim going to haunt him until he actually died? Was he going to spend the rest of his life looking over his shoulder for the beast?

And then there were the Dementors. Harry felt sick and humiliated every time he thought of them. Everyone said the Dementors were horrible, but no one else collapsed every time they went near one. No one else heard echoes in their head of their dying parents.

Because Harry knew who that screaming voice belonged to now. He had heard her words, heard them over and over again during the night hours in the hospital wing while he lay awake, staring at the strips of moonlight on the ceiling. When the Dementors approached him, he heard the last moments of his mother's life, her attempts to protect him, Harry, from Lord Voldemort, and Voldemort's laughter before he murdered her…Harry dozed fitfully, sinking into dreams full of clammy, rotted hands and petrified pleading, jerking awake to dwell again on his mother's voice.

It was a relief to return to the noise and bustle of the main school on Monday, where he was forced to think about other things, even if he had to endure Draco Malfoy's taunting. Malfoy was almost beside himself with glee at Gryffindor's defeat. He had finally taken off his bandages, and celebrated having the full use of both arms again by doing spirited imitations of Harry falling off his broom. Malfoy spent much of their next Potions class doing Dementor imitations across the

dungeon; Ron finally cracked and flung a large, slippery crocodile heart at Malfoy, which hit him in the face and caused Snape to take fifty points from Gryffindor.

"If Snape's teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts again, I'm skiving off," said Ron as they headed toward Lupin's classroom after lunch. "Check who's in there, Hermione."

Hermione peered around the classroom door.

"It's okay!"

Professor Lupin was back at work. It certainly looked as though he had been ill. His old robes were hanging more loosely on him and there were dark shadows beneath his eyes; nevertheless, he smiled at the class as they took their seats, and they burst at once into an explosion of complaints about Snape's behavior while Lupin had been ill.

"It's not fair, he was only filling in, why should he give us homework?"

"We don't know anything about werewolves —"

"— two rolls of parchment!"

"Did you tell Professor Snape we haven't covered them yet?" Lupin asked, frowning slightly.

The babble broke out again.

"Yes, but he said we were really behind —"

"— he wouldn't listen —"

"— *two rolls of parchment*!"

Professor Lupin smiled at the look of indignation on every face.

"Don't worry. I'll speak to Professor Snape. You don't have to do the essay."

"Oh *no*," said Hermione, looking very disappointed. "I've already finished it!"

They had a very enjoyable lesson. Professor Lupin had brought along a glass box containing a Hinkypunk, a little one-legged creature who looked as though he were made of wisps of smoke, rather frail and harmless looking.

"Lures travelers into bogs," said Professor Lupin as they took notes. "You notice the lantern dangling from his hand? Hops ahead — people follow the light — then —"

The Hinkypunk made a horrible squelching noise against the glass.

When the bell rang, everyone gathered up their things and headed for the door, Harry among them, but —

"Wait a moment, Harry," Lupin called. "I'd like a word."

Harry doubled back and watched Professor Lupin covering the Hinkypunk's box with a cloth.

“I heard about the match,” said Lupin, turning back to his desk and starting to pile books into his briefcase, “and I’m sorry about your broomstick. Is there any chance of fixing it?”

“No,” said Harry. “The tree smashed it to bits.”

Lupin sighed.

“They planted the Whomping Willow the same year that I arrived at Hogwarts. People used to play a game, trying to get near enough to touch the trunk. In the end, a boy called Davey Gudgeon nearly lost an eye, and we were forbidden to go near it. No broomstick would have a chance.”

“Did you hear about the Dementors too?” said Harry with difficulty.

Lupin looked at him quickly.

“Yes, I did. I don’t think any of us have seen Professor Dumbledore that angry. They have been growing restless for some time…furious at his refusal to let them inside the grounds…I suppose they were the reason you fell?”

“Yes,” said Harry. He hesitated, and then the question he had to ask burst from him before he could stop himself. “*Why*? Why do they affect me like that? Am I just —?”

“It has nothing to do with weakness,” said Professor Lupin sharply, as though he had read Harry’s mind. “The Dementors affect you worse than the others because there are horrors in your past that the others don’t have.”

A ray of wintry sunlight fell across the classroom, illuminating Lupin’s gray hairs and the lines on his young face.

“Dementors are among the foulest creatures that walk this earth. They infest the darkest, filthiest places, they glory in decay and despair, they drain peace, hope, and happiness out of the air around them. Even Muggles feel their presence, though they can’t see them. Get too near a Dementor and every good feeling, every happy memory will be sucked out of you. If it can, the Dementor will feed on you long enough to reduce you to something like itself — soul-less and evil. You’ll be left with nothing but the worst experiences of your life. And the worst that happened to you, Harry, is enough to make anyone fall off their broom. You have nothing to feel ashamed of.”

“When they get near me —” Harry stared at Lupin’s desk, his throat tight. “I can hear Voldemort murdering my mum.”

Lupin made a sudden motion with his arm as though to grip Harry’s shoulder, but thought better of it. There was a moment’s silence, then —

“Why did they have to come to the match?” said Harry bitterly.

"They're getting hungry," said Lupin coolly, shutting his briefcase with a snap. "Dumbledore won't let them into the school, so their supply of human prey has dried up…I don't think they could resist the large crowd around the Quidditch field. All that excitement…emotions running high…it was their idea of a feast."

"Azkaban must be terrible," Harry muttered. Lupin nodded grimly.

"The fortress is set on a tiny island, way out to sea, but they don't need walls and water to keep the prisoners in, not when they're all trapped inside their own heads, incapable of a single cheery thought. Most of them go mad within weeks."

"But Sirius Black escaped from them," Harry said slowly. "He got away…"

Lupin's briefcase slipped from the desk; he had to stoop quickly to catch it.

"Yes," he said, straightening up, "Black must have found a way to fight them. I wouldn't have believed it possible…Dementors are supposed to drain a wizard of his powers if he is left with them too long…"

"*You* made that Dementor on the train back off," said Harry suddenly.

"There are — certain defenses one can use," said Lupin. "But there was only one Dementor on the train. The more there are, the more difficult it becomes to resist."

"What defenses?" said Harry at once. "Can you teach me?"

"I don't pretend to be an expert at fighting Dementors, Harry — quite the contrary…"

"But if the Dementors come to another Quidditch match, I need to be able to fight them —"

Lupin looked into Harry's determined face, hesitated, then said, "Well…all right. I'll try and help. But it'll have to wait until next term, I'm afraid. I have a lot to do before the holidays. I chose a very inconvenient time to fall ill."

What with the promise of anti-Dementor lessons from Lupin, the thought that he might never have to hear his mother's death again, and the fact that Ravenclaw flattened Hufflepuff in their Quidditch match at the end of November, Harry's mood took a definite upturn. Gryffindor were not out of the running after all, although they could not afford to lose another match. Wood became repossessed of his manic energy, and worked his team as hard as ever in the chilly haze of rain that persisted into December. Harry saw no hint of a Dementor within the grounds. Dumbledore's anger seemed to be keeping them at their stations at the entrances.

Two weeks before the end of the term, the sky lightened suddenly to a dazzling, opaline white and the muddy grounds were revealed one morning covered in glittering frost. Inside the castle, there was a buzz of Christmas in the air. Professor Flitwick, the Charms teacher, had already

decorated his classroom with shimmering lights that turned out to be real, fluttering fairies. The students were all happily discussing their plans for the holidays. Both Ron and Hermione had decided to remain at Hogwarts, and though Ron said it was because he couldn't stand two weeks with Percy, and Hermione insisted she needed to use the library, Harry wasn't fooled; they were doing it to keep him company, and he was very grateful.

To everyone's delight except Harry's, there was to be another Hogsmeade trip on the very last weekend of the term.

"We can do all our Christmas shopping there!" said Hermione. "Mum and Dad would really love those Toothflossing Stringmints from Honeydukes!"

Resigned to the fact that he would be the only third year staying behind again, Harry borrowed a copy of *Which Broomstick* from Wood, and decided to spend the day reading up on the different makes. He had been riding one of the school brooms at team practice, an ancient Shooting Star, which was very slow and jerky; he definitely needed a new broom of his own.

On the Saturday morning of the Hogsmeade trip, Harry bid good-bye to Ron and Hermione, who were wrapped in cloaks and scarves, then turned up the marble staircase alone, and headed back toward Gryffindor Tower. Snow had started to fall outside the windows, and the castle was very still and quiet.

"Psst — Harry!"

He turned, halfway along the third-floor corridor, to see Fred and George peering out at him from behind a statue of a humpbacked, one-eyed witch.

"What are you doing?" said Harry curiously. "How come you're not going to Hogsmeade?"

"We've come to give you a bit of festive cheer before we go," said Fred, with a mysterious wink. "Come in here…"

He nodded toward an empty classroom to the left of the one-eyed statue. Harry followed Fred and George inside. George closed the door quietly and then turned, beaming, to look at Harry.

"Early Christmas present for you, Harry," he said.

Fred pulled something from inside his cloak with a flourish and laid it on one of the desks. It was a large, square, very worn piece of parchment with nothing written on it. Harry, suspecting one of Fred and George's jokes, stared at it.

"What's that supposed to be?"

"This, Harry, is the secret of our success," said George, patting the parchment fondly.

"It's a wrench, giving it to you," said Fred, "but we decided last night, your need's greater than ours."

"Anyway, we know it by heart," said George. "We bequeath it to you. We don't really need it anymore."

"And what do I need with a bit of old parchment?" said Harry.

"A bit of old parchment!" said Fred, closing his eyes with a grimace as though Harry had mortally offended him. "Explain, George."

"Well…when we were in our first year, Harry — young, carefree, and innocent —"

Harry snorted. He doubted whether Fred and George had ever been innocent.

"— well, more innocent than we are now — we got into a spot of bother with Filch."

"We let off a Dungbomb in the corridor and it upset him for some reason —"

"So he hauled us off to his office and started threatening us with the usual —"

"— detention —"

"— disembowelment —"

"— and we couldn't help noticing a drawer in one of his filing cabinets marked *Confiscated and Highly Dangerous*."

"Don't tell me —" said Harry, starting to grin.

"Well, what would you've done?" said Fred. "George caused a diversion by dropping another Dungbomb, I whipped the drawer open, and grabbed — *his*."

"It's not as bad as it sounds, you know," said George. "We don't reckon Filch ever found out how to work it. He probably suspected what it was, though, or he wouldn't have confiscated it."

"And you know how to work it?"

"Oh yes," said Fred, smirking. "This little beauty's taught us more than all the teachers in this school."

"You're winding me up," said Harry, looking at the ragged old bit of parchment.

"Oh, are we?" said George.

He took out his wand, touched the parchment lightly, and said, "*I solemnly swear that I am up to no good*."

And at once, thin ink lines began to spread like a spider's web from the point that George's wand had touched. They joined each other, they crisscrossed, they fanned into every corner of the parchment; then words began to blossom across the top, great, curly green words, that proclaimed:

Messrs. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs

Purveyors of Aids to Magical Mischief-Makers are proud to present

THE MARAUDER'S MAP

It was a map showing every detail of the Hogwarts castle and grounds. But the truly remarkable thing were the tiny ink dots moving around it, each labeled with a name in minuscule writing. Astounded, Harry bent over it. A labeled dot in the top left corner showed that Professor Dumbledore was pacing his study; the caretaker's cat, Mrs. Norris, was prowling the second floor; and Peeves the Poltergeist was currently bouncing around the trophy room. And as Harry's eyes traveled up and down the familiar corridors, he noticed something else.

This map showed a set of passages he had never entered. And many of them seemed to lead —

"Right into Hogsmeade," said Fred, tracing one of them with his finger. "There are seven in all. Now, Filch knows about these four" — he pointed them out — "but we're sure we're the only ones who know about *these*. Don't bother with the one behind the mirror on the fourth floor. We used it until last winter, but it's caved in — completely blocked. And we don't reckon anyone's ever used this one, because the Whomping Willow's planted right over the entrance. But this one here, this one leads right into the cellar of Honeydukes. We've used it loads of times. And as you might've noticed, the entrance is right outside this room, through that one-eyed old crone's hump."

"Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs," sighed George, patting the heading of the map. "We owe them so much."

"Noble men, working tirelessly to help a new generation of lawbreakers," said Fred solemnly.

"Right," said George briskly. "Don't forget to wipe it after you've used it —"

"— or anyone can read it," Fred said warningly.

"Just tap it again and say, 'Mischief managed!' And it'll go blank."

"So, young Harry," said Fred, in an uncanny impersonation of Percy, "mind you behave yourself."

"See you in Honeydukes," said George, winking.

They left the room, both smirking in a satisfied sort of way.

Harry stood there, gazing at the miraculous map. He watched the tiny ink Mrs. Norris turn left and pause to sniff at something on the floor. If Filch really didn't know…he wouldn't have to pass the Dementors at all…

But even as he stood there, flooded with excitement, something Harry had once heard Mr. Weasley say came floating out of his memory.

Never trust anything that can think for itself, if you can't see where it keeps its brain.

This map was one of those dangerous magical objects Mr. Weasley had been warning against…*Aids for Magical Mischief Makers*…but then, Harry reasoned, he only wanted to use it to get into Hogsmeade, it wasn't as though he wanted to steal anything or attack anyone…and Fred and George had been using it for years without anything horrible happening…

Harry traced the secret passage to Honeydukes with his finger.

Then, quite suddenly, as though following orders, he rolled up the map, stuffed it inside his robes, and hurried to the door of the classroom. He opened it a couple of inches. There was no one outside. Very carefully, he edged out of the room and behind the statue of the one-eyed witch.

What did he have to do? He pulled out the map again and saw to his astonishment, that a new ink figure had appeared upon it, labeled 'Harry Potter'. This figure was standing exactly where the real Harry was standing, about halfway down the third-floor corridor. Harry watched carefully. His little Ink self appeared to be tapping the witch with his minute wand. Harry quickly took out his real wand and tapped the statue. Nothing happened. He looked back at the map. The tiniest speech bubble had appeared next to his figure. The word inside said, '*Dissendium*.'

"*Dissendium!*" Harry whispered, tapping the stone witch again.

At once, the statue's hump opened wide enough to admit a fairly thin person. Harry glanced quickly up and down the corridor, then tucked the map away again, hoisted himself into the hole headfirst, and pushed himself forward.

He slid a considerable way down what felt like a stone slide, then landed on cold, damp earth. He stood up, looking around. It was pitch dark. He held up his wand, muttered, "*Lumos*!" and saw that he was in a very narrow, low, earthy passageway. He raised the map, tapped it with the tip of his wand, and muttered, "Mischief managed!" The map went blank at once. He folded it carefully, tucked it inside his robes, then, heart beating fast, both excited and apprehensive, he set off.

The passage twisted and turned, more like the burrow of a giant rabbit than anything else. Harry hurried along it, stumbling now and then on the uneven floor, holding his wand out in front of him.

It took ages, but Harry had the thought of Honeydukes to sustain him. After what felt like an hour, the passage began to rise. Panting, Harry sped up, his face hot, his feet very cold.

Ten minutes later, he came to the foot of some worn stone steps, which rose out of sight above him. Careful not to make any noise, Harry began to climb. A hundred steps, two hundred steps, he lost count as he climbed, watching his feet…then, without warning, his head hit something hard.

It seemed to be a trapdoor. Harry stood there, massaging the top of his head, listening. He couldn't hear any sounds above him. Very slowly, he pushed the trapdoor open and peered over the edge.

He was in a cellar, which was full of wooden crates and boxes. Harry climbed out of the trapdoor and replaced it — it blended so perfectly with the dusty floor that it was impossible to tell it was there. Harry crept slowly toward the wooden staircase that led upstairs. Now he could definitely hear voices, not to mention the tinkle of a bell and the opening and shutting of a door.

Wondering what he ought to do, he suddenly heard a door open much closer at hand; somebody was about to come downstairs.

"And get another box of Jelly Slugs, dear, they've nearly cleaned us out —" said a woman's voice.

A pair of feet was coming down the staircase. Harry leapt behind an enormous crate and waited for the footsteps to pass. He heard the man shifting boxes against the opposite wall. He might not get another chance —

Quickly and silently, Harry dodged out from his hiding place and climbed the stairs; looking back, he saw an enormous backside and shiny bald head, buried in a box. Harry reached the door at the top of the stairs, slipped through it, and found himself behind the counter of Honeydukes — he ducked, crept sideways, and then straightened up.

Honeydukes was so crowded with Hogwarts students that no one looked twice at Harry. He edged among them, looking around, and suppressed a laugh as he imagined the look that would spread over Dudley's piggy face if he could see where Harry was now.

There were shelves upon shelves of the most succulent-looking sweets imaginable. Creamy chunks of nougat, shimmering pink squares of coconut ice, fat, honey-colored toffees; hundreds of different kinds of chocolate in neat rows; there was a large barrel of Every Flavor Beans, and another of Fizzing Whizbees, the levitating sherbet balls that Ron had mentioned; along yet another wall were 'Special Effects' — sweets: Droobles Best Blowing Gum (which filled a room with bluebell-colored bubbles that refused to pop for days), the strange, splintery Toothflossing Stringmints, tiny black Pepper Imps ('breathe fire for your friends!'), Ice Mice ('hear your teeth chatter and squeak!'), peppermint creams shaped like toads ('hop realistically in the stomach!'), fragile sugar-spun quills, and exploding bonbons.

Harry squeezed himself through a crowd of sixth years and saw a sign hanging in the farthest corner of the shop (UNUSUAL TASTES). Ron and Hermione were standing underneath it, examining a tray of blood-flavored lollipops. Harry sneaked up behind them.

“Ugh, no, Harry won’t want one of those, they’re for vampires, I expect,” Hermione was saying.

“How about these?” said Ron, shoving a jar of Cockroach Clusters under Hermione’s nose.

“Definitely not,” said Harry.

Ron nearly dropped the jar.

“*Harry*!” squealed Hermione. “What are you doing here? How — how did you —?”

“Wow!” said Ron, looking very impressed, “you’ve learned to Apparate!”

“‘Course I haven’t,” said Harry. He dropped his voice so that none of the sixth years could hear him and told them all about the Marauder’s Map.

“How come Fred and George never gave it to*me*!” said Ron, outraged. “I’m their brother!”

“But Harry isn’t going to keep it!” said Hermione, as though the idea were ludicrous. “He’s going to hand it in to Professor McGonagall, aren’t you, Harry?”

“No, I’m not!” said Harry.

“Are you mad?” said Ron, goggling at Hermione. “Hand in something that good?”

“If I hand it in, I’ll have to say where I got it! Filch would know Fred and George had nicked it!”

“But what about Sirius Black?” Hermione hissed. “He could be using one of the passages on that map to get into the castle! The teachers have got to know!”

“He can’t be getting in through a passage,” said Harry quickly. “There are seven secret tunnels on the map, right? Fred and George reckon Filch already knows about four of them. And of the other three — one of them’s caved in, so no one can get through it. One of them’s got the Whomping Willow planted over the entrance, so you can’t get out of it. And the one I just came through — well — it’s really hard to see the entrance to it down in the cellar — so unless he knew it was there —”

Harry hesitated. What if Black did know the passage was there? Ron, however, cleared his throat significantly, and pointed to a notice pasted on the inside of the sweetshop door.

BY ORDER OF THE MINISTRY OF MAGIC

Customers are reminded that until further notice, Dementors will be patrolling the streets of Hogsmeade every night after sundown. This measure has been put in place for the safety of Hogsmeade residents and will be lifted upon the recapture of Sirius Black. It is therefore advisable that you complete your shopping well before nightfall.

Merry Christmas!

“See?” said Ron quietly. “I’d like to see Black try and break into Honeydukes with Dementors swarming all over the village. Anyway, Hermione, the Honeydukes owners would hear a break-in, wouldn’t they? They live over the shop!”

"Yes, but — but —" Heroine seemed to be struggling to find another problem. "Look, Harry still shouldn't be coming into Hogsmeade. He hasn't got a signed form! If anyone finds out, he'll be in so much trouble! And it's not nightfall yet — what if Sirius Black turns up today? Now?"

"He'd have a job spotting Harry in this," said Ron, nodding through the mullioned windows at the thick, swirling snow. "Come on, Hermione, it's Christmas. Harry deserves a break."

Hermione bit her lip, looking extremely worried.

"Are you going to report me?" Harry asked her, grinning.

"Oh — of course not — but honestly, Harry —"

"Seen the Fizzing Whizbees, Harry?" said Ron, grabbing him and leading him over to their barrel. "And the Jelly Slugs? And the Acid Pops? Fred gave me one of those when I was seven — it burnt a hole right through my tongue. I remember Mum walloping him with her broomstick." Ron stared broodingly into the Acid Pop box. "Reckon Fred'd take a bite of Cockroach Cluster if I told him they were peanuts?"

When Ron and Hermione had paid for all their sweets, the three of them left Honeydukes for the blizzard outside.

Hogsmeade looked like a Christmas card; the little thatched cottages and shops were all covered in a layer of crisp snow; there were holly wreaths on the doors and strings of enchanted candles hanging in the trees.

Harry shivered; unlike the other two, he didn't have his cloak. They headed up the street, heads bowed against the wind, Ron and Hermione shouting through their scarves.

"That's the post office —"

"Zonko's is up there —"

"We could go up to the Shrieking Shack —"

"Tell you what," said Ron, his teeth chattering, "shall we go for a butterbeer in the Three Broomsticks?"

Harry was more than willing; the wind was fierce and his hands were freezing, so they crossed the road, and in a few minutes were entering the tiny inn.

It was extremely crowded, noisy, warm, and smoky. A curvy sort of woman with a pretty face was serving a bunch of rowdy warlocks up at the bar.

"That's Madam Rosmerta," said Ron. "I'll get the drinks, shall I?" he added, going slightly red.

Harry and Hermione made their way to the back of the room, where there was a small, vacant table between the window and a handsome Christmas tree, which stood next to the fireplace. Ron came back five minutes later, carrying three foaming tankards of hot butterbeer.

"Merry Christmas!" he said happily, raising his tankard.

Harry drank deeply. It was the most delicious thing he'd ever tasted and seemed to heat every bit of him from the inside.

A sudden breeze ruffled his hair. The door of the Three Broomsticks had opened again. Harry looked over the rim of his tankard and choked.

Professors McGonagall and Flitwick had just entered the pub with a flurry of snowflakes, shortly followed by Hagrid, who was deep in conversation with a portly man in a lime-green bowler hat and a pinstriped cloak — Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic.

In an instant, Ron and Hermione had both placed hands on the top of Harry's head and forced him off his stool and under the table. Dripping with butterbeer and crouching out of sight, Harry clutched his empty tankard and watched the teachers' and Fudge's feet move toward the bar, pause, then turn and walk right toward him.

Somewhere above him, Hermione whispered, "*Mobiliarbus!*"

The Christmas tree beside their table rose a few inches off the ground, drifted sideways, and landed with a soft thump right in front of their table, hiding them from view. Staring through the dense lower branches, Harry saw four sets of chair legs move back from the table right beside theirs, then heard the grunts and sighs of the teachers and minister as they sat down.

Next he saw another pair of feet, wearing sparkly turquoise high heels, and heard a woman's voice.

"A small gillywater —"

"Mine," said Professor McGonagall's voice.

"Four pints of mulled mead —"

"Ta, Rosmerta," said Hagrid.

"A cherry syrup and soda with ice and umbrella —"

"Mmm!" said Professor Flitwick, smacking his lips.

"So you'll be the red currant rum, Minister."

"Thank you, Rosmerta, m'dear," said Fudge's voice. "Lovely to see you again, I must say. Have one yourself, won't you? Come and join us…"

"Well, thank you very much, Minister."

Harry watched the glittering heels march away and back again. His heart was pounding uncomfortably in his throat. Why hadn't it occurred to him that this was the last weekend of term for the teachers too? And how long were they going to sit there? He needed time to sneak back into Honeydukes if he wanted to return to school tonight…Hermione's leg gave a nervous twitch next to him.

"So, what brings you to this neck of the woods, Minister?" came Madam Rosmerta's voice.

Harry saw the lower part of Fudge's thick body twist in his chair as though he were checking for eavesdroppers. Then he said in a quiet voice, "What else, m'dear, but Sirius Black? I daresay you heard what happened up at the school at Halloween?"

"I did hear a rumor," admitted Madam Rosmerta.

"Did you tell the whole pub, Hagrid?" said Professor McGonagall exasperatedly.

"Do you think Black's still in the area, Minister?" whispered Madam Rosmerta.

"I'm sure of it," said Fudge shortly.

"You know that the Dementors have searched the whole village twice?" said Madam Rosmerta, a slight edge to her voice. "Scared all my customers away…It's very bad for business, Minister."

"Rosmerta, dear, I don't like them any more than you do," said Fudge uncomfortably. "Necessary precaution…unfortunate, but there you are…I've just met some of them. They're in a fury against Dumbledore — he won't let them inside the castle grounds."

"I should think not," said Professor McGonagall sharply. "How are we supposed to teach with those horrors floating around?"

"Hear, hear!" squeaked tiny Professor Flitwick, whose feet were dangling a foot from the ground.

"All the same," demurred Fudge, "they are here to protect you all from something much worse…We all know what Black's capable of…"

"Do you know, I still have trouble believing it," said Madam Rosmerta thoughtfully. "Of all the people to go over to the Dark Side, Sirius Black was the last I'd have thought…I mean, I remember him when he was a boy at Hogwarts. If you'd told me then what he was going to become, I'd have said you'd had too much mead."

"You don't know the half of it, Rosmerta," said Fudge gruffly. "The worst he did isn't widely known."

"The worst?" said Madam Rosmerta, her voice alive with curiosity. "Worse than murdering all those poor people, you mean?"

"I certainly do," said Fudge.

"I can't believe that. What could possibly be worse?"

"You say you remember him at Hogwarts, Rosmerta," murmured Professor McGonagall. "Do you remember who his best friend was?"

"Naturally," said Madam Rosmerta, with a small laugh. "Never saw one without the other, did you? The number of times I had them in here — ooh, they used to make me laugh. Quite the double act, Sirius Black and James Potter!"

Harry dropped his tankard with a loud clunk. Ron kicked him.

"Precisely," said Professor McGonagall. "Black and Potter. Ringleaders of their little gang. Both very bright, of course — exceptionally bright, in fact — but I don't think we've ever had such a pair of troublemakers —"

"I dunno," chuckled Hagrid. "Fred and George Weasley could give 'em a run fer their money."

"You'd have thought Black and Potter were brothers!" chimed in Professor Flitwick. "Inseparable!"

"Of course they were," said Fudge. "Potter trusted Black beyond all his other friends. Nothing changed when they left school. Black was best man when James married Lily. Then they named him godfather to Harry. Harry has no idea, of course. You can imagine how the idea would torment him."

"Because Black turned out to be in league with You-Know-Who?" whispered Madam Rosmerta.

"Worse even than that, m'dear…" Fudge dropped his voice and proceeded in a sort of low rumble. "Not many people are aware that the Potters knew You-Know-Who was after them. Dumbledore, who was of course working tirelessly against You-Know-Who, had a number of useful spies. One of them tipped him off, and he alerted James and Lily at once. He advised them to go into hiding. Well, of course, You-Know-Who wasn't an easy person to hide from. Dumbledore told them that their best chance was the Fidelius Charm."

"How does that work?" said Madam Rosmerta, breathless with interest. Professor Flitwick cleared his throat.

"An immensely complex spell," he said squeakily, "involving the magical concealment of a secret inside a single, living soul. The information is hidden inside the chosen person, or Secret-Keeper, and is henceforth impossible to find — unless, of course, the Secret-Keeper chooses to divulge it. As long as the Secret-Keeper refused to speak, You-Know-Who could search the village where Lily and James were staying for years and never find them, not even if he had his nose pressed against their sitting room window!"

“So Black was the Potters’ Secret-Keeper?” whispered Madam Rosmerta.

“Naturally,” said Professor McGonagall. “James Potter told Dumbledore that Black would die rather than tell where they were, that Black was planning to go into hiding himself…and yet, Dumbledore remained worried. I remember him offering to be the Potters’ Secret-Keeper himself.”

“He suspected Black?” gasped Madam Rosmerta.

“He was sure that somebody close to the Potters had been keeping You-Know-Who informed of their movements,” said Professor McGonagall darkly. “Indeed, he had suspected for some time that someone on our side had turned traitor and was passing a lot of information to You-Know-Who.”

“But James Potter insisted on using Black?”

“He did,” said Fudge heavily. “And then, barely a week after the Fidelius Charm had been performed —”

“Black betrayed them?” breathed Madam Rosmerta.

“He did indeed. Black was tired of his double-agent role, he was ready to declare his support openly for You-Know-Who, and he seems to have planned this for the moment of the Potters’ death. But, as we all know, You-Know-Who met his downfall in little Harry Potter. Powers gone, horribly weakened, he fled. And this left Black in a very nasty position indeed. His master had fallen at the very moment when he, Black, had shown his true colors as a traitor. He had no choice but to run for it —”

“Filthy, stinkin’ turncoat!” Hagrid said, so loudly that half the bar went quiet.

“Shh!” said Professor McGonagall.

“I met him!” growled Hagrid. “I musta bin the last ter see him before he killed all them people! It was me what rescued Harry from Lily an’ James’s house after they was killed! Jus’ got him outta the ruins, poor little thing, with a great slash across his forehead, an’ his parents dead…an’ Sirius Black turns up, on that flyin’ motorbike he used ter ride. Never occurred ter me what he was doin’ there. I didn’ know he’d bin Lily an’ James’s Secret-Keeper. Thought he’d jus’ heard the news o’ You-Know-Who’s attack an’ come ter see what he could do. White an’ shakin’, he was. An’ yeh know what I did? I COMFORTED THE MURDERIN’ TRAITOR!” Hagrid roared.

“Hagrid, please!” said Professor McGonagall. “Keep your voice down!”

“How was I ter know he wasn’ upset abou’ Lily an’ James? It was You-Know-Who he cared abou’! An’ then he says, ‘Give Harry ter me, Hagrid, I’m his godfather, I’ll look after him —’ Ha! But I’d had me orders from Dumbledore, an’ I told Black no, Dumbledore said Harry was ter go ter

his aunt an' uncle's. Black argued, but in the end he gave in. Told me ter take his motorbike ter get Harry there. 'I won't need it anymore,' he says.

"I shoulda known there was somethin' fishy goin' on then. He loved that motorbike, what was he givin' it ter me for? Why wouldn' he need it anymore? Fact was, it was too easy ter trace. Dumbledore knew he'd bin the Potters' Secret-Keeper. Black knew he was goin' ter have ter run fer it that night, knew it was a matter o' hours before the Ministry was after him.

"But what if I'd given Harry to him, eh? I bet he'd've pitched him off the bike halfway out ter sea. His bes' friends' son! But when a wizard goes over ter the Dark Side, there's nothin' and no one that matters to em anymore…"

A long silence followed Hagrid's story. Then Madam Rosmerta said with some satisfaction, "But he didn't manage to disappear, did he? The Ministry of Magic caught up with him next day!"

"Alas, if only we had," said Fudge bitterly. "It was not we who found him. It was little Peter Pettigrew — another of the Potters' friends. Maddened by grief, no doubt, and knowing that Black had been the Potters' Secret-Keeper, he went after Black himself."

"Pettigrew…that fat little boy who was always tagging around after them at Hogwarts?" said Madam Rosmerta.

"Hero — worshipped Black and Potter," said Professor McGonagall. "Never quite in their league, talent-wise. I was often rather sharp with him. You can imagine how I — how I regret that now…" She sounded as though she had a sudden head cold.

"There, now, Minerva," said Fudge kindly, "Pettigrew died a hero's death. Eyewitnesses — Muggles, of course, we wiped their memories later — told us how Pettigrew cornered Black. They say he was sobbing, 'Lily and James, Sirius! How could you?' And then he went for his wand. Well, of course, Black was quicker. Blew Pettigrew to smithereens…"

Professor McGonagall blew her nose and said thickly, "Stupid boy…foolish boy…he was always hopeless at dueling…should have left it to the Ministry…"

"I tell yeh, if I'd got ter Black before little Pettigrew did, I wouldn't've messed around with wands — I'd 've ripped him limb — from — limb," Hagrid growled.

"You don't know what you're talking about, Hagrid," said Fudge sharply. "Nobody but trained Hit Wizards from the Magical Law Enforcement Squad would have stood a chance against Black once he was cornered. I was Junior Minister in the Department of Magical Catastrophes at the time, and I was one of the first on the scene after Black murdered all those people. I — I will never forget it. I still dream about it sometimes. A crater in the middle of the street, so deep it had cracked the

sewer below. Bodies everywhere. Muggles screaming. And Black standing there laughing, with what was left of Pettigrew in front of him…a heap of bloodstained robes and a few — a few fragments —"

Fudge's voice stopped abruptly. There was the sound of five noses being blown.

"Well, there you have it, Rosmerta," said Fudge thickly. "Black was taken away by twenty members of the Magical Law Enforcement Squad and Pettigrew received the Order of Merlin, First Class, which I think was some comfort to his poor mother. Black's been in Azkaban ever since."

Madam Rosmerta let out a long sigh.

"Is it true he's mad, Minister?"

"I wish I could say that he was," said Fudge slowly. "I certainly believe his master's defeat unhinged him for a while. The murder of Pettigrew and all those Muggles was the action of a cornered and desperate man — cruel…pointless. Yet I met Black on my last inspection of Azkaban. You know, most of the prisoners in there sit muttering to themselves in the dark; there's no sense in them…but I was shocked at how *normal* Black seemed. He spoke quite rationally to me. It was unnerving. You'd have thought he was merely bored — asked if I'd finished with my newspaper, cool as you please, said he missed doing the crossword. Yes, I was astounded at how little effect the Dementors seemed to be having on him — and he was one of the most heavily guarded in the place, you know. Dementors outside his door day and night."

"But what do you think he's broken out to do?" said Madam Rosmerta. "Good gracious, Minister, he isn't trying to rejoin You-Know-Who, is he?"

"I daresay that is his — er — eventual plan," said Fudge evasively. "But we hope to catch Black long before that. I must say, You-Know-Who alone and friendless is one thing…but give him back his most devoted servant, and I shudder to think how quickly he'll rise again…"

There was a small chink of glass on wood. Someone had set down their glass.

"You know, Cornelius, if you're dining with the headmaster, we'd better head back up to the castle," said Professor McGonagall.

One by one, the pairs of feet in front of Harry took the weight of their owners once more; hems of cloaks swung into sight, and Madam Rosmerta's glittering heels disappeared behind the bar. The door of the Three Broomsticks opened again, there was another flurry of snow, and the teachers had disappeared.

"Harry?"

Ron's and Hermione's faces appeared under the table. They were both staring at him, lost for words.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE FIREBOLT

Harry didn't have a very clear idea of how he had managed to get back into the Honeydukes cellar, through the tunnel, and into the castle once more. All he knew was that the return trip seemed to take no time at all, and that he hardly noticed what he was doing, because his head was still pounding with the conversation he had just heard.

Why had nobody ever told him? Dumbledore, Hagrid, Mr. Weasley, Cornelius Fudge…why hadn't anyone ever mentioned the fact that Harry's parents had died because their best friend had betrayed them?

Ron and Hermione watched Harry nervously all through dinner, not daring to talk about what they'd overheard, because Percy was sitting close by them. When they went upstairs to the crowded common room, it was to find Fred and George had set off half a dozen Dungbombs in a fit of end-of-term high spirits. Harry, who didn't want Fred and George asking him whether he'd reached Hogsmeade or not, sneaked quietly up to the empty dormitory and headed straight for his bedside cabinet. He pushed his books aside and quickly found what he was looking for — the leather-bound photo album Hagrid had given him two years ago, which was full of wizard pictures of his mother and father. He sat down on his bed, drew the hangings around him, and started turning the pages, searching, until…

He stopped on a picture of his parents' wedding day. There was his father waving up at him, beaming, the untidy black hair Harry had inherited standing up in all directions. There was his mother, alight with happiness, arm in arm with his dad. And there…that must be him. Their best man…Harry had never given him a thought before.

If he hadn't known it was the same person, he would never have guessed it was Black in this old photograph. His face wasn't sunken and waxy, but handsome, full of laughter. Had he already been working for Voldemort when this picture had been taken? Was he already planning the deaths of the two people next to him? Did he realize he was facing twelve years in Azkaban, twelve years that would make him unrecognizable?

But the Dementors don't affect him, Harry thought, staring into the handsome, laughing face. He doesn't have to hear my Mum screaming if they get too close —

Harry slammed the album shut, reached over and stuffed it back into his cabinet, took off his robe and glasses and got into bed, making sure the hangings were hiding him from view.

The dormitory door opened.

"Harry?" said Ron's voice uncertainly.

But Harry lay still, pretending to be asleep. He heard Ron leave again, and rolled over on his back, his eyes wide open.

A hatred such as he had never known before was coursing through Harry like poison. He could see Black laughing at him through the darkness, as though somebody had pasted the picture from the album over his eyes. He watched, as though somebody was playing him a piece of film, Sirius Black blasting Peter Pettigrew (who resembled Neville Longbottom) into a thousand pieces. He could hear (though having no idea what Black's voice might sound like) a low, excited mutter. "It has happened, My Lord…the Potters have made me their Secret-Keeper" and then came another voice, laughing shrilly, the same laugh that Harry heard inside his head whenever the Dementors drew near…

"Harry, you — you look terrible."

Harry hadn't gotten to sleep until daybreak. He had awoken to find the dormitory deserted, dressed, and gone down the spiral staircase to a common room that was completely empty except for Ron, who was eating a Peppermint Toad and massaging his stomach, and Hermione, who had spread her homework over three tables.

"Where is everyone?" said Harry.

"Gone! It's the first day of the holidays, remember?" said Ron, watching Harry closely. "It's nearly lunchtime; I was going to come and wake you up in a minute."

Harry slumped into a chair next to the fire. Snow was still falling outside the windows. Crookshanks was spread out in front of the fire like a large, ginger rug.

"You really don't look well, you know," Hermione said, peering anxiously into his face.

"I'm fine," said Harry.

"Harry, listen," said Hermione, exchanging a look with Ron, "you must be really upset about what we heard yesterday. But the thing is, you mustn't go doing anything stupid."

"Like what?" said Harry.

"Like trying to go after Black," said Ron sharply.

Harry could tell they had rehearsed this conversation while he had been asleep. He didn't say anything.

"You won't, will you, Harry?" said Hermione.

"Because Black's not worth dying for," said Ron.

Harry looked at them. They didn't seem to understand at all.

"D'you know what I see and hear every time a Dementor gets too near me?" Ron and Hermione shook their heads, looking apprehensive. "I can hear my mum screaming and pleading with Voldemort. And if you'd heard your mum screaming like that, just about to be killed, you wouldn't forget it in a hurry. And if you found out someone who was supposed to be a friend of hers betrayed her and sent Voldemort after her —"

"There's nothing you can do!" said Hermione, looking stricken. "The Dementors will catch Black and he'll go back to Azkaban and — and serve him right!"

"You heard what Fudge said. Black isn't affected by Azkaban like normal people are. It's not a punishment for him like it is for the others."

"So what are you saying?" said Ron, looking very tense. "You want to — to kill Black or something?"

"Don't be silly," said Hermione in a panicky voice. "Harry doesn't want to kill anyone, do you, Harry?"

Again, Harry didn't answer. He didn't know what he wanted to do. All he knew was that the idea of doing nothing, while Black was at liberty, was almost more than he could stand.

"Malfoy knows," he said abruptly. "Remember what he said to me in Potions? 'If it was me, I'd hunt him down myself…I'd want revenge.'"

"You're going to take Malfoy's advice instead of ours?" said Ron furiously. "Listen…you know what Pettigrew's mother got back after Black had finished with him? Dad told me — the Order of Merlin, First Class, and Pettigrew's finger in a box. That was the biggest bit of him they could find. Black's a madman, Harry, and he's dangerous —"

"Malfoy's dad must have told him," said Harry, ignoring Ron. "He was right in Voldemort's inner circle —"

"*Say You-Know-Who, will you?*" interjected Ron angrily.

"— so obviously, the Malfoys knew Black was working for Voldemort —"

"— and Malfoy'd love to see you blown into about a million pieces, like Pettigrew! Get a grip. Malfoy's just hoping you'll get yourself killed before he has to play you at Quidditch."

"Harry, *please*," said Hermione, her eyes now shining with tears, "*Please* be sensible. Black did a terrible, terrible thing, but d-don't put yourself in danger, it's what Black wants…Oh, Harry, you'd be playing right into Black's hands if you went looking for him. Your mum and dad wouldn't want you to get hurt, would they? They'd never want you to go looking for Black!"

"I'll never know what they'd have wanted, because thanks to Black, I've never spoken to them," said Harry shortly.

There was a silence in which Crookshanks stretched luxuriously flexing his claws. Ron's pocket quivered.

"Look," said Ron, obviously casting around for a change of subject, "it's the holidays! It's nearly Christmas! Let's — let's go down and see Hagrid. We haven't visited him for ages!"

"No!" said Hermione quickly. "Harry isn't supposed to leave the castle, Ron —"

"Yeah, let's go," said Harry, sitting up, "and I can ask him how come he never mentioned Black when he told me all about my parents!"

Further discussion of Sirius Black plainly wasn't what Ron had had in mind.

"Or we could have a game of chess," he said hastily, "or Gobstones. Percy left a set —"

"No, let's visit Hagrid," said Harry firmly.

So they got their cloaks from their dormitories and set off through the portrait hole ("Stand and fight, you yellow-bellied mongrels!"), down through the empty castle and out through the oak front doors.

They made their way slowly down the lawn, making a shallow trench in the glittering, powdery snow, their socks and the hems of their cloaks soaked and freezing. The Forbidden Forest looked as though it had been enchanted, each tree smattered with silver, and Hagrid's cabin looked like an iced cake.

Ron knocked, but there was no answer.

"He's not out, is he?" said Hermione, who was shivering under her cloak.

Ron had his ear to the door.

"There's a weird noise," he said. "Listen — is that Fang?"

Harry and Hermione put their ears to the door too. From inside the cabin came a series of low, throbbing moans.

"Think we'd better go and get someone?" said Ron nervously.

"Hagrid!" called Harry, thumping the door. "Hagrid, are you in there?"

There was a sound of heavy footsteps, then the door creaked open. Hagrid stood there with his eyes red and swollen, tears splashing down the front of his leather vest.

"You've heard?" he bellowed, and he flung himself onto Harry's neck.

Hagrid being at least twice the size of a normal man, this was no laughing matter. Harry, about to collapse under Hagrid's weight, was rescued by Ron and Hermione, who each seized Hagrid

under an arm and heaved him back into the cabin. Hagrid allowed himself to be steered into a chair and slumped over the table, sobbing uncontrollably, his face glazed with tears that dripped down into his tangled beard.

"Hagrid, what is it?" said Hermione, aghast.

Harry spotted an official-looking letter lying open on the table.

"What's this, Hagrid?"

Hagrid's sobs redoubled, but he shoved the letter toward Harry, who picked it up and read aloud:

Dear Mr. Hagrid,

Further to our inquiry into the attack by a Hippogriff on a student in your class, we have accepted the assurances of Professor Dumbledore that you bear no responsibility for the regrettable incident.

"Well, that's okay then, Hagrid!" said Ron, clapping Hagrid on the shoulder. But Hagrid continued to sob, and waved one of his gigantic hands, inviting Harry to read on.

However, we must register our concern about the Hippogriff in question. We have decided to uphold the official complaint of Mr. Lucius Malfoy, and this matter will therefore be taken to the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures. The hearing will take place on April 20th, and we ask you to present yourself and your Hippogriff at the Committee's offices in London on that date. In the meantime, the Hippogriff should be kept tethered and isolated.

Yours in fellowship…

There followed a list of the school governors.

"Oh," said Ron. "But you said Buckbeak isn't a bad Hippogriff, Hagrid. I bet he'll get off."

"Yeh don' know them gargoyles at the Committee fer the Disposal o' Dangerous Creatures!" choked Hagrid, wiping his eyes on his sleeve. "They've got it in fer interestin' creatures!"

A sudden sound from the corner of Hagrid's cabin made Harry, Ron, and Hermione whip around. Buckbeak the Hippogriff was lying in the corner, chomping on something that was oozing blood all over the floor.

"I couldn' leave him tied up out there in the snow!" choked Hagrid. "All on his own! At Christmas."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked at one another. They had never seen eye to eye with Hagrid about what he called 'interesting creatures' and other people called 'terrifying monsters.' On the other hand, there didn't seem to be any particular harm in Buckbeak. In fact, by Hagrid's usual standards, he was positively cute.

"You'll have to put up a good strong defense, Hagrid," said Hermione, sitting down and laying a hand on Hagrid's massive forearm. "I'm sure you can prove Buckbeak is safe."

"Won' make no diff'rence!" sobbed Hagrid. "Them Disposal devils, they're all in Lucius Malfoy's pocket! Scared o' him! Ad if I lose the case, Buckbeak —"

Hagrid drew his finger swiftly across his throat, then gave a great wail and lurched forward, his face in his arms.

"What about Dumbledore, Hagrid?" said Harry.

"He's done more'n enough fer me already," groaned Hagrid. "Got enough on his plate what with keepin' them Dementors outta the castle, an' Sirius Black lurkin' around."

Ron and Hermione looked quickly at Harry, as though expecting him to start berating Hagrid for not telling him the truth about Black. But Harry couldn't bring himself to do it, not now that he saw Hagrid so miserable and scared.

"Listen, Hagrid," he said, "you can't give up. Hermione's right, you just need a good defense. You can call us as witnesses —"

"I'm sure I've read about a case of Hippogriff-baiting," said Hermione thoughtfully, "where the Hippogriff got off. I'll look it up for you, Hagrid, and see exactly what happened."

Hagrid howled still more loudly. Harry and Hermione looked at Ron to help them.

"Er — shall I make a cup of tea?" said Ron.

Harry stared at him.

"It's what my mum does whenever someone's upset," Ron muttered, shrugging.

At last, after many more assurances of help, with a steaming mug of tea in front of him, Hagrid blew his nose on a handkerchief the size of a tablecloth and said, "Yer right. I can' afford to go ter pieces. Gotta pull meself together…"

Fang the boarhound came timidly out from under the table and laid his head on Hagrid's knee.

"I've not bin meself lately," said Hagrid, stroking Fang with one hand and mopping his face with the other. "Worried abou' Buckbeak, an' no one likin' me classes —"

"We do like them!" lied Hermione at once.

"Yeah, they're great!" said Ron, crossing his fingers under the table. "Er — how are the flobberworms?"

"Dead," said Hagrid gloomily. "Too much lettuce."

"Oh no!" said Ron, his lip twitching.

"An' them Dementors make me feel ruddy terrible an' all," said Hagrid, with a sudden shudder. "Gotta walk past 'em ev'ry time I want a drink in the Three Broomsticks. 'S like bein' back in Azkaban —"

He fell silent, gulping his tea. Harry, Ron, and Hermione watched him breathlessly. They had never heard Hagrid talk about his brief spell in Azkaban before. After a pause, Hermione said timidly, "Is it awful in there, Hagrid?"

"Yeh've no idea," said Hagrid quietly. "Never bin anywhere like it. Thought I was goin' mad. Kep' goin' over horrible stuff in me mind…the day I got expelled from Hogwarts…day me dad died…day I had ter let Norbert go…"

His eyes filled with tears. Norbert was the baby dragon Hagrid had once won in a game of cards.

"Yeh can' really remember who yeh are after a while. An' yeh can' really see the point o' livin' at all. I used ter hope I'd jus' die in me sleep. When they let me out, it was like bein' born again, ev'rythin' came floodin' back, it was the bes' feelin' in the world. Mind, the Dementors weren't keen on lettin' me go."

"But you were innocent!" said Hermione.

Hagrid snorted.

"Think that matters to them? They don' care. Long as they've got a couple o' hundred humans stuck there with 'em, so they can leech all the happiness out of 'em, they don' give a damn who's guilty an' who's not."

Hagrid went quiet for a moment, staring into his tea. Then he said quietly, "Thought o' jus' letting Buckbeak go…tryin' ter make him fly away…but how d'yeh explain ter a Hippogriff it's gotta go inter hidin'? An' — an' I'm scared o' breakin' the law…" He looked up at them, tears leaking down his face again. "I don' ever want ter go back ter Azkaban."

The trip to Hagrid's, though far from fun, had nevertheless had the effect Ron and Hermione had hoped. Though Harry had by no means forgotten about Black, he couldn't brood constantly on revenge if he wanted to help Hagrid win his case against the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures. He, Ron, and Hermione went to the library the next day and returned to the empty common room laden with books that might help prepare a defense for Buckbeak. The three of them sat in front of the roaring fire, slowly turning the pages of dusty volumes about famous cases of marauding beasts, speaking occasionally when they ran across something relevant.

"Here's something…there was a case in 1722…but the Hippogriff was convicted — ugh, look what they did to it, that's disgusting —"

“This might help, look — a Manticore savaged someone in 1296, and they let the Manticore off — oh — no, that was only because everyone was too scared to go near it…”

Meanwhile, in the rest of the castle, the usual magnificent Christmas decorations had been put up, despite the fact that hardly any of the students remained to enjoy them. Thick streamers of holly and mistletoe were strung along the corridors, mysterious lights shone from inside every suit of armor, and the Great Hall was filled with its usual twelve Christmas trees, glittering with golden stars. A powerful and delicious smell of cooking pervaded the corridors, and by Christmas Eve, it had grown so strong that even Scabbers poked his nose out of the shelter of Ron’s pocket to sniff hopefully at the air.

On Christmas morning, Harry was woken by Ron throwing his pillow at him.

“Oi! Presents!”

Harry reached for his glasses and put them on, squinting through the semi-darkness to the foot of his bed, where a small heap of parcels had appeared. Ron was already ripping the paper off his own presents.

“Another sweater from Mum…maroon *again*…see if you’ve got one.”

Harry had. Mrs. Weasley had sent him a scarlet sweater with the Gryffindor lion knitted on the front, also a dozen home-baked mince pies, some Christmas cake, and a box of nut brittle. As he moved all these things aside, he saw a long, thin package lying underneath.

“What’s that?” said Ron, looking over, a freshly unwrapped pair of maroon socks in his hand.

“Dunno…”

Harry ripped the parcel open and gasped as a magnificent, gleaming broomstick rolled out onto his bedspread. Ron dropped his socks and jumped off his bed for a closer look.

“I don’t believe it,” he said hoarsely.

It was a Firebolt, identical to the dream broom Harry had gone to see every day in Diagon Alley. Its handle glitteredas he picked it up. He could feel it vibrating and let go; it hung in midair, unsupported, at exactly the right height for him to mount it. His eyes moved from the golden registration number at the top of the handle, right down to the perfectly smooth, streamlined birch twigs that made up the tail.

“Who sent it to you?” said Ron in a hushed voice.

“Look and see if there’s a card,” said Harry.

Ron ripped apart the Firebolt’s wrappings.

“Nothing! Blimey, who’d spend that much on you?”

“Well,” said Harry, feeling stunned, “I’m betting it wasn’t the Dursleys.”

“I bet it was Dumbledore,” said Ron, now walking around and around the Firebolt, taking in every glorious inch. “He sent you the Invisibility Cloak anonymously…”

“That was my dad’s, though,” said Harry. “Dumbledore was just passing it on to me. He wouldn’t spend hundreds of Galleons on me. He can’t go giving students stuff like this —”

“That’s why he wouldn’t say it was from him!” said Ron. “In case some git like Malfoy said it was favoritism. Hey, Harry —” Ron gave a great whoop of laughter — “*Malfoy*! Wait ‘til he sees you on this! He’ll be sick as a pig! This is an *international* standard broom, this is!”

“I can’t believe this,” Harry muttered, running a hand along the Firebolt, while Ron sank onto Harry’s bed, laughing his head off at the thought of Malfoy. “*Who—?”*

“I know,” said Ron, controlling himself, “I know who it could’ve been — Lupin!”

“What?” said Harry, now starting to laugh himself “*Lupin*? Listen, if he had this much gold, he’d be able to buy himself some new robes.”

“Yeah, but he likes you,” said Ron. “And he was away when your Nimbus got smashed, and he might’ve heard about it and decided to visit Diagon Alley and get this for you —”

“What d’you mean, he was away?” said Harry. “He was ill when I was playing in that match.”

“Well, he wasn’t in the hospital wing,” said Ron. “I was there, cleaning out the bedpans on that detention from Snape, remember?”

Harry frowned at Ron.

“I can’t see Lupin affording something like this.”

“What’re you two laughing about?”

Hermione had just come in, wearing her dressing gown and carrying Crookshanks, who was looking very grumpy, with a string of tinsel tied around his neck.

“Don’t bring him in here!” said Ron, hurriedly snatching Scabbers from the depths of his bed and stowing him in his pajama pocket.

But Hermione wasn’t listening. She dropped Crookshanks onto Seamus’s empty bed and stared, open-mouthed, at the Firebolt.

“Oh, *Harry*! Who sent you *that*?”

“No idea,” said Harry. “There wasn’t a card or anything with it.”

To his great surprise, Hermione did not appear either excited or intrigued by the news. On the contrary, her face fell, and she bit her lip.

“What’s the matter with you?” said Ron.

“I don’t know,” said Hermione slowly, “but it’s a bit odd, isn’t it? I mean, this is supposed to be quite a good broom, isn’t it?”

Ron sighed exasperatedly.

“It’s the best broom there is, Hermione,” he said.

“So it must’ve been really expensive…”

“Probably cost more than all the Slytherins’ brooms put together,” said Ron happily.

“Well…who’d send Harry something as expensive as that, and not even tell him they’d sent it?” said Hermione.

“Who cares?” said Ron impatiently. “Listen, Harry, can I have a go on it? Can I?”

“I don’t think anyone should ride that broom just yet!” said Hermione shrilly.

Harry and Ron looked at her.

“What d’you think Harry’s going to do with it — sweep the floor?” said Ron.

But before Hermione could answer, Crookshanks sprang from Seamus’s bed, right at Ron’s chest.

“GET — HIM — OUT — OF — HERE!” Ron bellowed as Crookshanks’s claws ripped his pajamas and Scabbers attempted a wild escape over his shoulder. Ron seized Scabbers by the tail and aimed a misjudged kick at Crookshanks that hit the trunk at the end of Harry’s bed, knocking it over and causing Ron to hop up and down, howling with pain.

Crookshanks’s fur suddenly stood on end. A shrill, tinny, whistling was filling the room. The Pocket Sneakoscope had become dislodged from Uncle Vernon’s old socks and was whirling and gleaming on the floor.

“I forgot about that!” Harry said, bending down and picking up the Sneakoscope. “I never wear those socks if I can help it…”

The Sneakoscope whirled and whistled in his palm. Crookshanks was hissing and spitting at it.

“You’d better take that cat out of here, Hermione,” said Ron furiously, sitting on Harry’s bed nursing his toe. “Can’t you shut that thing up?” he added to Harry as Hermione strode out of the room, Crookshanks’s yellow eyes still fixed maliciously on Ron.

Harry stuffed the Sneakoscope back inside the socks and threw it back into his trunk. All that could be heard now were Ron’s stifled moans of pain and rage. Scabbers was huddled in Ron’s hands. It had been a while since Harry had seen him out of Ron’s pocket, and he was unpleasantly surprised to see that Scabbers, once so fat, was now very skinny; patches of fur seemed to have fallen out too.

“He’s not looking too good, is he?” Harry said.

“It’s stress!” said Ron. “He’d be fine if that big stupid furball left him alone!”

But Harry, remembering what the woman at the Magical Menagerie had said about rats living only three years, couldn’t help feeling that unless Scabbers had powers he had never revealed, he was reaching the end of his life. And despite Ron’s frequent complaints that Scabbers was both boring and useless, he was sure Ron would be very miserable if Scabbers died.

Christmas spirit was definitely thin on the ground in the Gryffindor common room that morning. Hermione had shut Crookshanks in her dormitory, but was furious with Ron for trying to kick him; Ron was still fuming about Crookshanks’s fresh attempt to eat Scabbers. Harry gave up trying to make them talk to each other and devoted himself to examining the Firebolt, which he had brought down to the common room with him. For some reason this seemed to annoy Hermione as well; she didn’t say anything, but she kept looking darkly at the broom as though it too had been criticizing her cat.

At lunchtime they went down to the Great Hall, to find that the House tables had been moved against the walls again, and that a single table, set for twelve, stood in the middle of the room. Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall, Snape, Sprout, and Flitwick were there, along with Filch, the caretaker, who had taken off his usual brown coat and was wearing a very old and rather moldy-looking tailcoat. There were only three other students, two extremely nervous-looking first years and a sullen-faced Slytherin fifth year.

“Merry Christmas!” said Dumbledore as Harry, Ron, and Hermione approached the table. “As there are so few of us, it seemed foolish to use the House tables…Sit down, sit down!”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat down side by side at the end of the table.

“Crackers!” said Dumbledore enthusiastically, offering the end of a large silver noisemaker to Snape, who took it reluctantly and tugged. With a bang like a gunshot, the cracker flew apart to reveal a large, pointed witches hat topped with a stuffed vulture.

Harry, remembering the Boggart, caught Ron’s eye and they both grinned; Snape’s mouth thinned and he pushed the hat toward Dumbledore, who swapped it for his wizard’s hat at once.

“Dig in!” he advised the table, beaming around.

As Harry was helping himself to roast potatoes, the doors of the Great Hall opened again. It was Professor Trelawney, gliding toward them as though on wheels. She had put on a green sequined dress in honor of the occasion, making her look more than ever like a glittering, oversized dragonfly.

“Sybill, this is a pleasant surprise!” said Dumbledore, standing up.

"I have been crystal gazing, Headmaster," said Professor Trelawney in her mistiest, most faraway voice, "and to my astonishment, I saw myself abandoning my solitary luncheon and coming to join you. Who am I to refuse the promptings of fate? I at once hastened from my tower, and I do beg you to forgive my lateness…"

"Certainly, certainly," said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling. "Let me draw you up a chair —"

And he did indeed draw a chair in midair with his wand, which revolved for a few seconds before falling with a thud between Professors Snape and McGonagall. Professor Trelawney, however, did not sit down; her enormous eyes had been roving around the table, and she suddenly uttered a kind of soft scream.

"I dare not, Headmaster! If I join the table, we shall be thirteen! Nothing could be more unlucky! Never forget that when thirteen dine together, the first to rise will be the first to die!"

"We'll risk it, Sybill," said Professor McGonagall impatiently. "Do sit down, the turkey's getting stone cold."

Professor Trelawney hesitated, then lowered herself into the empty chair, eyes shut and mouth clenched tight, as though expecting a thunderbolt to hit the table. Professor McGonagall poked a large spoon into the nearest tureen.

"Tripe, Sybill?"

Professor Trelawney ignored her. Eyes open again, she looked around once more and said, "But where is dear Professor Lupin?"

"I'm afraid the poor fellow is ill again," said Dumbledore, indicating that everybody should start serving themselves. "Most unfortunate that it should happen on Christmas Day."

"But surely you already knew that, Sybill?" said Professor McGonagall, her eyebrows raised.

Professor Trelawney gave Professor McGonagall a very cold look.

"Certainly I knew, Minerva," she said quietly. "But one does not parade the fact that one is All-Knowing. I frequently act as though I am not possessed of the Inner Eye, so as not to make others nervous."

"That explains a great deal," said Professor McGonagall tartly.

Professor Trelawney's voice suddenly became a good deal less misty.

"If you must know, Minerva, I have seen that poor Professor Lupin will not be with us for very long. He seems aware, himself, that his time is short. He positively fled when I offered to crystal gaze for him —"

"Imagine that," said Professor McGonagall dryly.

“I doubt,” said Dumbledore, in a cheerful but slightly raised voice, which put an end to Professor McGonagall and Professor Trelawney’s conversation, “that Professor Lupin is in any immediate danger. Severus, you’ve made the potion for him again?”

“Yes, Headmaster,” said Snape.

“Good,” said Dumbledore. “Then he should be up and about in no time…Derek, have you had any of the chipolatas? They’re excellent.”

The first-year boy went furiously red on being addressed directly by Dumbledore, and took the platter of sausages with trembling hands.

Professor Trelawney behaved almost normally until the very end of Christmas dinner, two hours later. Full to bursting with Christmas dinner and still wearing their cracker hats, Harry and Ron got up first from the table and she shrieked loudly.

“My dears! Which of you left his seat first? Which?”

“Dunno,” said Ron, looking uneasily at Harry.

“I doubt it will make much difference,” said Professor McGonagall coldly, “unless a mad axe-man is waiting outside the doors to slaughter the first into the Entrance Hall.”

Even Ron laughed. Professor Trelawney looked highly affronted.

“Coming?” Harry said to Hermione.

“No,” Hermione muttered. “I want a quick word with Professor McGonagall.”

“Probably trying to see if she can take any more classes,” yawned Ron as they make their way into the Entrance Hall, which was completely devoid of mad axe-men.

When they reached the portrait hole they found Sir Cadogan enjoying a Christmas part with a couple of monks, several previous headmasters of Hogwarts and his fat pony. He pushed up his visor toasted them with a flagon of mead.

“Merry — hic — Christmas! Password?”

“Scurvy cur,” said Ron.

“And the same to you, sir!” roared Sir Cadogan, as the painting swung forward to admit them.

Harry went straight up to the dormitory, collected his Firebolt and the Broomstick Servicing Kit Hermione had given him for his birthday, brought them downstairs and tried to find something to do with the Firebolt; however, there where no bent twigs to clip, and the handle was so shiny already it seemed pointless to polish it. He and Ron simply sat admiring it from every angle, until the portrait hole opened, and Hermione came in, accompanied by Professor McGonagall.

Though Professor McGonagall was Head of Gryffindor House, Harry had only seen her in the common room once before, and that had been to make a very grave announcement. He and Ron stared at her, both holding the Firebolt. Hermione walked around them, sat down, picked up the nearest book and hid her face behind it.

"So that's it, is it?" said Professor McGonagall beadily, walking over to the fireside and staring at the Firebolt. "Miss Granger has just informed me that you have been sent a broomstick, Potter."

Harry and Ron looked around at Hermione. They could see her forehead reddening over the top of her book, which was upside-down.

"May I?" said Professor McGonagall, but she didn't wait for an answer before pulling the Firebolt out of their hands. She examined it carefully from handle to twig-ends. "Hmm. And there was no note at all, Potter? No card? No message of any kind?"

"No," said Harry blankly.

"I see…" said Professor McGonagall. "Well, I'm afraid I will have to take this, Potter."

"W — what?" said Harry, scrambling to his feet. "Why?"

"It will need to be checked for jinxes," said Professor McGonagall. "Of course, I'm no expert, but I daresay Madam Hooch and Professor Flitwick will strip it down —"

"Strip it down?" repeated Ron, as though Professor McGonagall was mad.

"It shouldn't take more than a few weeks," said Professor McGonagall. "You will have it back if we are sure it is jinx-free."

"There's nothing wrong with it!" said Harry, his voice shaking slightly. "Honestly, Professor —"

"You can't know that, Potter," said Professor McGonagall, quite kindly, "not until you've flown it, at any rate, and I'm afraid that is out of the question until we are certain that it has not been tampered with. I shall keep you informed."

Professor McGonagall turned on her heel and carried the Firebolt out of the portrait hole, which closed behind her. Harry stood staring after her, the tin of High-Finish Polish still clutched in his hands. Ron, however, rounded on Hermione.

"*What did you go running to McGonagall for?*"

Hermione threw her book aside. She was still pink in the face, but stood up and faced Ron defiantly.

"Because I thought — and Professor McGonagall agrees with me — that that broom was probably sent to Harry by Sirius Black!"

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE PATRONUS

Harry knew that Hermione had meant well, but that didn't stop him from being angry with her. He had been the owner of the best broom in the world for a few short hours, and now, because of her interference, he didn't know whether he would ever see it again. He was positive that there was nothing wrong with the Firebolt now, but what sort of state would it be in once it had been subjected to all sorts of anti-jinx tests?

Ron was furious with Hermione too. As far as he was concerned, the stripping-down of a brand-new Firebolt was nothing less than criminal damage. Hermione, who remained convinced that she had acted for the best, started avoiding the common room. Harry and Ron supposed she had taken refuge in the library and didn't try to persuade her to come back. All in all, they were glad when the rest of the school returned shortly after New Year, and Gryffindor Tower became crowded and noisy again. Wood sought Harry out on the night before term started.

"Had a good Christmas?" he said, and then, without waiting for an answer, he sat down, lowered his voice, and said, "I've been, doing some thinking over Christmas, Harry. After last match, you know. If the Dementors come to the next one…I mean…we can't afford you to — well —"

Wood broke off, looking awkward.

"I'm working on it," said Harry quickly. "Professor Lupin said he'd train me to ward off the Dementors. We should be starting this week. He said he'd have time after Christmas."

"Ah," said Wood, his expression clearing. "Well, in that case — I really didn't want to lose you as Seeker, Harry. And have you ordered a new broom yet?"

"No," said Harry.

"What! You'd better get a move on, you know — you can't ride that Shooting Star against Ravenclaw!"

"He got a Firebolt for Christmas," said Ron.

"A *Firebolt*? No! Seriously? A — a real *Firebolt*?"

"Don't get excited, Oliver," said Harry gloomily. "I haven't got it anymore. It was confiscated." And he explained all about how the Firebolt was now being checked for jinxes.

"Jinxed? How could it be jinxed?"

"Sirius Black," Harry said wearily. "He's supposed to be after me. So McGonagall reckons he might have sent it."

Waving aside the information that a famous murderer was after his Seeker, Wood said, "But Black couldn't have bought a Firebolt! He's on the run! The whole country's on the lookout for him! How could he just walk into Quality Quidditch Supplies and buy a broomstick?"

"I know," said Harry, "but McGonagall still wants to strip it down —"

Wood went pale.

"I'll go and talk to her, Harry," he promised. "I'll make her see reason…A Firebolt…a real Firebolt, on our team…She wants Gryffindor to win as much as we do…I'll make her see sense. A *Firebolt…"*

Classes started again the next day. The last thing anyone felt like doing was spending two hours on the grounds on a raw January morning, but Hagrid had provided a bonfire full of salamanders for their enjoyment, and they spent an unusually good lesson collecting dry wood and leaves to keep the fire blazing while the flame-loving lizards scampered up and down the crumbling, white-hot logs. The first Divination lesson of the new term was much less fun; Professor Trelawney was now teaching them palmistry, and she lost no time in informing Harry that he had the shortest life line she had ever seen.

It was Defense Against the Dark Arts that Harry was keen to get to; after his conversation with Wood, he wanted to get started on his anti-Dementor lessons as soon as possible.

"Ah yes," said Lupin, when Harry reminded him of his promise at the end of class. "Let me see…how about eight o'clock on Thursday evening? The History of Magic classroom should be large enough…I'll have to think carefully about how we're going to do this…We can't bring a real Dementor into the castle to practice on…"

"Still looks ill, doesn't he?" said Ron as they walked down the corridor, heading to dinner. "What d'you reckon's the matter with him?"

There was a loud and impatient "tuh" from behind them. It was Hermione, who had been sitting at the feet of a suit of armor, repacking her bag, which was so full of books it wouldn't close.

"And what are you tutting at us for?" said Ron irritably.

"Nothing," said Hermione in a lofty voice, heaving her bag back over her shoulder.

"Yes, you were," said Ron. "I said I wonder what's wrong with Lupin, and you —"

"Well, isn't it *obvious*?" said Hermione, with a look of maddening superiority.

"If you don't want to tell us, don't," snapped Ron.

"Fine," said Hermione haughtily, and she marched off.

“She doesn’t know,” said Ron, staring resentfully after Hermione. “She’s just trying to get us to talk to her again.”

At eight o’clock on Thursday evening, Harry left Gryffindor Tower for the History of Magic classroom. It was dark and empty when he arrived, but he lit the lamps with his wand and had waited only five minutes when Professor Lupin turned up, carrying a large packing case, which he heaved onto Professor Binn’s desk.

“What’s that?” said Harry.

“Another Boggart,” said Lupin, stripping off his cloak. “I’ve been combing the castle ever since Tuesday, and very luckily, I found this one lurking inside Mr. Filch’s filing cabinet. It’s the nearest we’ll get to a real Dementor. The Boggart will turn into a Dementor when he sees you, so we’ll be able to practice on him. I can store him in my office when we’re not using him; there’s a cupboard under my desk he’ll like.”

“Okay,” said Harry, trying to sound as though he wasn’t apprehensive at all and merely glad that Lupin had found such a good substitute for a real Dementor.

“So…” Professor Lupin had taken out his own wand, and indicated that Harry should do the same. “The spell I am going to try and teach you is highly advanced magic, Harry — well beyond Ordinary Wizarding Level. It is called the Patronus Charm.”

“How does it work?” said Harry nervously.

“Well, when it works correctly, It conjures up a Patronus,” said Lupin, “which is a kind of anti-Dementor — a guardian that acts as a shield between you and the Dementor.”

Harry had a sudden vision of himself crouching behind a Hagrid-sized figure holding a large club. Professor Lupin continued, “The Patronus is a kind of positive force, a projection of the very things that the Dementor feeds upon — hope, happiness, the desire to survive — but it cannot feel despair, as real humans can, so the Dementors can’t hurt it. But I must warn you, Harry, that the charm might be too advanced for you. Many qualified wizards have difficulty with it.”

“What does a Patronus look like?” said Harry curiously.

“Each one is unique to the wizard who conjures it.”

“And how do you conjure it?”

“With an incantation, which will work only if you are concentrating, with all your might, on a single, very happy memory.”

Harry cast his mind about for a happy memory. Certainly, nothing that had happened to him at the Dursleys' was going to do. Finally, he settled on the moment when he had first ridden a broomstick.

"Right," he said, trying to recall as exactly as possible the wonderful, soaring sensation of his stomach.

"The incantation is this —" Lupin cleared his throat. "*Expecto patronum*!"

"Expecto patronum," Harry repeated under his breath, "expecto patronum."

"Concentrating hard on your happy memory?"

"Oh — yeah —" said Harry, quickly forcing his thoughts back to that first broom ride. "Expecto patrono — no, patronum — sorry — expecto patronum, expecto patronum"

Something whooshed suddenly out of the end of his wand; it looked like a wisp of silvery gas.

"Did you see that?" said Harry excitedly. "Something happened!"

"Very good," said Lupin, smiling. "Right, then — ready to try it on a Dementor?"

"Yes," Harry said, gripping his wand very tightly, and moving into the middle of the deserted classroom. He tried to keep his mind on flying, but something else kept intruding…Any second now, he might hear his mother again…but he shouldn't think that, or he *would* hear her again, and he didn't want to…or did he?

Lupin grasped the lid of the packing case and pulled.

A Dementor rose slowly from the box, its hooded face turned toward Harry, one glistening, scabbed hand gripping its cloak. The lamps around the classroom flickered and went out. The Dementor stepped from the box and started to sweep silently toward Harry, drawing a deep, rattling breath. A wave of piercing cold broke over him —

"*Expecto patronum*!" Harry yelled. "*Expecto patronum*! *Expecto* —"

But the classroom and the Dementor were dissolving…Harry was falling again through thick white fog, and his mother's voice was louder than ever, echoing inside his head — "*Not Harry! Not Harry! Please — I'll do anything —"*

"Stand aside — stand aside, girl —"

"Harry!"

Harry jerked back to life. He was lying flat on his back on the floor. The classroom lamps were alight again. He didn't have to ask what had happened.

"Sorry," he muttered, sitting up and feeling cold sweat trickling down behind his glasses.

"Are you all right?" said Lupin.

"Yes…" Harry pulled himself up on one of the desks and leaned against it.

"Here —" Lupin handed him a Chocolate Frog. "Eat this before we try again. I didn't expect you to do it your first time; in fact, I would have been astounded if you had."

"It's getting worse," Harry muttered, biting off the Frog's head. "I could hear her louder that time — and him — Voldemort —"

Lupin looked paler than usual.

"Harry, if you don't want to continue, I will more than understand —"

"I do!" said Harry fiercely, stuffing the rest of the Chocolate Frog into his mouth. "I've got to! What if the Dementors turn up at our match against Ravenclaw? I can't afford to fall off again. If we lose this game we've lost the Quidditch Cup!"

"All right then…" said Lupin. "You might want to select another memory, a happy memory, I mean, to concentrate on…That one doesn't seem to have been strong enough…"

Harry thought hard and decided his feelings when Gryffindor had won the House Championship last year had definitely qualified as very happy. He gripped his wand tightly again and took up his position in the middle of the classroom.

"Ready?" said Lupin, gripping the box lid.

"Ready," said Harry; trying hard to fill his head with happy thoughts about Gryffindor winning, and not dark thoughts about what was going to happen when the box opened.

"Go!" said Lupin, pulling off the lid. The room went icily cold and dark once more. The Dementor glided forward, drawing its breath; one rotting hand was extending toward Harry —

"*Expecto patronum!*" Harry yelled. "*Expecto patronum! Expecto Pat—*"

White fog obscured his senses…big, blurred shapes were moving around him…then came a new voice, a man's voice, shouting, panicking —

"Lily, take Harry and go! It's him! Go! Run! I'll hold him off —"

The sounds of someone stumbling from a room — a door bursting open — a cackle of high-pitched laughter —

"Harry! Harry…wake up…"

Lupin was tapping Harry hard on the face. This time it was a minute before Harry understood why he was lying on a dusty classroom floor.

"I heard my dad," Harry mumbled. "That's the first time I've ever heard him — he tried to take on Voldemort himself, to give my mum time to run for it…"

Harry suddenly realized that there were tears on his face mingling with the sweat. He bent his face as low as possible, wiping them off on his robes, pretending to do up his shoelace, so that Lupin wouldn't see.

"You heard James?" said Lupin in a strange voice.

"Yeah…" Face dry, Harry looked up. "Why — you didn't know my dad, did you?"

"I — I did, as a matter of fact," said Lupin. "We were friends at Hogwarts. Listen, Harry — perhaps we should leave it here for tonight. This charm is ridiculously advanced…I shouldn't have suggested putting you through this…"

"No!" said Harry. He got up again. "I'll have one more go! I'm not thinking of happy enough things, that's what it is…hang on…"

He racked his brains. A really, really happy memory…one that he could turn into a good, strong Patronus…

The moment when he'd first found out he was a wizard, and would be leaving the Dursleys for Hogwarts! If that wasn't a happy memory, he didn't know what was…Concentrating very hard on how he had felt when he'd realized he'd be leaving Privet Drive, Harry got to his feet and faced the packing case once more.

"Ready?" said Lupin, who looked as though he were doing this against his better judgment. "Concentrating hard? All right — go!"

He pulled off the lid of the case for the third time, and the Dementor rose out of it; the room fell cold and dark —

"*EXPECTO PATRONUM!*" Harry bellowed. "*EXPECTO PATRONUM! EXPECTO PATRONUM!*"

The screaming inside Harry's head had started again — except this time, it sounded as though it were coming from a badly tuned radio — softer and louder and softer again…and he could still see the Dementor…it had halted…and then a huge, silver shadow came bursting out of the end of Harry's wand, to hover between him and the Dementor, and though Harry's legs felt like water, he was still on his feet — though for how much longer, he wasn't sure…

"*Riddikulus!*" roared Lupin, springing forward.

There was a loud crack, and Harry's cloudy Patronus vanished along with the Dementor; he sank into a chair, feeling as exhausted as if he'd just run a mile, and felt his legs shaking. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Professor Lupin forcing the Boggart back into the packing case with his wand; it had turned into a silvery orb again.

"Excellent!" Lupin said, striding over to where Harry sat. "Excellent, Harry! That was definitely a start!"

"Can we have another go? Just one more go?"

"Not now," said Lupin firmly. "You've had enough for one night. Here —"

He handed Harry a large bar of Honeydukes' best chocolate.

"Eat the lot, or Madam Pomfrey will be after my blood. Same time next week?"

"Okay," said Harry. He took a bite of the chocolate and watched Lupin extinguishing the lamps that had rekindled with the disappearance of the Dementor. A thought had just occurred to him.

"Professor Lupin?" he said. "If you knew my dad, you must've known Sirius Black as well."

Lupin turned very quickly.

"What gives you that idea?" he said sharply.

"Nothing — I mean, I just knew they were friends at Hogwarts too…"

Lupin's face relaxed.

"Yes, I knew him," he said shortly. "Or I thought I did. You'd better be off, Harry, it's getting late."

Harry left the classroom, walking along the corridor and around a corner, then took a detour behind a suit of armor and sank down on its plinth to finish his chocolate, wishing he hadn't mentioned Black, as Lupin was obviously not keen on the subject. Then Harry's thoughts wandered back to his mother and father…

He felt drained and strangely empty, even though he was so full of chocolate. Terrible though it was to hear his parents' last moments replayed inside his head, these were the only times Harry had heard their voices since he was a very small child. But he'd never be able to produce a proper Patronus if he half wanted to hear his parents again…

"They're dead," he told himself sternly. "They're dead and listening to echoes of them won't bring them back. You'd better get a grip on yourself if you want that Quidditch Cup."

He stood up, crammed the last bit of chocolate into his mouth, and headed back to Gryffindor Tower.

Ravenclaw played Slytherin a week after the start of term. Slytherin won, though narrowly. According to Wood, this was good news for Gryffindor, who would take second place if they beat Ravenclaw too. He therefore increased the number of team practices to five a week. This meant that with Lupin's anti-Dementor classes, which in themselves were more draining than six Quidditch practices, Harry had just one night a week to do all his homework. Even so, he was not showing the

strain nearly as much as Hermione, whose immense workload finally seemed to be getting to her. Every night, without fail, Hermione was to be seen in a corner of the common room, several tables spread with books, Arithmancy charts, rune dictionaries, diagrams of Muggles lifting heavy objects, and file upon file of extensive notes; she barely spoke to anybody and snapped when she was interrupted.

"How's she doing it?" Ron muttered to Harry one evening as Harry sat finishing a nasty essay on Undetectable Poisons for Snape. Harry looked up. Hermione was barely visible behind a tottering pile of books.

"Doing what?"

"Getting to all her classes!" Ron said. "I heard her talking to Professor Vector, that Arithmancy witch, this morning. They were going on about yesterday's lesson, but Hermione can't've been there, because she was with us in Care of Magical Creatures! And Ernie McMillan told me she's never missed a Muggle Studies class, but half of them are at the same time as Divination, and she's never missed one of them either!"

Harry didn't have time to fathom the mystery of Hermione's impossible schedule at the moment; he really needed to get on with Snape's essay. Two seconds later, however, he was interrupted again, this time by Wood.

"Bad news, Harry. I've just been to see Professor McGonagall about the Firebolt. She — er — got a bit shirty with me. Told me I'd got my priorities wrong. Seemed to think I cared more about winning the Cup than I do about you staying alive. Just because I told her I didn't care if it threw you off, as long as you caught the Snitch first." Wood shook his head in disbelief. "Honestly, the way she was yelling at me…you'd think I'd said something terrible. Then I asked her how much longer she was going to keep it…" He screwed up his face and imitated Professor McGonagall's severe voice. "As long as necessary, Wood"…I reckon it's time you ordered a new broom, Harry. There's an order form at the back of *Which Broomstick*…you could get a Nimbus Two Thousand and One, like Malfoy's got."

"I'm not buying anything Malfoy thinks is good," said Harry flatly.

January faded imperceptibly into February, with no change in the bitterly cold weather. The match against Ravenclaw was drawing nearer and nearer, but Harry still hadn't ordered a new broom. He was now asking Professor McGonagall for news of the Firebolt after every Transfiguration lesson, Ron standing hopefully at his shoulder, Hermione rushing past with her face averted.

"No, Potter, you can't have it back yet," Professor McGonagall told him the twelfth time this happened, before he'd even opened his mouth. "We've checked for most of the usual curses, but Professor Flitwick believes the broom might be carrying a Hurling Hex. I shall *tell* you once we've finished checking it. Now, please stop badgering me."

To make matters even worse, Harry's anti-Dementor lessons were not going nearly as well as he had hoped. Several sessions on, he was able to produce an indistinct, silvery shadow every time the Boggart-Dementor approached him, but his Patronus was too feeble to drive the Dementor away. All it did was hover, like a semitransparent cloud, draining Harry of energy as he fought to keep it there. Harry felt angry with himself, guilty about his secret desire to hear his parents' voices again.

"You're expecting too much of yourself," said Professor Lupin, sternly in their fourth week of practice. "For a thirteen-year-old wizard, even an indistinct Patronus is a huge achievement. You aren't passing out anymore, are you?"

"I thought a Patronus would — charge the Dementors down or something," said Harry dispiritedly. "Make them disappear —"

"The true Patronus does do that," said Lupin. "But you've achieved a great deal in a very short space of time. If the Dementors put in an appearance at your next Quidditch match, you will be able to keep them at bay long enough to get back to the ground."

"You said it's harder if there are loads of them," said Harry.

"I have complete confidence in you," said Lupin, smiling. "Here — you've earned a drink. Something from the Three Broomsticks. You won't have tried it before —"

He pulled two bottles out of his briefcase.

"Butterbeer!" said Harry, without thinking. "Yeah, I like that stuff!"

Lupin raised an eyebrow.

"Oh — Ron and Hermione brought me some back from Hogsmeade," Harry lied quickly.

"I see," said Lupin, though he still looked slightly suspicious. "Well — let's drink to a Gryffindor victory against Ravenclaw! Not that I'm supposed to take sides, as a teacher…" he added hastily.

They drank the butterbeer in silence, until Harry voiced something he'd been wondering for a while.

"What's under a Dementor's hood?"

Professor Lupin lowered his bottle thoughtfully.

"Hmmm…well, the only people who really know are in no condition to tell us. You see, the Dementor lowers its hood only to use its last and worst weapon."

"What's that?"

"They call it the Dementor's Kiss," said Lupin, with a slightly twisted smile. "It's what Dementors do to those they wish to destroy utterly. I suppose there must be some kind of mouth under there, because they clamp their jaws upon the mouth of the victim and — and suck out his soul."

Harry accidentally spat out a bit of butterbeer.

"What — they kill —?"

"Oh no," said Lupin. "Much worse than that. You can exist without your soul, you know, as long as your brain and heart are still working. But you'll have no sense of self anymore, no memory, no…anything. There's no chance at all of recovery. You'll just exist. As an empty shell. And your soul is gone forever…lost."

Lupin drank a little more butterbeer, then said, "It's the fate that awaits Sirius Black. It was in the *Daily Prophet* this morning. The Ministry have given the Dementors permission to perform it if they find him."

Harry sat stunned for a moment at the idea of someone having their soul sucked out through their mouth. But then he thought of Black.

"He deserves it," he said suddenly.

"You think so?" said Lupin lightly. "Do you really think anyone deserves that?"

"Yes," said Harry defiantly. "For…for some things…"

He would have liked to have told Lupin about the conversation he'd overheard about Black in the Three Broomsticks, about Black betraying his mother and father, but it would have involved revealing that he'd gone to Hogsmeade without permission, and he knew Lupin wouldn't be very impressed by that. So he finished his butterbeer, thanked Lupin, and left the History of Magic classroom.

Harry half wished that he hadn't asked what was under a Dementor's hood, the answer had been so horrible, and he was so lost in unpleasant thoughts of what it would feel like to have your soul sucked out of you that he walked headlong into Professor McGonagall halfway up the stairs.

"Do watch where you're going, Potter!"

"Sorry, Professor —"

"I've just been looking for you in the Gryffindor common room, Well, here it is, we've done everything we could think of, and there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with it at all — you've got a very good friend somewhere, Potter…"

Harry's jaw dropped. She was holding out his Firebolt, and it looked as magnificent as ever.

"I can have it back?" Harry said weakly. "Seriously?"

"Seriously," said Professor McGonagall, and she was actually smiling. "I daresay you'll need to get the feel of it before Saturday's match, won't you? And Potter —*do* try and win, won't you? Or we'll be out of the running for the eighth year in a row, as Professor Snape was kind enough to remind me only last night…"

Speechless, Harry carried the Firebolt back upstairs toward Gryffindor Tower. As he turned a corner, he saw Ron dashing toward him, grinning from ear to ear.

"She gave it to you? Excellent! Listen, can I still have a go on it? Tomorrow?"

"Yeah…anything…" said Harry, his heart lighter than it had been in a month. "You know what — we should make up with Hermione…She was only trying to help…"

"Yeah, all right," said Ron. "She's in the common room now working — for a change."

They turned into the corridor to Gryffindor Tower and saw Neville Longbottom, pleading with Sir Cadogan, who seemed to be refusing him entrance.

"I wrote them down!" Neville was saying tearfully. "But I must've dropped them somewhere!"

"A likely tale!" roared Sir Cadogan. Then, spotting Harry and Ron: "Good even, my fine young yeomen! Come clap this loon in irons. He is trying to force entry to the chambers within!"

"Oh, shut up," said Ron as he and Harry drew level with Neville.

"I've lost the passwords!" Neville told them miserably. "I made him tell me what passwords he was going to use this week, because he keeps changing them, and now I don't know what I've done with them!"

"Oddsbodkins," said Harry to Sir Cadogan, who looked extremely disappointed and reluctantly swung forward to let them into the common room. There was a sudden, excited murmur as every head turned and the next moment, Harry was surrounded by people exclaiming over his Firebolt.

"Where'd you get it, Harry?"

"Will you let me have a go?"

"Have you ridden it yet, Harry?"

"Ravenclaw'll have no chance, they're all on Cleansweep Sevens!"

"Can I just *hold* it, Harry?"

After ten minutes or so, during which the Firebolt was Passed around and admired from every angle, the crowd dispersed and Harry and Ron had a clear view of Hermione, the only person who

hadn't rushed over to them, bent over her work and carefully avoiding their eyes. Harry and Ron approached her table and at last, she looked up.

"I got it back," said Harry, grinning at her and holding up the Firebolt.

"See, Hermione? There wasn't anything wrong with it!" said Ron.

"Well — there *might* have been!" said Hermione. "I mean, at least you know now that it's safe!"

"Yeah, I suppose so," said Harry. "I'd better put it upstairs."

"I'll take it!" said Ron eagerly. "I've got to give Scabbers his rat tonic."

He took the Firebolt and, holding it as if it were made of glass, carried it away up the boys' staircase.

"Can I sit down, then?" Harry asked Hermione.

"I suppose so," said Hermione, moving a great stack of parchment off a chair.

Harry looked around at the cluttered table, at the long Arithmancy essay on which the ink was still glistening, at the even longer Muggle Studies essay ('Explain Why Muggles Need Electricity') and at the rune translation Hermione was now poring over.

"How are you getting through all this stuff?" Harry asked her.

"Oh, well — you know — working hard," said Hermione. Close-up, Harry saw that she looked almost as tired as Lupin.

"Why don't you just drop a couple of subjects?" Harry asked, watching her lifting books as she searched for her rune dictionary.

"I couldn't do that!" said Hermione, looking scandalized.

"Arithmancy looks terrible," said Harry, picking up a very complicated-looking number chart.

"Oh no, it's wonderful!" said Hermione earnestly. "It's my favorite subject! It's —"

But exactly what was wonderful about Arithmancy, Harry never found out. At that precise moment, a strangled yell echoed down the boys' staircase. The whole common room fell silent, staring, petrified, at the entrance. Then came hurried footsteps, growing louder and louder — and then Ron came leaping into view, dragging with him a bedsheet.

"LOOK!" he bellowed, striding over to Hermione's table. "LOOK!" he yelled, shaking the sheets in her face.

"Ron, what —?"

"SCABBERS! LOOK! SCABBERS!"

Hermione was leaning away from Ron, looking utterly bewildered. Harry looked down at the sheet Ron was holding. There was something red on it. Something that looked horribly like-

“BLOOD!” Ron yelled into the stunned silence. “HE’S GONE! AND YOU KNOW WHAT WAS ON THE FLOOR?”

“N — no,” said Hermione in a trembling voice.

Ron threw something down onto Hermione’s rune translation. Hermione and Harry leaned forward. Lying on top of the weird, spiky shapes were several long, ginger cat hairs.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

GRYFFINDOR VERSUS RAVENCLAW

It looked like the end of Ron and Hermione's friendship. Each was so angry with the other that Harry couldn't see how they'd ever make up.

Ron was enraged that Hermione had never taken Crookshanks's attempts to eat Scabbers seriously, hadn't bothered to keep a close enough watch on him, and was still trying to pretend that Crookshanks was innocent by suggesting that Ron look for Scabbers under all the boys' beds. Hermione, meanwhile, maintained fiercely that Ron had no proof that Crookshanks had eaten Scabbers, that the ginger hairs might have been there since Christmas, and that Ron had been prejudiced against her cat ever since Crookshanks had landed on Ron's head in the Magical Menagerie.

Personally, Harry was sure that Crookshanks had eaten Scabbers, and when he tried to point out to Hermione that the evidence all pointed that way, she lost her temper with Harry too.

"Okay, side with Ron, I knew you would!" she said shrilly. "First the Firebolt, now Scabbers, everything's my fault, isn't it! Just leave me alone, Harry, I've got a lot of work to do!"

Ron had taken the loss of his rat very hard indeed.

"Come on, Ron, you were always saying how boring Scabbers was," said Fred bracingly. "And he's been off-color for ages, he was wasting away. It was probably better for him to snuff it quickly — one swallow — he probably didn't feel a thing."

"*Fred*!" said Ginny indignantly.

"All he did was eat and sleep, Ron, you said it yourself," said George.

"He bit Goyle for us once!" Ron said miserably. "Remember, Harry?"

"Yeah, that's true," said Harry.

"His finest hour," said Fred, unable to keep a straight face. "Let the scar on Goyle's finger stand as a lasting tribute to his memory. Oh, come on, Ron, get yourself down to Hogsmeade and buy a new rat, what's the point of moaning?"

In a last-ditch attempt to cheer Ron up, Harry persuaded him to come along to the Gryffindor team's final practice before the Ravenclaw match, so that he could have a ride on the Firebolt after they'd finished. This did seem to take Ron's mind off Scabbers for a moment ("Great! Can I try and shoot a few goals on it?") so they set off for the Quidditch field together.

Madam Hooch, who was still overseeing Gryffindor practices to keep an eye on Harry, was just as impressed with the Firebolt as everyone else had been. She took it in her hands before takeoff and gave them the benefit of her professional opinion.

“Look at the balance on it! If the Nimbus series has a fault, it’s a slight list to the tail end — you often find they develop a drag after a few years. They’ve updated the handle too, a bit slimmer than the Cleansweeps, reminds me of the old Silver Arrows — a pity they’ve stopped making them. I learned to fly on one, and a very fine old broom it was too…”

She continued in this vein for some time, until Wood said, “Er — Madam Hooch? Is it okay if Harry has the Firebolt back? We need to practice…”

“Oh — right — here you are, then, Potter,” said Madam Hooch. “I’ll sit over here with Weasley…”

She and Ron left the field to sit in the stadium, and the Gryffindor team gathered around Wood for his final instructions for tomorrow’s match.

“Harry, I’ve just found out who Ravenclaw is playing as Seeker. It’s Cho Chang. She’s a fourth year, and she’s pretty good…I really hoped she wouldn’t be fit, she’s had some problems with injuries…” Wood scowled his displeasure that Cho Chang had made a full recovery, then said, “On the other hand, she rides a Comet Two Sixty, which is going to look like a joke next to the Firebolt.” He gave Harry’s broom a look of fervent admiration, then said, “Okay, everyone, let’s go —”

And at long last, Harry mounted his Firebolt, and kicked off from the ground.

It was better than he’d ever dreamed. The Firebolt turned with the lightest touch; it seemed to obey his thoughts rather than his grip; it sped across the field at such speed that the stadium turned into a green-and-gray blur; Harry turned it so sharply that Alicia Spinnet screamed, then he went into a perfectly controlled dive, brushing the grassy field with his toes before rising thirty, forty, fifty feet into the air again —

“Harry, I’m letting the Snitch out!” Wood called.

Harry turned and raced a Bludger toward the goal posts; he outstripped it easily, saw the Snitch dart out from behind Wood, and within ten seconds had caught it tightly in his hand.

The team cheered madly. Harry let the Snitch go again, gave it a minute’s head start, then tore after it, weaving in and out of the others; he spotted it lurking near Katie Bell’s knee, looped her easily, and caught it again.

It was the best practice ever; the team, inspired by the presence of the Firebolt in their midst, performed their best moves faultlessly, and by the time they hit the ground again, Wood didn’t have a single criticism to make, which, as George Weasley pointed out, was a first.

“I can’t see what’s going to stop us tomorrow!” said Wood. “Not unless — Harry, you’ve sorted out your Dementor problem, haven’t you?”

"Yeah," said Harry, thinking of his feeble Patronus and wishing it were stronger.

"The Dementors won't turn up again, Oliver. Dumbledore'd go ballistic," said Fred confidently.

"Well, let's hope not," said Wood. "Anyway — good work, everyone. Let's get back to the tower…turn in early…"

"I'm staying out for a bit; Ron wants a go on the Firebolt," Harry told Wood, and while the rest of the team headed off to the locker rooms, Harry strode over to Ron, who vaulted the barrier to the stands and came to meet him. Madam Hooch had fallen asleep in her seat.

"Here you go," said Harry, handing Ron the Firebolt.

Ron, an expression of ecstasy on his face, mounted the broom and zoomed off into the gathering darkness while Harry walked around the edge of the field, watching him. Night had fallen before Madam Hooch awoke with a start, told Harry and Ron off for not waking her, and insisted that they go back to the castle.

Harry shouldered the Firebolt and he and Ron walked out of the shadowy stadium, discussing the Firebolt's superbly smooth action, its phenomenal acceleration, and its pinpoint turning. They were halfway toward the castle when Harry, glancing to his left, saw something that made his heart turn over — a pair of eyes, gleaming out of the darkness.

Harry stopped dead, his heart banging against his ribs.

"What's the matter?" said Ron.

Harry pointed. Ron pulled out his wand and muttered, "*Lumos*!"

A beam of light fell across the grass, hit the bottom of a tree, and illuminated its branches; there, crouching among the budding leaves, was Crookshanks.

"Get out of here!" Ron roared, and he stooped down and seized a stone lying on the grass, but before he could do anything else, Crookshanks had vanished with one swish of his long ginger tail.

"See?" Ron said furiously, chucking the stone down again. "She's still letting him wander about wherever he wants — probably washing down Scabbers with a couple of birds now…"

Harry didn't say anything. He took a deep breath as relief seeped through him; he had been sure for a moment that those eyes had belonged to the Grim. They set off for the castle once more. slightly ashamed of his moment of panic, Harry didn't say anything to Ron — nor did he look left or right until they had reached the well lit entrance hall.

Harry went down to breakfast the next morning with the rest of the boys in his dormitory, all of whom seemed to think the Firebolt deserved a sort of guard of honor. As Harry entered the Great

Hall, heads turned in the direction of the Firebolt, and there was a good deal of excited muttering. Harry saw, with enormous satisfaction, that the Slytherin team were all looking thunderstruck.

"Did you see his face?" said Ron gleefully, looking back at Malfoy. "He can't believe it! This is brilliant!"

Wood, too, was basking in the reflected glory of the Firebolt.

"Put it here, Harry," he said, laying the broom in the middle of the table and carefully turning it so that its name faced upward. People from the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables were soon coming over to look. Cedric Diggory came over to congratulate Harry on having acquired such a superb replacement for his Nimbus, and Percy's Ravenclaw girlfriend, Penelope Clearwater, asked if she could actually hold the Firebolt.

"Now, now, Penny, no sabotage!" said Percy heartily as she examined the Firebolt closely. "Penelope and I have got a bet on," he told the team. "Ten Galleons on the outcome of the match!"

Penelope put the Firebolt down again, thanked Harry, and went back to her table.

"Harry — make sure you win," said Percy, in an urgent whisper. "*I haven't got ten Galleons*. Yes, I'm coming, Penny!" And he bustled off to join her in a piece of toast.

"Sure you can manage that broom, Potter?" said a cold, drawling voice.

Draco Malfoy had arrived for a closer look, Crabbe and Goyle right behind him.

"Yeah, reckon so," said Harry casually.

"Got plenty of special features, hasn't it?" said Malfoy, eyes glittering maliciously. "Shame it doesn't come with a parachute — in case you get too near a Dementor."

Crabbe and Goyle sniggered.

"Pity you can't attach an extra arm to yours, Malfoy," said Harry. "Then it could catch the Snitch for you."

The Gryffindor team laughed loudly. Malfoy's pale eyes narrowed, and he stalked away. They watched him rejoin the rest of the Slytherin team, who put their heads together, no doubt asking Malfoy whether Harry's broom really was a Firebolt.

At a quarter to eleven, the Gryffindor team set off for the locker rooms. The weather couldn't have been more different from their match against Hufflepuff. It was a clear, cool day with a very light breeze; there would be no visibility problems this time, and Harry, though nervous, was starting to feel the excitement only a Quidditch match could bring. They could hear the rest of the school moving into the stadium beyond. Harry took off his black school robes, removed his wand from his pocket, and stuck it inside the T-shirt he was going to wear under his Quidditch robes. He

only hoped he wouldn't need it. He wondered suddenly whether Professor Lupin was in the crowd, watching.

"You know what we've got to do," said Wood as they prepared to leave the locker rooms. "If we lose this match, we're out of the running, just — just fly like you did in practice yesterday, and we'll be okay!"

They walked out onto the field to tumultuous applause. The Ravenclaw team, dressed in blue, were already standing in the middle of the field. Their Seeker, Cho Chang, was the only girl on their team. She was shorter than Harry by about a head, and Harry couldn't help noticing, nervous as he was, that she was extremely pretty. She smiled at Harry as the teams faced each other behind their captains, and he felt a slight lurch in the region of his stomach that he didn't think had anything to do with nerves.

"Wood, Davies, shake hands," Madam Hooch said briskly, and Wood shook hands with the Ravenclaw Captain.

"Mount your brooms…on my whistle…three — two — one —"

Harry kicked off into the air and the Firebolt zoomed higher and faster than any other broom; he soared around the stadium and began squinting around for the Snitch, listening all the while to the commentary, which was being provided by the Weasley twins' friend Lee Jordan.

"They're off, and the big excitement this match is the Firebolt that Harry Potter is flying for Gryffindor. According to *Which Broomstick*, the Firebolt's going to be the broom of choice for the national teams at this year's World Championship —"

"Jordan, would you mind telling us what's going on in the match?" interrupted Professor McGonagall's voice.

"Right you are, Professor — just giving a bit of background information — the Firebolt, incidentally, has a built-in auto-brake and—"

"Jordan!"

"Okay, okay, Gryffindor in possession, Katie Bell of Gryffindor, heading for goal…"

Harry streaked past Katie in the opposite direction, gazing around for a glint of gold and noticing that Cho Chang was tailing him closely. She was undoubtedly a very good flier — she kept cutting across him, forcing him to change direction.

"Show her your acceleration, Harry!" Fred yelled as he whooshed past in pursuit of a Bludger that was aiming for Alicia.

Harry urged the Firebolt forward as they rounded the Ravenclaw goal posts and Cho fell behind. Just as Katie succeeded in scoring the first goal of the match, and the Gryffindor end of the field went wild, he saw it — the Snitch was close to the ground, flitting near one of the barriers.

Harry dived; Cho saw what he was doing and tore after him — Harry was speeding up, excitement flooding him; dives were his specialty, he was ten feet away —

Then a Bludger, hit by one of the Ravenclaw Beaters, came pelting out of nowhere; Harry veered off course, avoiding it by an inch, and in those few, crucial seconds, the Snitch had vanished.

There was a great "Ooooooh" of disappointment from the Gryffindor supporters, but much applause for their Beater from the Ravenclaw end. George Weasley vented his feelings by hitting the second Bludger directly at the offending Beater, who was forced to roll right over in midair to avoid it.

"Gryffindor leads by eighty points to zero, and look at that Firebolt go! Potter's really putting it through its paces now, see it turn — Chang's Comet is just no match for it, the Firebolt's precision — balance is really noticeable in these long —"

"JORDAN! ARE YOU BEING PAID TO ADVERTISE FIREBOLTS? GET ON WITH THE COMMENTARY!"

Ravenclaw was pulling back; they had now scored three goals, which put Gryffindor only fifty points ahead — if Cho got the Snitch before him, Ravenclaw would win. Harry dropped lower, narrowly avoiding a Ravenclaw Chaser, scanning the field frantically — a glint of gold, a flutter of tiny wings — the Snitch was circling the Gryffindor goal post…

Harry accelerated, eyes fixed on the speck of gold ahead — but just then, Cho appeared out of thin air, blocking him —

"HARRY, THIS IS NO TIME TO BE A GENTLEMAN!" Wood roared as Harry swerved to avoid a collision. "KNOCK HER OFF HER BROOM IF YOU HAVE TO!"

Harry turned and caught sight of Cho; she was grinning. The Snitch had vanished again. Harry turned his Firebolt upward and was soon twenty feet above the game. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Cho following him…She'd decided to mark him rather than search for the Snitch herself…All right, then…if she wanted to tail him, she'd have to take the consequences…

He dived again, and Cho, thinking he'd seen the Snitch, tried to follow; Harry pulled out of the dive very sharply; she hurtled downward; he rose fast as a bullet once more, and then saw it, for the third time — the Snitch was glittering way above the field at the Ravenclaw end.

He accelerated; so, many feet below, did Cho. He was winning, gaining on the Snitch with every second — then —

"Oh!" screamed Cho, pointing.

Distracted, Harry looked down.

Three Dementors, three tall, black, hooded Dementors, were looking up at him.

He didn't stop to think. Plunging a hand down the neck of his robes, he whipped out his wand and roared, "*Expecto patronum*!"

Something silver-white, something enormous, erupted from the end of his wand. He knew it had shot directly at the Dementors but didn't pause to watch; his mind still miraculously clear, he looked ahead — he was nearly there. He stretched out the hand still grasping his wand and just managed to close his fingers over the small, struggling Snitch.

Madam Hooch's whistle sounded. Harry turned around in midair and saw six scarlet blurs bearing down on him; next moment, the whole team was hugging him so hard he was nearly pulled off his broom. Down below he could hear the roars of the Gryffindors in the crowd.

"That's my boy!" Wood kept yelling. Alicia, Angelina, and Katie had all kissed Harry; Fred had him in a grip so tight Harry felt as though his head would come off. In complete disarray, the team managed to make its way back to the ground. Harry got off his broom and looked up to see a gaggle of Gryffindor supporters sprinting onto the field, Ron in the lead. Before he knew it, he had been engulfed by the cheering crowd.

"Yes!" Ron yelled, yanking Harry's arm into the air. "Yes! Yes!"

"Well *done*, Harry!" said Percy, looking delighted. "Ten Galleons to me! Must find Penelope, excuse me —"

"Good for you, Harry!" roared Seamus Finnigan.

"Ruddy brilliant!" boomed Hagrid over the heads of the milling Gryffindors.

"That was quite some Patronus," said a voice in Harry's ear.

Harry turned around to see Professor Lupin, who looked both shaken and pleased.

"The Dementors didn't affect me at all!" Harry said excitedly. "I didn't feel a thing!"

"That would be because they — er — weren't Dementors," said Professor Lupin. "Come and see —"

He led Harry out of the crowd until they were able to see the edge of the field.

"You gave Mr. Malfoy quite a fright," said Lupin.

Harry stared. Lying in a crumpled heap on the ground were Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, and Marcus Flint, the Slytherin team Captain, all struggling to remove themselves from long, black, hooded robes. It looked as though Malfoy had been standing on Goyle's shoulders. Standing over them, with an expression of the utmost fury on her face, was Professor McGonagall.

"An unworthy trick!" she was shouting. "A low and cowardly attempt to sabotage the Gryffindor Seeker! Detention for all of you, and fifty points from Slytherin! I shall be speaking to Professor Dumbledore about this, make no mistake! Ah, here he comes now!"

If anything could have set the seal on Gryffindor's victory, it was this. Ron, who had fought his way through to Harry's side, doubled up with laughter as they watched Malfoy fighting to extricate himself from the robe, Goyle's head still stuck inside it.

"Come on, Harry!" said George, fighting his way over. "Party! Gryffindor common room, now!"

"Right," said Harry, and feeling happier than he had in ages, he and the rest of the team led the way, still in their scarlet robes, out of the stadium and back up to the castle.

It felt as though they had already won the Quidditch Cup; the party went on all day and well into the night. Fred and George Weasley disappeared for a couple of hours and returned with armfuls of bottles of butterbeer, pumpkin fizz, and several bags full of Honeydukes sweets.

"How did you do that?" squealed Angelina Johnson as George started throwing Peppermint Toads into the crowd.

"With a little help from Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs," Fred muttered in Harry's ear.

Only one person wasn't joining in the festivities. Hermione, incredibly, was sitting in a corner, attempting to read an enormous book entitled *Home Life and Social Habits of British Muggles*. Harry broke away from the table where Fred and George had started juggling butterbeer bottles and went over to her.

"Did you even come to the match?" he asked her.

"Of course I did," said Hermione in a strangely high-pitched voice, not looking up. "And I'm very glad we won, and I think you did really well, but I need to read this by Monday."

"Come on, Hermione, come and have some food," Harry said, looking over at Ron and wondering whether he was in a good enough mood to bury the hatchet.

"I can't, Harry. I've still got four hundred and twenty-two pages to read!" said Hermione, now sounding slightly hysterical. "Anyway…" She glanced over at Ron too. "He doesn't want me to join in."

There was no arguing with this, as Ron chose that moment to say loudly, "If Scabbers hadn't just been *eaten*, he could have had some of those Fudge Flies. He used to really like them —"

Hermione burst into tears. Before Harry could say or do anything, she tucked the enormous book under her arm, and, still sobbing, ran toward the staircase to the girls' dormitories and out of sight.

"Can't you give her a break?" Harry asked Ron quietly.

"No," said Ron flatly. "If she just acted like she was sorry — but she'll never admit she's wrong, Hermione. She's still acting like Scabbers has gone on vacation or something."

The Gryffindor party ended only when Professor McGonagall turned up in her tartan dressing gown and hair net at one in the morning, to insist that they all go to bed. Harry and Ron climbed the stairs to their dormitory, still discussing the match. At last, exhausted, Harry climbed into bed, twitched the hangings of his four-poster shut to block out a ray of moonlight, lay back, and felt himself almost instantly drifting off to sleep…

He had a very strange dream. He was walking through a forest, his Firebolt over his shoulder, following something silvery-white. It was winding its way through the trees ahead, and he could only catch glimpses of it between the leaves. Anxious to catch up with it, he sped up, but as he moved faster, so did his quarry. Harry broke into a run, and ahead he heard hooves gathering speed. Now he was running flat out, and ahead he could hear galloping. Then he turned a corner into a clearing and —

"AAARRGGHH! NOOO!"

Harry woke as suddenly as though he'd been hit in the face. Disoriented in the total darkness, he fumbled with his hangings, he could hear movements around him, and Seamus Finnigan's voice from the other side of the room.

"What's going on?"

Harry thought he heard the dormitory door slam. At last finding the divide in his curtains, he ripped them back, and at the same moment, Dean Thomas lit his lamp.

Ron was sitting up in bed, the hangings torn from one side, a look of utmost terror on his face.

"Black! Sirius Black! With a knife!"

"*What*?"

"Here! Just now! Slashed the curtains! Woke me up!"

"You sure you weren't dreaming, Ron?" said Dean.

"Look at the curtains! I tell you, he was here!"

They all scrambled out of bed; Harry reached the dormitory door first, and they sprinted back down the staircase. Doors opened behind them, and sleepy voices called after them.

"Who shouted?"

"What're you doing?"

The common room was lit with the glow of the dying fire, still littered with the debris from the party. It was deserted.

"Are you *sure* you weren't dreaming, Ron?"

"I'm telling you, I saw him!"

"What's all the noise?"

"Professor McGonagall told us to go to bed!"

A few of the girls had come down their staircase, pulling on dressing gowns and yawning. Boys, too, were reappearing.

"Excellent, are we carrying on?" said Fred Weasley brightly.

"Everyone back upstairs!" said Percy, hurrying into the common room and pinning his Head Boy badge to his pajamas as he spoke.

"Perce — Sirius Black!" said Ron faintly. "In our dormitory! With a knife! Woke me up!"

The common room went very still.

"Nonsense!" said Percy, looking startled. "You had too much to eat, Ron — had a nightmare—"

"I'm telling you —"

"Now, really, enough's enough!"

Professor McGonagall was back. She slammed the portrait behind her as she entered the common room and stared furiously around.

"I am delighted that Gryffindor won the match, but this is getting ridiculous! Percy, I expected better of you!"

"I certainly didn't authorize this, Professor!" said Percy, puffing himself up indignantly. "I was just telling them all to get back to bed! My brother Ron here had a nightmare —"

"IT WASN'T A NIGHTMARE!" Ron yelled. "PROFESSOR, I WOKE UP, AND SIRIUS BLACK WAS STANDING OVER ME, HOLDING A KNIFE!"

Professor McGonagall stared at him.

"Don't be ridiculous, Weasley, how could he possibly have gotten through the portrait hole?"

"Ask him!" said Ron, pointing a shaking finger at the back of Sir Cadogan's picture. "Ask him if he saw —"

Glaring suspiciously at Ron, Professor McGonagall pushed the portrait back open and went outside. The whole common room listened with bated breath. "Sir Cadogan, did you just let a man enter Gryffindor Tower?"

"Certainly, good lady!" cried Sir Cadogan.

There was a stunned silence, both inside and outside the common room.

"You — you *did*?" said Professor McGonagall. "But — but the password!"

"He had 'em!" said Sir Cadogan proudly. "Had the whole week's, my lady! Read 'em off a little piece of paper!"

Professor McGonagall pulled herself back through the portrait hole to face the stunned crowd. She was white as chalk.

"Which person," she said, her voice shaking, "which abysmally foolish person wrote down this week's passwords and left them lying around?"

There was utter silence, broken by the smallest of terrified squeaks. Neville Longbottom, trembling from head to fluffy slippered toes, raised his hand slowly into the air.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SNAPE'S GRUDGE

No one in Gryffindor Tower slept that night. They knew that the castle was being searched again, and the whole House stayed awake in the common room, waiting to hear whether Black had been caught. Professor McGonagall came back at dawn, to tell them that he had again escaped.

Throughout the day, everywhere they went they saw signs of tighter security; Professor Flitwick could be seen teaching the front doors to recognize a large picture of Sirius Black; Filch was suddenly bustling up and down the corridors, boarding up everything from tiny cracks in the walls to mouse holes. Sir Cadogan had been fired. His portrait had been taken back to its lonely landing on the seventh floor, and the Fat Lady was back. She had been expertly restored, but was still extremely nervous, and had agreed to return to her job only on condition that she was given extra protection. A bunch of surly security trolls had been hired to guard her. They paced the corridor in a menacing group, talking in grunts and comparing the size of their clubs.

Harry couldn't help noticing that the statue of the one-eyed witch on the third floor remained unguarded and unblocked. It seemed that Fred and George had been right in thinking that they — and now Harry, Ron, and Hermione — were the only ones who knew about the hidden passageway within it.

"D'you reckon we should tell someone?" Harry asked Ron.

"We know he's not coming in through Honeyduke's," said Ron dismissively. "We'd've heard if the shop had been broken into."

Harry was glad Ron took this view. If the one-eyed witch was boarded up too, he would never be able to go into Hogsmeade again.

Ron had become an instant celebrity. For the first time in his life, people were paying more attention to him than to Harry, and it was clear that Ron was rather enjoying the experience. Though still severely shaken by the night's events, he was happy to tell anyone who asked what had happened, with a wealth of detail.

"…I was asleep, and I heard this ripping noise, and I thought it was in my dream, you know? But then there was this draft…I woke up and one side of the hangings on my bed had been pulled down…I rolled over…and I saw him standing over me…like a skeleton, with loads of filthy hair…holding this great long knife, must've been twelve inches…and he looked at me, and I looked at him, and then I yelled, and he scampered.

"Why, though?" Ron added to Harry as the group of second year girls who had been listening to his chilling tale departed. "Why did he run?"

Harry had been wondering the same thing. Why had Black, having got the wrong bed, not silenced Ron and proceeded to Harry? Black had proved twelve years ago that he didn't mind murdering innocent people, and this time he had been facing five unarmed boys, four of whom were asleep.

"He must've known he'd have a job getting back out of the castle once you'd yelled and woken people up," said Harry thoughtfully. "He'd've had to kill the whole house to get back through the portrait hole…then he would've met the teachers…"

Neville was in total disgrace. Professor McGonagall was so furious with him she had banned him from all future Hogsmeade visits, given him a detention, and forbidden anyone to give him the password into the tower. Poor Neville was forced to wait outside the common room every night for somebody to let him in, while the security trolls leered unpleasantly at him. None of these punishments, however, came close to matching the one his grandmother had in store for him. Two days after Black's break-in, she sent Neville the very worst thing a Hogwarts student could receive over breakfast — a Howler.

The school owls swooped into the Great Hall carrying the mail as usual, and Neville choked as a huge barn owl landed in front of him, a scarlet envelope clutched in its beak. Harry and Ron, who were sitting opposite him, recognized the letter as a Howler at once — Ron had got one from his mother the year before.

"Run for it, Neville," Ron advised.

Neville didn't need telling twice. He seized the envelope, and holding it before him like a bomb, sprinted out of the hall, while the Slytherin table exploded with laughter at the sight of him. They heard the Howler go off in the entrance hall — Neville's grandmother's voice, magically magnified to a hundred times its usual volume, shrieking about how he had brought shame on the whole family.

Harry was too busy feeling sorry for Neville to notice immediately that he had a letter too. Hedwig got his attention by nipping him sharply on the wrist.

"Ouch! Oh — thanks, Hedwig."

Harry tore open the envelope while Hedwig helped herself to some of Neville's cornflakes. The note inside said:

Dear Harry and Ron,

How about having tea with me this afternoon 'round six? I'll come collect you from the castle. WAIT FOR ME IN THE ENTRANCE HALL; YOU'RE NOT ALLOWED OUT ON YOUR OWN.

Cheers,

Hagrid

“He probably wants to hear all about Black!” said Ron.

So at six o’clock that afternoon, Harry and Ron left Gryffindor Tower, passed the security trolls at a run, and headed down to the entrance hall.

Hagrid was already waiting for them.

“All right, Hagrid!” said Ron. “S’pose you want to hear about Saturday night, do you?”

“I’ve already heard all abou’ it,” said Hagrid, opening the front doors and leading them outside.

“Oh,” said Ron, looking slightly put out.

The first thing they saw on entering Hagrid’s cabin was Buckbeak, who was stretched out on top of Hagrid’s patchwork quilt, his enormous wings folded tight to his body, enjoying a large plate of dead ferrets. Averting his eyes from this unpleasant sight, Harry saw a gigantic, hairy brown suit and a very horrible yellow-and-orange tie hanging from the top of Hagrid’s wardrobe door.

“What are they for, Hagrid?” said Harry.

“Buckbeak’s case against the Committee fer the Disposal o’ Dangerous Creatures,” said Hagrid. “This Friday. Him an’ me’ll be goin’ down ter London together. I’ve booked two beds on the Knight Bus…”

Harry felt a nasty pang of guilt. He had completely forgotten that Buckbeak’s trial was so near, and judging by the uneasy look on Ron’s face, he had too. They had also forgotten their promise about helping him prepare Buckbeak’s defense; the arrival of the Firebolt had driven it clean out of their minds.

Hagrid poured them tea and offered them a plate of Bath buns but they knew better than to accept; they had had too much experience with Hagrid’s cooking.

“I got somethin’ ter discuss with you two,” said Hagrid, sitting himself between them and looking uncharacteristically serious.

“What?” said Harry.

“Hermione,” said Hagrid.

“What about her?” said Ron.

“She’s in a righ’ state, that’s what. She’s bin comin’ down ter visit me a lot since Chris’mas. Bin feelin’ lonely. Firs’ yeh weren’ talking to her because o’ the Firebolt, now yer not talkin’ to her because her cat —”

“– ate Scabbers!” Ron interjected angrily.

"Because her cat acted like all cats do," Hagrid continued doggedly. "She's cried a fair few times, yeh know. Goin' through a rough time at the moment. Bitten off more'n she can chew, if yeh ask me, all the work she's tryin' ter do. Still found time ter help me with Buckbeak's case, mind…She's found some really good stuff fer me…reckon he'll stand a good chance now…"

"Hagrid, we should've helped as well — sorry —" Harry began awkwardly.

"I'm not blamin' yeh!" said Hagrid, waving Harry's apology aside. "Gawd knows yeh've had enough ter be getting' on with. I've seen yeh practicin' Quidditch ev'ry hour o' the day an' night — but I gotta tell yeh, I thought you two'd value yer friend more'n broomsticks or rats. Tha's all."

Harry and Ron exchanged uncomfortable looks.

"Really upset, she was, when Black nearly stabbed yeh, Ron. She's got her heart in the right place, Hermione has, an' you two not talkin' to her —"

"If she'd just get rid of that cat, I'd speak to her again!" Ron said angrily. "But she's still sticking up for it! It's a maniac, and she won't hear a word against it!"

"Ah, well, people can be a bit stupid abou' their pets," said Hagrid wisely. Behind him, Buckbeak spat a few ferret bones onto Hagrid's pillow.

They spent the rest of their visit discussing Gryffindor's improved chances for the Quidditch Cup. At nine o'clock, Hagrid walked them back up to the castle.

A large group of people was bunched around the bulletin board when they returned to the common room.

"Hogsmeade, next weekend!" said Ron, craning over the heads to read the new notice. "What d'you reckon?" he added quietly to Harry as they went to sit down.

"Well, Filch hasn't done anything about the passage into Honeydukes…" Harry said, even more quietly.

"Harry!" said a voice in his right ear. Harry started and looked around at Hermione, who was sitting at the table right behind them and clearing a space in the wall of books that had been hiding her.

"Harry, if you go into Hogsmeade again…I'll tell Professor McGonagall about that map!" said Hermione.

"Can you hear someone talking, Harry?" growled Ron, not looking at Hermione.

"Ron, how can you let him go with you? After what Sirius Black nearly did to *you*! I mean it, I'll tell —"

“So now you’re trying to get Harry expelled!” said Ron furiously. “Haven’t you done enough damage this year?”

Hermione opened her mouth to respond, but with a soft hiss, Crookshanks leapt onto her lap. Hermione took one frightened look at the expression on Ron’s face, gathered up Crookshanks, and hurried away toward the girls’ dormitories.

“So how about it?” Ron said to Harry as though there had been no interruption. “Come on, last time we went you didn’t see anything. You haven’t even been inside Zonko’s yet!”

Harry looked around to check that Hermione was well out of earshot.

“Okay,” he said. “But I’m taking the Invisibility Cloak this time.”

On Saturday morning, Harry packed his Invisibility Cloak in his bag, slipped the Marauder’s Map into his pocket, and went down to breakfast with everyone else. Hermione kept shooting suspicious looks down the table at him, but he avoided her eye and was careful to let her see him walking back up the marble staircase in the entrance hall as everybody else proceeded to the front doors.

“Bye!” Harry called to Ron. “See you when you get back!”

Ron grinned and winked.

Harry hurried up to the third floor, slipping the Marauder’s Map out of his pocket as he went. Crouching behind the one-eyed witch, he smoothed it out. A tiny dot was moving in his direction. Harry squinted at it. The minuscule writing next to it read *Neville Longbottom*.

Harry quickly pulled out his wand, muttered, “*Dissendium!*” and shoved his bag into the statue, but before he could climb in himself, Neville came around the corner.

“Harry! I forgot you weren’t going to Hogsmeade either!”

“Hi, Neville,” said Harry, moving swiftly away from the statue and pushing the map back into his pocket. “What are you up to?”

“Nothing,” shrugged Neville. “Want a game of Exploding Snap?”

“Er — not now — I was going to go to the library and do that vampire essay for Lupin —”

“I’ll come with you!” said Neville brightly. “I haven’t done it either!”

“Er — hang on — yeah, I forgot, I finished it last night!”

“Great, you can help me!” said Neville, his round face anxious. “I don’t understand that thing about the garlic at all — do they have to eat it, or —”

He broke off with a small gasp, looking over Harry’s shoulder.

It was Snape. Neville took a quick step behind Harry.

“And what are you two doing here?” said Snape, coming to a halt and looking from one to the other. “An odd place to meet —”

To Harry’s immense disquiet, Snape’s black eyes flicked to the doorways on either side of them, and then to the one-eyed witch.

“We’re not — meeting here,” said Harry. “We just — met here.”

“Indeed?” said Snape. “You have a habit of turning up in unexpected places, Potter, and you are very rarely there for no good reason…I suggest the pair of you return to Gryffindor Tower, where you belong.”

Harry and Neville set off without another word. As they turned the corner, Harry looked back. Snape was running one of his hands over the one-eyed witch’s head, examining it closely.

Harry managed to shake Neville off at the Fat Lady by telling him the password, then pretending he’d left his vampire essay in the library and doubling back. Once out of sight of the security trolls, he pulled out the map again and held it close to his nose.

The third floor corridor seemed to be deserted. Harry scanned the map carefully and saw, with a leap of relief, that the tiny dot labeled Severus Snape was now back in its office.

He sprinted back to the one-eyed witch, opened her hump, heaved himself inside, and slid down to meet his bag at the bottom of the stone chute. He wiped the Marauder’s Map blank again, then set off at a run.

Harry, completely hidden beneath the Invisibility Cloak, emerged into the sunlight outside Honeydukes and prodded Ron in the back.

“It’s me,” he muttered.

“What kept you?” Ron hissed.

“Snape was hanging around.”

They set off up the High Street.

“Where are you?” Ron kept muttering out of the corner of his mouth. “Are you still there? This feels weird…”

They went to the post office; Ron pretended to be checking the price of an owl to Bill in Egypt so that Harry could have a good look around. The owls sat hooting softly down at him, at least three hundred of them; from Great Grays right down to tiny little Scops owls (“Local Deliveries Only”), which were so small they could have sat in the palm of Harry’s hand.

Then they visited Zonko’s, which was so packed with students Harry had to exercise great care not to tread on anyone and cause a panic. There were jokes and tricks to fulfill even Fred’s and

George's wildest dreams; Harry gave Ron whispered orders and passed him some gold from under the cloak. They left Zonko's with their money bags considerably lighter than they had been on entering, but their pockets bulging with Dungbombs, Hiccup Sweets, Frog Spawn Soap, and a Nose-Biting Teacup apiece.

The day was fine and breezy, and neither of them felt like staying indoors, so they walked past the Three Broomsticks and climbed a slope to visit the Shrieking Shack, the most haunted dwelling in Britain. It stood a little way above the rest of the village, and even in daylight was slightly creepy, with its boarded windows and dank overgrown garden.

"Even the Hogwarts ghosts avoid it," said Ron as they leaned on the fence, looking up at it. "I asked Nearly Headless Nick…he says he's heard a very rough crowd lives here. No one can get in. Fred and George tried, obviously, but all the entrances are sealed shut…"

Harry, feeling hot from their climb, was just considering taking off the cloak for a few minutes when they heard voices nearby. Someone was climbing toward the house from the other side of the hill; moments later, Malfoy had appeared, followed closely by Crabbe and Goyle. Malfoy was speaking.

"…should have an owl from Father any time now. He had to go to the hearing to tell them about my arm…about how I couldn't use it for three months…"

Crabbe and Goyle sniggered.

"I really wish I could hear that great hairy moron trying to defend himself…'There's no 'arm in 'im, 'onest—'…That Hippogriff's as good as dead—"

Malfoy suddenly caught sight of Ron. His pale face split in a malevolent grin.

"What are you doing, Weasley?"

Malfoy looked up at the crumbling house behind Ron.

"Suppose you'd love to live here, wouldn't you, Weasley? Dreaming about having your own bedroom? I heard your family all sleep in one room — is that true?"

Harry seized the back of Ron's robes to stop him from leaping on Malfoy.

"Leave him to me," he hissed in Ron's ear.

The opportunity was too perfect to miss. Harry crept silently around behind Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, bent down, and scooped a large handful of mud out of the path.

"We were just discussing your friend Hagrid," Malfoy said to Ron. "Just trying to imagine what he's saying to the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures. D'you think he'll cry when they cut off his Hippogriff's—"

SPLAT!

Malfoy's head jerked forward as the mud hit him; his silverblond hair was suddenly dripping in muck.

"What the —?"

Ron had to hold onto the fence to keep himself standing, he was laughing so hard. Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle spun stupidly on the spot, staring wildly around, Malfoy trying to wipe his hair clean.

"What was that? Who did that?"

"Very haunted up here, isn't it?" said Ron, with the air of one commenting on the weather.

Crabbe and Goyle were looking scared. Their bulging muscles were no use against ghosts. Malfoy was staring madly around at the deserted landscape.

Harry sneaked along the path, where a particularly sloppy puddle yielded some foul-smelling, green sludge.

SPLATTER!

Crabbe and Goyle caught some this time. Goyle hopped furiously on the spot, trying to rub it out of his small, dull eyes.

"It came from over there!" said Malfoy, wiping his face, and staring at a spot some six feet to the left of Harry.

Crabbe blundered forward, his long arms outstretched like a zombie. Harry dodged around him, picked up a stick, and lobbed it at Crabbe's back. Harry doubled up with silent laughter as Crabbe did a kind of pirouette in midair, trying to see who had thrown it. As Ron was the only person Crabbe could see, it was Ron he started toward, but Harry stuck out his leg. Crabbe stumbled — and his huge, flat foot caught the hem of Harry's cloak. Harry felt a great tug, then the cloak slid off his face.

For a split second, Malfoy stared at him.

"AAARGH!" he yelled, pointing at Harry's head. Then he turned tail and ran, at breakneck speed, back down the hill, Crabbe and Goyle behind him.

Harry tugged the cloak up again, but the damage was done.

"Harry!" Ron said, stumbling forward and staring hopelessly at the point where Harry had disappeared, "you'd better run for it! If Malfoy tells anyone — you'd better get back to the castle, quick —"

“See you later,” said Harry, and without another word, he tore back down the path toward Hogsmeade.

Would Malfoy believe what he had seen? Would anyone believe Malfoy? Nobody knew about the Invisibility Cloak — nobody except Dumbledore. Harry’s stomach turned over — Dumbledore would know exactly what had happened, if Malfoy said anything —

Back into Honeydukes, back down the cellar steps, across the stone floor, through the trapdoor — Harry pulled off the cloak, tucked it under his arm, and ran, flat out, along the passage…Malfoy would get back first…how long would it take him to find a teacher? Panting, a sharp pain in his side, Harry didn’t slow down until he reached the stone slide. He would have to leave the cloak where it was, it was too much of a giveaway in case Malfoy had tipped off a teacher — he hid it in a shadowy corner, then started to climb, fast as he could, his sweaty hands slipping on the sides of the chute. He reached the inside of the witch’s hump, tapped it with his wand, stuck his head through, and hoisted himself out; the hump closed, and just as Harry jumped out from behind the statue, he heard quick footsteps approaching.

It was Snape. He approached Harry at a swift walk, his black robes swishing, then stopped in front of him.

“So,” he said.

There was a look of suppressed triumph about him. Harry tried to look innocent, all too aware of his sweaty face and his muddy hands, which he quickly hid in his pockets.

“Come with me, Potter,” said Snape.

Harry followed him downstairs, trying to wipe his hands clean on the inside of his robes without Snape noticing. They walked down the stairs to the dungeons and then into Snape’s office.

Harry had been in here only once before, and he had been in very serious trouble then too. Snape had acquired a few more slimy horrible things in jars since last time, all standing on shelves behind his desk, glinting in the firelight and adding to the threatening atmosphere.

“Sit,” said Snape.

Harry sat. Snape, however, remained, standing.

“Mr. Malfoy has just been to see me with a strange story, Potter,” said Snape.

Harry didn’t say anything.

“He tells me that he was up by the Shrieking Shack when he ran into Weasley — apparently alone.”

Still, Harry didn’t speak.

“Mr. Malfoy states that he was standing talking to Weasley, when a large amount of mud hit him in the back of the head. How do you think that could have happened?”

Harry tried to look mildly surprised.

“I don’t know, Professor.”

Snape’s eyes were boring into Harry’s. It was exactly like trying to stare down a Hippogriff. Harry tried hard not to blink.

“Mr. Malfoy then saw an extraordinary apparition. Can you imagine what it might have been, Potter?”

“No,” said Harry, now trying to sound innocently curious.

“It was your head, Potter. Floating in midair.”

There was a long silence.

“Maybe he’d better go to Madam Pomfrey,” said Harry. “If he’s seeing things like —”

“What would your head have been doing in Hogsmeade, Potter?” said Snape softly. “Your head is not allowed in Hogsmeade. No part of your body has permission to be in Hogsmeade.”

“I know that,” said Harry, striving to keep his face free of guilt or fear. “It sounds like Malfoy’s having hallucin —”

“Malfoy is not having hallucinations,” snarled Snape, and he bent down, a hand on each arm of Harry’s chair, so that their faces were a foot apart. “If your head was in Hogsmeade, so was the rest of you.”

“I’ve been up in Gryffindor Tower,” said Harry. “Like you told —”

“Can anyone confirm that?”

Harry didn’t say anything. Snape’s thin mouth curled into a horrible smile.

“So,” he said, straightening up again. “Everyone from the Minister of Magic downward has been trying to keep famous Harry Potter safe from Sirius Black. But famous Harry Potter is a law unto himself. Let the ordinary people worry about his safety! Famous Harry Potter goes where he wants to, with no thought for the consequences.”

Harry stayed silent. Snape was trying to provoke him into telling the truth. He wasn’t going to do it. Snape had no proof — yet.

“How extraordinarily like your father you are, Potter,” Snape said suddenly, his eyes glinting. “He too was exceedingly arrogant. A small amount of talent on the Quidditch field made him think he was a cut above the rest of us too. Strutting around the place with his friends and admirers…The resemblance between you is uncanny.”

“My dad didn’t strut,” said Harry, before he could stop himself. “And neither do I.”

“Your father didn’t set much store by rules either,” Snape went on, pressing his advantage, his thin face full of malice. “Rules were for lesser mortals, not Quidditch Cup-winners. His head was so swollen —”

“SHUT UP!”

Harry was suddenly on his feet. Rage such as he had not felt since his last night in Privet Drive was coursing through him. He didn’t care that Snape’s face had gone rigid, the black eyes flashing dangerously.

“*What did you say to me, Potter?*”

“I told you to shut up about my dad!” Harry yelled. “I know the truth, all right? He saved your life! Dumbledore told me! You wouldn’t even be here if it wasn’t for my dad!”

Snape’s sallow skin had gone the color of sour milk.

“And did the headmaster tell you the circumstances in which your father saved my life?” he whispered. “Or did he consider the details too unpleasant for precious Potter’s delicate ears?”

Harry bit his lip. He didn’t know what had happened and didn’t want to admit it — but Snape seemed to have guessed the truth.

“I would hate for you to run away with a false idea of your father, Potter,” he said, a terrible grin twisting his face. “Have you been imagining some act of glorious heroism? Then let me correct you — your saintly father and his friends played a highly amusing joke on me that would have resulted in my death if your father hadn’t got cold feet at the last moment. There was nothing brave about what he did. He was saving his own skin as much as mine. Had their joke succeeded, he would have been expelled from Hogwarts.”

Snape’s uneven, yellowish teeth were bared.

“Turn out your pockets, Potter!” he spat suddenly.

Harry didn’t move. There was a pounding in his ears.

“Turn out your pockets, or we go straight to the headmaster! Pull them out, Potter!”

Cold with dread, Harry slowly pulled out the bag of Zonko’s tricks and the Marauder’s Map.

Snap picked up the Zonko’s bag.

“Ron gave them to me,” said Harry, praying he’d get a chance to tip Ron off before Snape saw him. “He brought them back from Hogsmeade last time —”

“Indeed? And you’ve been carrying them around ever since? How very touching…and what is this?”

Snape had picked up the map. Harry tried with all his might to keep his face impassive.

"Spare bit of parchment," he said with a shrug.

Snape turned it over, his eyes on Harry.

"Surely you don't need such a very *old* piece of parchment?" he said. "Why don't I just — throw this away?"

His hand moved toward the fire.

"No!" Harry said quickly.

"So!" said Snape, his long nostrils quivering. "Is this another treasured gift from Mr. Weasley? Or is it — something else? A letter, perhaps, written in invisible ink? Or — instructions to get into Hogsmeade without passing the Dementors?"

Harry blinked. Snape's eyes gleamed.

"Let me see, let me see…" he muttered, taking out his wand and smoothing the map out on his desk. "Reveal your secret!" he said, touching the wand to the parchment.

Nothing happened. Harry clenched his hands to stop them from shaking.

"Show yourself!" Snape said, tapping the map sharply.

It stayed blank. Harry was taking deep, calming breaths.

"Professor Severus Snape, master of this school, commands you to yield the information you conceal!" Snape said, hitting the map with his wand.

As though an invisible hand were writing upon it, words appeared on the smooth surface of the map.

"Mooney presents his compliments to Professor Snape, and begs him to keep his abnormally large nose out of other people's business."

Snape froze. Harry stared, dumbstruck, at the message. But the map didn't stop there. More writing was appearing beneath the first.

"Mr. Prongs agrees with Mr. Mooney and would like to add that Professor Snape is an ugly git."

It would have been very funny if the situation hadn't been so serious. And there was more…

"Mr. Padfoot would like to register his astonishment that an idiot like that ever became a professor."

Harry closed his eyes in horror. When he'd opened them, the map had had its last word.

"Mr. Wormtail bids Professor Snape good day, and advises him to wash his hair, the slimeball."

Harry waited for the blow to fall.

"So…" said Snape softly. "We'll see about this…"

He strode across to his fire, seized a fistful of glittering powder from a jar on the fireplace, and threw it into the flames.

"Lupin!" Snape called into the fire. "I want a word!"

Utterly bewildered, Harry stared at the fire. A large shape had appeared in it, revolving very fast. Seconds later, Professor Lupin was clambering out of the fireplace, brushing ash off his shabby robes.

"You called, Severus?" said Lupin mildly.

"I certainly did," said Snape, his face contorted with fury as he strode back to his desk. "I have just asked Potter to empty his pockets. He was carrying this."

Snape pointed at the parchment, on which the words of Messrs. Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs were still shining. An odd, closed expression appeared on Lupin's face.

"Well?" said Snape.

Lupin continued to stare at the map. Harry had the impression that Lupin was doing some very quick thinking.

"*Well?*" said Snape again. "This parchment is plainly full of Dark Magic. This is supposed to be your area of expertise, Lupin. Where do you imagine Potter got such a thing?"

Lupin looked up and, by the merest half-glance in Harry's direction, warned him not to interrupt.

"Full of Dark Magic?" he repeated mildly. "Do you really think so, Severus? It looks to me as though it is merely a piece of parchment that insults anybody who reads it. Childish, but surely not dangerous? I imagine Harry got it from a joke shop —"

"Indeed?" said Snape. His jaw had gone rigid with anger. "You think a joke shop could supply him with such a thing? You don't think it more likely that he got it *directly from the manufacturers*?"

Harry didn't understand what Snape was talking about. Nor, apparently, did Lupin.

"You mean, by Mr. Wormtail or one of these people?" he said. "Harry, do you know any of these men?"

"No," said Harry quickly.

"You see, Severus?" said Lupin, turning back to Snape. "It looks like a Zonko product to me —"

Right on cue, Ron came bursting into the office. He was completely out of breath, and stopped just short of Snape's desk, clutching the stitch in his chest and trying to speak.

"I — gave — Harry — that — stuff," he choked. "Bought — it…in Zonko's…ages — ago…"

"Well!" said Lupin, clapping his hands together and looking around cheerfully. "That seems to clear that up! Severus, I'll take this back, shall I?" He folded the map and tucked it inside his robes. "Harry, Ron, come with me, I need a word about my vampire essay — excuse us, Severus—"

Harry didn't dare look at Snape as they left his office. He. Ron, and Lupin walked all the way back into the entrance hall before speaking. Then Harry turned to Lupin.

"Professor, I —"

"I don't want to hear explanations," said Lupin shortly. He glanced around the empty entrance hall and lowered his voice. "I happen to know that this map was confiscated by Mr. Filch many years ago. Yes, I know it's a map," he said as Harry and Ron looked amazed. "I don't want to know how it fell into your possession. I am, however, *astounded* that you didn't hand it in. Particularly after what happened the last time a student left information about the castle lying around. And I can't let you have it back, Harry."

Harry had expected that, and was too keen for explanations to protest.

"Why did Snape think I'd got it from the manufacturers?"

"Because…" Lupin hesitated, "because these mapmakers would have wanted to lure you out of school. They'd think it extremely entertaining."

"Do you know them?" said Harry, impressed.

"We've met," he said shortly. He was looking at Harry more seriously than ever before.

"Don't expect me to cover up for you again, Harry. I cannot make you take Sirius Black seriously. But I would have thought that what you have heard when the Dementors draw near you would have had more of an effect on you. Your parents gave their lives to keep you alive, Harry. A poor way to repay them — gambling their sacrifice for a bag of magic tricks."

He walked away, leaving Harry feeling worse by far than he had at any point in Snape's office. Slowly, he and Ron mounted the marble staircase. As Harry passed the one-eyed witch, he remembered the Invisibility Cloak — it was still down there, but he didn't dare go and get it.

"It's my fault," said Ron abruptly. "I persuaded you to go. Lupin's right, it was stupid, we shouldn't've done it —"

He broke off; they reached the corridor where the security trolls were pacing, and Hermione was walking toward them. One look at her face convinced Harry that she had heard what had happened. His heart plummeted — had she told Professor McGonagall?

"Come to have a good gloat?" said Ron savagely as she stopped in front of them. "Or have you just been to tell on us?"

“No,” said Hermione. She was holding a letter in her hands and her lip was trembling. “I just thought you ought to know…Hagrid lost his case. Buckbeak is going to be executed.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE QUIDDITCH FINAL

"He sent me this," Hermione said, holding out the letter.

Harry took it. The parchment was damp, and enormous teardrops had smudged the ink so badly in places that it was very difficult to read.

Dear Hermione,

We lost. I'm allowed to bring him back to Hogwarts. Execution date to be fixed. Beaky has enjoyed London.

I won't forget all the help you gave us.

Hagrid

"They can't do this," said Harry. "They can't. Buckbeak isn't dangerous."

"Malfoy's dad's frightened the Committee into it," said Hermione, wiping her eyes. "You know what he's like. They're a bunch of doddery old fools, and they were scared. There'll be an appeal, though, there always is. Only I can't see any hope…Nothing will have changed."

"Yeah, it will," said Ron fiercely. "You won't have to do all the work alone this time, Hermione. I'll help."

"Oh, Ron!"

Hermione flung her arms around Ron's neck and broke down completely. Ron, looking quite terrified, patted her very awkwardly on the top of the head. Finally, Hermione drew away.

"Ron, I'm really, really sorry about Scabbers…" she sobbed.

"Oh — well — he was old," said Ron, looking thoroughly relieved that she had let go of him. "And he was a bit useless. You never know, Mum and Dad might get me an owl now."

The safety measures imposed on the students since Black's second break-in made it impossible for Harry, Ron, and Hermione to go and visit Hagrid in the evenings. Their only chance of talking to him was during Care of Magical Creatures lessons.

He seemed numb with shock at the verdict.

"S'all my fault. Got all tongue-tied. They was all sittin' there in black robes an' I kep' droppin' me notes and forgettin' all them dates yeh looked up fer me, Hermione. An' then Lucius Malfoy stood up an' said his bit, and the Committee jus' did exac'ly what he told 'em…"

"There's still the appeal!" said Ron fiercely. "Don't give up yet, we're working on it!"

They were walking back up to the castle with the rest of the class. Ahead they could see Malfoy, who was walking with Crabbe and Goyle, and kept looking back, laughing derisively.

"S'no good, Ron," said Hagrid sadly as they reached the castle steps. "That Committee's in Lucius Malfoy's pocket. I'm jus' gonna make sure the rest o' Beaky's time is the happiest he's ever had. I owe him that…"

Hagrid turned around and hurried back toward his cabin, his face buried in his handkerchief.

"Look at him blubber!"

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle had been standing just inside the castle doors, listening.

"Have you ever seen anything quite as pathetic?" said Malfoy. "And he's supposed to be our teacher!"

Harry and Ron both made furious moves toward Malfoy, but Hermione got there first — SMACK!

She had slapped Malfoy across the face with all the strength she could muster. Malfoy staggered. Harry, Ron, Crabbe, and Goyle stood flabbergasted as Hermione raised her hand again.

"Don't you dare call Hagrid pathetic, you foul — you evil —"

"Hermione!" said Ron weakly, and he tried to grab her hand as she swung it back.

"Get off, Ron!"

Hermione pulled out her wand. Malfoy stepped backward. Crabbe and Goyle looked at him for instructions, thoroughly bewildered.

"C'mon." Malfoy muttered, and in a moment, all three of them had disappeared into the passageway to the dungeons.

"Hermione!" Ron said again, sounding both stunned and impressed.

"Harry, you'd better beat him in the Quidditch final!" Hermione said shrilly. "You just better had, because I can't stand it if Slytherin wins!"

"We're due in Charms," said Ron, still goggling at Hermione. "We'd better go."

They hurried up the marble staircase toward Professor Flitwick's classroom.

"You're late, boys!" said Professor Flitwick reprovingly as Harry opened the classroom door. "Come along, quickly, wands out, we're experimenting with Cheering Charms today, we've already divided into pairs —"

Harry and Ron hurried to a desk at the back and opened their bags. Ron looked behind him.

"Where's Hermione gone?"

Harry looked around too. Hermione hadn't entered the classroom, yet Harry knew she had been right next to him when he had opened the door.

“That’s weird,” said Harry, staring at Ron. “Maybe — maybe she went to the bathroom or something?”

But Hermione didn’t turn up all lesson.

“She could’ve done with a Cheering Charm on her too,” said Ron as the class left for lunch, all grinning broadly — the Cheering Charms had left them with a feeling of great contentment.

Hermione wasn’t at lunch either. By the time they had finished their apple pie, the after-effects of the Cheering Charms were wearing off, and Harry and Ron had started to get slightly worried.

“You don’t think Malfoy did something to her?” Ron said anxiously as they hurried upstairs toward Gryffindor Tower.

They passed the security trolls, gave the Fat Lady the password (“Flibbertigibbet”), and scrambled through the portrait hole into the common room.

Hermione was sitting at a table, fast asleep, her head resting on an open Arithmancy book. They went to sit down on either side of her. Harry prodded her awake.

“Wh — what?” said Hermione, waking with a start and staring wildly around. “Is it time to go? W — which lesson have we got now?”

“Divination, but it’s not for another twenty minutes,” said Harry. “Hermione, why didn’t you come to Charms?”

“What? Oh no!” Hermione squeaked. “I forgot to go to Charms!”

“But how could you forget?” said Harry. “You were with us till we were right outside the classroom!”

“I don’t believe it!” Hermione wailed. “Was Professor Flitwick angry? Oh, it was Malfoy, I was thinking about him and I lost track of things!”

“You know what, Hermione?” said Ron, looking down at the enormous Arithmancy book Hermione had been using as a pillow. “I reckon you’re cracking up. You’re trying to do too much.”

“No, I’m not!” said Hermione, brushing her hair out of her eyes and staring hopelessly around for her bag. “I just made a mistake, that’s all! I’d better go and see Professor Flitwick and say sorry…I’ll see you in Divination!”

Hermione joined them at the foot of the ladder to Professor Trelawney’s classroom twenty minutes later, looking extremely harassed.

“I can’t believe I missed Cheering Charms! And I bet they come up in our exams; Professor Flitwick hinted they might!”

Together they climbed the ladder into the dim, stifling tower room. Glowing on every little table was a crystal ball full of pearly white mist. Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat down together at the same rickety table.

“I thought we weren’t starting crystal balls until next term,” Ron muttered, casting a wary eye around for Professor Trelawney, in case she was lurking nearby.

“Don’t complain, this means we’ve finished palmistry,” Harry muttered back. “I was getting sick of her flinching every time she looked at my hands.”

“Good day to you!” said the familiar, misty voice, and Professor Trelawney made her usual dramatic entrance out of the shadows. Parvati and Lavender quivered with excitement, their faces lit by the milky glow of their crystal ball.

“I have decided to introduce the crystal ball a little earlier than I had planned,” said Professor Trelawney, sitting with her back to the fire and gazing around. “The fates have informed me that your examination in June will concern the Orb, and I am anxious to give you sufficient practice.”

Hermione snorted.

“Well, honestly…‘the fates have informed her’. Who sets the exam? She does! What an amazing prediction!” she said, not troubling to keep her voice low. Harry and Ron choked back laughs.

It was hard to tell whether Professor Trelawney had heard them as her face was hidden in shadow. She continued, however, as though she had not.

“Crystal gazing is a particularly refined art,” she said dreamily. “I do not expect any of you to See when first you peer into the Orb’s infinite depths. We shall start by practicing relaxing the conscious mind and external eyes —” Ron began to snigger uncontrollably and had to stuff his fist in his mouth to stifle the noise — “so as to clear the Inner Eye and the superconscious. Perhaps, if we are lucky, some of you will see before the end of the class.”

And so they began. Harry, at least, felt extremely foolish, staring blankly at the crystal ball, trying to keep his mind empty when thoughts such as “this is stupid” kept drifting across it. It didn’t help that Ron kept breaking into silent giggles and Hermione kept tutting.

“Seen anything yet?” Harry asked them after a quarter of an hour’s quiet crystal gazing.

“Yeah, there’s a burn on this table,” said Ron, pointing. “Someone’s spilled their candle.”

“This is such a waste of time,” Hermione hissed. “I could be practicing something useful. I could be catching up on Cheering Charms —”

Professor Trelawney rustled past.

“Would anyone like me to help them interpret the shadowy portents within their Orb?” she murmured over the clinking of her bangles.

“I don’t need help,” Ron whispered. “It’s obvious what this means. There’s going to be loads of fog tonight.”

Both Harry and Hermione burst out laughing.

“Now, really!” said Professor Trelawney as everyone’s heads turned in their direction. Parvati and Lavender were looking scandalized. “You are disturbing the clairvoyant vibrations!” She approached their table and peered into their crystal ball. Harry felt his heart sinking. He was sure he knew what was coming —

“There is something here!” Professor Trelawney whispered, lowering her face to the ball, so that it was reflected twice in her huge glasses. “Something moving…but what is it?”

Harry was prepared to bet everything he owned, including his Firebolt, that it wasn’t good news, whatever it was. And sure enough —

“My dear,” Professor Trelawney breathed, gazing up at Harry. “It is here, plainer than ever before…my dear, stalking toward you, growing ever closer…the Gr —”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake!” said Hermione loudly. “Not that ridiculous Grim again!”

Professor Trelawney raised her enormous eyes to Hermione’s face. Parvati whispered something to Lavender, and they both glared at Hermione too. Professor Trelawney stood up, surveying Hermione with unmistakable anger.

“I am sorry to say that from the moment you have arrived in this class my dear, it has been apparent that you do not have what the noble art of Divination requires. Indeed, I don’t remember ever meeting a student whose mind was so hopelessly mundane.”

There was a moment’s silence. Then —

“Fine!” said Hermione suddenly, getting up and cramming *Unfogging the Future* back into her bag. “Fine!” she repeated, swinging the bag over her shoulder and almost knocking Ron off his chair. “I give up! I’m leaving!”

And to the whole class’s amazement, Hermione strode over to the trapdoor, kicked it open, and climbed down the ladder out of sight.

It took a few minutes for the class to settle down again. Professor Trelawney seemed to have forgotten all about the Grim. She turned abruptly from Harry and Ron’s table, breathing rather heavily as she tugged her gauzy shawl more closely to her.

"Ooooo!" said Lavender suddenly, making everyone start. "Ooooo, Professor Trelawney, I've just remembered! You saw her leaving, didn't you? Didn't you, Professor? 'Around Easter, one of our number will leave us forever!' You said it ages ago, Professor!"

Professor Trelawney gave her a dewy smile.

"Yes, my dear, I did indeed know that Miss Granger would be leaving us. One hopes, however, that one might have mistaken the Signs…The Inner Eye can be a burden, you know…"

Lavender and Parvati looked deeply impressed, and moved over so that Professor Trelawney could join their table instead.

"Some day Hermione's having, eh?" Ron muttered to Harry, looking awed.

"Yeah…"

Harry glanced into the crystal ball but saw nothing but swirling white mist. Had Professor Trelawney really seen the Grim again? Would he? The last thing he needed was another near-fatal accident, with the Quidditch final drawing ever nearer.

The Easter holidays were not exactly relaxing. The third years had never had so much homework. Neville Longbottom seemed close to a nervous collapse, and he wasn't the only one.

"Call this a holiday!" Seamus Finnigan roared at the common room one afternoon. "The exams are ages away, what're they playing at?"

But nobody had as much to do as Hermione. Even without Divination, she was taking more subjects than anybody else. She was usually last to leave the common room at night, first to arrive at the library the next morning; she had shadows like Lupin's under her eyes, and seemed constantly close to tears.

Ron had taken over responsibility for Buckbeak's appeal. When he wasn't doing his own work, he was poring over enormously thick volumes with names like *The Handbook of Hippogriff Psychology and Fowl or Foul? A Study of Hippogriff Brutality*. He was so absorbed, he even forgot to be horrible to Crookshanks.

Harry, meanwhile, had to fit in his homework around Quidditch practice every day, not to mention endless discussions of tactics with Wood. The Gryffindor-Slytherin match would take place on the first Saturday after the Easter holidays. Slytherin was leading the tournament by exactly two hundred points. This meant (as Wood constantly reminded his team) that they needed to win the match by more than that amount to win the Cup. It also meant that the burden of winning fell largely on Harry, because capturing the Snitch was worth one hundred and fifty points.

"So you must catch it only if we're more than fifty points up," Wood told Harry constantly. "Only if we're more than fifty points up, Harry, or we win the match but lose the Cup. You've got that, Haven't you? You must catch the Snitch only if we're —"

"I KNOW, OLIVER!" Harry yelled.

The whole of Gryffindor House was obsessed with the coming match. Gryffindor hadn't won the Quidditch Cup since the legendary Charlie Weasley (Ron's second oldest brother) had been Seeker. But Harry doubted whether any of them, even Wood, wanted to win as much as he did. The enmity between Harry and Malfoy was at its highest point ever. Malfoy was still smarting about the mud-throwing incident in Hogsmeade and was even more furious that Harry had somehow wormed his way out of punishment. Harry hadn't forgotten Malfoy's attempt to sabotage him in the match against Ravenclaw, but it was the matter of Buckbeak that made him most determined to beat Malfoy in front of the entire school.

Never, in anyone's memory, had a match approached in such a highly charged atmosphere. By the time the holidays were over, tension between the two teams and their Houses was at the breaking point. A number of small scuffles broke out in the corridors, culminating in a nasty incident in which a Gryffindor fourth year and a Slytherin sixth year ended up in the hospital wing with leeks sprouting out of their ears.

Harry was having a particularly bad time of it. He couldn't walk to class without Slytherins sticking out their legs and trying to trip him up; Crabbe and Goyle kept popping up wherever he went, and slouching away looking disappointed when they saw him surrounded by people. Wood had given instructions that Harry should be accompanied everywhere he went, in case the Slytherins tried to put him out of action. The whole of Gryffindor House took up the challenge enthusiastically, so that it was impossible for Harry to get to classes on time because he was surrounded by a vast, chattering crowd. Harry was more concerned for his Firebolt's safety than his own. When he wasn't flying it, he locked it securely in his trunk and frequently dashed back up to Gryffindor Tower at break times to check that it was still there.

All usual pursuits were abandoned in the Gryffindor common room the night before the match. Even Hermione had put down her books.

"I can't work, I can't concentrate," she said nervously.

There was a great deal of noise. Fred and George Weasley were dealing with the pressure by being louder and more exuberant than ever. Oliver Wood was crouched over a model of a Quidditch field in the corner, prodding little figures across it with his wand and muttering to himself Angelina,

Alicia, and Katie were laughing at Fred's and George's jokes. Harry was sitting with Ron and Hermione, removed from the center of things, trying not to think about the next day, because every time he did, he had the horrible sensation that something very large was fighting to get out of his stomach.

"You're going to be fine," Hermione told him, though she looked positively terrified.

"You've got a Firebolt!" said Ron.

"Yeah…" said Harry, his stomach writhing.

It came as a relief when Wood suddenly stood up and yelled, "Team! Bed!"

Harry slept badly. First he dreamed that he had overslept, and that Wood was yelling, "Where were you? We had to use Neville instead!" Then he dreamed that Malfoy and the rest of the Slytherin team arrived for the match riding dragons. He was flying at breakneck speed, trying to avoid a spurt of flames from Malfoy's steed's mouth, when he realized he had forgotten his Firebolt. He fell through the air and woke with a start.

It was a few seconds before Harry remembered that the match hadn't taken place yet, that he was safe in bed, and that the Slytherin team definitely wouldn't be allowed to play on dragons. He was feeling very thirsty. Quietly as he could, he got out of his four-poster and went to pour himself some water from the silver jug beneath the window.

The grounds were still and quiet. No breath of wind disturbed the treetops in the Forbidden Forest; the Whomping Willow was motionless and innocent-looking. It looked as though the conditions for the match would be perfect.

Harry set down his goblet and was about to turn back to his bed when something caught his eye. An animal of some kind was prowling across the silvery lawn.

Harry dashed to his bedside table, snatched up his glasses, and put them on, then hurried back to the window. It couldn't be the Grim — not now — not right before the match —

He peered out at the grounds again and, after a minute's frantic searching, spotted it. It was skirting the edge of the forest now…It wasn't the Grim at all…it was a cat…Harry clutched the window ledge in relief as he recognized the bottlebrush tail. It was only Crookshanks…

Or was it only Crookshanks? Harry squinted, pressing his nose flat against the glass. Crookshanks seemed to have come to a halt. Harry was sure he could see something else moving in the shadow of the trees too.

And just then, it emerged — a gigantic, shaggy black dog, moving stealthily across the lawn, Crookshanks trotting at its side. Harry stared. What did this mean? If Crookshanks could see the dog as well, how could it be an omen of Harry's death?

"Ron!" Harry hissed. "Ron! Wake up!"

"Huh?"

"I need you to tell me if you can see something!"

"S'all dark, Harry," Ron muttered thickly. "What're you on about?"

"Down here —"

Harry looked quickly back out of the window.

Crookshanks and the dog had vanished. Harry climbed onto the windowsill to look right down into the shadows of the castle, but they weren't there. Where had they gone?

A loud snore told him Ron had fallen asleep again.

Harry and the rest of the Gryffindor team entered the Great Hall the next day to enormous applause. Harry couldn't help grinning broadly as he saw that both the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables were applauding them too. The Slytherin table hissed loudly as they passed. Harry noticed that Malfoy looked even paler than usual.

Wood spent the whole of breakfast urging his team to eat, while touching nothing himself. Then he hurried them off to the field before anyone else had finished, so they could get an idea of the conditions. As they left the Great Hall, everyone applauded again.

"Good luck, Harry!" called Cho. Harry felt himself blushing.

"Okay — no wind to speak of — sun's a bit bright, that could impair your vision, watch out for it — ground's fairly hard, good, that'll give us a fast kickoff —"

Wood paced the field, staring around with the team behind him. Finally, they saw the front doors of the castle open in the distance and the rest of the school spilling onto the lawn.

"Locker rooms," said Wood tersely.

None of them spoke as they changed into their scarlet robes. Harry wondered if they were feeling like he was: as though he'd eaten something extremely wriggly for breakfast. In what seemed like no time at all, Wood was saying, "Okay, it's time, let's go —"

They walked out onto the field to a tidal wave of noise. Three quarters of the crowd was wearing scarlet rosettes, waving scarlet flags with the Gryffindor lion upon them, or brandishing banners with slogans like "GO GRYFFINDOR!" and "LIONS FOR THE CUP." Behind the Slytherin goal posts, however, two hundred people were wearing green; the silver serpent of Slytherin glittered on

their flags, and Professor Snape sat in the very front row, wearing green like everyone else, and a very grim smile.

"And here are the Gryffindors!" yelled Lee Jordan, who was acting as commentator as usual. "Potter, Bell, Johnson, Spinnet, Weasley, Weasley, and Wood. Widely acknowledged as the best team Hogwarts has seen in a good few years —"

Lee's comments were drowned by a tide of 'boos' from the Slytherin end.

"And here come the Slytherin team, led by Captain Flint. He's made some changes in the lineup and seems to be going for size rather than skill —"

More boos from the Slytherin crowd. Harry, however, thought Lee had a point. Malfoy was easily the smallest person On the Slytherin team; the rest of them were enormous.

"Captains, shake hands!" said Madam Hooch.

Flint and Wood approached each other and grasped each other's hand very tightly; it looked as though each was trying to break the other's fingers.

"Mount your brooms!" said Madam Hooch. "Three…two…one…"

The sound of her whistle was lost in the roar from the crowd as fourteen brooms rose into the air. Harry felt his hair fly back off his forehead; his nerves left him in the thrill of the flight; he glanced around, saw Malfoy on his tail, and sped off in search of the Snitch.

"And it's Gryffindor in possession, Alicia Spinner of Gryffindor with the Quaffle, heading straight for the Slytherin goal posts, looking good, Alicia! Argh, no — Quaffle intercepted by Warrington, Warrington of Slytherin tearing UP the field — WHAM! — nice Bludger work there by George Weasley, Warrington drops the Quaffle, it's caught by — Johnson, Gryffindor back in possession, come on, Angelina — nice swerve around Montague — duck, Angelina, that's a Bludger! – SHE SCORES! TEN-ZERO TO GRYFFINDOR!"

Angelina punched the air as she soared around the end of the field; the sea of scarlet below was screaming its delight

"OUCH!"

Angelina was nearly thrown from her broom as Marcus Flint went smashing into her.

"Sorry!" said Flint as the crowd below booed. "Sorry, didn't see her!"

A moment later, Fred Weasley chucked his Beater's club at the back of Flint's head. Flint's nose smashed into the handle of his broom and began to bleed.

“That will do!” shrieked Madam Hooch, zooming between then. “Penalty shot to Gryffindor for an unprovoked attack on their Chaser! Penalty shot to Slytherin for deliberate damage to their Chaser!”

“Come off it, Miss!” howled Fred, but Madam Hooch blew her whistle and Alicia flew forward to take the penalty.

“Come on, Alicia!” yelled Lee into the silence that had descended on the crowd. “YES! SHE’S BEATEN THE KEEPER! TWENTY-ZERO TO GRYFFINDOR!”

Harry turned the Firebolt sharply to watch Flint, still bleeding freely, fly forward to take the Slytherin penalty. Wood was hovering in front of the Gryffindor goal posts, his jaw clenched.

“’Course, Wood’s a superb Keeper!” Lee Jordan told the crowd as Flint waited for Madam Hooch’s whistle. “Superb! Very difficult to pass — very difficult indeed — YES! I DON’T BELIEVE IT! HE’S SAVED IT!”

Relieved, Harry zoomed away, gazing around for the Snitch, but still making sure he caught every word of Lee’s commentary. It was essential that he hold Malfoy off the Snitch until Gryffindor was more than fifty points up —

“Gryffindor in possession, no, Slytherin in possession — no! Gryffindor back in possession and it’s Katie Bell, Katie Bell for Gryffindor with the Quaffle, she’s streaking up the field — THAT WAS DELIBERATE!”

Montague, a Slytherin Chaser, had swerved in front of Katie, and instead of seizing the Quaffle had grabbed her head. Katie cart-wheeled in the air, managed to stay on her broom, but dropped the Quaffle.

Madam Hooch’s whistle rang out again as she soared over to Montague and began shouting at him. A minute later, Katie had put another penalty past the Slytherin Seeker.

“THIRTY-ZERO! TAKE THAT, YOU DIRTY, CHEATING —”

“Jordan, if you can’t commentate in an unbiased way —”

“I’m telling it like it is, Professor!”

Harry felt a huge jolt of excitement. He had seen the Snitch — it was shimmering at the foot of one of the Gryffindor goal posts — but he mustn’t catch it yet — and if Malfoy saw it —

Faking a look of sudden concentration, Harry pulled his Firebolt around and sped off toward the Slytherin end — it worked. Malfoy went haring after him, clearly thinking Harry had seen the Snitch there…

WHOOSH.

One of the Bludgers came streaking past Harry's right ear, hit by the gigantic Slytherin Beater, Derrick. Then again…

WHOOSH.

The second Bludger grazed Harry's elbow. The other Beater, Bole, was closing in.

Harry had a fleeting glimpse of Bole and Derrick zooming toward him, clubs raised — He turned the Firebolt upward at the last second, and Bole and Derrick collided with a sickening crunch.

"Ha haaa!" yelled Lee Jordan as the Slytherin Beaters lurched away from each other, clutching their heads. "Too bad, boys! You'll need to get up earlier than that to beat a Firebolt! And it's Gryffindor in possession again, as Johnson takes the Quaffle — Flint alongside her — poke him in the eye, Angelina! — it was a joke, Professor, it was a joke — oh no — Flint in possession, Flint flying toward the Gryffindor goal posts, come on now, Wood, save —!"

But Flint had scored; there was an eruption of cheers from the Slytherin end, and Lee swore so badly that Professor McGonagall tried to tug the magical megaphone away from him.

"Sorry, Professor, sorry! Won't happen again! So, Gryffindor in the lead, thirty points to ten, and Gryffindor in possession —"

It was turning into the dirtiest game Harry had ever played in. Enraged that Gryffindor had taken such an early lead, the Slytherins were rapidly resorting to any means to take the Quaffle. Bole hit Alicia with his club and tried to say he'd thought she was a Bludger. George Weasley elbowed Bole in the face in retaliation. Madam Hooch awarded both teams penalties, and Wood pulled off another spectacular save, making the score forty-ten to Gryffindor.

The Snitch had disappeared again. Malfoy was still keeping close to Harry as he soared over the match, looking around for it once Gryffindor was fifty points ahead —

Katie scored. Fifty-ten. Fred and George Weasley were swooping around her, clubs raised, in case any of the Slytherins were thinking of revenge. Bole and Derrick took advantage of Fred's and George's absence to aim both Bludgers at Wood; they caught him in the stomach, one after the other, and he rolled over in the air, clutching his broom, completely winded.

Madam Hooch was beside herself —

"YOU DO NOT ATTACK THE KEEPER UNLESS THE QUAFFLE IS WITHIN THE SCORING AREA!" she shrieked at Bole and Derrick. "Gryffindor penalty!"

And Angelina scored. Sixty-ten. Moments later, Fred Weasley pelted a Bludger at Warrington, knocking the Quaffle out of his hands; Alicia seized it and put it through the Slytherin goal — seventy-ten.

The Gryffindor crowd below was screaming itself hoarse — Gryffindor was sixty points in the lead, and if Harry caught the Snitch now, the Cup was theirs. Harry could almost feel hundreds of eyes following him as he soared around the field, high above the rest of the game, with Malfoy speeding along behind him.

And then he saw it. The Snitch was sparkling twenty feet above him.

Harry put on a huge burst of speed; the wind was roaring in his ears; he stretched out his hand, but suddenly, the Firebolt was slowing down —

Horrified, he looked around. Malfoy had thrown himself forward, grabbed hold of the Firebolt's tail, and was pulling it back.

"You —"

Harry was angry enough to hit Malfoy, but couldn't reach — Malfoy was panting with the effort of holding onto the Firebolt, but his eyes were sparkling maliciously. He had achieved what he'd wanted to do — the Snitch had disappeared again.

"Penalty! Penalty to Gryffindor! I've never seen such tactics." Madam Hooch screeched, shooting up to where Malfoy was sliding back onto his Nimbus Two Thousand and One.

"YOU CHEATING SCUM!" Lee Jordan was howling into the megaphone, dancing out of Professor McGonagall's reach. "YOU FILTHY, CHEATING B —"

Professor McGonagall didn't even bother to tell him off. She was actually shaking her finger in Malfoy's direction, her hat had fallen off, and she too was shouting furiously.

Alicia took Gryffindor's penalty, but she was so angry she missed by several feet. The Gryffindor team was losing concentration and the Slytherins, delighted by Malfoy's foul on Harry, were being spurred on to greater heights.

"Slytherin in possession, Slytherin heading for goal — Montague scores —" Lee groaned. "Seventy-twenty to Gryffindor…"

Harry was now marking Malfoy so closely their knees kept hitting each other. Harry wasn't going to let Malfoy anywhere near the Snitch…

"Get out of it, Potter!" Malfoy yelled in frustration as he tried to turn and found Harry blocking him.

"Angelina Johnson gets the Quaffle for Gryffindor, come on, Angelina, COME ON!"

Harry looked around. Every single Slytherin player apart from Malfoy was streaking up the pitch toward Angelina, including the Slytherin Keeper — they were all going to block her — Harry wheeled the Firebolt around, bent so low he was lying flat along the handle, and kicked it forward. Like a bullet, he shot toward the Slytherins.

"AAAAAAARRRGH!"

They scattered as the Firebolt zoomed toward them; Angelina's way was clear.

"SHE SCORES! SHE SCORES! Gryffindor leads by eighty Points to twenty!"

Harry, who had almost pelted headlong into the stands, skidded to a halt in midair, reversed, and zoomed back into the middle of the field.

And then he saw something to make his heart stand still. Malfoy was diving, a look of triumph on his face — there, a few feet above the grass below, was a tiny, golden glimmer —

Harry urged the Firebolt downward, but Malfoy was miles ahead —

"Go! Go! Go!" Harry urged his broom. He was gaining on Malfoy — Harry flattened himself to the broom handle as Bole sent a Bludger at him — he was at Malfoy's ankles — he was level —

Harry threw himself forward, took both hands off his broom. He knocked Malfoy's arm out of the way and —

"YES!"

He pulled out of his dive, his hand in the air, and the stadium exploded. Harry soared above the crowd, an odd ringing in his ears. The tiny golden ball was held tight in his fist, beating its wings hopelessly against his fingers.

Then Wood was speeding toward him, half-blinded by tears; he seized Harry around the neck and sobbed unrestrainedly into his shoulder. Harry felt two large thumps as Fred and George hit them; then Angelina's, Alicia's, and Katie's voices, "We've won the Cup! We've won the Cup!" Tangled together in a many-armed hug, the Gryffindor team sank, yelling hoarsely, back to earth.

Wave upon wave of crimson supporters was pouring over the barriers onto the field. Hands were raining down on their backs. Harry had a confused impression of noise and bodies pressing in on him. Then he, and the rest of the team, were hoisted onto the shoulders of the crowd. Thrust into the light, he saw Hagrid, Plastered with crimson rosettes — "Yeh beat 'em, Harry, yeh beat 'em! Wait till I tell Buckbeak!"

There was Percy, jumping up and down like a maniac, all dignity forgotten. Professor McGonagall was sobbing harder even than Wood, wiping her eyes with an enormous Gryffindor flag; and there, fighting their way toward Harry, were Ron and Hermione. Words failed them. They

simply beamed as Harry was borne toward the stands, where Dumbledore stood waiting with the enormous Quidditch Cup.

If only there had been a Dementor around…As a sobbing Wood passed Harry the Cup, as he lifted it into the air, Harry felt he could have produced the world's best Patronus.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

PROFESSOR TRELAWNEY'S PREDICTION

Harry's euphoria at finally winning the Quidditch Cup lasted at least a week. Even the weather seemed to be celebrating; as June approached, the days became cloudless and sultry, and all anybody felt like doing was strolling onto the grounds and flopping down on the grass with several pints of iced pumpkin juice, perhaps playing a casual game of Gobstones or watching the giant squid propel itself dreamily across the surface of the lake.

But they couldn't. Exams were nearly upon them, and instead of lazing around outside, the students were forced to remain inside the castle, trying to bully their brains into concentrating while enticing wafts of summer air drifted in through the windows. Even Fred and George Weasley had been spotted working; they were about to take their O.W.L.s (Ordinary Wizarding Levels). Percy was getting ready to take his N.E.W.T.s (Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Tests), the highest qualification Hogwarts offered. As Percy hoped to enter the Ministry of Magic, he needed top grades. He was becoming increasingly edgy, and gave very severe punishments to anybody who disturbed the quiet of the common room in the evenings. In fact, the only person who seemed more anxious than Percy was Hermione.

Harry and Ron had given up asking her how she was managing to attend several classes at once, but they couldn't restrain themselves when they saw the exam schedule she had drawn up for herself. The first column read:

Monday

9 o'clock, Arithmancy

9 o'clock, Transfiguration

Lunch

1 o'clock, Charms

1 o'clock, Ancient Runes

"Hermione?" Ron said cautiously, because she was liable to explode when interrupted these days. "Er — are you sure you've copied down these times right?"

"What?" snapped Hermione, picking up the exam schedule and examining it. "Yes, of course I have."

"Is there any point asking how you're going to sit for two exams at once?" said Harry.

"No," said Hermione shortly. "Have either of you seen my copy of *Numerology and Gramatica*?"

"Oh, yeah, I borrowed it for a bit of bedtime reading," said Ron, but very quietly. Hermione started shifting heaps of parchment. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had plenty of opportunity to speak to Hagrid.

"Beaky's gettin' a bit depressed," Hagrid told them, bending low on the pretense of checking that Harry's flobberworm was still alive. "Bin cooped up too long. But still…we'll know day after tomorrow — one way or the other —"

They had Potions that afternoon, which was an unqualified disaster. Try as Harry might, he couldn't get his Confusing Concoction to thicken, and Snape, standing watch with an air of vindictive pleasure, scribbled something that looked suspiciously like a zero onto his notes before moving away.

Then came Astronomy at midnight, up on the tallest tower; History of Magic on Wednesday morning, in which Harry scribbled everything Florean Fortescue had ever told him about medieval witch-hunts, while wishing he could have had one of Fortescue's choconut sundaes with him in the stifling classroom. Wednesday afternoon meant Herbology, in the greenhouses under a baking-hot sun; then back to the common room once more, with sunburnt necks, thinking longingly of this time next day, when it would all be over.

Their second to last exam, on Thursday morning, was Defense Against the Dark Arts. Professor Lupin had compiled the most unusual exam any of them had ever taken; a sort of obstacle course outside in the sun, where they had to wade across a deep paddling pool containing a Grindylow, cross a series of potholes full of Red Caps, squish their way across a patch of marsh while ignoring misleading directions from a Hinkypunk, then climb into an old trunk and battle with a new Boggart.

"Excellent, Harry," Lupin muttered as Harry climbed out of the trunk, grinning. "Full marks."

Flushed with his success, Harry hung around to watch Ron and Hermione. Ron did very well until he reached the Hinkypunk, which successfully confused him into sinking waist-high into the quagmire. Hermione did everything perfectly until she reached the trunk with the Boggart in it. After about a minute inside it, she burst out again, screaming.

"Hermione!" said Lupin, startled. "What's the matter?"

"P-P-Professor McGonagall!" Hermione gasped, pointing into the trunk. "Sh-she said I'd failed everything!"

It took a little while to calm Hermione down. When at last she had regained a grip on herself, she, Harry, and Ron went back to the castle. Ron was still slightly inclined to laugh at Hermione's Boggart, but an argument was averted by the sight that met them on the top of the steps.

Cornelius Fudge, sweating slightly in his pinstriped cloak, was standing there staring out at the grounds. He started at the sight of Harry.

"Hello there, Harry!" he said. "Just had an exam, I expect? Nearly finished?"

"Yes," said Harry. Hermione and Ron, not being on speaking terms with the Minister of Magic, hovered awkwardly in the background.

"Lovely day," said Fudge, casting an eye over the lake. "Pity…pity…"

He sighed deeply and looked down at Harry.

"I'm here on an unpleasant mission, Harry. The Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures required a witness to the execution of a mad Hippogriff. As I needed to visit Hogwarts to check on the Black situation, I was asked to step in."

"Does that mean the appeal's already happened?" Ron interrupted, stepping forward.

"No, no, it's scheduled for this afternoon," said Fudge, looking curiously at Ron.

"Then you might not have to witness an execution at all!" said Ron stoutly. "The Hippogriff might get off!"

Before Fudge could answer, two wizards came through the castle doors behind him. One was so ancient he appeared to be withering before their very eyes; the other was tall and strapping, with a thin back mustache. Harry gathered that they were representatives of the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures, because the very old wizard squinted toward Hagrid's cabin and said in a feeble voice, "Dear, dear, I'm getting too old for this…Two o'clock, isn't it, Fudge?"

The black-mustached man was fingering something in his belt; Harry looked and saw that he was running one broad thumb along the blade of a shining axe. Ron opened his mouth to say something, but Hermione nudged him hard in the ribs and jerked her head toward the entrance hall.

"Why'd you stop me?" said Ron angrily as they entered the Great Hall for lunch. "Did you see them? They've even got the axe ready! This isn't justice!"

"Ron, your dad works for the Ministry, you can't go saying things like that to his boss!" said Hermione, but she too looked very upset. "As long as Hagrid keeps his head this time, and argues his case properly, they can't possibly execute Buckbeak…"

But Harry could tell Hermione didn't really believe what she was saying. All around them, people were talking excitedly as they ate their lunch, happily anticipating the end of the exams that afternoon, but Harry, Ron, and Hermione, lost in worry about Hagrid and Buckbeak, didn't join in.

Harry's and Ron's last exam was Divination; Hermione's, Muggle Studies. They walked up the marble staircase together; Hermione left them on the first floor and Harry and Ron proceeded all the way up to the seventh, where many of their class were sitting on the spiral staircase to Professor Trelawney's classroom, trying to cram in a bit of last-minute studying.

"She's seeing us all separately," Neville informed them as they went to sit down next to him. He had his copy of *Unfogging the Future* open on his lap at the pages devoted to crystal gazing. "Have either of you ever seen anything in a crystal ball?" he asked them unhappily.

"Nope," said Ron in an offhand voice. He kept checking his watch; Harry knew that he was counting down the time until Buckbeak's appeal started.

The line of people outside the classroom shortened very slowly. As each person climbed back down the silver ladder, the rest of the class hissed, "What did she ask? Was it okay?"

But they all refused to say.

"She says the crystal ball's told her that if I tell you, I'll have a horrible accident!" squeaked Neville as he clambered back down the ladder toward Harry and Ron, who had now reached the landing.

"That's convenient," snorted Ron. "You know, I'm starting to think Hermione was right about her" — he jabbed his thumb toward the trapdoor overhead — "she's a right old fraud."

"Yeah," said Harry, looking at his own watch. It was now two o'clock. "Wish she'd hurry up…"

Parvati came back down the ladder glowing with pride.

"She says I've got all the makings of a true Seer," she informed Harry and Ron. "I saw loads of stuff…Well, good luck!"

She hurried off down the spiral staircase toward Lavender.

"Ronald Weasley," said the familiar, misty voice from over their heads. Ron grimaced at Harry and climbed the silver ladder out of sight. Harry was now the only person left to be tested. He settled himself on the floor with his back against the wall, listening to a fly buzzing in the sunny window, his mind across the grounds with Hagrid.

Finally, after about twenty minutes, Ron's large feet reappeared on the ladder.

"How'd it go?" Harry asked him, standing up.

“Rubbish,” said Ron. “Couldn’t see a thing, so I made some stuff up. Don’t think she was convinced, though…”

“Meet you in the common room,” Harry muttered as Professor Trelawney’s voice called, “Harry Potter!”

The tower room was hotter than ever before; the curtains were closed, the fire was alight, and the usual sickly scent made Harry cough as he stumbled through the clutter of chairs and table to where Professor Trelawney sat waiting for him before a large crystal ball.

“Good day, my dear,” she said softly. “If you would kindly gaze into the Orb…Take your time, now…then tell me what you see within it…”

Harry bent over the crystal ball and stared, stared as hard as he could, willing it to show him something other than swirling white fog, but nothing happened.

“Well?” Professor Trelawney prompted delicately. “What do you see?”

The heat was overpowering and his nostrils were stinging with the perfumed smoke wafting from the fire beside them. He thought of what Ron had just said, and decided to pretend.

“Er —” said Harry, “a dark shape…um…”

“What does it resemble?” whispered Professor Trelawney. “Think, now…”

Harry cast his mind around and it landed on Buckbeak.

“A Hippogriff,” he said firmly.

“Indeed!” whispered Professor Trelawney, scribbling keenly on the parchment perched upon her knees. “My boy, you may well be seeing the outcome of poor Hagrid’s trouble with the Ministry of Magic! Look closer…Does the Hippogriff appear to…have its head?”

“Yes,” said Harry firmly.

“Are you sure?” Professor Trelawney urged him. “Are you quite sure, dear? You don’t see it writhing on the ground, perhaps, and a shadowy figure raising an axe behind it?”

“No!” said Harry, starting to feel slightly sick.

“No blood? No weeping Hagrid?”

“No!” said Harry again, wanting more than ever to leave the room and the heat. “It looks fine, it’s — flying away…”

Professor Trelawney sighed.

“Well, dear, I think we’ll leave it there…A little disappointing…but I’m sure you did your best.”

Relieved, Harry got up, picked up his bag and turned to go, but then a loud, harsh voice spoke behind him.

"*IT WILL HAPPEN TONIGHT*."

Harry wheeled around. Professor Trelawney had gone rigid in her armchair; her eyes were unfocused and her mouth sagging.

"S — sorry?" said Harry.

But Professor Trelawney didn't seem to hear him. Her eyes started to roll. Harry sat there in a panic. She looked as though she was about to have some sort of seizure. He hesitated, thinking of running to the hospital wing — and then Professor Trelawney spoke again, in the same harsh voice, quite unlike her own:

"*THE DARK LORD LIES ALONE AND FRIENDLESS, ABANDONED BY HIS FOLLOWERS. HIS SERVANT HAS BEEN CHAINED THESE TWELVE YEARS. TONIGHT, BEFORE MIDNIGHT…THE SERVANT WILL BREAK FREE AND SET OUT TO REJOIN HIS MASTER. THE DARK LORD WILL RISE AGAIN WITH HIS SERVANT'S AID, GREATER AND MORE TERRIBLE THAN EVER HE WAS. TONIGHT…BEFORE MIDNIGHT…THE SERVANT…WILL SET OUT…TO REJOIN…HIS MASTER…*"

Professor Trelawney's head fell forward onto her chest. She made a grunting sort of noise. Harry sat there, staring at her. Then, quite suddenly, Professor Trelawney's head snapped up again.

"I'm so sorry, dear boy," she said dreamily, "the heat of the day, you know…I drifted off for a moment…"

Harry sat there, staring at her.

"Is there anything wrong, my dear?"

"You — you just told me that the — the Dark Lord's going to rise again…that his servant's going to go back to him."

Professor Trelawney looked thoroughly startled.

"The Dark Lord? He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named? My dear boy, that's hardly something to joke about…Rise again, indeed —"

"But you just said it! You said the Dark Lord —"

"I think you must have dozed off too, dear!" said Professor Trelawney. "I would certainly not presume to predict anything quite as far-fetched as that!"

Harry climbed back down the ladder and the spiral staircase, wondering…had he just heard

Professor Trelawney make a real prediction? Or had that been her idea of an impressive end to the test?

Five minutes later he was dashing past the security trolls outside the entrance to Gryffindor Tower, Professor Trelawney's words still resounding in his head. People were striding past him in the opposite direction, laughing and joking, heading for the grounds and a bit of long-awaited freedom; by the time he had reached the portrait hole and entered the common room, it was almost deserted. Over in the corner, however, sat Ron and Hermione.

"Professor Trelawney," Harry panted, "just told me —"

But he stopped abruptly at the sight of their faces.

"Buckbeak lost," said Ron weakly. "Hagrid's just sent this."

Hagrid's note was dry this time, no tears had splattered it, yet his hand seemed to have shaken so much as he wrote that it was hardly legible.

Lost appeal. They're going to execute at sunset. Nothing you can do. Don't come down. I don't want you to see it.

Hagrid

"We've got to go," said Harry at once. "He can't just sit there on his own, waiting for the executioner!"

"Sunset, though," said Ron, who was staring out the window ill a glazed sort of way. "We'd never be allowed…'specially you, Harry…"

Harry sank his head into his hands, thinking.

"If we only had the Invisibility Cloak…"

"Where is it?" said Hermione.

Harry told her about leaving it in the passageway under the one-eyed witch.

"…if Snape sees me anywhere near there again, I'm in serious trouble," he finished.

"That's true," said Hermione, getting to her feet. "If he sees you…How do you open the witch's hump again?"

"You — you tap it and say, '*Dissendium*,'" said Harry. "But —"

Hermione didn't wait for the rest of his sentence; she strode across the room, pushed open the Fat Lady's portrait and vanished from sight.

"She hasn't gone to get it?" Ron said, staring after her.

She had. Hermione returned a quarter of an hour later with the silvery cloak folded carefully under her robes.

"Hermione, I don't know what's gotten, into you lately!" said Ron, astounded. "First you hit Malfoy, then you walk out on Professor Trelawney —"

Hermione looked rather flattered.

They went down to dinner with everybody else, but did not return to Gryffindor Tower afterward. Harry had the cloak hidden down the front of his robes; he had to keep his arms folded to hide the lump. They skulked in an empty chamber off the entrance hall, listening, until they were sure it was deserted. They heard a last pair of people hurrying across the hall and a door slamming. Hermione poked her head around the door.

"Okay," she whispered, "no one there — cloak on —"

Walking very close together so that nobody would see them, they crossed the hall on tiptoe beneath the cloak, then walked down the stone front steps into the grounds. The sun was already sinking behind the Forbidden Forest, gilding the top branches of the trees.

They reached Hagrid's cabin and knocked. He was a minute in answering, and when he did, he looked all around for his visitor, pale-faced and trembling.

"It's us," Harry hissed. "We're wearing the Invisibility Cloak. Let us in and we can take it off."

"Yeh shouldn've come!" Hagrid whispered, but he stood back, and they stepped inside. Hagrid shut the door quickly and Harry pulled off the cloak.

Hagrid was not crying, nor did he throw himself upon their necks. He looked like a man who did not know where he was or what to do. This helplessness was worse to watch than tears.

"Wan' some tea?" he said. His great hands were shaking as he reached for the kettle.

"Where's Buckbeak, Hagrid?" said Hermione hesitantly.

"I — I took him outside," said Hagrid, spilling milk all over the table as he filled up the jug. "He's tethered in me pumpkin patch. Thought he oughta see the trees an' — an' smell fresh air — before —"

Hagrid's hand trembled so violently that the milk jug slipped from his grasp and shattered all over the floor.

"I'll do it, Hagrid," said Hermione quickly, hurrying over and starting to clean up the mess.

"There's another one in the cupboard," Hagrid said, sitting down and wiping his forehead on his sleeve. Harry glanced at Ron, who looked back hopelessly.

"Isn't there anything anyone can do, Hagrid?" Harry asked fiercely, sitting down next to him. "Dumbledore —"

"He's tried," said Hagrid. "He's got no power ter overrule the Committee. He told 'em Buckbeak's all right, but they're scared…Yeh know what Lucius Malfoy's like…threatened 'em, I

expect…an' the executioner, Macnair, he's an old pal o' Malfoy's…but it'll be quick an' clean…an' I'll be beside him…"

Hagrid swallowed. His eyes were darting all over the cabin as though looking for some shred of hope or comfort.

"Dumbledore's gonna come down while it — while it happens. Wrote me this mornin'. Said he wants ter — ter be with me. Great man, Dumbledore…"

Hermione, who had been rummaging in Hagrid's cupboard for another milk jug, let out a small, quickly stifled sob. She straightened up with the new jug in her hands, fighting back tears.

"We'll stay with you too, Hagrid," she began, but Hagrid shook his shaggy head.

"Yeh're ter go back up ter the castle. I told yeh, I don' wan' yeh watchin'. An' yeh shouldn' be down here anyway…If Fudge an' Dumbledore catch yeh out without permission, Harry, yeh'll be in big trouble."

Silent tears were now streaming down Hermione's face, but she hid them from Hagrid, bustling around making tea. Then, as she picked up the milk bottle to pour some into the jug, she let out a shriek.

"Ron, I don't believe it — it's Scabbers!"

Ron gaped at her.

"What are you talking about?"

Hermione carried the milk jug over to the table and turned it upside down. With a frantic squeak, and much scrambling to get back inside, Scabbers the rat came sliding out onto the table.

"Scabbers!" said Ron blankly. "Scabbers, what are you doing here?"

He grabbed the struggling rat and held him up to the light. Scabbers looked dreadful. He was thinner than ever, large tufts of hair had fallen out leaving wide bald patches, and he writhed in Ron's hands as though desperate to free himself.

"It's okay, Scabbers!" said Ron. "No cats! There's nothing here to hurt you!"

Hagrid suddenly stood up, his eyes fixed on the window. His normally ruddy face had gone the color of parchment.

"They're comin'…"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione whipped around. A group of men was walking down the distant castle steps. In front was Albus Dumbledore, his silver beard gleaming in the dying sun. Next to him trotted Cornelius Fudge. Behind them came the feeble old Committee member and the executioner, Macnair.

“Yeh gotta go,” said Hagrid. Every inch of him was trembling. “They mustn’ find yeh here…Go now…”

Ron stuffed Scabbers into his pocket and Hermione picked up the cloak. “I’ll let yeh out the back way,” said Hagrid.

They followed him to the door into his back garden. Harry felt strangely unreal, and even more so when he saw Buckbeak a few yards away, tethered to a tree behind Hagrid’s pumpkin patch. Buckbeak seemed to know something was happening. He turned his sharp head from side to side and pawed the ground nervously.

“It’s okay, Beaky,” said Hagrid softly. “It’s okay…” He turned to Harry, Ron, and Hermione. “Go on,” he said. “Get goin’.”

But they didn’t move.

“Hagrid, we can’t —”

“We’ll tell them what really happened —”

“They can’t kill him —”

“Go!” said Hagrid fiercely. “It’s bad enough without you lot in trouble an’ all!”

They had no choice. As Hermione threw the cloak over Harry and Ron, they heard voices at the front of the cabin. Hagrid looked at the place where they had just vanished from sight.

“Go quick,” he said hoarsely. “Don’ listen…”

And he strode back into his cabin as someone knocked at the front door.

Slowly, in a kind of horrified trance, Harry, Ron, and Hermione set off silently around Hagrid’s house. As they reached the other side, the front door closed with a sharp snap.

“Please, let’s hurry,” Hermione whispered. “I can’t stand it, I can’t bear it…”

They started up the sloping lawn toward the castle. The sun was sinking fast now; the sky had turned to a clear, purple-tinged gray, but to the west there was a ruby-red glow.

Ron stopped dead.

“Oh, please, Ron,” Hermione began.

“It’s Scabbers — he won’t — stay put —”

Ron was bent over, trying to keep Scabbers in his pocket, but the rat was going berserk; squeaking madly, twisting and flailing, trying to sink his teeth into Ron’s hand.

“Scabbers, it’s me, you idiot, it’s Ron,” Ron hissed.

They heard a door open behind them and men’s voices.

“Oh, Ron, please let’s move, they’re going to do it!” Hermione breathed.

“Okay — Scabbers, stay put —”

They walked forward; Harry, like Hermione, was trying not to listen to the rumble of voices behind them. Ron stopped again.

“I can’t hold him — Scabbers, shut up, everyone’ll hear us —”

The rat was squealing wildly, but not loudly enough to cover up the sounds drifting from Hagrid’s garden. There was a jumble of indistinct male voices, a silence, and then, without warning, the unmistakable swish and thud of an axe.

Hermione swayed on the spot.

“They did it!” she whispered to Harry. “I’d — don’t believe it — they did it!”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CAT, RAT, AND DOG

Harry's mind had gone blank with shock. The three of them stood transfixed with horror under the Invisibility Cloak. The very last rays of the setting sun were casting a bloody light over the long-shadowed grounds. Then, behind them, they heard a wild howling.

"Hagrid," Harry muttered. Without thinking about what he was doing, he made to turn back, but both Ron and Hermione seized his arms.

"We can't," said Ron, who was paper-white. "He'll be in worse trouble if they know we've been to see him…"

Hermione's breathing was shallow and uneven.

"How — could — they?" she choked. "How could they?"

"Come on," said Ron, whose teeth seemed to be chattering.

They set off back toward the castle, walking slowly to keep themselves hidden under the cloak. The light was fading fast now.

By the time they reached open ground, darkness was settling like a spell around them.

"Scabbers, keep still," Ron hissed, clamping his hand over his chest. The rat was wriggling madly. Ron came to a sudden halt, trying to force Scabbers deeper into his pocket. "What's the matter with you, You stupid rat? Stay still — OUCH! He bit me!"

"Ron, be quiet!" Hermione whispered urgently. "Fudge'll be out here in a minute —"

"He won't — stay — put —"

Scabbers was plainly terrified. He was writhing with all his might, trying to break free of Ron's grip.

"What's the matter with him?"

But Harry had just seen — stinking toward them, his body low to the ground, wide yellow eyes glinting eerily in the darkness — Crookshanks. Whether he could see them or was following the sound of Scabbers's squeaks, Harry couldn't tell.

"Crookshanks!" Hermione moaned. "No, go away, Crookshanks! Go away!"

But the cat was getting nearer —

"Scabbers — NO!"

Too late — the rat had slipped between Ron's clutching fingers, hit the ground, and scampered away. In one bound, Crookshanks sprang after him, and before Harry or Hermione could stop him, Ron had thrown the Invisibility Cloak off himself and pelted away into the darkness.

"Ron!" Hermione moaned.

She and Harry looked at each other, then followed at a sprint; it was impossible to run full out under the cloak; they pulled it off and it streamed behind them like a banner as they hurtled after Ron; they could hear his feet thundering along ahead and his shouts at Crookshanks.

"Get away from him — get away — Scabbers, come here —"

There was a loud thud.

"Gotcha! Get off, you stinking cat —"

Harry and Hermione almost fell over Ron; they skidded to a stop right in front of him. He was sprawled on the ground, but Scabbers was back in his pocket; he had both hands held tight over the quivering lump.

"Ron — come on back under the cloak —" Hermione panted. "Dumbledore — the Minister — they'll be coming back out in a minute—"

But before they could cover themselves again, before they could even catch their breath, they heard the soft pounding of gigantic paws…Something was bounding toward them, quiet as a shadow — an enormous, pale-eyed, jet-black dog.

Harry reached for his wand, but too late — the dog had made an enormous leap and the front paws hit him on the chest; he keeled over backward in a whirl of hair; he felt its hot breath, saw inch-long teeth —

But the force of its leap had carried it too far; it rolled off him. Dazed, feeling as though his ribs were broken, Harry tried to stand up; he could hear it growling as it skidded around for a new attack.

Ron was on his feet. As the dog sprang back toward them he pushed Harry aside; the dog's jaws fastened instead around Ron's outstretched arm. Harry lunged forward, he seized a handful of the brute's hair, but it was dragging Ron away as easily as though he were a rag doll —

Then, out of nowhere, something hit Harry so hard across the face he was knocked off his feet again. He heard Hermione shriek with pain and fall too.

Harry groped for his wand, blinking blood out of his eyes "*Lumos!*" he whispered.

The wandlight showed him the trunk of a thick tree; they had chased Scabbers into the shadow of the Whomping Willow and its branches were creaking as though in a high wind, whipping backward and forward to stop them going nearer.

And there, at the base of the trunk, was the dog, dragging Ron backward into a large gap in the roots — Ron was fighting furiously, but his head and torso were slipping out of sight —

“Ron!” Harry shouted, trying to follow, but a heavy branch whipped lethally through the air and he was forced backward again.

All they could see now was one of Ron’s legs, which he had hooked around a root in an effort to stop the dog from pulling him farther underground — but a horrible crack cut the air like a gunshot; Ron’s leg had broken, and a moment later, his foot vanished from sight.

“Harry — we’ve got to go for help —” Hermione gasped; she was bleeding too; the Willow had cut her across the shoulder.

“No! That thing’s big enough to eat him; we haven’t got time —”

“Harry — we’re never going to get through without help —”

Another branch whipped down at them, twigs clenched like knuckles.

“If that dog can get in, we can,” Harry panted, darting here and there, trying to find a way through the vicious, swishing branches, but he couldn’t get an inch nearer to the tree roots without being in range of the tree’s blows.

“Oh, help, help,” Hermione whispered frantically, dancing uncertainly on the spot, “Please…”

Crookshanks darted forward. He slithered between the battering branches like a snake and placed his front paws upon a knot on the trunk.

Abruptly, as though the tree had been turned to marble, it stopped moving. Not a leaf twitched or shook.

“Crookshanks!” Hermione whispered uncertainly. She now grasped Harry’s arm painfully hard. “How did he know —?”

“He’s friends with that dog,” said Harry grimly. “I’ve seen them together. Come on — and keep your wand out —”

They covered the distance to the trunk in seconds, but before they had reached the gap in the roots, Crookshanks had slid into it with a flick of his bottlebrush tail. Harry went next; he crawled forward, headfirst, and slid down an earthy slope to the bottom of a very low tunnel.

Crookshanks was a little way along, his eyes flashing in the light from Harry’s wand. Seconds later, Hermione slithered down beside him.

“Where’s Ron?” she whispered in a terrified voice.

“This way,” said Harry, setting off, bent-backed, after Crookshanks.

“Where does this tunnel come out?” Hermione asked breathlessly from behind him.

“I don’t know…It’s marked on the Marauder’s Map but Fred and George said no one’s ever gotten into it…It goes off the edge of the map, but it looked like it was heading for Hogsmeade…”

They moved as fast as they could, bent almost double; ahead of them, Crookshanks's tail bobbed in and out of view. On and on went the passage; it felt at least as long as the one to Honeydukes…All Harry could think of was Ron and what the enormous dog might be doing to him…He was drawing breath in sharp, painful gasps, running at a crouch…

And then the tunnel began to rise; moments later it twisted, and Crookshanks had gone. Ahead Harry could see a patch of dim light through a small opening.

He and Hermione paused, gasping for breath, edging forward. Both raised their wands to see what lay beyond.

It was a room, a very disordered, dusty room. Paper was peeling from the walls; there were stains all over the floor; every piece of furniture was broken as though somebody had smashed it. The windows were all boarded up.

Harry glanced at Hermione, who looked very frightened but nodded.

Harry pulled himself out of the hole, staring around. The room was deserted, but a door to their right stood open, leading to a shadowy hallway. Hermione suddenly grabbed Harry's arm again. Her wide eyes were traveling around the boarded windows.

"Harry," she whispered, "I think we're in the Shrieking Shack."

Harry looked around. His eyes fell on a wooden chair near them. Large chunks had been torn out of it; one of the legs had been ripped off entirely.

"Ghosts didn't do that," he said slowly.

At that moment, there was a creak overhead. Something had moved upstairs. Both of them looked up at the ceiling. Hermione's grip on Harry's arm was so tight he was losing feeling in his fingers. He raised his eyebrows at her; she nodded again and let go.

Quietly as they could, they crept out into the hall and up the crumbling staircase. Everything was covered in a thick layer of dust except the floor, where a wide shiny stripe had been made by something being dragged upstairs.

They reached the dark landing.

"*Nox*," they whispered together, and the lights at the end of their wands went out. Only one door was open. As they crept toward it, they heard movement from behind it; a low moan, and then a deep, loud purring. They exchanged a last look, a last nod.

Wand held tightly before him, Harry kicked the door wide open.

On a magnificent four-poster bed with dusty hangings lay Crookshanks, purring loudly at the sight of them. On the floor beside him, clutching his leg, which stuck out at a strange angle, was Ron.

Harry and Hermione dashed across to him.

"Ron — are you okay?"

"Where's the dog?"

"Not a dog," Ron moaned. His teeth were gritted with pain. "Harry, it's a trap —"

"What —"

"He's the dog…he's an Animagus."

Ron was staring over Harry's shoulder. Harry wheeled around. With a snap, the man in the shadows closed the door behind them.

A mass of filthy, matted hair hung to his elbows. If eyes hadn't been shining out of the deep, dark sockets, he might have been a corpse. The waxy skin was stretched so tightly over the bones of his face, it looked like a skull. His yellow teeth were bared in a grin. It was Sirius Black.

"*Expelliarmus!*" he croaked, pointing Ron's wand at them.

Harry's and Hermione's wands shot out of their hands, high in the air, and Black caught them. Then he took a step closer. His eyes were fixed on Harry.

"I thought you'd come and help your friend," he said hoarsely.

His voice sounded as though he had long since lost the habit of using it. "Your father would have done the same for me. Brave of you not to run for a teacher. I'm grateful…it will make everything much easier…"

The taunt about his father rang in Harry's ears as though Black had bellowed it. A boiling hate erupted in Harry's chest, leaving no place for fear. For the first time in his life, he wanted his wand back in his hand, not to defend himself, but to attack…to kill. Without knowing what he was doing, he started forward, but there was a sudden movement on either side of him and two pairs of hands grabbed him and held him back…"No, Harry!" Hermione gasped in a petrified whisper; Ron, however, spoke to Black.

"If you want to kill Harry, you'll have to kill us too!" he said fiercely, though the effort of standing upright was draining him of still more color, and he swayed slightly as he spoke.

Something flickered in Black's shadowed eyes.

"Lie down," he said quietly to Ron. "You will damage that leg even more."

"Did you hear me?" Ron said weakly, though he was clinging painfully to Harry to stay upright. "You'll have to kill all three of us!"

"There'll be only one murder here tonight," said Black, and his grin widened.

"Why's that?" Harry spat, trying to wrench himself free of Ron, and Hermione. "Didn't care last time, did you? Didn't mind slaughtering all those Muggles to get at Pettigrew…What's the matter, gone soft in Azkaban?"

"Harry!" Hermione whimpered. "Be quiet!"

"HE KILLED MY MUM AND DAD!" Harry roared, and with a huge effort he broke free of Hermione's and Ron's restraint and lunged forward —

He had forgotten about magic — he had forgotten that he was short and skinny and thirteen, whereas Black was a tall, full-grown man — all Harry knew was that he wanted to hurt Black as badly as he could and that he didn't care how much he got hurt in return —

Perhaps it was the shock of Harry doing something so stupid, but Black didn't raise the wands in time — one of Harry's hands fastened over his wasted wrist, forcing the wand tips away; the knuckles of Harry's other hand collided with the side of Black's head and they fell, backward, into the wall —

Hermione was screaming; Ron was yelling; there was a blinding flash as the wands in Black's hand sent a jet of sparks into the air that missed Harry's face by inches; Harry felt the shrunken arm under his fingers twisting madly, but he clung on, his other hand punching every part of Black it could find.

But Black's free hand had found Harry's throat

"No," he hissed, "I've waited too long —"

The fingers tightened, Harry choked, his glasses askew.

Then he saw Hermione's foot swing out of nowhere. Black let go of Harry with a grunt of pain; Ron had thrown himself on Black's wand hand and Harry heard a faint clatter —

He fought free of the tangle of bodies and saw his own wand rolling across the floor; he threw himself toward it but

"Argh!"

Crookshanks had joined the fray; both sets of front claws had sunk themselves deep into Harry's arm; Harry threw him off, but Crookshanks now darted toward Harry's wand —

"NO YOU DON'T!" roared Harry, and he aimed a kick at Crookshanks that made the cat leap aside, spitting; Harry snatched up his wand and turned —

"Get out of the way!" he shouted at Ron and Hermione.

They didn't need telling twice. Hermione, gasping for breath, her lip bleeding, scrambled aside, snatching up her and Ron's wands. Ron crawled to the four-poster and collapsed onto it, panting, his white face now tinged with green, both hands clutching his broken leg.

Black was sprawled at the bottom of the wall. His thin chest rose and fell rapidly as he watched Harry walking slowly nearer, his wand pointing straight at Black's heart.

"Going to kill me, Harry?" he whispered.

Harry stopped right above him, his wand still pointing at Black's chest, looking down at him. A livid bruise was rising around Black's left eye and his nose was bleeding.

"You killed my parents," said Harry, his voice shaking slightly, but his wand hand quite steady.

Black stared up at him out of those sunken eyes.

"I don't deny it," he said very quietly. "But if you knew the whole story."

"The whole story?" Harry repeated, a furious pounding in his ears. "You sold them to Voldemort. That's all I need to know."

"You've got to listen to me," Black said, and there was a note of urgency in his voice now. "You'll regret it if you don't…You don't understand…"

"I understand a lot better than you think," said Harry, and his voice shook more than ever. "You never heard her, did you? My mum…trying to stop Voldemort killing me…and you did that…you did it…"

Before either of them could say another word, something ginger streaked past Harry; Crookshanks leapt onto Black's chest and settled himself there, right over Black's heart. Black blinked and looked down at the cat.

"Get off," he murmured, trying to push Crookshanks off him.

But Crookshanks sank his claws into Black's robes and wouldn't shift. He turned his ugly, squashed face to Harry and looked up at him with those great yellow eyes. To his right, Hermione gave a dry sob.

Harry stared down at Black and Crookshanks, his grip tightening on the wand. So what if he had to kill the cat too? It was in league with Black…If it was prepared to die, trying to protect Black, that wasn't Harry's business…If Black wanted to save it, that only proved he cared more for Crookshanks than for Harry's parents…

Harry raised the wand. Now was the moment to do it. Now was the moment to avenge his mother and father. He was going to kill Black. He had to kill Black. This was his chance…

The seconds lengthened. And still Harry stood frozen there, wand poised, Black staring up at him, Crookshanks on his chest. Ron's ragged breathing came from near the bed; Hermione was quite silent.

And then came a new sound —

Muffled footsteps were echoing up through the floor — someone was moving downstairs.

"WE'RE UP HERE!" Hermione screamed suddenly. "WE'RE UP HERE — SIRIUS BLACK — QUICK!"

Black made a startled movement that almost dislodged Crookshanks; Harry gripped his wand convulsively — *Do it now!* said a voice in his head — but the footsteps were thundering up the stairs and Harry still hadn't done it.

The door of the room burst open in a shower of red sparks and Harry wheeled around as Professor Lupin came hurtling into the room, his face bloodless, his wand raised and ready. His eyes flickered over Ron, lying on the floor, over Hermione, cowering next to the door, to Harry, standing there with his wand covering Black, and then to Black himself, crumpled and bleeding at Harry's feet.

"Expelliarmus!" Lupin shouted.

Harry's wand flew once more out of his hand; so did the two Hermione was holding. Lupin caught them all deftly, then moved into the room, staring at Black, who still had Crookshanks lying protectively across his chest.

Harry stood there, feeling suddenly empty. He hadn't done it. His nerve had failed him. Black was going to be handed back to the Dementors.

Then Lupin spoke, in a very tense voice.

"Where is he, Sirius?"

Harry looked quickly at Lupin. He didn't understand what Lupin meant. Who was Lupin talking about? He turned to look at Black again.

Black's face was quite expressionless. For a few seconds, he didn't move at all. Then, very slowly, he raised his empty hand and pointed straight at Ron. Mystified, Harry glanced around at Ron, who looked bewildered.

"But then…" Lupin muttered, staring at Black so intently it seemed he was trying to read his mind, "…why hasn't he shown himself before now? Unless" — Lupin's eyes suddenly widened, as though he was seeing something beyond Black, something none of the rest could see, "— unless he was the one…unless you switched…without telling me?"

Very slowly, his sunken gaze never leaving Lupin's face, Black nodded.

"Professor," Harry interrupted loudly, "what's going on —?"

But he never finished the question, because what he saw made his voice die in his throat. Lupin was lowering his wand, gazing fixed at Black. The Professor walked to Black's side, seized his hand, pulled him to his feet so that Crookshanks fell to the floor, and embraced Black like a brother.

Harry felt as though the bottom had dropped out of his stomach.

"I DON'T BELIEVE IT!" Hermione screamed.

Lupin let go of Black and turned to her. She had raised herself off the floor and was pointing at Lupin, wild-eyed. "You — you —"

"Hermione —"

"– you and him!"

"Hermione, calm down —"

"I didn't tell anyone!" Hermione shrieked. "I've been covering up for you —"

"Hermione, listen to me, please" Lupin shouted. "I can explain —"

Harry could feel himself shaking, not with fear, but with a fresh wave of fury.

"I trusted you," he shouted at Lupin, his voice wavering, out of control, "and all the time you've been his friend!"

"You're wrong," said Lupin. "I haven't been Sirius's friend, but I am now — Let me explain…"

"NO!" Hermione screamed. "Harry, don't trust him, he's been helping Black get into the castle, he wants you dead too — he's a werewolf!"

There was a ringing silence. Everyone's eyes were now on Lupin, who looked remarkably calm, though rather pale.

"Not at all up to your usual standard, Hermione," he said. "Only one out of three, I'm afraid. I have not been helping Sirius get into the castle and I certainly don't want Harry dead." An odd shiver passed over his face. "But I won't deny that I am a werewolf."

Ron made a valiant effort to get up again but fell back with a whimper of pain. Lupin made toward him, looking concerned, but Ron gasped, "Get away from me, werewolf!"

Lupin stopped dead. Then, with an obvious effort, he turned to Hermione and said, "How long have you known?"

"Ages," Hermione whispered. "Since I did Professor Snape's essay…"

"He'll be delighted," said Lupin coolly. "He assigned that essay hoping someone would realize what my symptoms meant…Did you check the lunar chart and realize that I was always ill at the full moon? Or did you realize that the Boggart changed into the moon when it saw me?"

"Both," Hermione said quietly.

Lupin forced a laugh.

"You're the cleverest witch of your age I've ever met, Hermione."

"I'm not," Hermione whispered. "If I'd been a bit cleverer, I'd have told everyone what you are!"

"But they already know," said Lupin. "At least, the staff do."

"Dumbledore hired you when he knew you were a werewolf," Ron gasped. "Is he mad?"

"Some of the staff thought so," said Lupin. "He had to work very hard to convince certain teachers that I'm trustworthy —"

"AND HE WAS WRONG!" Harry yelled. "YOU'VE BEEN HELPING HIM ALL THE TIME!"

He was pointing at Black, who suddenly crossed to the four-poster bed and sank onto it, his face hidden in one shaking hand. Crookshanks leapt up beside him and stepped onto his lap, purring. Ron edged away from both of them, dragging his leg.

"I have not been helping Sirius," said Lupin. "If you'll give me a chance, I'll explain. Look —"

He separated Harry's, Ron's and Hermione's wands and threw each back to its owner; Harry caught his, stunned.

"There," said Lupin, sticking his own wand back into his belt "You're armed, we're not. Now will you listen?"

Harry didn't know what to think. Was it a trick?

"If you haven't been helping him," he said, with a furious glance at Black, "how did you know he was here?"

"The map," said Lupin. "The Marauder's Map. I was in my office examining it —"

"You know how to work it?" Harry said suspiciously.

"Of course I know how to work it," said Lupin, waving his hand impatiently. "I helped write it. I'm Moony — that was my friends' nickname for me at school."

"You wrote —?"

"The important thing is, I was watching it carefully this evening, because I had an idea that you, Ron, and Hermione might try and sneak out of the castle to visit Hagrid before his Hippogriff was executed. And I was right, wasn't I?"

He had started to pace up and down, looking at them. Little patches of dust rose at his feet.

"You might have been wearing your father's old cloak, Harry—"

"How d'you know about the cloak?"

"The number of times I saw James disappearing under it…" said Lupin, waving an impatient hand again. "The point is, even if you're wearing an Invisibility Cloak, you still show up on the Marauder's Map. I watched you cross the grounds and enter Hagrid's hut. Twenty minutes later, you left Hagrid, and set off back toward the castle. But you were now accompanied by somebody else."

"What?" said Harry. "No, we weren't!"

"I couldn't believe my eyes," said Lupin, still pacing, and ignoring Harry's interruption. "I thought the map must be malfunctioning. How could he be with you?"

"No one was with us!" said Harry.

"And then I saw another dot, moving fast toward you, labeled Sirius Black…I saw him collide with you; I watched as he pulled two of you into the Whomping Willow —"

"One of us!" Ron said angrily.

"No, Ron," said Lupin. "Two of you."

He had stopped his pacing, his eyes moving over Ron.

"Do you think I could have a look at the rat?" he said evenly.

"What?" said Ron. "What's Scabbers got to do with it?"

"Everything," said Lupin. "Could I see him, please?"

Ron hesitated, then put a hand inside his robes. Scabbers emerged, thrashing desperately; Ron had to seize his long bald tail to stop him escaping. Crookshanks stood up on Black's leg and made a soft hissing noise.

Lupin moved closer to Ron. He seemed to be holding his breath as he gazed intently at Scabbers.

"What?" Ron said again, holding Scabbers close to him, looking scared. "What's my rat got to do with anything?"

"That's not a rat," croaked Sirius Black suddenly.

"What d'you mean — of course he's a rat —"

"No, he's not," said Lupin quietly. "He's a wizard."

"An Animagus," said Black, "by the name of Peter Pettigrew."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

MOONY, WORMTAIL, PADFOOT, AND PRONGS

It took a few seconds for the absurdity of this statement to sink in. Then Ron voiced what Harry was thinking.

"You're both mental."

"Ridiculous!" said Hermione faintly.

"Peter Pettigrew's dead!" said Harry. "He killed him twelve years ago!" He pointed at Black, whose face twitched convulsively.

"I meant to," he growled, his yellow teeth bared, "but little Peter got the better of me…not this time, though!"

And Crookshanks was thrown to the floor as Black lunged at Scabbers; Ron yelled with pain as Black's weight fell on his broken leg.

"Sirius, NO!" Lupin yelled, launching himself forwards and dragging Black away from Ron again, "WAIT! You can't do it just like that — they need to understand — we've got to explain —"

"We can explain afterwards!" snarled Black, trying to throw Lupin off. One hand was still clawing the air as it tried to reach Scabbers, who was squealing like a piglet, scratching Ron's face and neck as he tried to escape.

"They've — got — a — right — to — know — everything!" Lupin panted, still trying to restrain Black. "Ron's kept him as a pet! There are parts of it even I don't understand, and Harry — you owe Harry the truth, Sirius!"

Black stopped struggling, though his hollowed eyes were still fixed on Scabbers, who was clamped tightly under Ron's bitten, scratched, and bleeding hands.

"All right, then," Black said, without taking his eyes off the rat. "Tell them whatever you like. But make it quick, Remus. I want to commit the murder I was imprisoned for…"

"You're nutters, both of you," said Ron shakily, looking round at Harry and Hermione for support. "I've had enough of this. I'm off."

He tried to heave himself up on his good leg, but Lupin raised his wand again, pointing it at Scabbers.

"You're going to hear me out, Ron," he said quietly. "Just keep a tight hold on Peter while you listen."

"HE'S NOT PETER, HE'S SCABBERS!" Ron yelled, trying to force the rat back into his front pocket, but Scabbers was fighting too hard; Ron swayed and overbalanced, and Harry caught him am pushed him back down to the bed. Then, ignoring Black, Harry turned to Lupin.

“There were witnesses who saw Pettigrew die,” he said. “A whole street full of them…”

“They didn’t see what they thought they saw!” said Black savagely, still watching Scabbers struggling in Ron’s hands.

“Everyone thought Sirius killed Peter,” said Lupin, nodding. “I believed it myself — until I saw the map tonight. Because the Marauder’s map never lies…Peter’s alive. Ron’s holding him, Harry.”

Harry looked down at Ron, and as their eyes met, they agreed, silently: Black and Lupin were both out of their minds. Their story made no sense whatsoever. How could Scabbers be Peter Pettigrew? Azkaban must have unhinged Black after all — but why was Lupin playing along with him?

Then Hermione spoke, in a trembling, would-be calm sort of voice, as though trying to will Professor Lupin to talk sensibly.

“But Professor Lupin…Scabbers can’t be Pettigrew…it just can’t be true, you know it can’t…”

“Why can’t it be true?” Lupin said calmly, as though they were in class, and Hermione had simply spotted a problem in an experiment with Grindylows.

“Because…because people would know if Peter Pettigrew had been an Animagus. We did Animagi in class with Professor McGonagall. And I looked them up when I did my homework — the Ministry of Magic keeps tabs on witches and wizards who can become animals; there’s a register showing what animal they become, and their markings and things…and I went and looked Professor McGonagall up on the register, and there have been only seven Animagi this century, and Pettigrew’s name wasn’t on the list.”

Harry had barely had time to marvel inwardly at the effort Hermione put into her homework, when Lupin started to laugh.

“Right again, Hermione!” he said. “But the Ministry never knew that here used to be three unregistered Animagi running around Hogwarts.”

“If you’re going to tell them the story, get a move on, Remus,” said Black, who was still watching Scabbers’s every desperate move. “I’ve waited twelve years, I’m not going to wait much longer.”

“All right…but you’ll need to help me, Sirius,” said Lupin, “I only know how it began…”

Lupin broke off. There had been a loud creak behind him. The bedroom door had opened of its own accord. All five of them stared at it. Then Lupin strode toward it and looked out into the landing.

“No one there…”

“This place is haunted!” said Ron.

“It’s not,” said Lupin, still looking at the door in a puzzled way. “The Shrieking Shack was never haunted…The screams and howls the villagers used to hear were made by me.”

He pushed his graying hair out of his eyes, thought for a moment then said, “That’s where all of this starts — with my becoming a werewolf. None of this could have happened if I hadn’t been bitter…and if I hadn’t been so foolhardy…”

He looked sober and tired. Ron started to interrupt, but Hermione, said, “Shh!” She was watching Lupin very intently.

“I as a very small boy when I received the bite. My parents tried everything, but in those days there was no cure. The potion that Professor Snape has been making for me is a very recent discovery. It makes me safe, you see. As long as I take it in the week, preceding the full moon, I keep my mind when I transform…I’m able to curl up in my office, a harmless wolf, and wait for the moon to wane again.

“Before the Wolfsbane Potion was discovered, however, I became a fully fledged monster once a month. It seemed impossible that I would be able to come to Hogwarts. Other parents weren’t likely to want their children exposed to me.

“But then Dumbledore became Headmaster, and he was sympathetic. He said that as long as we took certain precautions, there was no reason I shouldn’t come to school…” Lupin sighed, and looked directly at Harry. “I told you, months ago, that the Whomping Willow was planted the year I came to Hogwarts. The truth is that it was planted because I came to Hogwarts. This house” — Lupin looked miserably around the room, — “the tunnel that leads to it — they were built for my use. Once a month, I was smuggled out of the castle, into this place, to transform. The tree was placed at the tunnel mouth to stop anyone coming across me while I was dangerous.”

Harry couldn’t see where this story was going, but he was listening raptly all the same. The only sound apart from Lupin’s voice was Scabbers’s frightened squeaking.

“My transformations in those days were — were terrible. It is very painful to turn into a werewolf. I was separated from humans to bite, so I bit and scratched myself instead. The villagers heard the noise and the screaming and thought they were hearing particularly violent spirits. Dumbledore encouraged the rumor…Even now, when the house has been silent for years, the villagers don’t dare approach it…

“But apart from my transformations, I was happier than I had ever been in my life. For the first time ever, I had friends, three great friends. Sirius Black…Peter Pettigrew…and, of course, your father, Harry — James Potter.

"Now, my three friends could hardly fail to notice that I disappeared once a month. I made up all sorts of stories. I told them my mother was ill, and that I had to go home to see her…I was terrified they would desert me the moment they found out what I was. But of course, they, like you, Hermione, worked out the truth…

"And they didn't desert me at all. Instead, they did something for me that would make my transformations not only bearable, but the best times of my life. They became Animagi."

"My dad too?" said Harry, astounded.

"Yes, indeed," said Lupin. "It took them the best part of three years to work out how to do it. Your father and Sirius here were the cleverest students in the school, and lucky they were, because the Animagus transformation can go horribly wrong — one reason the Ministry keeps a close watch on those attempting to do it. Peter needed all the help he could get from James and Sirius. Finally, in our fifth year, they managed it. They could each turn into a different animal at will."

"But how did that help you?" said Hermione, sounding puzzled.

"They couldn't keep me company as humans, so they kept me company as animals," said Lupin. "A werewolf is only a danger to people. They sneaked out of the castle every month under James's Invisibility Cloak. They transformed…Peter, as the smallest, could slip beneath the Willow's attacking branches and touch the knot that freezes it. They would then slip down the tunnel and join me. Under their influence, I became less dangerous. My body was still wolfish, but my mind seemed to become less so while I was with them."

"Hurry up, Remus," snarled Black, who was still watching Scabbers with a horrible sort of hunger on his face.

"I'm getting there, Sirius, I'm getting there…well, highly exciting possibilities were open to us now that we could all transform. Soon we were leaving the Shrieking Shack and roaming the school grounds and the village by night. Sirius and James transformed into such large animals, they were able to keep a werewolf in check. I doubt whether any Hogwarts students ever found out more about the Hogwarts grounds and Hogsmeade than we did…And that's how we came to write the Marauder's Map, and sign it with our nicknames. Sirius is Padfoot. Peter is Wormtail. James was Prongs."

"What sort of animal —?" Harry began, but Hermione cut him off. "That was still really dangerous! Running around in the dark with a werewolf! What if you'd given the others the slip, and bitten somebody?"

"A thought that still haunts me," said Lupin heavily. "And there were near misses, many of them. We laughed about them afterwards. We were young, thoughtless — carried away with our own cleverness.

"I sometimes felt guilty about betraying Dumbledore's trust, of course…he had admitted me to Hogwarts when no other headmaster would have done so, and he had no idea I was breaking the rules he had set down for my own and others' safety. He never knew I had led three fellow students into becoming Animagi illegally. But I always managed to forget my guilty feelings every time we sat down to plan our next month's adventure. And I haven't changed…"

Lupin's face had hardened, and there was self-disgust in his voice. "All this year, I have been battling with myself, wondering whether I should tell Dumbledore that Sirius was an Animagus. But I didn't do it. Why? Because I was too cowardly. It would have meant admitting that I'd betrayed his trust while I was at school, admitting that I'd led others along with me…and Dumbledore's trust has meant everything to me. He let me into Hogwarts as a boy, and he gave me a job when I have been shunned all my adult life, unable to find paid work because of what I am. And so I convinced myself that Sirius was getting into the school using dark arts he learned from Voldemort, that being an Animagus had nothing to do with it…so, in a way, Snape's been right about me all along."

"Snape?" said Black harshly, taking his eyes off Scabbers; for the first time in minutes and looking up at Lupin. "What's Snape got to do with it?"

"He's here, Sirius," said Lupin heavily. "He's teaching here as well." He looked up at Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

"Professor Snape was at school with us. He fought very hard against my appointment to the Defense Against the Dark Arts job. He has been telling Dumbledore all year that I am not to be trusted. He has his reasons…you see, Sirius here played a trick on him which nearly killed him, a trick which involved me —"

Black made a derisive noise.

"It served him right," he sneered. "Sneaking around, trying to find out what we were up to…hoping he could get us expelled…"

"Severus was very interested in where I went every month." Lupin told Harry, Ron, and Hermione. "We were in the same year, you know, and we — er — didn't like each other very much. He especially disliked James. Jealous, I think, of James's talent on the Quidditch field…anyway Snape had seen me crossing the grounds with Madam Pomfrey one evening as she led me toward the Whomping Willow to transform. Sirius thought it would be — er — amusing, to tell Snape all he

had to do was prod the knot on the tree trunk with a long stick, and he'd be able to get in after me. Well, of course, Snape tried it — if he'd got as far as this house, he'd have met a fully grown werewolf — but your father, who'd heard what Sirius had done, went after Snape and pulled him back, at great risk to his life…Snape glimpsed me, though, at the end of the tunnel. He was forbidden by Dumbledore to tell anybody, but from that time on he knew what I was…"

"So that's why Snape doesn't like you," said Harry slowly, "because he thought you were in on the joke?"

"That's right," sneered a cold voice from the wall behind Lupin.

Severus Snape was pulling off the Invisibility Cloak, his wand pointing directly at Lupin.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE SERVANT OF LORD VOLDEMORT

Hermione screamed. Black leapt to his feet. Harry felt as though he'd received a huge electric shock.

"I found this at the base of the Whomping Willow," said Snape, throwing the cloak aside, careful to keep this wand pointing directly at Lupin's chest. "Very useful, Potter, I thank you…"

Snape was slightly breathless, but his face was full of suppressed triumph. "You're wondering, perhaps, how I knew you were here?" he said, his eyes glittering. "I've just been to your office, Lupin. You forgot to take your potion tonight, so I took a gobletful along. And very lucky I did…lucky for me, I mean. Lying on your desk was a certain map. One glance at it told me all I needed to know. I saw you running along this passageway and out of sight."

"Severus —" Lupin began, but Snape overrode him.

"I've told the headmaster again and again that you're helping your old friend Black into the castle, Lupin, and here's the proof. Not even I dreamed you would have the nerve to use this old place as your hideout —"

"Severus, you're making a mistake," said Lupin urgently. "You haven't heard everything — I can explain — Sirius is not here to kill Harry —"

"Two more for Azkaban tonight," said Snape, his eyes now gleaming fanatically. "I shall be interested to see how Dumbledore takes this…He was quite convinced you were harmless, you know, Lupin…a tame werewolf —"

"You fool," said Lupin softly. "Is a schoolboy grudge worth putting an innocent man back inside Azkaban?"

BANG! Thin, snakelike cords burst from the end of Snape's wand and twisted themselves around Lupin's mouth, wrists, and ankles; he overbalanced and fell to the floor, unable to move. With a roar of rage, Black started toward Snape, but Snape pointed his wand straight between Black's eyes.

"Give me a reason," he whispered. "Give me a reason to do it, and I swear I will."

Black stopped dead. It would have been impossible to say which face showed more hatred.

Harry stood there, paralyzed, not knowing what to do or whom to believe. He glanced around at Ron and Hermione. Ron looked just as confused as he did, still fighting to keep hold on the struggling Scabbers. Hermione, however, took an uncertain step toward Snape and said, in a very breathless voice, "Professor Snape — it wouldn't hurt to hear what they've got to say, w-would it?"

“Miss Granger, you are already facing suspension from this school,” Snape spat. “You, Potter, and Weasley are out-of-bounds, in the company of a convicted murderer and a werewolf. For once in your life, hold your tongue.”

“But if — if there was a mistake —”

“KEEP QUIET, YOU STUPID GIRL!” Snape shouted, looking suddenly quite deranged. “DON’T TALK ABOUT WHAT YOU DON’T UNDERSTAND!” A few sparks shot out of the end of his wand, which was still pointed at Black’s face. Hermione fell silent.

“Vengeance is very sweet,” Snape breathed at Black. “How I hoped I would be the one to catch you…”

“The joke’s on you again, Severus,” Black snarled. “As long as this boy brings his rat up to the castle” — he jerked his head at Ron — “I’ll come quietly…”

“Up to the castle?” said Snape silkily. “I don’t think we need to go that far. All I have to do is call the Dementors once we get out of the Willow. They’ll be very pleased to see you, Black…pleased enough to give you a little kiss, I daresay…I —”

What little color there was in Black’s face left it.

“You — you’ve got to hear me out,” he croaked. “The rat — look at the rat —”

But there was a mad glint in Snape’s eyes that Harry had never seen before. He seemed beyond reason.

“Come on, all of you,” he said. He clicked his fingers, and the ends of the cords that bound Lupin flew to his hands. “I’ll drag the werewolf. Perhaps the Dementors will have a kiss for him too —”

Before he knew what he was doing, Harry had crossed the room in three strides and blocked the door.

“Get out of the way, Potter, you’re in enough trouble already,” snarled Snape. “If I hadn’t been here to save your skin —”

“Professor Lupin could have killed me about a hundred times this year,” Harry said. “I’ve been alone with him loads of times, having defense lessons against the Dementors. If he was helping Black, why didn’t he just finish me off then?”

“Don’t ask me to fathom the way a werewolf’s mind works,” hissed Snape. “Get out of the way, Potter.”

“YOU’RE PATHETIC!” Harry yelled. “JUST BECAUSE THEY MADE A FOOL OF YOU AT SCHOOL YOU WON’T EVEN LISTEN —”

"SILENCE! I WILL NOT BE SPOKEN TO LIKE THAT!" Snape shrieked, looking madder than ever. "Like father, like son, Potter! I have just saved your neck; you should be thanking me on bended knee! You would have been well served if he'd killed you! You'd have died like your father, too arrogant to believe you might be mistaken in Black — now get out of the way, or I will make you. GET OUT OF THE WAY, POTTER!"

Harry made up his mind in a split second. Before Snape could take even one step toward him, he had raised his wand.

"*Expelliarmus!*" he yelled — except that his wasn't the only voice that shouted. There was a blast that made the door rattle on its hinges; Snape was lifted off his feet and slammed into the wall, then slid down it to the floor, a trickle of blood oozing from under his hair. He had been knocked out.

Harry looked around. Both Ron and Hermione had tried to disarm Snape at exactly the same moment. Snape's wand soared in a high arc and landed on the bed next to Crookshanks.

"You shouldn't have done that," said Black, looking at Harry. "You should have left him to me…"

Harry avoided Black's eyes. He wasn't sure, even now, that he'd done the right thing.

"We attacked a teacher…We attacked a teacher…" Hermione whimpered, staring at the lifeless Snape with frightened eyes. "Oh, we're going to be in so much trouble —"

Lupin was struggling against his bonds. Black bent down quickly and untied him. Lupin straightened up, rubbing his arms where the ropes had cut into them.

"Thank you, Harry," he said.

"I'm still not saying I believe you," he told Lupin.

"Then it's time we offered you some proof," said Lupin. "You, boy — give me Peter, please. Now."

Ron clutched Scabbers closer to his chest.

"Come off it," he said weakly. "Are you trying to say he broke out of Azkaban just to get his hands on Scabbers? I mean…" He looked up at Harry and Hermione for support, "Okay, say Pettigrew could turn into a rat — there are millions of rats — how's he supposed to know which one he is after if he was locked up in Azkaban?"

"You know, Sirius, that's a fair question," said Lupin, turning to Black and frowning slightly.

"How did you find out where he was?"

Black put one of his claw-like hands inside his robes and took out a crumpled piece of paper, which he smoothed flat and held out to show the others.

It was the photograph of Ron and his family that had appeared in the *Daily Prophet* the previous summer, and there, on Ron's shoulder, was Scabbers.

"How did you get this?" Lupin asked Black, thunderstruck.

"Fudge," said Black. "When he came to inspect Azkaban last year, he gave me his paper. And there was Peter, on the front page on this boy's shoulder…I knew him at once…how many times had I seen him transform? And the caption said the boy would be going back to Hogwarts…to where Harry was…"

"My God," said Lupin softly, staring from Scabbers to the picture in the paper and back again. "His front paw…"

"What about it?" said Ron defiantly.

"He's got a toe missing," said Black.

"Of course," Lupin breathed. "So simple…so brilliant…he cut it off himself?"

"Just before he transformed," said Black. "When I cornered him, he yelled for the whole street to hear that I'd betrayed Lily and James. Then, before I could curse him, he blew apart the street with the wand behind his back, killed everyone within twenty feet of himself — and sped down into the sewer with the other rats…"

"Didn't you ever hear, Ron?" said Lupin. "The biggest bit of Peter they found was his finger."

"Look, Scabbers probably had a fight with another rat or something! He's been in my family for ages, right —"

"Twelve years, in fact," said Lupin. "Didn't you ever wonder why he was living so long?"

"We — we've been taking good care of him!" said Ron.

"Not looking too good at the moment, though, is he?" said Lupin. "I'd guess he's been losing weight ever since he heard Sirius was on the loose again…"

"He's been scared of that mad cat!" said Ron, nodding toward Crookshanks, who was still purring on the bed.

But that wasn't right, Harry thought suddenly…Scabbers had been looking ill before he met Crookshanks…ever since Ron's return from Egypt…since the time when Black had escaped…

"This cat isn't mad," said Black hoarsely. He reached out a bony hand and stroked Crookshanks's fluffy head. "He's the most intelligent of his kind I've ever met. He recognized Peter for what he was right away. And when he met me, he knew I was no dog. It was a while before he trusted me…Finally, I managed to communicate to him what I was after, and he's been helping me…"

“What do you mean?” breathed Hermione.

“He tried to bring Peter to me, but couldn’t…so he stole the passwords into Gryffindor Tower for me…As I understand it, he took them from a boy’s bedside table…”

Harry’s brain seemed to be sagging under the weight of what he was hearing. It was absurd…and yet…

“But Peter got wind of what was going on and ran for it.” croaked Black. “This cat — Crookshanks, did you call him? — told me Peter had left blood on the sheets…I supposed he bit himself…Well, faking his own death had worked once.”

These words jolted Harry to his senses.

“And why did he fake his death?” he said furiously. “Because he knew you were about to kill him like you killed my parents!”

“No,” said Lupin, “Harry—”

“And now you’ve come to finish him off!”

“Yes, I have,” said Black, with an evil look at Scabbers.

“Then I should’ve let Snape take you!” Harry shouted.

“Harry,” said Lupin hurriedly, “don’t you see? All this time we’ve thought Sirius betrayed your parents, and Peter tracked him down — but it was the other way around, don’t you see? Peter betrayed your mother and father — Sirius tracked Peter down —”

“THAT’S NOT TRUE!” Harry yelled. “HE WAS THEIR SECRET-KEEPER! HE SAID SO BEFORE YOU TURNED UP. HE SAID HE KILLED THEM!”

He was pointing at Black, who shook his head slowly; the sunken eyes were suddenly over bright.

“Harry…I as good as killed them,” he croaked. “I persuaded Lily and James to change to Peter at the last moment, persuaded them to use him as Secret-Keeper instead of me…I’m to blame, I know it…The night they died, I’d arranged to check on Peter, make sure he was still safe, but when I arrived at his hiding place, he’d gone. Yet there was no sign of a struggle. It didn’t feel right. I was scared. I set out for your parents’ house straight away. And when I saw their house, destroyed, and their bodies…I realized what Peter must’ve done…what I’d done…”

His voice broke. He turned away.

“Enough of this,” said Lupin, and there was a steely note in his voice Harry had never heard before. “There’s one certain way to prove what really happened. Ron, give me that rat.”

“What are you going to do with him if I give him to you?” Ron asked Lupin tensely.

“Force him to show himself,” said Lupin. “If he really is a rat, it won’t hurt him.”

Ron hesitated. Then at long last, he held out Scabbers and Lupin took him. Scabbers began to squeak without stopping, twisting and turning, his tiny black eyes bulging in his head. “Ready, Sirius?” said Lupin.

Black had already retrieved Snape’s wand from the bed. He approached Lupin and the struggling rat, and his wet eyes suddenly seemed to be burning in his face.

“Together?” he said quietly.

“I think so”, said Lupin, holding Scabbers tightly in one hand and his wand in the other. “On the count of three. One — two — THREE!”

A flash of blue-white light erupted from both wands; for a moment, Scabbers was frozen in midair, his small gray form twisting madly — Ron yelled — the rat fell and hit the floor. There was another blinding flash of light and then —

It was like watching a speeded-up film of a growing tree. A head was shooting upward from the ground; limbs were sprouting; a moment later, a man was standing where Scabbers had been, cringing and wringing his hands. Crookshanks was spitting and snarling on the bed; the hair on his back was standing up.

He was a very short man, hardly taller than Harry and Hermione. His thin, colorless hair was unkempt and there was a large bald patch on top. He had the shrunken appearance of a plump man who has lost a lot of weight in a short time. His skin looked grubby, almost like Scabbers’s fur, and something of the rat lingered around his pointed nose and his very small, watery eyes. He looked around at them all, his breathing fast and shallow. Harry saw his eyes dart to the door and back again.

“Well, hello, Peter,” said Lupin pleasantly, as though rats frequently erupted into old school friends around him. “Long time, no see.”

“S—Sirius…R—Remus…” Even Pettigrew’s voice was squeaky. Again, his eyes darted toward the door. “My friends…my old friends…”

Black’s wand arm rose, but Lupin seized him around the wrist, gave him a warning took, then turned again to Pettigrew, his voice light and casual.

“We’ve been having a little chat, Peter, about what happened the night Lily and James died. You might have missed the finer points while you were squeaking around down there on the bed —”

“Remus,” gasped Pettigrew, and Harry could see beads of sweat breaking out over his pasty face, “you don’t believe him, do you…? He tried to kill me, Remus…”

“So we’ve heard,” said Lupin, more coldly. “I’d like to clear up one or two little matters with you, Peter, if you’ll be so —”

“He’s come to try and kill me again!” Pettigrew squeaked suddenly, pointing at Black, and Harry saw that he used his middle finger, because his index was missing. “He killed Lily and James and now he’s going to kill me too…You’ve got to help me, Remus…”

Black’s face looked more skull-like than ever as he stared at Pettigrew with his fathomless eyes.

“No one’s going to try and kill you until we’ve sorted a few things out,” said Lupin.

“Sorted things out?” squealed Pettigrew, looking wildly about him once more, eyes taking in the boarded windows and, again, the only door. “I knew he’d come after me! I knew he’d be back for me! I’ve been waiting for this for twelve years!”

“You knew Sirius was going to break out of Azkaban?” said Lupin, his brow furrowed. “When nobody has ever done it before?”

“He’s got dark powers the rest of us can only dream of!” Pettigrew shouted shrilly. “How else did he get out of there? I suppose He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named taught him a few tricks!”

Black started to laugh, a horrible, mirthless laugh that filled the whole room.

“Voldemort, teach me tricks?” he said.

Pettigrew flinched as though Black had brandished a whip at him.

“What, scared to hear your old master’s name?” said Black. “I don’t blame you, Peter. His lot aren’t very happy with you, are they?”

“Don’t know what you mean, Sirius —” muttered Pettigrew, his breathing faster than ever. His whole face was shining with sweat now.

“You haven’t been hiding from me for twelve years,” said Black. “You’ve been hiding from Voldemort’s old supporters. I heard things in Azkaban, Peter…They all think you’re dead, or you’d have to answer to them…I’ve heard them screaming all sorts of things in their sleep. Sounds like they think the double-crosser double-crossed them. Voldemort went to the Potters’ on your information…and Voldemort met his downfall there. And not all Voldemort’s supporters ended up in Azkaban, did they? There are still plenty out here, biding their time, pretending they’ve seen the error of their ways. If they ever got wind that you were still alive, Peter —”

“Don’t know…what you’re talking about…” said Pettigrew again, more shrilly than ever. He wiped his face on his sleeve and looked up at Lupin. “You don’t believe this — this madness, Remus —”

“I must admit, Peter, I have difficulty in understanding why an innocent man would want to spend twelve years as a rat,” said Lupin evenly.

“Innocent, but scared!” squealed Pettigrew. “If Voldemort’s supporters were after me, it was because I put one of their best men in Azkaban — the spy, Sirius Black!”

Black’s face contorted.

“How dare you,” he growled, sounding suddenly like the bearsized dog he had been. “I, a spy for Voldemort? When did I ever sneak around people who were stronger and more powerful than myself? But you, Peter — I’ll never understand why I didn’t see you were the spy from the start. You always liked big friends who’d look after you, didn’t you? It used to be us…me and Remus…and James…”

Pettigrew wiped his face again; he was almost panting for breath.

“Me, a spy…must be out of your mind…never…don’t know how you can say such a —”

“Lily and James only made you Secret-Keeper because I suggested it,” Black hissed, so venomously that Pettigrew took a step backward. “I thought it was the perfect plan…a bluff…Voldemort would be sure to come after me, would never dream they’d use a weak, talentless thing like you…It must have been the finest moment of your miserable life, telling Voldemort you could hand him the Potters.”

Pettigrew was muttering distractedly; Harry caught words like “far-fetched” and “lunacy,” but he couldn’t help paying more attention to the ashen color of Pettigrew’s face and the way his eyes continued to dart toward the windows and door.

“Professor Lupin?” said Hermione timidly. “Can — can I say something?”

“Certainly, Hermione,” said Lupin courteously.

“Well — Scabbers — I mean, this — this man — he’s been sleeping in Harry’s dormitory for three years. If he’s working for You-Know-Who, how come he never tried to hurt Harry before now?”

“There!” said Pettigrew shrilly, pointing at Ron with his maimed hand. “Thank you! You see, Remus? I have never hurt a hair of Harry’s head! Why should I?”

“I’ll tell you why,” said Black. “Because you never did anything for anyone unless you could see what was in it for you. Voldemort’s been in hiding for fifteen years, they say he’s half dead. You weren’t about to commit murder right under Albus Dumbledore’s nose, for a wreck of a wizard who’d lost all of his power, were you? You’d want to be quite sure he was the biggest bully in the playground before you went back to him, wouldn’t you? Why else did you find a wizard family to

take you in? Keeping an ear out for news, weren't you, Peter? Just in case your old protector regained strength, and it was safe to rejoin him…"

Pettigrew opened his mouth and closed it several times. He seemed to have lost the ability to talk.

"Er — Mr. Black — Sirius?" said Hermione.

Black jumped at being addressed like this and stared at Hermione as though he had never seen anything quite like her.

"If you don't mind me asking, how — how did you get out of Azkaban, if you didn't use Dark Magic?"

"Thank you!" gasped Pettigrew, nodding frantically at her. "Exactly! Precisely what I —"

But Lupin silenced him with a look. Black was frowning slightly at Hermione, but not as though he were annoyed with her. He seemed to be pondering his answer.

"I don't know how I did it," he said slowly. "I think the only reason I never lost my mind is that I knew I was innocent. That wasn't a happy thought, so the Dementors couldn't suck it out of me…but it kept me sane and knowing who I am…helped me keep my powers…so when it all became…too much…I could transform in my cell…become a dog. Dementors can't see, you know…" He swallowed. "They feel their way toward people by feeding off their emotions…They could tell that my feelings were less — less human, less complex when I was a dog…but they thought, of course, that I was losing my mind like everyone else in there, so it didn't trouble them. But I was weak, very weak, and I had no hope of driving them away from me without a wand…

"But then I saw Peter in that picture…I realized he was at Hogwarts with Harry…perfectly positioned to act, if one hint reached his ears that the Dark Side was gathering strength again…"

Pettigrew was shaking his head, mouthing noiselessly, but staring all the while at Black as though hypnotized.

"…ready to strike at the moment he could be sure of allies…and to deliver the last Potter to them. If he gave them Harry, who'd dare say he'd betrayed Lord Voldemort? He'd be welcomed back with honors…

"So you see, I had to do something. I was the only one who knew Peter was still alive…"

Harry remembered what Mr. Weasley had told Mrs. Wealsey. "The guards say he's been talking in his sleep…always the same words…'He's at Hogwarts.'"

"It was as if someone had lit a fire In my head, and the Dementors couldn't destroy it…It wasn't a happy feeling…it was an obsession…but it gave me strength, it cleared my mind. So, one night

when they opened my door to bring food, I slipped past them as a dog…It's so much harder for them to sense animal emotions that they were confused…I was thin, very thin…thin enough to slip through the bars…I swam as a dog back to the mainland…I journeyed north and slipped into the Hogwarts grounds as a dog. I've been living in the forest ever since, except when I came to watch the Quidditch, of course. You fly as well as your father did, Harry…"

He looked at Harry, who did not look away.

"Believe me," croaked Black. "Believe me, Harry. I never betrayed James and Lily. I would have died before I betrayed them."

And at long last, Harry believed him. Throat too tight to speak, he nodded.

"No!"

Pettigrew had fallen to his knees as though Harry's nod had been his own death sentence. He shuffled forward on his knees, groveling, his hands clasped in front of him as though praying.

"Sirius — it's me…it's Peter…your friend…you wouldn't —"

Black kicked out and Pettigrew recoiled.

"There's enough filth on my robes without you touching them," said Black.

"Remus!" Pettigrew squeaked, turning to Lupin instead, writhing imploringly in front of him. "You don't believe this — wouldn't Sirius have told you they'd changed the plan?"

"Not if he thought I was the spy, Peter," said Lupin. "I assume that's why you didn't tell me, Sirius?" he said casually over Pettigrew's head.

"Forgive me, Remus," said Black.

"Not at all, Padfoot, old friend," said Lupin, who was now rolling up his sleeves. "And will you, in turn, forgive me for believing you were the spy?"

"Of course," said Black, and the ghost of a grin flitted across his gaunt face. He, too, began rolling up his sleeves. "Shall we kill him together?"

"Yes, I think so," said Lupin grimly.

"You wouldn't…you won't…" gasped Pettigrew. And he scrambled around to Ron.

"Ron…haven't I been a good friend…a good pet? You won't let them kill me, Ron, will you…you're on my side, aren't you?"

But Ron was staring at Pettigrew with the utmost revulsion.

"I let you sleep in my bed!" he said.

"Kind boy…kind master…" Pettigrew crawled toward Ron "You won't let them do it…I was your rat…I was a good pet…"

"If you made a better rat than a human, it's not much to boast about, Peter," said Black harshly.

Ron, going still paler with pain, wrenched his broken leg out of Pettigrew's reach. Pettigrew turned on his knees, staggered forward, and seized the hem of Hermione's robes.

"Sweet girl…clever girl…you — you won't let them…Help me…"

Hermione pulled her robes out of Pettigrew's clutching hands and backed away against the wall, looking horrified.

Pettigrew knelt, trembling uncontrollably, and turned his head slowly toward Harry.

"Harry…Harry…you look just like your father…just like him…"

"HOW DARE YOU SPEAK TO HARRY?" roared Black. "HOW DARE YOU FACE HIM? HOW DARE YOU TALK ABOUT JAMES IN FRONT OF HIM?"

"Harry," whispered Pettigrew, shuffling toward him, hands outstretched. "Harry, James wouldn't have wanted me killed…James would have understood, Harry…he would have shown me mercy…"

Both Black and Lupin strode forward, seized Pettigrew's shoulders, and threw him backward onto the floor. He sat there, twitching with terror, staring up at them.

"You sold Lily and James to Voldemort," said Black, who was shaking too. "Do you deny it?"

Pettigrew burst into tears. It was horrible to watch, like an oversized, balding baby, cowering on the floor.

"Sirius, Sirius, what could I have done? The Dark Lord…you have no idea…he has weapons you can't imagine…I was scared, Sirius, I was never brave like you and Remus and James. I never meant it to happen…He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named forced me —"

"DON'T LIE!" bellowed Black. "YOU'D BEEN PASSING INFORMATION TO HIM FOR A YEAR BEFORE LILY AND JAMES DIED! YOU WERE HIS SPY!"

"He — he was taking over everywhere!" gasped Pettigrew. "Wh-what was there to be gained by refusing him?"

"What was there to be gained by fighting the most evil wizard who has ever existed?" said Black, with a terrible fury in his face. "Only innocent lives, Peter!"

"You don't understand!" whined Pettigrew. "He would have killed me, Sirius!"

"THEN YOU SHOULD HAVE DIED!" roared Black. "DIED RATHER THAN BETRAY YOUR FRIENDS, AS WE WOULD HAVE DONE FOR YOU!"

Black and Lupin stood shoulder to shoulder, wands raised.

“You should have realized,” said Lupin quietly, “if Voldemort didn’t kill you, we would. Good-bye, Peter.”

Hermione covered her face with her hands and turned to the wall.

“NO!” Harry yelled. He ran forward, placing himself in front Pettigrew, facing the wands. “You can’t kill him,” he said breathlessly. “You can’t.”

Black and Lupin both looked staggered.

“Harry, this piece of vermin is the reason you have no parents,” Black snarled. “This cringing bit of filth would have seen you die too, without turning a hair. You heard him. His own stinking skin meant more to him than your whole family.”

“I know,” Harry panted. “We’ll take him up to the castle. We’ll hand him over to the Dementors…He can go to Azkaban…but don’t kill him.”

“Harry!” gasped Pettigrew, and he flung his arms around Harry’s knees. “You — thank you — it’s more than I deserve — thank you —”

“Get off me,” Harry spat, throwing Pettigrew’s hands off him in disgust. “I’m not doing this for you. I’m doing it because — I don’t reckon my dad would’ve wanted them to become killers — just for you.”

No one moved or made a sound except Pettigrew, whose breath was coming in wheezes as he clutched his chest. Black and Lupin were looking at each other. Then, with one movement, they lowered their wands.

“You’re the only person who has the right to decide, Harry,” said Black. “But think…think what he did…”

“He can go to Azkaban,” Harry repeated. “If anyone deserves that place, he does…”

Pettigrew was still wheezing behind him.

“Very well,” said Lupin. “Stand aside, Harry.”

Harry hesitated.

“I’m going to tie him up,” said Lupin. “That’s all, I swear.”

Harry stepped out of the way. Thin cords shot from Lupin’s wand this time, and next moment, Pettigrew was wriggling on the floor, bound and gagged.

“But if you transform, Peter,” growled Black, his own wand pointing at Pettigrew too, “we will kill you. You agree, Harry?”

Harry looked down at the pitiful figure on the floor and nodded so that Pettigrew could see him.

"Right," said Lupin, suddenly businesslike. "Ron, I can't mend bones nearly as well as Madam Pomfrey, so I think it's best if we just strap your leg up until we can get you to the hospital wing."

He hurried over to Ron, bent down, tapped Ron's leg with his wand, and muttered, "*Ferula*." Bandages spun up Ron's leg, strapping it tightly to a splint. Lupin helped him to his feet; Ron put his weight gingerly on the leg and didn't wince.

"That's better," he said. "Thanks."

"What about Professor Snape?" said Hermione in a small voice, looking down at Snape's prone figure.

"There's nothing seriously wrong with him," said Lupin, bending over Snape and checking his pulse. "You were just a little — overenthusiastic. Still out cold. Er — perhaps it will be best if we don't revive him until we're safety back in the castle. We can take him like this…"

He muttered, "*Mobilicorpus*." As though invisible strings were tied to Snape's wrists, neck, and knees, he was pulled into a standing position, head still lolling unpleasantly, like a grotesque puppet. He hung a few inches above the ground, his limp feet dangling. Lupin picked up the Invisibility Cloak and tucked it safely into his pocket.

"And two of us should be chained to this," said Black, nudging Pettigrew with his toe. "Just to make sure."

"I'll do it," said Lupin.

"And me," said Ron savagely, limping forward.

Black conjured heavy manacles from thin air; soon Pettigrew was upright again, left arm chained to Lupin's right, right arm to Ron's left. Ron's face was set. He seemed to have taken Scabbers's true identity as a personal insult. Crookshanks leapt lightly off the bed and led the way out of the room, his bottlebrush tail held jauntily high.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE DEMENTOR'S KISS

Harry had never been part of a stranger group. Crookshanks led the way down the stairs; Lupin, Pettigrew, and Ron went next, looking like entrants in a six-legged race. Next came Professor Snape, drifting creepily along, his toes hitting each stair as they descended, held up by his own wand, which was being pointed at him by Sirius. Harry and Hermione brought up the rear.

Getting back into the tunnel was difficult. Lupin, Pettigrew, and Ron had to turn sideways to manage it; Lupin still had Pettigrew covered with his wand. Harry could see them edging awkwardly along the tunnel in single file. Crookshanks was still in the lead. Harry went right after Black, who was still making Snape drift along ahead of them; he kept bumping his lolling head on the low ceiling. Harry had the impression Black was making no effort to prevent this.

"You know what this means?" Black said abruptly to Harry as they made their slow progress along the tunnel. "Turning Pettigrew in?"

"You're free," said Harry.

"Yes…" said Black. "But I'm also — I don't know if anyone ever told you — I'm your godfather."

"Yeah, I knew that," said Harry.

"Well…your parents appointed me your guardian," said Black stiffly. "If anything happened to them…"

Harry waited. Did Black mean what he thought he meant?

"I'll understand, of course, if you want to stay with your aunt and uncle," said Black. "But…well…think about it. Once my name's cleared…if you wanted a…a different home…"

Some sort of explosion took place in the pit of Harry's stomach.

"What — live with you?" he said, accidentally cracking his head on a bit of rock protruding from the ceiling. "Leave the Dursleys?"

"Of course, I thought you wouldn't want to," said Black quickly. "I understand, I just thought I'd —"

"Are you insane?" said Harry, his voice easily as croaky as Black's. "Of course I want to leave the Dursleys! Have you got a house? When can I move in?"

Black turned right around to look at him; Snape's head was scraping the ceiling but Black didn't seem to care.

"You want to?" he said. "You mean it?"

"Yeah, I mean it!" said Harry.

Black's gaunt face broke into the first true smile Harry had seen upon it. The difference it made was startling, as though a person ten years younger were shining through the starved mask; for a moment, he was recognizable as the man who had laughed at Harry's parents' wedding.

They did not speak again until they had reached the end of the tunnel. Crookshanks darted up first; he had evidently pressed his paw to the knot on the trunk, because Lupin, Pettigrew, and Ron clambered upward without any sound of savaging branches.

Black saw Snape up through the hole, then stood back for Harry and Hermione to pass. At last, all of them were out.

The grounds were very dark now; the only light came from the distant windows of the castle. Without a word, they set off. Pettigrew was still wheezing and occasionally whimpering. Harry's mind was buzzing. He was going to leave the Dursleys. He was going to live with Sirius Black, his parents' best friend…He felt dazed…What would happen when he told the Dursleys he was going to live with the convict they'd seen on television…!

"One wrong move, Peter," said Lupin threateningly ahead. His wand was still pointed sideways at Pettigrew's chest.

Silently they tramped through the grounds, the castle lights growing slowly larger. Snape was still drifting weirdly ahead of Black, his chin bumping on his chest. And then -

A cloud shifted. There were suddenly dim shadows on the ground. Their party was bathed in moonlight.

Snape collided with Lupin, Pettigrew, and Ron, who had stopped abruptly. Black froze. He flung out one arm to make Harry and Hermione stop.

Harry could see Lupin's silhouette. He had gone rigid. Then his limbs began to shake.

"Oh, my —" Hermione gasped. "He didn't take his potion tonight! He's not safe!"

"Run," Black whispered. "Run. Now."

But Harry couldn't run. Ron was chained to Pettigrew and Lupin. He leapt forward but Black caught him around the chest and threw him back.

"Leave it to me — RUN!"

There was a terrible snarling noise. Lupin's head was lengthening. So was his body. His shoulders were hunching. Hair was sprouting visibly on his face and hands, which were curling into clawed paws. Crookshanks's hair was on end again; he was backing away —

As the werewolf reared, snapping its long jaws, Sirius disappeared from Harry's side. He had transformed. The enormous, bearlike dog bounded forward. As the werewolf wrenched itself free of

the manacle binding it, the dog seized it about the neck and pulled it backward, away from Ron and Pettigrew. They were locked, jaw to jaw, claws ripping at each other.

Harry stood, transfixed by the sight, too intent upon the battle to notice anything else. It was Hermione's scream that alerted him —

Pettigrew had dived for Lupin's dropped wand. Ron, unsteady on his bandaged leg, fell. There was a bang, a burst of light — and Ron lay motionless on the ground. Another bang — Crookshanks flew into the air and back to the earth in a heap.

"Expelliarmus." Harry yelled, pointing his own wand at Pettigrew; Lupin's wand flew high into the air and out of sight. "Stay where you are!" Harry shouted, running forward.

Too late. Pettigrew had transformed. Harry saw his bald tail whip through the manacle on Ron's outstretched arm and heard a scurrying through the grass.

There was a howl and a rumbling growl; Harry turned to see the werewolf taking flight; it was galloping into the forest —

"Sirius, he's gone, Pettigrew transformed!" Harry yelled.

Black was bleeding; there were gashes across his muzzle and back, but at Harry's words he scrambled up again, and in an instant, the sound of his paws faded to silence as he pounded away across the grounds.

Harry and Hermione dashed over to Ron.

"What did he do to him?" Hermione whispered. Ron's eyes were only half-closed, his mouth hung open; he was definitely alive, they could hear him breathing, but he didn't seem to recognize them.

"I don't know…"

Harry looked desperately around. Black and Lupin both gone…they had no one but Snape for company, still hanging, unconscious, in midair.

"We'd better get them up to the castle and tell someone," said Harry, pushing his hair out of his eyes, trying to think straight. "Come —"

But then, from beyond the range of their vision, they heard a yelping, a whining: a dog in pain…

"Sirius," Harry muttered, staring into the darkness.

He had a moment's indecision, but there was nothing they could do for Ron at the moment, and by the sound of it, Black was in trouble —

Harry set off at a run, Hermione right behind him. The yelping seemed to be coming from the ground near the edge of the lake. They pelted toward it, and Harry, running flat out, felt the cold without realizing what it must mean -

The yelping stopped abruptly. As they reached the lakeshore, they saw why — Sirius had turned back into a man. He was crouched on all fours, his hands over his head.

"Nooo," he moaned. "Nooo…please…"

And then Harry saw them. Dementors, at least a hundred of them, gliding in a black mass around the lake toward them. He spun around, the familiar, icy cold penetrating his insides, fog starting to obscure his vision; more were appearing out of the darkness on every side; they were encircling them…

"Hermione, think of something happy!" Harry yelled, raising his wand, blinking furiously to try and clear his vision, shaking his head to rid it of the faint screaming that had started inside it —

I'm going to live with my godfather. I'm leaving the Dursleys.

He forced himself to think of Black, and only Black, and began to chant: "*Expecto patronum! Expecto patronum!*"

Black gave a shudder, rolled over, and lay motionless on the ground, pale as death.

He'll be all right. I'm going to go and live with him.

"*Expecto patronum!* Hermione, help me! *Expecto patronum!*"

"*Expecto* —" Hermione whispered, "*expecto — expecto* —"

But she couldn't do it. The Dementors were closing in, barely ten feet from them. They formed a solid wall around Harry and Hermione, and were getting closer…

"*EXPECTO PATRONUM!*" Harry yelled, trying to blot the screaming from his ears. "*EXPECTO PATRONUM!*"

A thin wisp of silver escaped his wand and hovered like mist before him. At the same moment, Harry felt Hermione collapse next to him. He was alone…completely alone…

"*Expecto — expecto patronum* —"

Harry felt his knees hit the cold grass. Fog was clouding his eyes. With a huge effort, he fought to remember — Sirius was innocent — innocent — We'll be okay — I'm going to live with him —

"*Expecto patronum!*" he gasped.

By the feeble light of his formless Patronus, he saw a Dementor halt, very close to him. It couldn't walk through the cloud of silver mist Harry had conjured. A dead, slimy hand slid out from under the cloak. It made a gesture as though to sweep the Patronus aside.

“No — no —” Harry gasped. “He’s innocent…expecto expecto patronum —”

He could feet them watching him, hear their rattling breath like an evil wind around him. The nearest Dementor seemed to be considering him. Then it raised both its rotting hands — and lowered its hood.

Where there should have been eyes, there was only thin, gray scabbed skin, stretched blankly over empty sockets. But there was a mouth…a gaping, shapeless hole, sucking the air with the sound of a death rattle.

A paralyzing terror filled Harry so that he couldn’t move or speak. His Patronus flickered and died.

White fog was blinding him. He had to fight…expecto patronum…he couldn’t see…and in the distance, he heard the familiar screaming…expecto patronum…he groped in the mist for Sirius, and found his arm…they weren’t going to take him…

But a pair of strong, clammy hands suddenly attached themselves around Harry’s neck. They were forcing his face upward…He could feel its breath…It was going to get rid of him first…He could feel its putrid breath…His mother was screaming in his ears…She was going to be the last thing he ever heard —

And then, through the fog that was drowning him, he thought he saw a silvery light growing brighter and brighter…He felt himself fall forward onto the grass…Facedown, too weak to move, sick and shaking, Harry opened his eyes. The Dementor must have released him. The blinding light was illuminating the grass around him…The screaming had stopped, the cold was ebbing away…

Something was driving the Dementors back…It was circling around him and Black and Hermione…They were leaving…

The air was warm again…

With every ounce of strength he could muster, Harry raised his head a few inches and saw an animal amid the light, galloping away across the lake…Eyes blurred with sweat, Harry tried to make out what it was…It was as bright as a unicorn…Fighting to stay conscious, Harry watched it can’ter to a halt as it reached the opposite shore. For a moment, Harry saw, by its brightness, somebody welcoming it back…raising his hand to pat it…someone who looked strangely familiar…but it couldn’t be…

Harry didn’t understand. He couldn’t think anymore. He felt the last of his strength leave him, and his head hit the ground as he fainted.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

HERMIONE'S SECRET

"Shocking business…shocking…miracle none of them died…never heard the like…by thunder, it was lucky you were there, Snape…"

"Thank you, Minister."

"Order of Merlin, Second Class, I'd say. First Class, if I can wangle it!"

"Thank you very much indeed, Minister."

"Nasty cut you've got there…Black's work, I suppose?"

"As a matter of fact, it was Potter, Weasley, and Granger, Minister…"

"No!"

"Black had bewitched them, I saw it immediately. A Confundus Charm, to judge by their behavior. They seemed to think there was a possibility he was innocent. They weren't responsible for their actions. On the other hand, their interference might have permitted Black to escape…They obviously thought they were going to catch Black single-handed. They've got away with a great deal before now…I'm afraid it's given them a rather high opinion of themselves…and of course Potter has always been allowed an extraordinary amount of license by the headmaster —"

"Ah, well, Snape…Harry Potter, you know…we've all got a bit of a blind spot where he's concerned."

"And yet — is it good for him to be given so much special treatment? Personally, I try and treat him like any other student. And any other student would be suspended — at the very least — for leading his friends into such danger. Consider, Minister — against all school rules — after all the precautions put in place for his protection — out-of-bounds, at night, consorting with a werewolf and a murderer — and I have reason to believe he has been visiting Hogsmeade illegally too —"

"Well, well…we shall see, Snape, we shall see…The boy has undoubtedly been foolish…"

Harry lay listening with his eyes tight shut. He felt very groggy. The words he was hearing seemed to be traveling very slowly from his ears to his brain, so that it was difficult to understand…His limbs felt like lead; his eyelids too heavy to lift…He wanted to lie here, on this comfortable bed, forever…

"What amazes me most is the behavior of the Dementors…you've really no idea what made them retreat, Snape?"

"No, Minister…by the time I had come 'round they were heading back to their positions at the entrances…"

"Extraordinary. And yet Black, and Harry, and the girl —"

"All unconscious by the time I reached them. I bound and gagged Black, naturally, conjured stretchers, and brought them all straight back to the castle."

There was a pause. Harry's brain seemed to be moving a little faster, and as it did, a gnawing sensation grew in the pit of his stomach…

He opened his eyes.

Everything was slightly blurred. Somebody had removed his glasses. He was lying in the dark hospital wing. At the very end of the ward, he could make out Madam Pomfrey with her back to him, bending over a bed. Harry squinted. Ron's red hair was visible beneath Madam Pomfrey's arm.

Harry moved his head over on the pillow. In the bed to his right lay Hermione. Moonlight was falling across her bed. Her eyes were open too. She looked petrified, and when she saw that Harry was awake, pressed a finger to her lips, then pointed to the hospital wing door. It was ajar, and the voices of Cornelius Fudge and Snape were coming through it from the corridor outside.

Madam Pomfrey now came walking briskly up the dark ward to Harry's bed. He turned to took at her. She was carrying the largest block of chocolate he had ever seen in his life. It looked like a small boulder.

"Ah, you're awake!" she said briskly. She placed the chocolate on Harry's bedside table and began breaking it apart with a small hammer.

"How's Ron?" said Harry and Hermione together.

"He'll live," said Madam Pomfrey grimly. "As for you two, you'll be staying here until I'm satisfied you're — Potter, what do you think you're doing?"

Harry was sitting up, putting his glasses back on, and picking up his wand.

"I need to see the headmaster," he said.

"Potter," said Madam Pomfrey soothingly, "it's all right. They've got Black. He's locked away upstairs. The Dementors will be performing the kiss any moment now —"

"WHAT?"

Harry jumped up out of bed; Hermione had done the same. But his shout had been heard in the corridor outside; next second, Cornelius Fudge and Snape had entered the ward.

"Harry, Harry, what's this?" said Fudge, looking agitated. "You should be in bed — has he had any chocolate?" he asked Madam Pomfrey anxiously.

"Minister, listen!" Harry said. "Sirius Black's innocent! Peter Pettigrew faked his own death! We saw him tonight! You can't let the Dementors do that thing to Sirius, he's —"

But Fudge was shaking his head with a small smile on his face.

"Harry, Harry, you're very confused, you've been through a dreadful ordeal, lie back down, now, we've got everything under control…"

"YOU HAVEN'T!" Harry yelled. "YOU'VE GOT THE WRONG MAN!"

"Minister, listen, please," Hermione said; she had hurried to Harry's side and was gazing imploringly into Fudge's face. "I saw him too. It was Ron's rat, he's an Animagus, Pettigrew, I mean, and —"

"You see, Minister?" said Snape. "Confunded, both of them…Black's done a very good job on them…"

"WE'RE NOT CONFUNDED!" Harry roared.

"Minister! Professor!" said Madam Pomfrey angrily. "I must insist that you leave. Potter is my patient, and he should not be distressed!"

"I'm not distressed, I'm trying to tell them what happened!" Harry said furiously. "If they'd just listen —"

But Madam Pomfrey suddenly stuffed a large chunk of chocolate into Harry"s mouth; he choked, and she seized the opportunity to force him back onto the bed.

"Now, please, Minister, these children need care. Please leave."

The door opened again. It was Dumbledore. Harry swallowed his mouthful of chocolate with great difficulty and got up again.

"Professor Dumbledore, Sirius Black —"

"For heaven's sake!" said Madam Pomfrey hysterically. "Is this a hospital wing or not? Headmaster, I must insist —"

"My apologies, Poppy, but I need a word with Mr. Potter and Miss Granger," said Dumbledore calmly. "I have just been talking to Sirius Black —"

"I suppose he's told you the same fairy tale he's planted in Potter's mind?" spat Snape. "Something about a rat, and Pettigrew being alive —"

"That, indeed, is Black's story," said Dumbledore, surveying Snape closely through his half-moon spectacles.

"And does my evidence count for nothing?" snarled Snape. "Peter Pettigrew was not in the Shrieking Shack, nor did I see any sign of him on the grounds."

"That was because you were knocked out, Professor!" said Hermione earnestly. "You didn't arrive in time to hear."

"Miss Granger, HOLD YOUR TONGUE!"

"Now, Snape," said Fudge, startled, "the young lady is disturbed in her mind, we must make allowances —"

"I would like to speak to Harry and Hermione alone," said Dumbledore abruptly. "Cornelius, Severus, Poppy — please leave us."

"Headmaster!" sputtered Madam Pomfrey. "They need treatment, they need rest —"

"This cannot wait," said Dumbledore. "I must insist."

Madam Pomfrey pursed her lips and strode away into her office at the end of the ward, slamming the door behind her. Fudge consulted the large gold pocket watch dangling from his waistcoat.

"The Dementors should have arrived by now," he said. "I'll go and meet them. Dumbledore, I'll see you upstairs."

He crossed to the door and held it open for Snape, but Snape hadn't moved.

"You surely don't believe a word of Black's story?" Snape whispered, his eyes fixed on Dumbledore's face.

"I wish to speak to Harry and Hermione alone," Dumbledore repeated.

Snape took a step toward Dumbledore.

"Sirius Black showed he was capable of murder at the age of sixteen," he breathed. "You haven't forgotten that, Headmaster? You haven't forgotten that he once tried to kill me?"

"My memory is as good as it ever was, Severus," said Dumbledore quietly.

Snape turned on his heel and marched through the door Fudge was still holding. It closed behind them, and Dumbledore turned to Harry and Hermione. They both burst into speech at the same time.

"Professor, Black's telling the truth — we saw Pettigrew — he escaped when Professor Lupin turned into a werewolf —"

"— he's a rat —"

"— Pettigrew's front paw, I mean, finger, he cut it off —"

"— Pettigrew attacked Ron, it wasn't Sirius —"

But Dumbledore held up his hand to stem the flood of explanations.

"It is your turn to listen, and I beg you will not interrupt me, because there is very little time," he said quietly. "There is not a shred of proof to support Black's story, except your word — and the word of two thirteen-year-old wizards will not convince anybody. A street full of eyewitnesses swore

they saw Sirius murder Pettigrew. I myself gave evidence to the Ministry that Sirius had been the Potters' Secret-Keeper."

"Professor Lupin can tell you —" Harry said, unable to stop himself

"Professor Lupin is currently deep in the forest, unable to tell anyone anything. By the time he is human again, it will be too late, Sirius will be worse than dead. I might add that werewolves are so mistrusted by most of our kind that his support will count for very little and the fact that he and Sirius are old friends —"

"But —"

"Listen to me, Harry. It is too late, you understand me? You must see that Professor Snape's version of events is far more convincing than yours."

"He hates Sirius," Hermione said desperately. "All because of some stupid trick Sirius played on him —"

"Sirius has not acted like an innocent man. The attack on the Fat Lady — entering Gryffindor Tower with a knife — without Pettigrew, alive or dead, we have no chance of overturning Sirius's sentence."

"But you believe us."

"Yes, I do," said Dumbledore quietly. "But I have no power to make other men see the truth, or to overrule the Minister of Magic…"

Harry stared up into the grave face and felt as though the ground beneath him were falling sharply away. He had grown used to the idea that Dumbledore could solve anything. He had expected Dumbledore to pull some amazing solution out of the air. But no…their last hope was gone.

"What we need," said Dumbledore slowly, and his light blue eyes moved from Harry to Hermione, "is more time."

"But —" Hermione began. And then her eyes became very round. "OH!"

"Now, pay attention," said Dumbledore, speaking very low, and very clearly. "Sirius is locked in Professor Flitwick's office on the seventh floor. Thirteenth window from the right of the West Tower. If all goes well, you will be able to save more than one innocent life tonight. But remember this, both of you: you must not be seen. Miss Granger, you know the law — you know what is at stake…You — must — not — be —seen."

Harry didn't have a clue what was going on. Dumbledore had turned on his heel and looked back as he reached the door.

“I am going to lock you in. It is —” he consulted his watch, “five minutes to midnight. Miss Granger, three turns should do it. Good luck.”

“Good luck?” Harry repeated as the door closed behind Dumbledore. “Three turns? What’s he talking about? What are we supposed to do?”

But Hermione was fumbling with the neck of her robes, pulling from beneath them a very long, very fine gold chain.

“Harry, come here,” she said urgently. “Quick!”

Harry moved toward her, completely bewildered. She was holding the chain out. He saw a tiny, sparkling hourglass hanging from it.

“Here —”

She had thrown the chain around his neck too.

“Ready?” she said breathlessly.

“What are we doing?” Harry said, completely lost.

Hermione turned the hourglass over three times.

The dark ward dissolved. Harry had the sensation that he was flying very fast, backward. A blur of colors and shapes rushed past him, his ears were pounding, he tried to yell but couldn’t hear his own voice —

And then he felt solid ground beneath his feet, and everything came into focus again —

He was standing next to Hermione in the deserted entrance hall and a stream of golden sunlight was falling across the paved floor from the open front doors. He looked wildly around at Hermione, the chain of the hourglass cutting into his neck.

“Hermione, what —?”

“In here!” Hermione seized Harry’s arm and dragged him across the hall to the door of a broom closet; she opened it, pushed him inside among the buckets and mops, then slammed the door behind them.

“What — how — Hermione, what happened?”

“We’ve gone back in time,” Hermione whispered, lifting the chain off Harry’s neck in the darkness. “Three hours back…”

Harry found his own leg and gave it a very hard pinch. It hurt a lot, which seemed to rule out the possibility that he was having a very bizarre dream.

“But —”

“Shh! Listen! Someone’s coming! I think — I think it might be us!” Hermione had her ear pressed against the cupboard door.

“Footsteps across the hall…yes, I think it’s us going down to Hagrid’s!”

“Are you telling me,” Harry whispered, “that we’re here in this cupboard and we’re out there too?”

“Yes,” said Hermione, her ear still glued to the cupboard door. “I’m sure it’s us. It doesn’t sound like more than three people…and we’re walking slowly because we’re under the Invisibility Cloak—”

She broke off, still listening intently.

“We’ve gone down the front steps…”

Hermione sat down on an upturned bucket, looking desperately anxious, but Harry wanted a few questions answered.

“Where did you get that hourglass thing?”

“It’s called a Time-Turner,” Hermione whispered, “and I got it from Professor McGonagall on our first day back. I’ve been using it all year to get to all my lessons. Professor McGonagall made me swear I wouldn’t tell anyone. She had to write all sorts of letters to the Ministry of Magic so I could have one. She had to tell them that I was a model student, and that I’d never, ever use it for anything except my studies…I’ve been turning it back so I could do hours over again, that’s how I’ve been doing several lessons at once, see? But…

“Harry, I don’t understand what Dumbledore wants us to do. Why did he tell us to go back three hours? How’s that going to help Sirius?”

Harry stared at her shadowy face.

“There must be something that happened around now he wants us to change,” he said slowly. “What happened? We were walking down to Hagrid’s three hours ago…”

“This is three hours ago, and we are walking down to Hagrid’s,” said Hermione. “We just heard ourselves leaving…”

Harry frowned; he felt as though he were screwing up his whole brain in concentration.

“Dumbledore just said — just said we could save more than one innocent life…” And then it hit him. “Hermione, we’re going to save Buckbeak!”

“But — how will that help Sirius?”

“Dumbledore said — he just told us where the window is — the window of Flitwick’s office! Where they’ve got Sirius locked up! We’ve got to fly Buckbeak up to the window and rescue Sirius! Sirius can escape on Buckbeak — they can escape together!”

From what Harry could see of Hermione's face, she looked terrified.

"If we manage that without being seen, it'll be a miracle!"

"Well, we've got to try, haven't we?" said Harry. He stood up and pressed his ear against the door. "Doesn't sound like anyone's there…Come on, let's go."

Harry pushed open the closet door. The entrance hall was deserted. As quietly and quickly as they could, they darted out of the closet and down the stone steps. The shadows were already lengthening, the tops of the trees in the Forbidden Forest gilded once more with gold.

"If anyone's looking out of the window —" Hermione squeaked, looking up at the castle behind them.

"We'll run for it," said Harry determinedly. "Straight into the forest, all right? We'll have to hide behind a tree or something and keep a lookout —"

"Okay, but we'll go around by the greenhouses!' said Hermione breathlessly. "We need to keep out of sight of Hagrid's front door, or we'll see us! We must be nearly at Hagrid's by now!"

Still working out what she meant, Harry set off at a sprint, Hermione behind him. They tore across the vegetable gardens to the greenhouses, paused for a moment behind them, then set off again, fast as they could, skirting around the Whomping Willow, tearing toward the shelter of the forest…

Safe in the shadows of the trees, Harry turned around; seconds later, Hermione arrived beside him, panting.

"Right," she gasped. "We need to sneak over to Hagrid's…Keep out of sight, Harry…"

They made their way silently through the trees, keeping to the very edge of the forest. Then, as they glimpsed the front of Hagrid's house, they heard a knock upon his door. They moved quickly behind a wide oak trunk and peered out from either side. Hagrid had appeared in his doorway, shaking and white, looking around to see who had knocked. And Harry heard his own voice.

"It's us. We're wearing the Invisibility Cloak. Let us in and we can take it off."

"Yeh shouldn've come!" Hagrid whispered. He stood back, then shut the door quickly.

"This is the weirdest thing we've ever done," Harry said fervently.

"Let's move along a bit," Hermione whispered. "We need to get nearer to Buckbeak!"

They crept through the trees until they saw the nervous Hippogriff, tethered to the fence around Hagrid's pumpkin patch.

"Now?" Harry whispered.

"No!" said Hermione. "If we steal him now, those Committee people will think Hagrid set him free! We've got to wait until they've seen he's tied outside!"

"That's going to give us about sixty seconds," said Harry. This was starting to seem impossible.

At that moment, there was a crash of breaking china from inside Hagrid's cabin.

"That's Hagrid breaking the milk jug," Hermione whispered. "I'm going to find Scabbers in a moment —"

Sure enough, a few minutes later, they heard Hermione's shriek of surprise.

"Hermione," said Harry suddenly, "what if we — we just run in there and grab Pettigrew —"

"No!" said Hermione in a terrified whisper. "Don't you understand? We're breaking one of the most important wizarding laws! Nobody's supposed to change time, nobody! You heard Dumbledore, if we're seen —"

"We'd only be seen by ourselves and Hagrid!"

"Harry, what do you think you'd do if you saw yourself bursting into Hagrid's house?" said Hermione.

"I'd — I'd think I'd gone mad," said Harry, "or I'd think there was some Dark Magic going on —"

"Exactly! You wouldn't understand, you might even attack yourself! Don't you see? Professor McGonagall told me what awful things have happened when wizards have meddled with time…Loads of them ended up killing their past or future selves by mistake!"

"Okay!" said Harry. "It was just an idea, I just thought —"

But Hermione nudged him and pointed toward the castle. Harry moved his head a few inches to get a clear view of the distant front doors. Dumbledore, Fudge, the old Committee member, and Macnair the executioner were coming down the steps.

"We're about to come out!" Hermione breathed.

And sure enough, moments later, Hagrid's back door opened, and Harry saw himself, Ron, and Hermione walking out of it with Hagrid. It was, without a doubt, the strangest sensation of his life, standing behind the tree, and watching himself in the pumpkin patch.

"It's Okay, Beaky, it's okay…" Hagrid said to Buckbeak. Then he turned to Harry, Ron, and Hermione. "Go on. Get goin'."

"Hagrid, we can't —"

"We'll tell them what really happened —"

"They can't kill him —"

"Go! It's bad enough without you lot in trouble an' all!"

Harry watched the Hermione in the pumpkin patch throw the Invisibility Cloak over him and Ron.

"Go quick. Don' listen…"

There was a knock on Hagrid's front door. The execution party had arrived. Hagrid turned, around and headed back into his cabin, leaving the back door ajar. Harry watched the grass flatten in patches all around the cabin and heard three pairs of feet retreating. He, Ron, and Hermione had gone…but the Harry and Hermione hidden in the trees could now hear what was happening inside the cabin through the back door.

"Where is the beast?" came the cold voice of Macnair.

"Out — outside," Hagrid croaked.

Harry pulled his head out of sight as Macnair's face appeared at Hagrid's window, staring out at Buckbeak. Then they heard Fudge.

"We — er — have to read you the official notice of execution, Hagrid. I'll make it quick. And then you and Macnair need to sign it. Macnair, You're supposed to listen too, that's procedure--"

Macnair's face vanished from the window. It was now or never.

"Wait here," Harry whispered to Hermione. "I'll do it."

As Fudge's voice started again, Harry darted out from behind his tree, vaulted the fence into the pumpkin patch, and approached Buckbeak.

"It is the decision of the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures that the Hippogriff Buckbeak, hereafter called the condemned, shall he executed on the sixth of June at sundown—"

Careful not to blink, Harry stared up into Buckbeak's fierce orange eyes once more and bowed. Buckbeak sank to his scaly knees and then stood up again. Harry began to fumble with the knot of rope tying Buckbeak to the fence.

"…sentenced to execution by beheading, to be carried out by the Committee's appointed executioner, Walden Macnair…"

"Come on, Buckbeak," Harry murmured, "come on, we're going to help you. Quietly…quietly…"

"…as witnessed below. Hagrid, you sign here…"

Harry threw all his weight onto the rope, but Buckbeak had dug in his front feet.

"Well, let's get this over with," said the reedy voice of the Committee member from inside Hagrid's cabin. "Hagrid, perhaps it will be better if you stay inside —"

“No, I — I wan’ ter be with him…I don’ wan’ him ter be alone —”

Footsteps echoed from within the cabin.

“Buckbeak, move!” Harry hissed.

Harry tugged harder on the rope around Buckbeak’s neck. The Hippogriff began to walk, rustling its wings irritably. They were still ten feet away from the forest, in plain view of Hagrid’s back door.

“One moment, please, Macnair,” came Dumbledore’s voice. “You need to sign too.” The footsteps stopped. Harry heaved on the rope. Buckbeak snapped his beak and walked a little faster.

Hermione’s white face was sticking out from behind a tree.

“Harry, hurry!” she mouthed.

Harry could still hear Dumbledore’s voice talking from within the cabin. He gave the rope another wrench. Buckbeak broke into a grudging trot. They had reached the trees…

“Quick! Quick!” Hermione moaned, darting out from behind her tree, seizing the rope too and adding her weight to make Buckbeak move faster. Harry looked over his shoulder; they were now blocked from sight; they couldn’t see Hagrid’s garden at all.

“Stop!” he whispered to Hermione. “They might hear us.”

Hagrid’s back door had opened with a bang. Harry, Hermione, and Buckbeak stood quite still; even the Hippogriff seemed to be listening intently. Silence…then —

“Where is it?” said the reedy voice of the Committee member. “Where is the beast?”

“It was tied here!” said the executioner furiously. “I saw it! Just here!”

“How extraordinary,” said Dumbledore. There was a note of amusement in his voice.

“Beaky!” said Hagrid huskily.

There was a swishing noise, and the thud of an axe. The executioner seemed to have swung it into the fence in anger. And then came the howling, and this time they could hear Hagrid’s words through his sobs.

“Gone! Gone! Bless his little beak, he’s gone! Musta pulled himself free! Beaky, yeh clever boy!”

Buckbeak started to strain against the rope, trying to get back to Hagrid. Harry and Hermione tightened their grip and dug their heels into the forest floor to stop him.

“Someone untied him!” the executioner was snarling. “We should search the grounds, the forest.”

“Macnair, if Buckbeak has indeed been stolen, do you really think the thief will have led him away on foot?” said Dumbledore, still sounding amused. “Search the skies, if you will…Hagrid, I could do with a cup of tea. Or a large brandy.”

“O’ — o’ course, Professor,” said Hagrid, who sounded weak with happiness. “Come in, come in…”

Harry and Hermione listened closely. They heard footsteps, the soft cursing of the executioner, the snap of the door, and then silence once more.

“Now what?” whispered Harry, looking around.

“We’ll have to hide in here,” said Hermione, who looked very shaken. “We need to wait until they’ve gone back to the castle. Then we wait until it’s safe to fly Buckbeak up to Sirius’s window. He won’t be there for another couple of hours…Oh, this is going to be difficult…”

She looked nervously over her shoulder into the depths of the forest. The sun was setting now.

“We’re going to have to move,” said Harry, thinking hard. “We’ve got to be able to see the Whomping Willow, or we won’t know what’s going on.”

“Okay,” said Hermione, getting a firmer grip on Buckbeak’s rope. “But we’ve got to keep out of sight, Harry, remember…”

They moved around the edge of the forest, darkness falling thickly around them, until they were hidden behind a clump of trees through which they could make out the Willow.

“There’s Ron!” said Harry suddenly.

A dark figure was sprinting across the lawn and its shout echoed through the still night air.

“Get away from him — get away — Scabbers, come here —”

And then they saw two more figures materialize out of nowhere. Harry watched himself and Hermione chasing after Ron. Then he saw Ron dive.

“Gotcha! Get off, you stinking cat —”

“There’s Sirius!” said Harry. The great shape of the dog had bounded out from the roots of the Willow. They saw him bowl Harry over, then seize on…

“Looks even worse from here, doesn’t it?” said Harry, watching the dog pulling Ron into the roots. “Ouch — look, I just got walloped by the tree — and so did you — this is weird —”

The Whomping Willow was creaking and lashing out with its lower branches; they could see themselves darting here and there, trying to reach the trunk. And then the tree froze.

“That was Crookshanks pressing the knot,” said Hermione.

“And there we go…” Harry muttered. “We’re in.”

The moment they disappeared, the tree began to move again. Seconds later, they heard footsteps quite close by. Dumbledore, Macnair, Fudge, and the old Committee member were making their way up to the castle.

"Right after we'd gone down into the passage!" said Hermione. "If only Dumbledore had come with us…"

"Macnair and Fudge would've come too," said Harry bitterly. "I bet you anything Fudge would've told Macnair to murder Sirius on the spot…"

They watched the four men climb the castle steps and disappear from view. For a few minutes the scene was deserted. Then —

"Here comes Lupin!" said Harry as they saw another figure sprinting down the stone steps and halting toward the Willow. Harry looked up at the sky. Clouds were obscuring the moon completely.

They watched Lupin seize a broken branch from the ground and prod the knot on the trunk. The tree stopped fighting, and Lupin, too, disappeared into the gap in its roots.

"If he'd only grabbed the cloak," said Harry. "It's just lying there…"

He turned to Hermione.

"If I just dashed out now and grabbed it, Snape'd never be able to get it and —"

"Harry, we mustn't be seen!"

"How can you stand this?" he asked Hermione fiercely. "Just standing here and watching it happen?" He hesitated. "I'm going to grab the cloak!"

"Harry, no!"

Hermione seized the back of Harry's robes not a moment too soon. Just then, they heard a burst of song. It was Hagrid, making his way up to the castle, singing at the top of his voice, and weaving slightly as he walked. A large bottle was swinging from his hands.

"See?" Hermione whispered. "See what would have happened? We've got to keep out of sight! No, Buckbeak!"

The Hippogriff was making frantic attempts to get to Hagrid again; Harry seized his rope too, straining to hold Buckbeak back. They watched Hagrid meander tipsily up to the castle. He was gone. Buckbeak stopped fighting to get away. His head drooped sadly.

Barely two minutes later, the castle doors flew open yet again, and Snape came charging out of them, running toward the Willow.

Harry's fists clenched as they watched Snape skid to a halt next to the tree, looking around. He grabbed the cloak and held it up.

"Get your filthy hands off it," Harry snarled under his breath.

"Shh!"

Snape seized the branch Lupin had used to freeze the tree, prodded the knot, and vanished from view as he put on the cloak.

"So that's it," said Hermione quietly. "We're all down there…and now we've just got to wait until we come back up again…"

She took the end of Buckbeak's rope and tied it securely around the nearest tree, then sat down on the dry ground, arms around her knees.

"Harry, there's something I don't understand…Why didn't the Dementors get Sirius? I remember them coming, and then I think I passed out…there were so many of them…"

Harry sat down too. He explained what he'd seen; how, as the nearest Dementor had lowered its mouth to Harry's, a large silver something had come galloping across the lake and forced the Dementors to retreat.

Hermione's mouth was slightly open by the time Harry had finished.

"But what was it?"

"There's only one thing it could have been, to make the Dementors go," said Harry. "A real Patronus. A powerful one."

"But who conjured it?"

Harry didn't say anything. He was thinking back to the person he'd seen on the other bank of the lake. He knew who he thought it had been…but how could it have been?

"Didn't you see what they looked like?" said Hermione eagerly. "Was it one of the teachers?"

"No," said Harry. "He wasn't a teacher."

"But it must have been a really powerful wizard, to drive all those Dementors away…If the Patronus was shining so brightly, didn't it light him up? Couldn't you see —?"

"Yeah, I saw him," said Harry slowly. "But…maybe I imagined it…I wasn't thinking straight…I passed out right afterward…"

"Who did you think it was?"

"I think —" Harry swallowed, knowing how strange this was going to sound. "I think it was my dad."

Harry glanced up at Hermione and saw that her mouth was fully open now. She was gazing at him with a mixture of alarm and pity.

"Harry, your dad's — well — dead," she said quietly.

"I know that," said Harry quickly.

"You think you saw his ghost?"

"I don't know…no…he looked solid…"

"But then —"

"Maybe I was seeing things," said Harry. "But…from what I could see…it looked like him…I've got photos of him…"

Hermione was still looking at him as though worried about his sanity.

"I know it sounds crazy," said Harry flatly. He turned to took at Buckbeak, who was digging his beak into the ground, apparently searching for worms. But he wasn't really watching Buckbeak.

He was thinking about his father and about his father's three oldest friends…Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs…Had all four of them been out on the grounds tonight? Wormtail had reappeared this evening when everyone had thought he was dead…Was it so impossible his father had done the same? Had he been seeing things across the take? The figure had been too far away to see distinctly…yet he had felt sure, for a moment, before he'd lost consciousness…

The leaves overhead rustled faintly in the breeze. The moon drifted in and out of sight behind the shifting clouds. Hermione sat with her face turned toward the Willow, waiting.

And then, at last, after over an hour…

"Here we come!" Hermione whispered.

She and Harry got to their feet. Buckbeak raised his head. They saw Lupin, Ron, and Pettigrew clambering awkwardly out of the hole in the roots. Then came Hermione…then the unconscious Snape, drifting weirdly upward. Next came Harry and Black. They all began to walk toward the castle.

Harry's heart was starting to beat very fast. He glanced up at the sky. Any moment now, that cloud was going to move aside and show the moon…

"Harry," Hermione muttered as though she knew exactly what he was thinking, "we've got to stay put. We mustn't be seen. There's nothing we can do…"

"So we're just going to let Pettigrew escape all over again…" said Harry quietly.

"How do you expect to find a rat in the dark?" snapped Hermione. "There's nothing we can do! We came back to help Sirius; we're not supposed to be doing anything else!"

"All right!"

The moon slid out from behind its cloud. They saw the tiny figures across the grounds stop. Then they saw movement —

"There goes Lupin," Hermione whispered. "He's transforming."

"Hermione!" said Harry suddenly. "We've got to move!"

"We mustn't, I keep telling you —"

"Not to interfere! Lupin's going to run into the forest, right at us!"

Hermione gasped.

"Quick!" she moaned, dashing to untie Buckbeak. "Quick! Where are we going to go? Where are we going to hide? The Dementors will be coming any moment —"

"Back to Hagrid's!" Harry said. "It's empty now — come on!"

They ran as fast as they could, Buckbeak cantering along behind them. They could hear the werewolf howling behind them…

The cabin was in sight; Harry skidded to the door, wrenched it open, and Hermione and Buckbeak flashed past him; Harry threw himself in after them and bolted the door. Fang the boarhound barked loudly.

"Shh, Fang, it's us!" said Hermione, hurrying over and scratching his ears to quieten him. "That was really close!" she said to Harry.

"Yeah…"

Harry was looking out of the window. It was much harder to see what was going on from here. Buckbeak seemed very happy to find himself back inside Hagrid's house. He lay down in front of the fire, folded his wings contentedly, and seemed ready for a good nap.

"I think I'd better go outside again, you know," said Harry slowly. "I can't see what's going on — we won't know when it's time —"

Hermione looked up. Her expression was suspicious.

"I'm not going to try and interfere," said Harry quickly. "But if we don't see what's going on, how're we going to know when it's time to rescue Sirius?"

"Well…okay, then…I'll wait here with Buckbeak…but Harry, be careful — there's a werewolf out there — and the Dementors."

Harry stepped outside again and edged around the cabin. He could hear yelping in the distance. That meant the Dementors were closing in on Sirius…He and Hermione would be running to him any moment…

Harry stared out toward the lake, his heart doing a kind of drumroll in his chest…Whoever had sent that Patronus would be appearing at any moment…

For a fraction of a second he stood, irresolute, in front of Hagrid's door. You must not be seen. But he didn't want to be seen. He wanted to do the seeing…He had to know…

And there were the Dementors. They were emerging out of the darkness from every direction, gliding around the edges of the lake…They were moving away from where Harry stood, to the opposite bank…He wouldn't have to get near them…

Harry began to run. He had no thought in his head except his father…If it was him…if it really was him…he had to know, had to find out…

The lake was coming nearer and nearer, but there was no sign of anybody. On the opposite bank, he could see tiny glimmers of silver — his own attempts at a Patronus —

There was a bush at the very edge of the water. Harry threw himself behind it, peering desperately through the leaves. On the opposite bank, the glimmers of silver were suddenly extinguished. A terrified excitement shot through him — any moment now —

"Come on!" he muttered, staring about. "Where are you? Dad, come on —"

But no one came. Harry raised his head to look at the circle of Dementors across the lake. One of them was lowering its hood. It was time for the rescuer to appear — but no one was coming to help this time —

And then it hit him — he understood. He hadn't seen his father he had seen himself —

Harry flung himself out from behind the bush and pulled out his wand.

"*EXPECTO PATRONUM!*" he yelled.

And out of the end of his wand burst, not a shapeless cloud of mist, but a blinding, dazzling, silver animal. He screwed up his eyes, trying to see what it was. It looked like a horse. It was galloping silently away from him, across the black surface of the lake. He saw it lower its head and charge at the swarming Dementors…Now it was galloping around and around the black shapes on the ground, and the Dementors were falling back, scattering, retreating into the darkness…They were gone.

The Patronus turned. It was cantering back toward Harry across the still surface of the water. It wasn't a horse. It wasn't a unicorn, either. It was a stag. It was shining brightly as the moon above…it was coming back to him…

It stopped on the bank. Its hooves made no mark on the soft ground as it stared at Harry with its large, silver eyes. Slowly, it bowed its antlered head. And Harry realized…"Prongs," he whispered.

But as his trembling fingertips stretched toward the creature, it vanished.

Harry stood there, hand still outstretched. Then, with a great leap of his heart, he heard hooves behind him. He whirled around and saw Hermione dashing toward him, dragging Buckbeak behind her.

"What did you do?" she said fiercely. "You said you were only going to keep a lookout!"

"I just saved all our lives..." said Harry. "Get behind here behind this bush — I'll explain."

Hermione listened to what had just happened with her mouth open yet again.

"Did anyone see you?"

"Yes, haven't you been listening? I saw me but I thought I was my dad! It's okay!"

"Harry, I can't believe it...You conjured up a Patronus that drove away all those Dementors! That's very, very advanced magic."

"I knew I could do it this time," said Harry, "because I'd already done it...Does that make sense?"

"I don't know — Harry, look at Snape!"

Together they peered around the bush at the other bank. Snape had regained consciousness. He was conjuring stretchers and lifting the limp forms of Harry, Hermione, and Black onto them. A fourth stretcher, no doubt bearing Ron, was already floating at his side. Then, wand held out in front of him, he moved them away toward the castle.

"Right, it's nearly time," said Hermione tensely, looking at her watch. "We've got about forty-five minutes until Dumbledore locks the door to the hospital wing. We've got to rescue Sirius and get back into the ward before anybody realizes we're missing..."

They waited, watching the moving clouds reflected in the lake, while the bush next to them whispered in the breeze. Buckbeak, bored, was ferreting for worms again.

"Do you reckon he's up there yet?" said Harry, checking his watch. He looked up at the castle and began counting the windows to the right of the West Tower.

"Look!" Hermione whispered. "Who's that? Someone's coming back out of the castle!"

Harry stared through the darkness. The man was hurrying across the grounds, toward one of the entrances. Something shiny glinted in his belt.

"Macnair!" said Harry. "The executioner! He's gone to get the Dementors! This is it, Hermione —"

Hermione put her hands on Buckbeak's back and Harry gave her a leg up. Then he placed his foot on one of the lower branches of the bush and climbed up in front of her. He pulled Buckbeak's rope back over his neck and tied it to the other side of his collar like reins.

"Ready?" he whispered to Hermione. "You'd better hold on to me —"

He nudged Buckbeak's sides with his heels.

Buckbeak soared straight into the dark air. Harry gripped his flanks with his knees, feeling the great wings rising powerfully beneath them. Hermione was holding Harry very tight around the waist; he could hear her muttering, "Oh, no — I don't like this oh, I really don't like this —"

Harry urged Buckbeak forward. They were gliding quietly toward the upper floors of the castle…Harry pulled hard on the left-hand side of the rope, and Buckbeak turned. Harry was trying to count the windows flashing past —

"Whoa!" he said, pulling backward as hard as he could.

Buckbeak slowed down and they found themselves at a stop, unless you counted the fact that they kept rising up and down several feet as the Hippogriff beat his wings to remain airborne.

"He's there!" Harry said, spotting Sirius as they rose up beside the window. He reached out, and as Buckbeak's wings fell, was able to tap sharply on the glass.

Black looked up. Harry saw his jaw drop. He leapt from his chair, hurried to the window and tried to open it, but it was locked.

"Stand back!" Hermione called to him, and she took out her wand, still gripping the back of Harry's robes with her left hand.

"*Alohomora!*"

The window sprang open.

"How — how —?" said Black weakly, staring at the Hippogriff.

"Get on — there's not much time," said Harry, gripping Buckbeak firmly on either side of his sleek neck to hold him steady. "You've got to get out of here — the Dementors are coming — Macnair's gone to get them."

Black placed a hand on either side of the window frame and heaved his head and shoulders out of it. It was very lucky he was so thin. In seconds, he had managed to fling one leg over Buckbeak's back and pull himself onto the Hippogriff behind Hermione.

"Okay, Buckbeak, up!" said Harry, shaking the rope. "Up to the tower — come on."

The Hippogriff gave one sweep of its mighty wings and they were soaring upward again, high as the top of the West Tower. Buckbeak landed with a clatter on the battlements, and Harry and Hermione slid off him at once.

"Sirius, you'd better go, quick," Harry panted. "They'll reach Flitwick's office any moment, they'll find out you're gone."

Buckbeak pawed the ground, tossing his sharp head.

"What happened to the other boy? Ron?" croaked Sirius.

"He's going to be okay. He's still out of it, but Madam Pomfrey says she'll be able to make him better. Quick — go —"

But Black was still staring down at Harry.

"How can I ever thank —"

"GO!" Harry and Hermione shouted together.

Black wheeled Buckbeak around, facing the open sky.

"We'll see each other again," he said. "You are — truly your father's son, Harry…"

He squeezed Buckbeak's sides with his heels. Harry and Hermione jumped back as the enormous wings rose once more…The Hippogriff took off into the air…He and his rider became smaller and smaller as Harry gazed after them…then a cloud drifted across the moon…They were gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

OWL POST AGAIN

"Harry!"

Hermione was tugging at his sleeve, staring at her watch. "We've got exactly ten minutes to get back down to the hospital wing without anybody seeing us — before Dumbledore locks the door—"

"Okay," said Harry, wrenching his gaze from the sky, "let's go…"

They slipped through the doorway behind them and down a tightly spiraling stone staircase. As they reached the bottom of it, they heard voices. They flattened themselves against the wall and listened. It sounded like Fudge and Snape. They were walking quickly along the corridor at the foot of the staircase.

"…only hope Dumbledore's not going to make difficulties," Snape was saying. "The Kiss will be performed immediately?"

"As soon as Macnair returns with the Dementors. This whole Black affair has been highly embarrassing. I can't tell you how much I'm looking forward to informing the *Daily Prophet* that we've got him at last…I daresay they'll want to interview you, Snape…and once young Harry's back in his right mind, I expect he'll want to tell the Prophet exactly how you saved him…"

Harry clenched his teeth. He caught a glimpse of Snape's smirk as he and Fudge passed Harry and Hermione's hiding place. Their footsteps died away. Harry and Hermione waited a few moments to make sure they'd really gone, then started to run in the opposite direction. Down one staircase, then another, along a new corridor — then they heard a cackling ahead.

"Peeves!" Harry muttered, grabbing Hermione's wrist. "In here!"

They tore into a deserted classroom to their left just in time. Peeves seemed to be bouncing along the corridor in boisterous good spirits, laughing his head off.

"Oh, he's horrible," whispered Hermione, her ear to the door. "I bet he's all excited because the Dementors are going to finish off Sirius…" She checked her watch. "Three minutes, Harry!"

They waited until Peeves's gloating voice had faded into the distance, then slid back out of the room and broke into a run again.

"Hermione — what'll happen — if we don't get back inside before Dumbledore locks the door?" Harry panted.

"I don't want to think about it!" Hermione moaned, checking her watch again. "One minute!"

They had reached the end of the corridor with the hospital wing entrance. "Okay — I can hear Dumbledore," said Hermione tensely. "Come on, Harry!"

They crept along the corridor. The door opened. Dumbledore's back appeared.

"I am going to lock you in," they heard him saying. "it is five minutes to midnight. Miss Granger, three turns should do it. Good luck."

Dumbledore backed out of the room, closed the door, and took out his wand to magically lock it. Panicking, Harry and Hermione ran forward. Dumbledore looked up, and a wide smile appeared under the long silver mustache. "Well?" he said quietly.

"We did it!" said Harry breathlessly. "Sirius has gone, on Buckbeak…"

Dumbledore beamed at them.

"Well done. I think —" He listened intently for any sound within the hospital wing. "Yes, I think you've gone too — get inside — I'll lock you in —"

Harry and Hermione slipped back inside the dormitory. It was empty except for Ron, who was still lying motionless in the end bed. As the lock clicked behind them, Harry and Hermione crept back to their own beds, Hermione tucking the Time-Turner back under her robes. A moment later, Madam Pomfrey came striding back out of her office.

"Did I hear the headmaster leaving? Am I allowed to look after my patients now?"

She was in a very bad mood. Harry and Hermione thought it best to accept their chocolate quietly. Madam Pomfrey stood over them, making sure they ate it. But Harry could hardly swallow. He and Hermione were waiting, listening, their nerves jangling…And then, as they both took a fourth piece of chocolate from Madam Pomfrey, they heard a distant roar of fury echoing from somewhere above them…

"What was that?" said Madam Pomfrey in alarm.

Now they could hear angry voices, growing louder and louder. Madam Pomfrey was staring at the door.

"Really — they'll wake everybody up! What do they think they're doing?"

Harry was trying to hear what the voices were saying. They were drawing nearer —

"He must have Disapparated, Severus. We should have left somebody in the room with him. When this gets out —"

"HE DIDN'T DISAPPARATE!" Snape roared, now very close at hand. "YOU CAN'T APPARATE OR DISAPPARATE INSIDE THIS CASTLE! THIS — HAS — SOMETHING — TO — DO — WITH — POTTER!"

"Severus — be reasonable — Harry has been locked up —"

BAM.

The door of the hospital wing burst open.

Fudge, Snape, and Dumbledore came striding into the ward. Dumbledore alone looked calm. Indeed, he looked as though he was quite enjoying himself. Fudge appeared angry. But Snape was beside himself.

"OUT WITH IT, POTTER!" he bellowed. "WHAT DID YOU DO?"

"Professor Snape!" shrieked Madam Pomfrey. "Control yourself!"

"See here, Snape, be reasonable," said Fudge. "This door's been locked, we just saw —"

"THEY HELPED HIM ESCAPE, I KNOW IT!" Snape howled, pointing at Harry and Hermione. His face was twisted; spit was flying from his mouth.

"Calm down, man!" Fudge barked. "You're talking nonsense!"

"YOU DON'T KNOW POTTER!" shrieked Snape. "HE DID IT, I KNOW HE DID IT —"

"That will do, Severus," said Dumbledore quietly. "Think about what you are saying. This door has been locked since I left the ward ten minutes ago. Madam Pomfrey, have these students left their beds?"

"Of course not!" said Madam Pomfrey, bristling. "I would have heard them!"

"Well, there you have it, Severus," said Dumbledore calmly. "Unless you are suggesting that Harry and Hermione are able to be in two places at once, I'm afraid I don't see any point in troubling them further."

Snape stood there, seething, staring from Fudge, who looked thoroughly shocked at his behavior, to Dumbledore, whose eyes were twinkling behind his glasses. Snape whirled about, robes swishing behind him, and stormed out of the ward.

"Fellow seems quite unbalanced," said Fudge, staring after him. "I'd watch out for him if I were you, Dumbledore."

"Oh, he's not unbalanced," said Dumbledore quietly. "He's just suffered a severe disappointment."

"He's not the only one!" puffed Fudge. "The Daily Prophet's going to have a field day! We had Black cornered and he slipped through our fingers yet again! All it needs now is for the story of that Hippogriff's escape to get out, and I'll be a laughingstock! Well…I'd better go and notify the Ministry…"

"And the Dementors?" said Dumbledore. "They'll be removed from the school, I trust?"

"Oh yes, they'll have to go," said Fudge, running his fingers distractedly through his hair. "Never dreamed they'd attempt to administer the Kiss on an innocent boy…Completely out of

control…no, I'll have them packed off back to Azkaban tonight…Perhaps we should think about dragons at the school entrance…"

"Hagrid would like that," said Dumbledore, smiling at Harry and Hermione. As he and Fudge left the dormitory, Madam Pomfrey hurried to the door and locked it again. Muttering angrily to herself, she headed back to her office.

There was a low moan from the other end of the ward. Ron had woken up. They could see him sitting up, rubbing his head, looking around.

"What — what happened?" he groaned. "Harry? Why are we in here? Where's Sirius? Where's Lupin? What's going on?"

Harry and Hermione looked at each other.

"You explain," said Harry, helping himself to some more chocolate.

When Harry, Ron, and Hermione left the hospital wing at noon the next day, it was to find an almost deserted castle. The sweltering, heat and the end of the exams meant that everyone was taking full advantage of another Hogsmeade visit. Neither Ron nor Hermione felt like going, however, so they and Harry wandered onto the grounds, still talking about the extraordinary events of the previous night and wondering where Sirius and Buckbeak were now. Sitting near the lake, watching the giant squid waving its tentacles lazily above the water, Harry lost the thread of the conversation as he looked across to the opposite bank. The stag had galloped toward him from there just last night…

A shadow fell across them and they looked up to see a very bleary-eyed Hagrid, mopping his sweaty face with one of his tablecloth-sized handkerchiefs and beaming down at them.

"Know I shouldn' feel happy, after wha' happened las' night," he said. "I mean, Black escapin' again, an, everythin' — but guess what?"

"What?" they said, pretending to look curious.

"Beaky! He escaped! He's free! Bin celebratin' all night!"

"That's wonderful!" said Hermione, giving Ron a reproving look because he looked as though he was close to laughing.

"Yeah…can't've tied him up properly," said Hagrid, gazing happily out over the grounds. "I was worried this mornin', mind…thought he mighta met Professor Lupin on the grounds, but Lupin says he never ate anythin' las' night…"

"What?" said Harry quickly.

"Blimey, haven' yeh heard?" said Hagrid, his smile fading a little. He lowered his voice, even though there was nobody in sight. "Er — Snape told all the Slytherins this mornin'…Thought everyone'd know by now…Professor Lupin's a werewolf, see. An' he was loose on the grounds las' night…He's packin' now, o' course."

"He's packing?" said Harry, alarmed. "Why?"

"Leavin', isn' he?" said Hagrid, looking surprised that Harry had to ask. "Resigned firs' thing this mornin'. Says he can't risk it happenin again."

Harry scrambled to his feet.

"I'm going to see him," he said to Ron and Hermione.

"But if he's resigned —"

"— doesn't sound like there's anything we can do —"

"I don't care. I still want to see him. I'll meet you back here."

Lupin's office door was open. He had already packed most of his things. The Grindylow's empty tank stood next to his battered old suitcase, which was open and nearly full. Lupin was bending over something on his desk and looked up only when Harry knocked on the door.

"I saw you coming," said Lupin, smiling. He pointed to the parchment he had been poring over. It was the Marauder's Map.

"I just saw Hagrid," said Harry. "And he said you'd resigned. It's not true, is it?"

"I'm afraid it is," said Lupin. He started opening his desk drawers and taking out the contents.

"Why?" said Harry. "The Ministry of Magic don't think you were helping Sirius, do they?"

Lupin crossed to the door and closed it behind Harry.

"No. Professor Dumbledore managed to convince Fudge that I was trying to save your lives." He sighed. "That was the final straw for Severus. I think the loss of the Order of Merlin hit him hard. So he — er — accidentally let slip that I am a werewolf this morning at breakfast."

"You're not leaving just because of that!" said Harry.

Lupin smiled wryly.

"This time tomorrow, the owls will start arriving from parents…They will not want a werewolf teaching their children, Harry. And after last night, I see their point. I could have bitten any of you…That must never happen again."

"You're the best Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher we've ever had!" said Harry. "Don't go!"

Lupin shook his head and didn't speak. He carried on emptying his drawers. Then, while Harry was trying to think of a good argument to make him stay, Lupin said, "From what the headmaster

told me this morning, you saved a lot of lives last night, Harry. If I'm proud of anything I've done this year, it's how much you've learned…Tell me about your Patronus."

"How d'you know about that?" said Harry, distracted.

"What else could have driven the Dementors back?"

Harry told Lupin what had happened. When he'd finished, Lupin was smiling again.

"Yes, your father was always a stag when he transformed," he said. "You guessed right…that's why we called him Prongs."

Lupin threw his last few books into his case, closed the desk drawers, and turned to look at Harry.

"Here — I brought this from the Shrieking Shack last night," he said, handing Harry back the Invisibility Cloak. "And…" He hesitated, then held out the Marauder's Map too. "I am no longer your teacher, so I don't feel guilty about giving you back this as well. It's no use to me, and I daresay you, Ron, and Hermione will find uses for it."

Harry took the map and grinned.

"You told me Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs would've wanted to lure me out of school…you said they'd have thought it was funny."

"And so we would have," said Lupin, now reaching down to close his case. "I have no hesitation in saying that James would have been highly disappointed if his son had never found any of the secret passages out of the castle."

There was a knock on the door. Harry hastily stuffed the Marauder's Map and the Invisibility Cloak into his pocket.

It was Professor Dumbledore. He didn't look surprised to see Harry there.

"Your carriage is at the gates, Remus," he said.

"Thank You, Headmaster."

Lupin picked up his old suitcase and the empty Grindylow tank.

"Well — good-bye, Harry," he said, smiling. "It has been a real pleasure teaching you. I feel sure we'll meet again sometime. Headmaster, there is no need to see me to the gates, I can manage…"

Harry had the impression that Lupin wanted to leave as quickly as possible.

"Good-bye, then, Remus," said Dumbledore soberly. Lupin shifted the Grindylow tank slightly so that he and Dumbledore could shake hands. Then, with a final nod to Harry and a swift smile, Lupin left the office.

Harry sat down in his vacated chair, staring glumly at the floor. He heard the door close and looked up. Dumbledore was still there.

"Why so miserable, Harry?" he said quietly. "You should be very proud of yourself after last night."

"It didn't make any difference," said Harry bitterly. "Pettigrew got away."

"Didn't make any difference?" said Dumbledore quietly, "it made all the difference in the world, Harry. You helped uncover the truth. You saved an innocent man from a terrible fate."

Terrible. Something stirred in Harry's memory. Greater and more terrible than ever before…Professor Trelawney's prediction!

"Professor Dumbledore — yesterday, when I was having my Divination exam, Professor Trelawney went very — very strange."

"Indeed?" said Dumbledore. "Er — stranger than usual, you mean?"

"Yes…her voice went all deep and her eyes rolled and she said…she said Voldemort's servant was going to set out to return to him before midnight…She said the servant would help him come back to power." Harry stared up at Dumbledore. "And then she sort of became normal again, and she couldn't remember anything she'd said. Was it — was she making a real prediction?"

Dumbledore looked mildly impressed.

"Do you know, Harry, I think she might have been." he said thoughtfully. "Who'd have thought it? That brings her total of real predictions up to two. I should offer her a pay raise…"

"But —" Harry looked at him, aghast. How could Dumbledore take this so calmly?

"But — I stopped Sirius and Professor Lupin from killing Pettigrew! That makes it my fault if Voldemort comes back!"

"It does not," said Dumbledore quietly. "Hasn't your experience with the Time-Turner taught you anything, Harry? The consequences of our actions are always so complicated, so diverse, that predicting the future is a very difficult business indeed…Professor Trelawney, bless her, is living proof of that…You did a very noble thing, in saving Pettigrew's life."

"But if he helps Voldemort back to power…"

"Pettigrew owes his life to you. You have sent Voldemort a deputy who is in your debt…When one wizard saves another wizard's life, it creates a certain bond between them…and I'm much mistaken if Voldemort wants his servant in the debt of Harry Potter."

"I don't want a connection with Pettigrew!" said Harry. "He betrayed my parents!"

“This is magic at its deepest, its most impenetrable, Harry. But trust me…the time may come when you will be very glad you saved Pettigrew’s life.”

Harry couldn’t imagine when that would be. Dumbledore looked as though he knew what Harry was thinking.

“I knew your father very well, both at Hogwarts and later, Harry,” he said gently. “He would have saved Pettigrew too, I am sure of it.”

Harry looked up at him. Dumbledore wouldn’t laugh — he could tell Dumbledore…

“I thought it was my dad who’d conjured my Patronus. I mean, when I saw myself across the lake…I thought I was seeing him.”

“An easy mistake to make,” said Dumbledore softly. “I expect you’ll tire of hearing it, but you do look extraordinarily like James. Except for the eyes…you have your mother’s eyes.”

Harry shook his head.

“It was stupid, thinking it was him,” he muttered. “I mean, I knew he was dead.”

“You think the dead we loved ever truly leave us? You think that we don’t recall them more clearly than ever in times of great trouble? Your father is alive in you, Harry, and shows himself most plainly when you have need of him. How else could you produce that particular Patronus? Prongs rode again last night.”

It took a moment for Harry to realize what Dumblefore had said.

“Last night Sirius told me all about how they became Animagi,” said Dumbledore, smiling. “An extraordinary achievement — not least, keeping it quiet from me. And then I remembered the most unusual form your Patronus took, when it charged Mr. Malfoy down at your Quidditch match against Ravenclaw. You know, Harry, in a way, you did see your father last night…You found him inside yourself.”

And Dumbledore left the office, leaving Harry to his very confused thoughts.

Nobody at Hogwarts now knew the truth of what had happened the night that Sirius, Buckbeak, and Pettigrew had vanished except Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Professor Dumbledore. As the end of term approached, Harry heard many different theories about what had really happened, but none of them came close to the truth.

Malfoy was furious about Buckbeak. He was convinced that Hagrid had found a way of smuggling the Hippogriff to safety, and seemed outraged that he and his father had been outwitted by a gamekeeper. Percy Weasley, meanwhile, had much to say on the subject of Sirius’s escape.

"If I manage to get into the Ministry, I'll have a lot of proposals to make about Magical Law Enforcement!" he told the only person who would listen — his girlfriend, Penelope.

Though the weather was perfect, though the atmosphere was so cheerful, though he knew they had achieved the near impossible in helping Sirius to freedom, Harry had never approached the end of a school year in worse spirits.

He certainly wasn't the only one who was sorry to see Professor Lupin go. The whole of Harry's Defense Against the Dark Arts class was miserable about his resignation.

"Wonder what they'll give us next year?" said Seamus Finnigan gloomily.

"Maybe a vampire," suggested Dean Thomas hopefully.

It wasn't only Professor Lupin's departure that was weighing on Harry's mind. He couldn't help thinking a lot about Professor Trelawney's prediction. He kept wondering where Pettigrew was now, whether he had sought sanctuary with Voldemort yet. But the thing that was lowering Harry's spirits most of all was the prospect of returning to the Dursleys. For maybe half an hour, a glorious half hour, he had believed he would be living with Sirius from now on…his parents' best friend…It would have been the next best thing to having his own father back. And while no news of Sirius was definitely good news, because it meant he had successfully gone into hiding, Harry couldn't help feeling miserable when he thought of the home he might have had, and the fact that it was now impossible.

The exam results came out on the last day of term. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had passed every subject. Harry was amazed that he had got through Potions. He had a shrewd suspicion that Dumbledore might have stepped in to stop Snape failing him on purpose. Snape's behavior toward Harry over the past week had been quite alarming. Harry wouldn't have thought it possible that Snape's dislike for him could increase, but it certainly had. A muscle twitched unpleasantly at the corner of Snape's thin mouth every time he looked at Harry, and he was constantly flexing his fingers, as though itching to place them around Harry's throat.

Percy had got his top-grade N.E.W.T.s; Fred and George had scraped a handful of O.W.L.s each. Gryffindor House, meanwhile, largely thanks to their spectacular performance in the Quidditch Cup, had won the House championship for the third year running. This meant that the end of term feast took place amid decorations of scarlet and gold, and that the Gryffindor table was the noisiest of the lot, as everybody celebrated. Even Harry managed to forget about the journey back to the Dursleys the next day as he ate, drank, talked, and laughed with the rest.

As the Hogwarts Express pulled out of the station the next morning, Hermione gave Harry and Ron some surprising news.

"I went to see Professor McGonagall this morning, just before breakfast. I've decided to drop Muggle Studies."

"But you passed your exam with three hundred and twenty percent!" said Ron.

"I know," sighed Hermione, "but I can't stand another year like this one. That Time-Turner, it was driving me mad. I've handed it in. Without Muggle Studies and Divination, I'll be able to have a normal schedule again."

"I still can't believe you didn't tell us about it," said Ron grumpily. "We're supposed to be your friends."

"I promised I wouldn't tell anyone," said Hermione severely. She looked around at Harry, who was watching Hogwarts disappear from view behind a mountain. Two whole months before he'd see it again…

"Oh, cheer up, Harry!" said Hermione sadly.

"I'm okay," said Harry quickly. "Just thinking about the holidays."

"Yeah, I've been thinking about them too," said Ron. "Harry, you've got to come and stay with us. I'll fix it up with Mum and Dad, then I'll call you. I know how to use a fellytone now —"

"A telephone, Ron," said Hermione. "Honestly, you should take Muggle Studies next year…"

Ron ignored her.

"It's the Quidditch World Cup this summer! How about it, Harry? Come and stay, and we'll go and see it! Dad can usually get tickets from work."

This proposal had the effect of cheering Harry up a great deal.

"Yeah…I bet the Dursleys'd be pleased to let me come…especially after what I did to Aunt Marge…"

Feeling considerably more cheerful, Harry joined Ron and Hermione in several games of Exploding Snap, and when the witch with the tea cart arrived, he bought himself a very large lunch, though nothing with chocolate in it.

But it was late in the afternoon before the thing that made him truly happy turned up…

"Harry," said Hermione suddenly, peering over his shoulder. "What's that thing outside your window?"

Harry turned to look outside. Something very small and gray was bobbing in and out of sight beyond the glass. He stood up for a better look and saw that it was a tiny owl, carrying a letter that

was much too big for it. The owl was so small, in fact, that it kept tumbling over in the air, buffeted this way and that in the train's slipstream. Harry quickly pulled down the window, stretched out his arm, and caught it. It felt like a very fluffy Snitch. He brought it carefully inside.

The owl dropped its letter onto Harry's seat and began zooming around their compartment, apparently very pleased with itself for accomplishing its task. Hedwig clicked her beak with a sort of dignified disapproval. Crookshanks sat up in his seat, following the owl with his great yellow eyes. Ron, noticing this, snatched the owl safely out of harm's way.

Harry picked up the letter. It was addressed to him. He ripped open the letter, and shouted, "It's from Sirius!"

"What?" said Ron and Hermione excitedly. "Read it aloud!"

Dear Harry,

I hope this finds you before you reach your aunt and uncle. I don't know whether they're used to owl post.

Buckbeak and I are in hiding. I won't tell you where, in case this owl falls into the wrong hands. I have some doubt about his reliability, but he is the best I could find, and he did seem eager for the job.

I believe the Dementors are still searching for me, but they haven't a hope of finding me here. I am planning to allow some Muggles to glimpse me soon, a long way from Hogwarts, so that the security on the castle will be lifted.

There is something I never got around to telling you during our brief meeting. It was I who sent you the Firebolt —

"Ha!" said Hermione triumphantly. "See! I told you it was from him!"

"Yes, but he hadn't jinxed it, had he?" said Ron. "Ouch!" The tiny owl now hooting happily in his hand, had nibbled one of his fingers in what it seemed to think was an affectionate way.

– Crookshanks took the order to the Owl Office for me. I used your name but told them to take the gold from my own Gringotts vault. Please consider it as thirteen birthdays' worth of presents from your godfather.

I would also like to apologize for the fright I think I gave you that night last year when you left your uncle's house. I had only hoped to get a glimpse of you before starting my journey north, but I think the sight of me alarmed you.

I am enclosing something else for you, which I think will make your next year at Hogwarts more enjoyable.

If ever you need me, send word. Your owl will find me.

I'll write again soon.

Sirius

Harry looked eagerly inside the envelope. There was another piece of parchment in there. He read it through quickly and felt suddenly as warm and contented as though he'd swallowed a bottle of hot butterbeer in one gulp.

I, Sirius Black, Harry Potter's godfather, hereby give him permission to visit Hogsmeade on weekends.

"That'll be good enough for Dumbledore!" said Harry happily. He looked back at Sirius's letter. "Hang on, there's a PS…"

I thought your friend Ron might like to keep this owl, as it's my fault he no longer has a rat.

Ron's eyes widened. The minute owl was still hooting excitedly. "Keep him?" he said uncertainly. He looked closely at the owl for a moment; then, to Harry's and Hermione's great surprise, he held him out for Crookshanks to sniff.

"What do you reckon?" Ron asked the cat. "Definitely an owl?"

Crookshanks purred.

"That's good enough for me," said Ron happily. "He's mine."

Harry read and reread the letter from Sirius all the way back into King's Cross station. It was still clutched tightly in his hand as he, Ron, and Hermione stepped back through the barrier of platform nine and three-quarters. Harry spotted Uncle Vernon at once. He was standing a good distance from Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, eyeing them suspiciously, and when Mrs. Weasley hugged Harry in greeting, his worst suspicions about them seemed confirmed.

"I'll call about the World Cup!" Ron yelled after Harry as Harry bid him and Hermione good-bye, then wheeled the trolley bearing his trunk and Hedwig's cage toward Uncle Vernon, who greeted him in his usual fashion.

"What's that?" he snarled, staring at the envelope Harry was still clutching in his hand. "If it's another form for me to sign, you've got another —"

"It's not," said Harry cheerfully. "It's a letter from my godfather."

"Godfather?" sputtered Uncle Vernon. "You haven't got a godfather!"

"Yes, I have," said Harry brightly. "He was my mum and dad's best friend. He's a convicted murderer, but he's broken out of wizard prison and he's on the run. He likes to keep in touch with me, though…keep up with my news…check if I'm happy…"

And, grinning broadly at the look of horror on Uncle Vernon's face, Harry set off toward the station exit, Hedwig rattling along in front of him, for what looked like a much better summer than the last.

Harry Potter

and the Goblet of Fire

J. K. ROWLING

Harry Potter
and the Goblet of Fire
by
J.K. Rowling

To Peter Rowling.

In Memory of Mr. Ridley.

And to Susan Sladden.

Who Helped Harry

Out of His Cupboard.

CONTENTS

HARRY POTTER AND THE GOBLET OF FIRE

CHAPTER ONE - THE RIDDLE HOUSE

The villagers of Little Hangleron still called it "the Riddle House," even though it had been many years since the Riddle family had lived there. It stood on a hill overlooking the village, some of its windows boarded, tiles missing from its roof, and ivy spreading unchecked over its face. Once a fine-looking manor, and easily the largest and grandest building for miles around, the Riddle House was now damp, derelict, and unoccupied.

The Little Hagletons all agreed that the old house was "creepy." Half a century ago, something strange and horrible had happened there, something that the older inhabitants of the village still liked to discuss when topics for gossip were scarce. The story had been picked over so many times, and had been embroidered in so many places, that nobody was quite sure what the truth was anymore. Every version of the tale, however, started in the same place: Fifty years before, at daybreak on a fine summer's morning when the Riddle House had still been well kept and impressive, a maid had entered the drawing room to find all three Riddles dead.

The maid had run screaming down the hill into the village and roused as many people as she could.

"Lying there with their eyes wide open! Cold as ice! Still in their dinner things!"

The police were summoned, and the whole of Little Hangleton had seethed with shocked curiosity and ill-disguised excitement. Nobody wasted their breath pretending to feel very sad about the Riddles, for they had been most unpopular. Elderly Mr. and Mrs. Riddle had been rich, snobbish, and rude, and their grown-up son, Tom, had been, if anything, worse. All the villagers cared about was the identity of their murderer -- for plainly, three apparently healthy people did not all drop dead of natural causes on the same night.

The Hanged Man, the village pub, did a roaring trade that night; the whole village seemed to have turned out to discuss the murders. They were rewarded for leaving their firesides when the Riddles' cook arrived dramatically in their midst and announced to the suddenly silent pub that a man called Frank Bryce had just been arrested.

"Frank!" cried several people. "Never!"

Frank Bryce was the Riddles' gardener. He lived alone in a run-down cottage on the grounds of the Riddle House. Frank had come back from the war with a very stiff leg and a great dislike of crowds and loud noises, and had been working for the Riddles ever since.

There was a rush to buy the cook drinks and hear more details.

"Always thought he was odd," she told the eagerly listening villagers, after her fourth sherry. "Unfriendly, like. I'm sure if I've offered him a cuppa once, I've offered it a hundred times. Never wanted to mix, he didn't."

"Ah, now," said a woman at the bar, "he had a hard war, Frank. He likes the quiet life. That's no reason to --"

"Who else had a key to the back door, then?" barked the cook. "There's been a spare key hanging in the gardener's cottage far back as I can remember! Nobody forced the door last night! No broken windows! All Frank had to do was creep up to the big house while we was all sleeping..."

The villagers exchanged dark looks.

"I always thought that he had a nasty look about him, right enough," grunted a man at the bar.

"War turned him funny, if you ask me," said the landlord.

"Told you I wouldn't like to get on the wrong side of Frank, didn't I, Dot?" said an excited woman in the corner.

"Horrible temper," said Dot, nodding fervently. "I remember, when he was a kid..."

By the following morning, hardly anyone in Little Hangleton doubted that Frank Bryce had killed the Riddles.

But over in the neighboring town of Great Hangleton, in the dark and dingy police station, Frank was stubbornly repeating, again and again, that he was innocent, and that the only person he had seen near the house on the day of the Riddles' deaths had been a teenage boy, a stranger, dark-haired and pale. Nobody else in the village had seen any such boy, and the police were quite sure Frank had invented him.

Then, just when things were looking very serious for Frank, the report on the Riddles' bodies came back and changed everything.

The police had never read an odder report. A team of doctors had examined the bodies and had concluded that none of the Riddles had been poisoned, stabbed, shot, strangles, suffocated, or (as far as they could tell) harmed at all. In fact (the report continued, in a tone of unmistakable bewilderment), the Riddles all appeared to be in perfet health -- apart from the fact that they were all dead. The doctors did note (as though determined to find something wrong with the bodies) that each of the Riddles had a look of terror upon his or her face -- but as the frustrated police said, whoever heard of three people being frightened to death?

As there was no proof that the Riddles had been murdered at all, the police were

forced to let Frank go. The Riddles were buried in the Little Hangleton churchyard, and their graves remained objects of curiosity for a while. To everyone's surprise, and amid a cloud of suspicion, Frank Bryce returned to his cottage on the grounds of the Riddle House.

"'S far as I'm concerned, he killed them, and I don't care what the police say," said Dot in the Hanged Man. "And if he had any decency, he'd leave here, knowing as how we knows he did it."

But Frank did not leave. He stayed to tend the garden for the next family who lived in the Riddle House, and then the next -- for neither family stayed long. Perhaps it was partly because of Frank that the new owners said there was a nasty feeling about the place, which, in the absence of inhabitants, started to fall into disrepair.

The wealthy man who owned the Riddle House these days neither lived there nor put it to any use; they said in the village that he kept it for "tax reasons," though nobody was very clear what these might be. The wealthy owner continued to pay Frank to do the gardening, however. Frank was nearing his seventy-seventh birthday now, very deaf, his bad leg stiffer than ever, but could be seen pottering around the flower beds in fine weather, even though the weeds were starting to creep up on him, try as he might to suppress them.

Weeds were not the only things Frank had to contend with either. Boys from the village made a habit of throwing stones through the windows of the Riddle House. They rode their bicycles over the lawns Frank worked so hard to keep smooth. Once or twice, they broke into the old house for a dare. They knew that old Frank's devotion to the house and the grounds amounted almost to an obsession, and it amused them to see him limping across the garden, brandishing his stick and yelling croakily at them. Frank, for his part, believed the boys tormented him because they, like their parents and grandparents, though him a murderer. So when Frank awoke one night in August and saw something very odd up at the old house, he merely assumed that the boys had gone one step further in their attempts to punish him.

It was Frank's bad leg that woke him; it was paining him worse than ever in his old age. He got up and limped downstairs into the kitchen with the idea of refilling his hot-water bottle to ease the stiffness in his knee. Standing at the sink, filling the kettle, he looked up at the Riddle House and saw lights glimmering in its upper windows. Frank knew at once what was going on. The boys had broken into the house again, and judging by the flickering quality of the light, they had started a fire.

Frank had no telephone, in any case, he had deeply mistrusted the police ever since they had taken him in for questioning about the Riddles' deaths. He put down the kettle at once, hurried back upstairs as fast as his bad leg would allow, and was soon back in his kitchen, fully dressed and removing a rusty old key from its hook by the door. He picked up his walking stick, which was propped against the wall,

and set off into the night.

The front door of the Riddle House bore no sign of being forced, nor did any of the windows. Frank limped around to the back of the house until he reached a door almost completely hidden by ivy, took out the old key, put it into the lock, and opened the door noiselessly.

He let himself into the cavernous kitchen. Frank had not entered it for many years; nevertheless, although it was very dark, he remembered where the door into the hall was, and he groped his way towards it, his nostrils full of the smell of decay, ears pricked for any sound of footsteps or voices from overhead. He reached the hall, which was a little lighter owing to the large mullioned windows on either side of the front door, and started to climb the stairs, blessing the dust that lay thick upon the stone, because it muffled the sound of his feet and stick.

On the landing, Frank turned right, and saw at once where the intruders were: At the every end of the passage a door stood ajar, and a flickering light shone through the gap, casting a long sliver of gold across the black floor. Frank edged closer and closer, he was able to see a narrow slice of the room beyond.

The fire, he now saw, had been lit in the grate. This surprised him. Then he stopped moving and listened intently, for a man's voice spoke within the room; it sounded timid and fearful.

"There is a little more in the bottle, My Lord, if you are still hungry."

"Later," said a second voice. This too belonged to a man -- but it was strangely high-pitched, and cold as a sudden blast of icy wind. Something about that voice made the sparse hairs on the back of Frank's neck stand up. "Move me closer to the fire, Wormtail."

Frank turned his right ear toward the door, the better to hear. There came the clink of a bottle being put down upon some hard surface, and then the dull scraping noise of a heavy chair being dragged across the floor. Frank caught a glimpse of a small man, his back to the door, pushing the chair into place. He was wearing a long black cloak, and there was a bald patch at the back of his head. Then he went out of sight again.

"Where is Nagini?" said the cold voice.

"I -- I don't know, My Lord," said the first voice nervously. "She set out to explore the house, I think..."

"You will milk her before we retire, Wormtail," said the second voice. "I will need feeding in the night. The journey has tired me greatly."

Brow furrowed, Frank inclined his good ear still closer to the door, listening very hard. There was a pause, and then the man called Wormtail spoke again.

"My Lord, may I ask how long we are going to stay here?"

"A week," said the cold voice. "Perhapse longer. The place is moderately comfortable, and the plan cannot proceed yet. It would be foolish to act before the Quidditch World Cup is over."

Frank inserted a gnarled finger into his ear and rotated it. Owing, no doubt, to a buildup of earwax, he had heard the word "Quidditch," which was not a word at all.

"The -- the Quidditch World Cup, My Lord?" said Wormtail. (Frank dug his finger still more vigorously into his ear.) "Forgive me, but -- I do not understand -- why should we wait until the World Cup is over?"

"Because, fool, at this very moment wizards are pouring into the country from all over the world, and every meddler from the Ministry of Magic will be on duty, on the watch for signs of ususual activity, checking and double-checking identities. They will be obsessed with security, lest the Muggles notice anything. So we wait."

Frank stopped trying to clear out his ear. He had distinctly heard the words "Ministry of Magic," "wizards," and "Muggles." Plainly, each of these expressions meant something secret, and Frank could think of only two sorts of people who would speak in code: spies and criminals. Frank tightened his hold on his walking stick once more, and listened more closely still.

"Your Lordship is still determined, then?" Wormtail said quietly.

"Certainly I am determined, Wormtail." There was a note of menace in the cold voice now.

A slight pause followed -- and the Wormtail spoke, the words tumbling from him in a rush, as though he was forcing himself to say this before he lost his nerve.

"It could be done without Harry Potter, My Lord."

Another pause, more protracted, and then --

"Without Harry Potter?" breathed the second voice softly. "I see..."

"My Lord, I do not say this out of concern for the boy!" said Wormtail, his voice rising squeakily. "The boy is nothing to me, nothing at all! It is merely that if we were to use another witch or wizard -- any wizard -- the thing could be done so much more quickly! If you allowed me to leave you for a short while -- you know that I can disguise myself most effectively -- I could be back here in as little as two days with a suitable person --"

"I could use another wizard," said the cold voice softly, "that is true..."

"My Lord, it makes sense," said Wormtail, sounding thoroughly relieved now. "Laying hands on Harry Potter would be so difficult, he is so well protected --"

"And so you volunteer to go and fetch me a substitute? I wonder...perhaps the task of nursing me has become wearisome for you, Wormtail? Could this suggestion of abandoning the plan be nothing more than an attempt to desert me?"

"My Lord! I -- I have no wish to leave you, none at all --"

"Do not lie to me!" hissed the second voice. "I can always tell, Wormtail! You are regretting that you ever returned to me. I revolt you. I see you flinch when you look at me, feel you shudder when you touch me..."

"No! My devotion to Your Lordship --"

"Your devotion is nothing more than cowardice. You would not be here if you had anywhere else to go. How am I to survive without you, when I need feeding every few hours? Who is to milk Nagini?"

"But you seem so much stronger, My Lord --"

"Liar," breathed the second voice. "I am no stronger, and a few days alone would be enough to rob me of the little health I have regained under your clumsy care. Silence!"

Wormtail, who had been sputtering incoherently, fell silent at once. For a few seconds, Frank could hear nothing but the fire crackling. The the second man spoke once more, in a whisper that was almost a hiss.

"I have my reasons for using the boy, as I have already explained to you, and I will use no other. I have waited thirteen years. A few more months will make no difference. As for the protection surrounding the boy, I believe my plan will be effective. All that is needed is a little courage from you, Wormtail -- courage you will find, unless you wish to feel the full extent of Lord Voldermort's wrath --"

"My Lord, I must speak!" said Wormtail, panic in his voice now. "All through our journey I have gone over the plan in my head -- My Lord, Bertha Jorkin's disappearance will not go unnoticed for long, and if we proceed, if I murder --"

"If?" whispered the second voice. "If? If you follow the plan, Wormtail, the Ministry need never know that anyone else has died. You will do it quietly and without fuss; I only wish that i could do it myself, but in my present condition...Come, Wormtail, one more death and our path to Harry Potter is clear. I am not asking you to do it alone. By that time, my faithful serant will have rejoined us --"

"I am a faithful servant," said Wormtail, the merest trace of sullenness in his voice.

"Wormtail, I need somebody with brains, somebody whose loyalty has never wavered, and you, unfortunately, fulfill neither requirement."

"I found you," said Wormtail, and there was definitely a sulky edge to his voice now. "I was the one who found you. I brought you Bertha Jorkins."

"That is true," said the second man, sounding amused. "A stroke of brilliance I would not have thought possible from you, Wormtail -- though, if truth be told, you were not aware how useful she would be when you caught her, were you?"

"I -- I thought she might be useful, My Lord --"

"Liar," said the second voice again, the cruel amusement more pronounced than ever. "However, I do not deny that her information was invaluable. Without it, I could never have formed our plan, and for that, you will have your reward, Wormtail. I will allow you to perform an essential task for me, one that many of my followers would give their right hands to perform..."

"R-really, My Lord? What -- ?" Wormtail sounded terrified again.

"Ah, Wormtail, you don't want me to spoil the surprise? Your part will come at the very end...but I promise you, you will have the honor of being just as useful as Bertha Jorkins."

"You...you..." Wormtail's voice suddenly sounded hoarse, as though his mouth had gone very dry. "You...are going...to kill me too?"

"Wormtail, Wormtail," said the cold voice silkily, "why would I kill you? I killed Bertha because I had to. She was fit for nothing after my questioning, quite useless. In any case, awkward questions would have been asked if she had gone back to the Ministry with the news that she had met you on her holidays. Wizards who are supposed to be dead would do well not to run into Ministry of Magic witches at wayside inns..."

Wormtail muttered something so quietly that Frank could not hear it, but it made the second man laugh -- an entirely mirthless laugh, cold as his speech.

"We could have modified her memory? But Memory Charms can be broken by a powerful wizard, as I proved when I questioned her. It would be an insult to her memory not to use the information I extracted from her, Wormtail."

Out in the corridor, Frank suddenly became aware that the hand gripping his walking stick was slippery with sweat. The man with the cold voice had killed a woman. He was talking about it without any kind of remorse -- with amusement. He was dangerous -- a madman. And he was planning more murders -- this boy, Harry Potter, whoever he was -- was in danger --

Frank knew what he must do. Now, if ever, was the time to go to the police. He would creep out of the house and head straight for the telephone box in the village...but the cold voice was speaking again, and Frank remained where he was, frozen to the spot, listening with all his might.

"One more murder...my faithful servant at Hogwarts...Harry Potter is as good as mine, Wormtail. It is decided. There will be no more argument. But quiet...I think I hear Nagini..."

And the second man's voice changed. He started making noises such as Frank had never heard before; he was hissing and spitting without drawing breath. Frank thought he must be having some sort of fit or seizure.

And then Frank heard movement behind him in the dark passageway. He turned to look, and found himself paralyzed with fright.

Something was slithering toward him along the dark corridor floor, and as it drew nearer to the sliver of firelight, he realized with a thrill of terror that it was a gigantic snake, at least twelve feet long. Horrified, transfixed, Frank stared as its undulating body cut a wide, curving track through the thick dust on the floor, coming closer and closer -- What was he to do? The only means of escape was into the room where the two men sat plotting murder, yet if he stayed where he was the snake would surely kill him --

But before he had made his decision, the snake was level with him, and then, incredibly, miraculously, it was passing; it was following the spitting, hissing noises made by the cold voice beyond the door, and in seconds, the tip of its diamond-patterned tail had vanished through the gap.

There was sweat on Frank's forehead now, and the hand on the walking stick was trembling. Inside the room, the cold voice was continuing to hiss, and Frank was visited by a strange idea, an impossible idea...This man could talk to snakes.

Frank didn't understand what was going on. He wanted more than anything to be back in his bed with his hot-water bottle. The problem was that his legs didn't seem to want to move. As he stood there shaking and trying to master himself, the cold voice switched abruptly to English again.

"Nagini has interesting news, Wormtail," it said.

"In-indeed, My Lord?" said Wormtail.

"Indeed, yes," said the voice, "According to Nagini, there is an old Muggle standing right outside this room, listening to every word we say."

Frank didn't have a chance to hide himself. There were footsteps and then the door of the room was flung wide open.

A short, balding man with graying hair, a pointed nose, and small, watery eyes stood before Frank, a mixture of fear and alarm in his face.

"Invite him inside, Wormtail. Where are your manners?"

The cold voice was coming from the ancient armchair before the fire, but Frank couldn't see the speaker. the snake, on the other hand, was curled up on the rotting hearth rug, like some horrible travesty of a pet dog.

Wormtail beckoned Frank into the room. Though still deeply shaken, Frank took a firmer grip on his walking stick and limped over the threshold.

The fire was the only source of light in the room; it cast long, spidery shadows upon the walls. Frank stared at the back of the armchair; the man inside it seemed to be even smaller than his servant, for Frank couldn't even see the back of his head.

"You heard everything, Muggle?" said the cold voice.

"What's that you're calling me?" said Frank defiantly, for now that he was inside the room, now that the time had come for some sort of action, he felt braver; it had always been so in the war.

"I am calling you a Muggle," said the voice coolly. "It means that you are not a wizard."

"I don't know what you mean by wizard," said Frank, his voice growing steadier. "All I know is I've heard enough to interest the police tonight, I have. You've done murder and you're planning more! And I'll tell youthis too," he added, on a sudden inspiration, "my wife knows I'm up here, and if I don't come back --"

"You have no wife," said te cold voice, very quietly. "Nobody knows you are here. You told nobody that you were coming. Do not lie to Lord Voldemort, Muggle, for he knows...he always knows..."

"Is that right?" said Frank roughly. "Lord, is it? Well, I don't think much of your manners, My Lord. Turn 'round and face me like a man, why don't you?"

"But I am not a man, Muggle," said the cold voice, barely audible now over the crackling of the flames. "I am much, much more than a man. However...why not? I will face you...Wormtail, come turn my chair around."

The servant gave a whimper.

"You heard me, Wormtail."

Slowly, with his face screwed up, as though he would rather have done anything than approach his master and the hearth rug where the snake lay, the small man walked forward and began to turn the chair. The snake lifted its ugly triangular head and hissed slightly as the legs of the chair snagged on its rug.

And then the chair was facing Frank, and he saw what was sitting in it. His walking stick fell to the floor with a clatter. He opened his mouth and let out a scream. He was screaming so loudly that he never heard the words the thing in the chair spoke as it raised a wand. There was a flash of green light, a rushing sound, and Frank Bryce crumpled. He was dead before he hit the floor.

Two hundred miles away, the boy called Harry Potter woke with a start.

CHAPTER TWO - THE SCAR

Harry lay flat on his back, breathing hard as though he had been running. He had awoken from a vivid dream with his hands pressed over his face. The old scar on his forehead, which was shaped like a bolt of lightning, was burning beneath his fingers as though someone had just pressed a white-hot wire to his skin.

He sat up, one hand still on his scar, the other hand reaching out in the darkness for his glasses, which were on the bedside table. He put them on and his bedroom came into clearer focus, lit by a faint, misty orange light that was filtering through the curtains from the street lamp outside the window.

Harry ran his fingers over the scar again. It was still painful. He turned on the lamp beside him, scrambled out of bed, crossed the room, opened his wardrobe, and peered into the mirror on the inside of the door. A skinny boy of fourteen looked back at him, his bright green eyes puzzled under his untidy black hair. He examined the lightning-bolt scar of his reflection more closely. It looked normal, but it was still stinging.

harry tried to recall what he had been dreaming about before he had awoken. It had seemed so real...There had been two people he knew and one he didn't ...He concentrated hard, frowning, trying to remember...

The dim picture of a darkened room came to him...There had been a snake on a hearth rug...a small man called Peter, nicknamed Wormtail...and a cold, high voice...the voice of Lord Voldemort. Harry felt as though an ice cube had slipped down into his stomach at the very thought...

He closed his eyes tightly and tried to remember what Voldemort had looked like, but it was impossible...All Harry knew was that at the moment when Voldemort's chair had swung around, and he, Harry, had seen what was sitting in it, he had felt a spasm of horror, which had awoken him...or had that been the pain in his scar?

And who had the old man been? For there had definitely been an old man; Harry had watched him fall to the ground. It was all becoming confused. Harry put his face into his hands, blocking out his bedroom, trying to hold on to the picture of that dimly lit room, but it was like trying to keep water in his cupped hands; the details were now trickling away as fast as he tried to hold on to them...Voldemort and Wormtail had been talking about someone they had killed, though Harry could not remember the name...and they had been plotting to kill someone else...him!

Harry took his face out of his hands, opened his eyes, and stared around his bedroom as though expecting to see something unusual there. As it happened, there was an extraordinary number of unusual things in this room. A large wooden trunk stood open at the foot of his bed, revealing a cauldron, broomstick, black robes, and assorted spellbooks. Rolls of parchment littered that part of his desk that was not taken up by the large, empty cage in which his snowy owl, Hedwig,

usually perched. On the floor beside his bed a book lay open; Harry had been reading it before he fell asleep last night. The pictures in this book were all moving. Men in bright orange robes were zooming in and out of sight on broomsticks, throwing a red ball to one another.

Harry walked over to the book, picked it up, and watched on of the wizards score a spectacular goal by putting the ball through a fifty-foot-high hoop. Then he snapped the book shut. Even Quidditch -- in Harry's opinion, the best sport in the world -- couldn't distract him at the moment. He placed Flying with the Cannons on his bedside table, crossed to the window, and drew back the curtains to survey the street below.

Privet Drive looked exactly as a respectable suburban street would be expected to look inthe early hours of Saturday morning. All the curtains were closed. As far as Harry could see through the darkness, there wasn't a living creature in sight, not even a cat.

And yet...and yet...Harry went restlessly back to the bed and sat down on it, running a finger over his scar again. It wasn't the pain that bothered him; Harry was no stranger to pain and injury. He had lost all the bones from his right arm once and had them painfully regrown in a night. The same arm had been pierced by a venemous foot-long fang not long afterward. Only last year Harry had fallen fifty feet from an airborn broomstick. He was used to bizarre accidents and injuries; they were unavoidable if you attended Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and had a knack for attracting a lot of trouble.

No, the thing that was bothering Harry was the last time his scar had hurt him, it had been because Voldemort had been close by...But Voldemort couldn't be here, now...The idea of Voldemort lurking in Privet Drive was absurd, impossible...

Harry listened closely to the silence around him. Was he half expecting to hear the creak of a stair or the swish of a cloak? And then he jumped slightly as he heard his cousin Dudley give a tremendous grunting snore from the next room.

Harry shook himself mentally; he was being stupid. There was no one in the house with him except Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, and Dudley, and they were plainly still asleep, their dreams untroubled and painless.

Asleep was the way Harry liked the Dursleys best; it wasn't as though they were ever any help to him awake. Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, and Dudley were Harry's only living relatives. They were Muggles who hated and despised magic in any form, which meant that Harry was about as welcome in their house as dry rot. They had explained away Harry's long absences at Hogwarts over the last three years by telling everyone that he went to St. Brutus's Secure Center for Incurably Criminal Boys. They knew perfectly well that, as an underage wizard, Harry wasn't allowed to use magic outside Hogwarts, but they were still apt to blame him for anything that went wrong about the house. Harry had never been able to confide in them or tell them anything about his life in the wizarding world. The

very idea of going to them when they awoke, and telling them about his scar hurting him, and about his worries about Voldemort, was laughable.

And yet it was because of Voldemort that Harry had come to live with the Dursleys in the first place. If it hadn't been for Voldemort, Harry would not have had the lightning scar on his forehead. If it hadn't been for Voldemort, Harry would still have had parents...

Harry had been a year old the night that Voldemort -- the most powerful Dark wizard for a century, a wizard who had been gaining power steadily for eleven years -- arrived at his house and killed his father and mother. Voldemort had then turned his wand on Harry; he had performed the curse that had disposed of many full-grown witches and wizards in his steady rise to power -- and, incredibly, it had not worked. Instead of killing the small boy, the curse had rebounded upon Voldemort. Harry had survived with nothing but a lightning-shaped cut on his forehead, and Voldemort had been reduced to something barely alive. His powers gone, his life almost extinguished, Voldemort had fled; the terror in which the secret community of witches and wizards had lived for so long had lifted, Voldemort's followers had disbanded, and Harry Potter had become famous.

It had been enough of a shock for Harry to discover, on his eleventh birthday, that he was a wizard; it had been even more disconcerting to find out that everyone in the hidden wizarding world knew his name. Harry had arrived at Hogwarts to find that heads turned and whispers followed him wherever he went. But he was used to it now: At the end of this summer, he would be starting his fourth year at Hogwarts, and Harry was already counting the days until he would be back at the castle again.

But there was still a fortnight to go before he went back to school. He looked hopelessly around his room again, and his eye paused on the birthday cards his two best friends had sent him at the end of July. What would they say if Harry wrote to them and told them about his scar hurting?

At once, Hermione Granger's voice seemed to fill his head, shrill and panicky.

"Your scar hurt? Harry, that's really serious.... Write to Professor Dumbledore! And I'll go and check Common Magical Ailments and Afflictions.... Maybe there's something in there about curse scars. . . ."

Yes, that would be Hermione's advice: Go straight to the headmaster of Hogwarts, and in the meantime, consult a book. Harry stared out of the window at the inky blue-black sky. He doubted very much whether a book could help him now. As far as he knew, he was the only living person to have survived a curse like Voldemort's; it was highly unlikely, therefore, that he would find his symptoms listed in Common Magical Ailments and Afflictions. As for informing the headmaster, Harry had no idea where Dumbledore went during the summer holidays. He amused himself for a moment, picturing Dumbledore, with his long silver beard, full length wizard's robes, and pointed hat, stretched out on a beach

somewhere, rubbing suntan lotion onto his long crooked nose. Wherever Dumbledore was, though, Harry was sure that Hedwig would be able to find him; Harry's owl had never yet failed to deliver a letter to anyone, even without an address. But what would he write?

Dear Professor Dumbledore, Sorry to bother you, but my scar hurt this morning. Yours sincerely, Harry Potter.

Even inside his head the words sounded stupid.

And so he tried to imagine his other best friend, Ron Weasley's, reaction, and in a moment, Ron's red hair and long-nosed, freckled face seemed to swim before Harry, wearing a bemused expression.

"Your scar hurt? But ... but You-Know-Who can't be near you now, can he? I mean ... you'd know, wouldn't you? He'd be trying to do you in again, wouldn't be? I dunno, Harry, maybe curse scars always twinge a bit... I'll ask Dad. . . ."

Mr. Weasley was a fully qualified wizard who worked in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office at the Ministry of Magic, but he didn't have any particular expertise in the matter of curses, as far as Harry knew. In any case, Harry didn't like the idea of the whole Weasley family knowing that he, Harry, was getting jumpy about a few moments' pain. Mrs. Weasley would fuss worse than Hermione, and Fred and George, Ron's sixteen- year-old twin brothers, might think Harry was losing his nerve. The Weasleys were Harry's favorite family in the world; he was hoping that they might invite him to stay any time now (Ron had mentioned something about the Quidditch World Cup), and he somehow didn't want his visit punctuated with anxious inquiries about his scar.

Harry kneaded his forehead with his knuckles. What he really wanted (and it felt almost shameful to admit it to himself) was someone like - someone like a parent: an adult wizard whose advice he could ask without feeling stupid, someone who cared about him, who had had experience with Dark Magic....

And then the solution came to him. It was so simple, and so obvious, that he couldn't believe it had taken so long - Sirius.

Harry leapt up from the bed, hurried across the room, and sat down at his desk; he pulled a piece of parchment toward him, loaded his eagle-feather quill with ink, wrote Dear Sirius, then paused, wondering how best to phrase his problem, still marveling at the fact that he hadn't thought of Sirius straight away. But then, perhaps it wasn't so surprising - after all, he had only found out that Sirius was his godfather two months ago.

There was a simple reason for Sirius's complete absence from Harry's life until then - Sirius had been in Azkaban, the terrifying wizard jail guarded by creatures called dementors, sightless, soul-sucking fiends who had come to search for Sirius at Hogwarts when he had escaped. Yet Sirius had been innocent - the murders for which he had been convicted had been committed by Wormtail, Voldemort's

supporter, whom nearly everybody now believed dead. Harry, Ron, and Hermione knew otherwise, however; they had come face-to-face with Wormtail only the previous year, though only Professor Dumbledore had believed their story.

For one glorious hour, Harry had believed that he was leaving the Dursleys at last, because Sirius had offered him a home once his name had been cleared. But the chance had been snatched away from him - Wormtail had escaped before they could take him to the Ministry of Magic, and Sirius had had to flee for his life. Harry had helped him escape on the back of a hippogriff called Buckbeak, and since then, Sirius had been on the run. The home Harry might have had if Wormtail had not escaped had been haunting him all summer. It had been doubly hard to return to the Dursleys knowing that he had so nearly escaped them forever.

Nevertheless, Sirius had been of some help to Harry, even if he couldn't be with him. It was due to Sirius that Harry now had all his school things in his bedroom with him. The Dursleys had never allowed this before; their general wish of keeping Harry as miserable as possible, coupled with their fear of his powers, had led them to lock his school trunk in the cupboard under the stairs every summer prior to this. But their attitude had changed since they had found out that Harry had a dangerous murderer for a godfather - for Harry had conveniently forgotten to tell them that Sirius was innocent.

Harry had received two letters from Sirius since he had been back at Privet Drive. Both had been delivered, not by owls (as was usual with wizards), but by large, brightly colored tropical birds. Hedwig had not approved of these flashy intruders; she had been most reluctant to allow them to drink from her water tray before flying off again. Harry, on the other hand, had liked them; they put him in mind of palm trees and white sand, and he hoped that, wherever Sirius was (Sirius never said, in case the letters were intercepted), he was enjoying himself. Somehow, Harry found it hard to imaging dementors surviving for long in bright sunlight, perhapse that was why Sirius had gone South. Sirius's letters, which were now hidden beneath the highly useful loose floorboards under Harry's bed, sounded chearful, and in both of them he had reminded Harry to call on him if ever Harry needed to. Well, he needed to right now, all right...

Harry's lamp seemed to grow dimmer as the cold gray light that precedes sunrise slowly crept into the room. Finally, when the sun had risen, when his bedroom walls had turned gold, and when sounds of movement could be heard from Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia's room, Harry cleared his desk of crumpled pieces of parchment and reread his finished letter.

Dear Sirius,

Thanks for your last letter. That bird was enormous; it could hardly get through my window. Things are the same as usual here. Dudley's diet isn't going too well. My aunt found him smuggling doughnuts into his room yesterday. They told him they'd have to cut his pocket money if he keeps doing it, so he got really angry and chucked his PlayStation out of the window. That's a sort of computer thing you

can play games on. Bit stupid really, now he hasn't even got Mega-Mutilation Part Three to take his mind off things.

I'm okay, mainly because the Dursleys are terrified you might turn up and turn them all into bats if I ask you to.

A weird thing happened this morning, though. My scar hurt again. Last time that happened it was because Voldemort was at Hogwarts. But I don't reckon he can be anywhere near me now, can he? Do you know if curse scars sometimes hurt years afterward?

I'll send this with Hedwig when she gets back; she's off hunting at the moment. Say hello to Buckbeak for me. Harry

Yes, thought Harry, that looked all right. There was no point putting in the dream; he didn't want it to look as though he was too worried. He folded up the parchment and laid it aside on his desk, ready for when Hedwig returned. Then he got to his feet, stretched, and opened his wardrobe once more. Without glancing at his reflection he started to get dressed before going down to breakfast.

CHAPTER THREE - THE INVITATION

By the time Harry arrived in the kitchen, the three Dursleys were already seated around the table. None of them looked up as he entered or sat down. Uncle Vernon's large red face was hidden behind the morning's Daily Mail, and Aunt Petunia was cutting a grapefruit into quarters, her lips pursed over her horselike teeth.

Dudley looked furious and sulky, and somehow seemed to be taking up even more space than usual. This was saying something, as he always took up an entire side of the square table by himself. When Aunt Petunia put a quarter of unsweetened grapefruit onto Dudley's plate with a tremulous "There you are, Diddy darling," Dudley glowered at her. His life had taken a most unpleasant turn since he had come home for the summer with his end-of-year report.

Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia had managed to find excuses for his bad marks as usual: Aunt Petunia always insisted that Dudley was a very gifted boy whose teachers didn't understand him, while Uncle Vernon maintained that "he didn't want some swotty little nancy boy for a son anyway." They also skated over the accusations of bullying in the report - "He's a boisterous little boy, but he wouldn't hurt a fly!" Aunt Petunia had said tearfully.

However, at the bottom of the report there were a few well-chosen comments from the school nurse that not even Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia could explain away. No matter how much Aunt Petunia wailed that Dudley was big-boned, and that his poundage was really puppy fat, and that he was a growing boy who needed plenty of food, the fact remained that the school outfitters didn't stock knickerbockers big enough for him anymore. The school nurse had seen what Aunt Petunia's eyes - so sharp when it came to spotting fingerprints on her gleaming walls, and in observing the comings and goings of the neighbors - simply refused to see: that far from needing extra nourishment, Dudley had reached roughly the size and weight of a young killer whale.

So - after many tantrums, after arguments that shook Harry's bedroom floor, and many tears from Aunt Petunia - the new regime had begun. The diet sheet that had been sent by the Smeltings school nurse had been taped to the fridge, which had been emptied of all Dudley's favorite things - fizzy drinks and cakes, chocolate bars and burgers and filled instead with fruit and vegetables and the sorts of things that Uncle Vernon called "rabbit food." To make Dudley feel better about it all, Aunt Petunia had insisted that the whole family follow the diet too. She now passed a grapefruit quarter to Harry. He noticed that it was a lot smaller than Dudley's. Aunt Petunia seemed to feet that the best way to keep up Dudley's morale was to make sure that he did, at least, get more to eat than Harry.

But Aunt Petunia didn't know what was hidden under the loose floorboard upstairs. She had no idea that Harry was not following the diet at all. The moment he had got wind of the fact that he was expected to survive the summer on carrot

sticks, Harry had sent Hedwig to his friends with pleas for help, and they had risen to the occasion magnificently. Hedwig had returned from Hermione's house with a large box stuffed full of sugar-free snacks. (Hermione's parents were dentists.) Hagrid, the Hogwarts gamekeeper, had obliged with a sack full of his own homemade rock cakes. (Harry hadn't touched these; he had had too much experience of Hagrid's cooking.) Mrs. Weasley, however, had sent the family owl, Errol, with an enormous fruitcake and assorted meat pies. Poor Errol, who was elderly and feeble, had needed a full five days to recover from the journey. And then on Harry's birthday (which the Dursleys had completely ignored) he had received four superb birthday cakes, one each from Ron, Hermione, Hagrid, and Sirius. Harry still had two of them left, and so, looking forward to a real breakfast when he got back upstairs, he ate his grapefruit without complaint.

Uncle Vernon laid aside his paper with a deep sniff of disapproval and looked down at his own grapefruit quarter.

"Is this it?" he said grumpily to Aunt Petunia.

Aunt Petunia gave him a severe look, and then nodded pointedly at Dudley, who had already finished his own grapefruit quarter and was eyeing Harry's with a very sour look in his piggy little eyes.

Uncle Vernon gave a great sigh, which ruffled his large, bushy mustache, and picked up his spoon.

The doorbell rang. Uncle Vernon heaved himself out of his chair and set off down the hall. Quick as a flash, while his mother was occupied with the kettle, Dudley stole the rest of Uncle Vernon's grapefruit.

Harry heard talking at the door, and someone laughing, and Uncle Vernon answering curtly. Then the front door closed, and the sound of ripping paper came from the hall.

Aunt Petunia set the teapot down on the table and looked curiously around to see where Uncle Vernon had got to. She didn't have to wait long to find out; after about a minute, he was back. He looked livid.

"You," he barked at Harry. "In the living room. Now."

Bewildered, wondering what on earth he was supposed to have done this time, Harry got up and followed Uncle Vernon out of the kitchen and into the next room. Uncle Vernon closed the door sharply behind both of them.

"So," he said, marching over to the fireplace and turning to face Harry as though he were about to pronounce him under arrest. "So."

Harry would have dearly loved to have said, "So what?" but he didn't feel that Uncle Vernon's temper should be tested this early in the morning, especially when it was already under severe strain from lack of food. He therefore settled for

looking politely puzzled.

"This just arrived," said Uncle Vernon. He brandished a piece of purple writing paper at Harry. "A letter. About you."

Harry's confusion increased. Who would be writing to Uncle Vernon about him? Who did he know who sent letters by the postman?

Uncle Vernon glared at Harry, then looked down at the letter and began to read aloud:

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Dursley,

We have never been introduced, but I am sure you have heard a great deal from Harry about my son Ron.

As Harry might have told you, the final of the Quidditch World Cup takes place this Monday night, and my husband, Arthur, has just managed to get prime tickets through his connections at the Department of Magical Games and Sports.

I do hope you will allow us to take Harry to the match, as this really is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity; Britain hasn't hosted the cup for thirty years, and tickets are extremely hard to come by. We would of course be glad to have Harry stay for the remainder of the summer holidays, and to see him safely onto the train back to school.

It would be best for Harry to send us your answer as quickly as possible in the normal way, because the Muggle postman has never delivered to our house, and I am not sure he even knows where it is.

Hoping to see Harry soon,

Yours sincerely,

Molly Weasley

P.S. I do hope we've put enough stamps on.

Uncle Vernon finished reading, put his hand back into his breast pocket, and drew out something else.

"Look at this," he growled.

He held up the envelope in which Mrs. Weasley's letter had come, and Harry had to fight down a laugh. Every bit of it was covered in stamps except for a square inch on the front, into which Mrs. Weasley had squeezed the Dursleys' address in minute writing.

"She did put enough stamps on, then," said Harry, trying to sound as though Mrs. Weasley's was a mistake anyone could make. His uncle's eyes flashed.

"The postman noticed," he said through gritted teeth. "Very interested to know where this letter came from, he was. That's why he rang the doorbell. Seemed to think it was funny."

Harry didn't say anything. Other people might not understand why Uncle Vernon was making a fuss about too many stamps, but Harry had lived with the Dursleys too long not to know how touchy they were about anything even slightly out of the ordinary. Their worst fear was that someone would find out that they were connected (however distantly) with people like Mrs. Weasley.

Uncle Vernon was still glaring at Harry, who tried to keep his expression neutral. If he didn't do or say anything stupid, he might just be in for the treat of a lifetime. He waited for Uncle Vernon to say something, but he merely continued to glare. Harry decided to break the silence.

"So - can I go then?" he asked.

A slight spasm crossed Uncle Vernon's large purple face. The mustache bristled. Harry thought he knew what was going on behind the mustache: a furious battle as two of Uncle Vernon's most fundamental instincts came into conflict. Allowing Harry to go would make Harry happy, something Uncle Vernon had struggled against for thirteen years. On the other hand, allowing Harry to disappear to the Weasleys' for the rest of the summer would get rid of him two weeks earlier than anyone could have hoped, and Uncle Vernon hated having Harry in the house. To give himself thinking time, it seemed, he looked down at Mrs. Weasley's letter again.

"Who is this woman?" he said, staring at the signature with distaste.

"You've seen her," said Harry. "She's my friend Ron's mother, she was meeting him off the Hog - off the school train at the end of last term."

He had almost said "Hogwarts Express," and that was a sure way to get his uncle's temper up. Nobody ever mentioned the name of Harry's school aloud in the Dursley household.

Uncle Vernon screwed up his enormous face as though trying to remember something very unpleasant.

"Dumpy sort of woman?" he growled finally. "Load of children with red hair?"

Harry frowned. He thought it was a bit rich of Uncle Vernon to call anyone "dumpy," when his own son, Dudley, had finally achieved what he'd been threatening to do since the age of three, and become wider than he was tall.

Uncle Vernon was perusing the letter again.

"Quidditch," he muttered under his breath. "Quidditch - what is this rubbish?"

Harry felt a second stab of annoyance.

"It's a sport," he said shortly. "Played on broom- "

"All right, all right!" said Uncle Vernon loudly. Harry saw, with some satisfaction, that his uncle looked vaguely panicky. Apparently his nerves couldn't stand the sound of the word "broomsticks" in his living room. He took refuge in perusing the letter again. Harry saw his lips form the words "send us your answer ... in the normal way." He scowled.

"What does she mean, 'the normal way'?" he spat.

"Normal for us," said Harry, and before his uncle could stop him, he added, "you know, owl post. That's what's normal for wizards."

Uncle Vernon looked as outraged as if Harry had just uttered a disgusting swearword. Shaking with anger, he shot a nervous look through the window, as though expecting to see some of the neighbors with their ears pressed against the glass.

"How many times do I have to tell you not to mention that unnaturalness under my roof?" he hissed, his face now a rich plum color. "You stand there, in the clothes Petunia and I have put on your ungrateful back -"

"Only after Dudley finished with them," said Harry coldly, and indeed, he was dressed in a sweatshirt so large for him that he had had to roll back the sleeves five times so as to be able to use his hands, and which fell past the knees of his extremely baggy jeans.

"I will not be spoken to like that!" said Uncle Vernon, trembling with rage.

But Harry wasn't going to stand for this. Gone were the days when he had been forced to take every single one of the Dursleys' stupid rules. He wasn't following Dudley's diet, and he wasn't going to let Uncle Vernon stop him from going to the Quidditch World Cup, not if he could help it. Harry took a deep, steadying breath and then said, "Okay, I can't see the World Cup. Can I go now, then? Only I've got a letter to Sirius I want to finish. You know - my godfather."

He had done it, he had said the magic words. Now he watched the purple recede blotchily from Uncle Vernon's face, making it look like badly mixed black currant ice cream.

"You're - you're writing to him, are you?" said Uncle Vernon, in a would-be calm voice - but Harry had seen the pupils of his tiny eyes contract with sudden fear.

"Well - yeah," said Harry, casually. "It's been a while since he heard from me, and, you know, if he doesn't he might start thinking something's wrong."

He stopped there to enjoy the effect of these words. He could almost see the cogs working under Uncle Vernon's thick, dark, neatly parted hair. If he tried to stop Harry writing to Sirius, Sirius would think Harry was being mistreated. If he told Harry he couldn't go to the Quidditch World Cup, Harry would write and tell

Sirius, who would know Harry was being mistreated. There was only one thing for Uncle Vernon to do. Harry could see the conclusion forming in his uncle's mind as though the great mustached face were transparent. Harry tried not to smile, to keep his own face as blank as possible. And then -

"Well, all right then. You can go to this ruddy ... this stupid ... this World Cup thing. You write and tell these - these Weasleys they're to pick you up, mind. I haven't got time to go dropping you off all over the country. And you can spend the rest of the summer there. And you can tell your - your godfather ... tell him ... tell him you're going."

"Okay then," said Harry brightly.

He turned and walked toward the living room door, fighting the urge to jump into the air and whoop. He was going ... he was going to the Weasleys', he was going to watch the Quidditch World Cup!

Outside in the hall he nearly ran into Dudley, who had been lurking behind the door, clearly hoping to overhear Harry being told off. He looked shocked to see the broad grin on Harry's face.

"That was an excellent breakfast, wasn't it?" said Harry. "I feel really full, don't you?"

Laughing at the astonished look on Dudley's face, Harry took the stairs three at a time, and hurled himself back into his bedroom.

The first thing he saw was that Hedwig was back. She was sitting in her cage, staring at Harry with her enormous amber eyes, and clicking her beak in the way that meant she was annoyed about something. Exactly what was annoying her became apparent almost at once.

"OUCH!" said Harry as what appeared to be a small, gray, feathery tennis ball collided with the side of his head. Harry massaged the spot furiously, looking up to see what had hit him, and saw a minute owl, small enough to fit into the palm of his hand, whizzing excitedly around the room like a loose firework. Harry then realized that the owl had dropped a letter at his feet. Harry bent down, recognized Ron's handwriting, then tore open the envelope. Inside was a hastily scribbled note.

Harry - DAD GOT THE TICKETS - Ireland versus Bulgaria, Monday night. Mum's writing to the Muggles to ask you to stay. They might already have the letter, I don't know how fast Muggle post is. Thought I'd send this with Pig anyway.

Harry stared at the word "Pig," then looked up at the tiny owl now zooming around the light fixture on the ceiling. He had never seen anything that looked less like a pig. Maybe he couldn't read Ron's writing. He went back to the letter:

We're coming for you whether the Muggles like it or not, you can't miss the World Cup, only Mum and Dad reckon it's better if we pretend to ask their permission first. If they say yes, send Pig back with your answer pronto, and we'll come and get you at five o'clock on Sunday. If they say no, send Pig back pronto and we'll come and get you at five o'clock on Sunday anyway.

Hermione's arriving this afternoon. Percy's started work - the Department of International Magical Cooperation. Don't mention anything about Abroad while you're here unless you want the pants bored off you.

See you soon - Ron

"Calm down!" Harry said as the small owl flew low over his head, twittering madly with what Harry could only assume was pride at having delivered the letter to the right person. "Come here, I need you to take my answer back!"

The owl fluttered down on top of Hedwig's cage. Hedwig looked coldly up at it, as though daring it to try and come any closer.

Harry seized his eagle-feather quill once more, grabbed a fresh piece of parchment, and wrote:

Ron, it's all okay, the Muggles say I can come. See you five o'clock tomorrow. Can't wait. Harry

He folded this note up very small, and with immense difficulty, tied it to the tiny owl's leg as it hopped on the spot with excitement. The moment the note was secure, the owl was off again; it zoomed out of the window and out of sight.

Harry turned to Hedwig.

"Feeling up to a long journey?" he asked her.

Hedwig hooted in a dignified sort of a way.

"Can you take this to Sirius for me?" he said, picking up his letter. "Hang on ... I just want to finish it."

He unfolded the parchment and hastily added a postscript.

If you want to contact me, I'll be at my friend Ron Weasley's for the rest of the summer. His dad's got us tickets for the Quidditch World Cup!

The letter finished, he tied it to Hedwig's leg; she kept unusually still, as though determined to show him how a real post owl should behave.

"I'll be at Ron's when you get back, all right?" Harry told her.

She nipped his finger affectionately, then, with a soft swooshing noise, spread her enormous wings and soared out of the open window.

Harry watched her out of sight, then crawled under his bed, wrenched up the loose floorboard, and pulled out a large chunk of birthday cake. He sat there on the floor eating it, savoring the happiness that was flooding through him. He had cake, and Dudley had nothing but grapefruit; it was a bright summer's day, he would be leaving Privet Drive tomorrow, his scar felt perfectly normal again, and he was going to watch the Quidditch World Cup. It was hard, just now, to feel worried about anything - even Lord Voldemort.

CHAPTER FOUR - BACK TO THE BURROW

By twelve o'clock the next day, Harry's school trunk was packed with his school things and all his most prized possessions - the Invisibility Cloak he had inherited from his father, the broomstick he had gotten from Sirius, the enchanted map of Hogwarts he had been given by Fred and George Weasley last year. He had emptied his hiding place under the loose floorboard of all food, double-checked every nook and cranny of his bedroom for forgotten spellbooks or quills, and taken down the chart on the wall counting down the days to September the first, on which he liked to cross off the days remaining until his return to Hogwarts.

The atmosphere inside number four, Privet Drive was extremely tense. The imminent arrival at their house of an assortment of wizards was making the Dursleys uptight and irritable. Uncle Vernon had looked downright alarmed when Harry informed him that the Weasleys would be arriving at five o'clock the very next day.

"I hope you told them to dress properly, these people," he snarled at once. "I've seen the sort of stuff your lot wear. They'd better have the decency to put on normal clothes, that's all."

Harry felt a slight sense of foreboding. He had rarely seen Mr. or Mrs. Weasley wearing anything that the Dursleys would call "normal." Their children might don Muggle clothing during the holidays, but Mr. and Mrs. Weasley usually wore long robes in varying states of shabbiness. Harry wasn't bothered about what the neighbors would think, but he was anxious about how rude the Dursleys might be to the Weasleys if they turned up looking like their worst idea of wizards.

Uncle Vernon had put on his best suit. To some people, this might have looked like a gesture of welcome, but Harry knew it was because Uncle Vernon wanted to look impressive and intimidating. Dudley, on the other hand, looked somehow diminished. This was not because the diet was at last taking effect, but due to fright. Dudley had emerged from his last encounter with a fully grown wizard with a curly pig's tail poking out of the seat of his trousers, and Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon had had to pay for its removal at a private hospital in London. It wasn't altogether surprising, therefore, that Dudley kept running his hand nervously over his backside, and walking sideways from room to room, so as not to present the same target to the enemy.

Lunch was an almost silent meal. Dudley didn't even protest at the food (cottage cheese and grated celery). Aunt Petunia wasn't, eating anything at all. Her arms were folded, her lips were pursed, and she seemed to be chewing her tongue, as though biting back the furious diatribe she longed to throw at Harry.

"They'll be driving, of course?" Uncle Vernon barked across the table.

"Er," said Harry.

He hadn't thought of that. How were the Weasleys going to pick him up? They didn't have a car anymore; the old Ford Anglia they had once owned was currently running wild in the Forbidden Forest at Hogwarts. But Mr. Weasley had borrowed a Ministry of Magic car last year; possibly he would do the same today?

"I think so," said Harry.

Uncle Vernon snorted into his mustache. Normally, Uncle Vernon would have asked what car Mr. Weasley drove; he tended to judge other men by how big and expensive their cars were. But Harry doubted whether Uncle Vernon would have taken to Mr. Weasley even if he drove a Ferrari.

Harry spent most of the afternoon in his bedroom; he couldn't stand watching Aunt Petunia peer out through the net curtains every few seconds, as though there had been a warning about an escaped rhinoceros. Finally, at a quarter to five, Harry went back downstairs and into the living room.

Aunt Petunia was compulsively straightening cushions. Uncle Vernon was pretending to read the paper, but his tiny eyes were not moving, and Harry was sure he was really listening with all his might for the sound of an approaching car. Dudley was crammed into an armchair, his porky hands beneath him, clamped firmly around his bottom. Harry couldn't take the tension; he left the room and went and sat on the stairs in the hall, his eyes on his watch and his heart pumping fast from excitement and nerves.

But five o'clock came and then went. Uncle Vernon, perspiring slightly in his suit, opened the front door, peered up and down the street, then withdrew his head quickly.

"They're late!" he snarled at Harry.

I know," said Harry. "Maybe - er - the traffic's bad, or something."

Ten past five ... then a quarter past five ... Harry was starting to feel anxious himself now. At half past, he heard Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia conversing in terse mutters in the living room.

"No consideration at all."

"We might've had an engagement."

"Maybe they think they'll get invited to dinner if they're late."

"Well, they most certainly won't be," said Uncle Vernon, and Harry heard him stand up and start pacing the living room. "They'll take the boy and go, there'll be no hanging around. That's if they're coming at all. Probably mistaken the day. I daresay their kind don't set much store by punctuality. Either that or they drive some tin-pot car that's broken d- AAAAAAAARRRRRGH!"

Harry jumped up. From the other side of the living room door came the sounds of the three Dursleys scrambling, panic-stricken, across the room. Next moment Dudley came flying into the hall, looking terrified.

"What happened?" said Harry. "What's the matter?"

But Dudley didn't seem able to speak. Hands still clamped over his buttocks, he waddled as fast as he could into the kitchen. Harry hurried into the living room.

Loud bangings and scrapings were coming from behind the Dursleys' boarded-up fireplace, which had a fake coal fire plugged in front of it.

"What is it?" gasped Aunt Petunia, who had backed into the wall and was staring, terrified, toward the fire. "What is it, Vernon?"

But they were left in doubt barely a second longer. Voices could be heard from inside the blocked fireplace.

"Ouch! Fred, no - go back, go back, there's been some kind of mistake - tell George not to - OUCH! George, no, there's no room, go back quickly and tell Ron-"

"Maybe Harry can hear us, Dad - maybe he'll be able to let us out-"

There was a loud hammering of fists on the boards behind the electric fire.

"Harry? Harry, can you hear us?"

The Dursleys rounded on Harry like a pair of angry wolverines.

"What is this?" growled Uncle Vernon. "What's going on?"

"They - they've tried to get here by Floo powder," said Harry, fighting a mad desire to laugh. "They can travel by fire - only you've blocked the fireplace - hang on -"

He approached the fireplace and called through the boards.

"Mr. Weasley? Can you hear me?"

The hammering stopped. Somebody inside the chimney piece said, "Shh!"

"Mr. Weasley, it's Harry ... the fireplace has been blocked up. You won't be able to get through there."

"Damn!" said Mr. Weasley's voice. "What on earth did they want to block up the fireplace for?"

"They've got an electric fire," Harry explained.

"Really?" said Mr. Weasley's voice excitedly. "Eclectic, you say? With a plug? Gracious, I must see that.... Let's think ... ouch, Ron!"

Ron's voice now joined the others'.

"What are we doing here? Has something gone wrong?"

"Oh no, Ron," came Fred's voice, very sarcastically. "No, this is exactly where we wanted to end up."

"Yeah, we're having the time of our lives here," said George, whose voice sounded muffled, as though he was squashed against the wall.

"Boys, boys. . ." said Mr. Weasley vaguely. "I'm trying to think what to do.... Yes ... only way. . . Stand back, Harry."

Harry retreated to the sofa. Uncle Vernon, however, moved forward.

"Wait a moment!" he bellowed at the fire. "What exactly are you going to -"

BANG.

The electric fire shot across the room as the boarded-up fireplace burst outward, expelling Mr. Weasley, Fred, George, and Ron in a cloud of rubble and loose chippings. Aunt Petunia shrieked and fell backward over the coffee table; Uncle Vernon caught her before she hit the floor, and gaped, speechless, at the Weasleys, all of whom had bright red hair, including Fred and George, who were identical to the last freckle.

"That's better," panted Mr. Weasley, brushing dust from his long green robes and straightening his glasses. "Ah - you must be Harry's aunt and uncle!"

Tall, thin, and balding, he moved toward Uncle Vernon, his hand outstretched, but Uncle Vernon backed away several paces, dragging Aunt Petunia. Words utterly failed Uncle Vernon. His best suit was covered in white dust, which had settled in his hair and mustache and made him look as though he had just aged thirty years.

"Er - yes - sorry about that," said Mr. Weasley, lowering his hand and looking over his shoulder at the blasted fireplace. "It's all my fault. It just didn't occur to me that we wouldn't be able to get out at the other end. I had your fireplace connected to the Floo Network, you see - just for an afternoon, you know, so we could get Harry. Muggle fireplaces aren't supposed to be connected, strictly speaking - but I've got a useful contact at the Floo Regulation Panel and he fixed it for me. I can put it right in a jiffy, though, don't worry. I'll light a fire to send the boys back, and then I can repair your fireplace before I Disapparate."

Harry was ready to bet that the Dursleys hadn't understood a single word of this. They were still gaping at Mr. Weasley, thunderstruck. Aunt Petunia staggered upright again and hid behind Uncle Vernon.

"Hello, Harry!" said Mr. Weasley brightly. "Got your trunk ready?"

"It's upstairs," said Harry, grinning back.

"We'll get it," said Fred at once. Winking at Harry, he and George left the room. They knew where Harry's bedroom was, having once rescued him from it in the dead of night. Harry suspected that Fred and George were hoping for a glimpse of Dudley; they had heard a lot about him from Harry.

"Well," said Mr. Weasley, swinging his arms slightly, while he tried to find words to break the very nasty silence. "Very - erm - very nice place you've got here."

As the usually spotless living room was now covered in dust and bits of brick, this remark didn't go down too well with the Dursleys. Uncle Vernon's face purpled once more, and Aunt Petunia started chewing her tongue again. However, they seemed too scared to actually say anything.

Mr. Weasley was looking around. He loved everything to do with Muggles. Harry could see him itching to go and examine the television and the video recorder.

"They run off eckeltricity, do they?" he said knowledgeably. "Ah yes, I can see the plugs. I collect plugs," he added to Uncle Vernon. "And batteries. Got a very large collection of batteries. My wife thinks I'm mad, but there you are."

Uncle Vernon clearly thought Mr. Weasley was mad too. He moved ever so slightly to the right, screening Aunt Petunia from view, as though he thought Mr. Weasley might suddenly run at them and attack.

Dudley suddenly reappeared in the room. Harry could hear the clunk of his trunk on the stairs, and knew that the sounds had scared Dudley out of the kitchen. Dudley edged along the wall, gazing at Mr. Weasley with terrified eyes, and attempted to conceal himself behind his mother and father. Unfortunately, Uncle Vernon's bulk, while sufficient to hide bony Aunt Petunia, was nowhere near enough to conceal Dudley.

"Ah, this is your cousin, is it, Harry?" said Mr. Weasley, taking another brave stab at making conversation.

"Yep," said Harry, "that's Dudley."

He and Ron exchanged glances and then quickly looked away from each other; the temptation to burst out laughing was almost overwhelming. Dudley was still clutching his bottom as though afraid it might fall off. Mr. Weasley, however, seemed genuinely concerned at Dudley's peculiar behavior. Indeed, from the tone of his voice when he next spoke, Harry was quite sure that Mr. Weasley thought Dudley was quite as mad as the Dursleys thought he was, except that Mr. Weasley felt sympathy rather than fear.

"Having a good holiday, Dudley?" he said kindly.

Dudley whimpered. Harry saw his hands tighten still harder over his massive backside.

Fred and George came back into the room carrying Harry's school trunk. They

glanced around as they entered and spotted Dudley. Their faces cracked into identical evil grins.

"Ah, right," said Mr. Weasley. "Better get cracking then."

He pushed up the sleeves of his robes and took out his wand. Harry saw the Dursleys draw back against the wall as one.

"Incendio!" said Mr. Weasley, pointing his wand at the hole in the wall behind him.

Flames rose at once in the fireplace, crackling merrily as though they had been burning for hours. Mr. Weasley took a small drawstring bag from his pocket, untied it, took a pinch of the powder inside, and threw it onto the flames, which turned emerald green and roared higher than ever.

"Off you go then, Fred," said Mr. Weasley.

"Coming," said Fred. "Oh no - hang on -"

A bag of sweets had spilled out of Fred's pocket and the contents were now rolling in every direction - big, fat toffees in brightly colored wrappers.

Fred scrambled around, cramming them back into his pocket, then gave the Dursleys a cheery wave, stepped forward, and walked right into the fire, saying "the Burrow!" Aunt Petunia gave a little shuddering gasp. There was a whooshing sound, and Fred vanished.

"Right then, George," said Mr. Weasley, "you and the trunk."

Harry helped George carry the trunk forward into the flames and turn it onto its end so that he could hold it better. Then, with a second whoosh, George had cried "the Burrow!" and vanished too.

"Ron, you next," said Mr. Weasley.

"See you," said Ron brightly to the Dursleys. He grinned broadly at Harry, then stepped into the fire, shouted "the Burrow!" and disappeared.

Now Harry and Mr. Weasley alone remained.

"Well . . . 'bye then," Harry said to the Dursleys.

They didn't say anything at all. Harry moved toward the fire, but just as he reached the edge of the hearth, Mr. Weasley put out a hand and held him back. He was looking at the Dursleys in amazement.

"Harry said good-bye to you," he said. "Didn't you hear him?"

"It doesn't matter," Harry muttered to Mr. Weasley. "Honestly, I don't care."

Mr. Weasley did not remove his hand from Harry's shoulder.

"You aren't going to see your nephew till next summer," he said to Uncle Vernon in mild indignation. "Surely you're going to say good-bye?"

Uncle Vernon's face worked furiously. The idea of being taught consideration by a man who had just blasted away half his living room wall seemed to be causing him intense suffering. But Mr. Weasley's wand was still in his hand, and Uncle Vernon's tiny eyes darted to it once, before he said, very resentfully, "Good-bye, then."

"See you," said Harry, putting one foot forward into the green flames, which felt pleasantly like warm breath. At that moment, however, a horrible gagging sound erupted behind him, and Aunt Petunia started to scream.

Harry wheeled around. Dudley was no longer standing behind his parents. He was kneeling beside the coffee table, and he was gagging and sputtering on a foot-long, purple, slimy thing that was protruding from his mouth. One bewildered second later, Harry realized that the foot-long thing was Dudley's tongue - and that a brightly colored toffee wrapper lay on the floor before him.

Aunt Petunia hurled herself onto the ground beside Dudley, seized the end of his swollen tongue, and attempted to wrench it out of his mouth; unsurprisingly, Dudley yelled and sputtered worse than ever, trying to fight her off. Uncle Vernon was bellowing and waving his arms around, and Mr. Weasley had to shout to make himself heard.

"Not to worry, I can sort him out!" he yelled, advancing on Dudley with his wand outstretched, but Aunt Petunia screamed worse than ever and threw herself on top of Dudley, shielding him from Mr. Weasley.

"No, really!" said Mr. Weasley desperately. "It's a simple process it was the toffee - my son Fred - real practical joker - but it's only an Engorgement Charm - at least, I think it is - please, I can correct it -"

But far from being reassured, the Dursleys became more panic- stricken; Aunt Petunia was sobbing hysterically, tugging Dudley's tongue as though determined to rip it out; Dudley appeared to be suffocating under the combined pressure of his mother and his tongue; and Uncle Vernon, who had lost control completely, seized a china figure from on top of the sideboard and threw it very hard at Mr. Weasley, who ducked, causing the ornament to shatter in the blasted fireplace.

"Now really!" said Mr. Weasley angrily, brandishing his wand. "I'm trying to help!"

Bellowing like a wounded hippo, Uncle Vernon snatched up another ornament.

"Harry, go! Just go!" Mr. Weasley shouted, his wand on Uncle Vernon. "I'll sort this out!"

Harry didn't want to miss the fun, but Uncle Vernon's second ornament narrowly

missed his left ear, and on balance he thought it best to leave the situation to Mr. Weasley. He stepped into the fire, looking over his shoulder as he said "the Burrow!" His last fleeting glimpse of the living room was of Mr. Weasley blasting a third ornament out of Uncle Vernon's hand with his wand, Aunt Petunia screaming and lying on top of Dudley, and Dudley's tongue lolling around like a great slimy python. But next moment Harry had begun to spin very fast, and the Dursleys' living room was whipped out of sight in a rush of emerald-green flames.

CHAPTER FIVE - WEASLEYS' WIZARD WHEEZES

Harry spun faster and faster, elbows tucked tightly to his sides, blurred fireplaces flashing past him, until he started to feel sick and closed his eyes. Then, when at last he felt himself slowing down, he threw out his hands and came to a halt in time to prevent himself from falling face forward out of the Weasleys' kitchen fire.

"Did he eat it?" said Fred excitedly, holding out a hand to pull Harry to his fee

"Yeah," said Harry, straightening up. "What was it?"

"Ton-Tongue Toffee," said Fred brightly. "George and I invented them, and we've been looking for someone to test them on all summer. . . ."

The tiny kitchen exploded with laughter; Harry looked around and saw that Ron and George were sitting at the scrubbed wooden table with two red-haired people Harry had never seen before, though he knew immediately who they must be: Bill and Charlie, the two eldest Weasley brothers.

"How're you doing, Harry?" said the nearer of the two, grinning at him and holding out a large hand, which Harry shook, feeling calluses and blisters under his fingers. This had to be Charlie, who worked with dragons in Romania. Charlie was built like the twins, shorter and stockier than Percy and Ron, who were both long and lanky. He had a broad, good-natured face, which was weather-beaten and so freckly that he looked almost tanned; his arms were muscular, and one of them had a large, shiny burn on it.

Bill got to his feet, smiling, and also shook Harry's hand. Bill came as something of a surprise. Harry knew that he worked for the wizarding bank, Gringotts, and that Bill had been Head Boy at Hogwarts; Harry had always imagined Bill to be an older version of Percy: fussy about rule-breaking and fond of bossing everyone around. However, Bill was - there was no other word for it - cool. He was tall, with long hair that he had tied back in a ponytail. He was wearing an earring with what looked like a fang dangling from it. Bill's clothes would not have looked out of place at a rock concert, except that Harry recognized his boots to be made, not of leather, but of dragon hide.

Before any of them could say anything else, there was a faint popping noise, and Mr. Weasley appeared out of thin air at George's shoulder. He was looking angrier than Harry had ever seen him.

"That wasn't funny Fred!" he shouted. "What on earth did you give that Muggle boy?"

"I didn't give him anything," said Fred, with another evil grin. I just dropped it.... It was his fault he went and ate it, I never told him to."

"You dropped it on purpose!" roared Mr. Weasley. "You knew he'd eat it, you knew he was on a diet -"

"How big did his tongue get?" George asked eagerly.

"It was four feet long before his parents would let me shrink it!"

Harry and the Weasleys roared with laughter again.

"It isn't funny!" Mr. Weasley shouted. "That sort of behavior seriously undermines wizard-Muggle relations! I spend half my life campaigning against the mistreatment of Muggles, and my own sons

"We didn't give it to him because he's a Muggle!" said Fred indignantly.

"No, we gave it to him because he's a great bullying git," said George. "Isn't he, Harry?"

"Yeah, he is, Mr. Weasley," said Harry earnestly.

"That's not the point!" raged Mr. Weasley. "You wait until I tell your mother -"

"Tell me what?" said a voice behind them.

Mrs. Weasley had just entered the kitchen. She was a short, plump woman with a very kind face, though her eyes were presently narrowed with suspicion.

"Oh hello, Harry, dear," she said, spotting him and smiling. Then her eyes snapped back to her husband. "Tell me what, Arthur?"

Mr. Weasley hesitated. Harry could tell that, however angry he was with Fred and George, he hadn't really intended to tell Mrs. Weasley what had happened. There was a silence, while Mr. Weasley eyed his wife nervously. Then two girls appeared in the kitchen doorway behind Mrs. Weasley. One, with very bushy brown hair and rather large front teeth, was Harry's and Ron's friend, Hermione Granger. The other, who was small and red-haired, was Ron's younger sister, Ginny. Both of them smiled at Harry, who grinned back, which made Ginny go scarlet - she had been very taken with Harry ever since his first visit to the Burrow.

"Tell me what, Arthur?" Mrs. Weasley repeated, in a dangerous sort of voice.

"It's nothing, Molly," mumbled Mr. Weasley, "Fred and George just - but I've had words with them -"

"What have they done this time?" said Mrs. Weasley. "If it's got anything to do with Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes -"

"Why don't you show Harry where he's sleeping, Ron?" said Hermione from the doorway.

"He knows where he's sleeping," said Ron, "in my room, he slept there last -"

"We can all go," said Hermione pointedly.

"Oh," said Ron, cottoning on. "Right."

"Yeah, we'll come too," said George.

"You stay where you are!" snarled Mrs. Weasley.

Harry and Ron edged out of the kitchen, and they, Hermione, and Ginny set off along the narrow hallway and up the rickety staircase that zigzagged through the house to the upper stories.

"What are Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes?" Harry asked as they climbed.

Ron and Ginny both laughed, although Hermione didn't.

"Mum found this stack of order forms when she was cleaning Fred and George's room," said Ron quietly. "Great long price lists for stuff they've invented. Joke stuff, you know. Fake wands and trick sweets, loads of stuff. It was brilliant, I never knew they'd been inventing all that . . ."

"We've been hearing explosions out of their room for ages, but we never thought they were actually making things," said Ginny. "We thought they just liked the noise."

"Only, most of the stuff - well, all of it, really - was a bit dangerous," said Ron, "and, you know, they were planning to sell it at Hogwarts to make some money, and Mum went mad at them. Told them they weren't allowed to make any more of it, and burned all the order forms.... She's furious at them anyway. They didn't get as many O.W.L.s as she expected."

O.W.L.s were Ordinary Wizarding Levels, the examinations Hogwarts students took at the age of fifteen.

"And then there was this big row," Ginny said, "because Mum wants them to go into the Ministry of Magic like Dad, and they told her all they want to do is open a joke shop."

Just then a door on the second landing opened, and a face poked out wearing horn-rimmed glasses and a very annoyed expression.

"Hi, Percy," said Harry.

"Oh hello, Harry," said Percy. "I was wondering who was making all the noise. I'm trying to work in here, you know I've got a report to finish for the office - and it's rather difficult to concentrate when people keep thundering up and down the stairs."

"We're not thundering, "said Ron irritably. "We're walking. Sorry if we've

disturbed the top-secret workings of the Ministry of Magic."

"What are you working on?" said Harry.

"A report for the Department of International Magical Cooperation," said Percy smugly. "We're trying to standardize cauldron thickness. Some of these foreign imports are just a shade too thin - leakages have been increasing at a rate of almost three percent a year -"

"That'll change the world, that report will," said Ron. "Front page of the Daily Prophet, I expect, cauldron leaks."

Percy went slightly pink.

"You might sneer, Ron," he said heatedly, "but unless some sort of international law is imposed we might well find the market flooded with flimsy, shallow-bottomed products that seriously endanger -"

"Yeah, yeah, all right," said Ron, and he started off upstairs again. Percy slammed his bedroom door shut. As Harry, Hermione, and Ginny followed Ron up three more flights of stairs, shouts from the kitchen below echoed up to them. It sounded as though Mr. Weasley had told Mrs. Weasley about the toffees.

The room at the top of the house where Ron slept looked much as it had the last time that Harry had come to stay: the same posters of Ron's favorite Quidditch team, the Chudley Cannons, were whirling and waving on the walls and sloping ceiling, and the fish tank on the windowsill, which had previously held frog spawn, now contained one extremely large frog. Ron's old rat, Scabbers, was here no more, but instead there was the tiny gray owl that had delivered Ron's letter to Harry in Privet Drive. It was hopping up and down in a small cage and twittering madly.

"Shut up, Pig," said Ron, edging his way between two of the four beds that had been squeezed into the room. "Fred and George are in here with us, because Bill and Charlie are in their room," he told Harry. "Percy gets to keep his room all to himself because he's got to work."

"Er - why are you calling that owl Pig?" Harry asked Ron.

"Because he's being stupid," said Ginny, "Its proper name is Pigwidgeon."

"Yeah, and that's not a stupid name at all," said Ron sarcastically. "Ginny named him," he explained to Harry. "She reckons it's sweet. And I tried to change it, but it was too late, he won't answer to anything else. So now he's Pig. I've got to keep him up here because he annoys Errol and Hermes. He annoys me too, come to that.

Pigwidgeon zoomed happily around his cage, hooting shrilly. Harry knew Ron too well to take him seriously. He had moaned continually about his old rat, Scabbers, but had been most upset when Hermione's cat, Crookshanks, appeared to have

eaten him.

"Where's Crookshanks?" Harry asked Hermione now.

"Out in the garden, I expect," she said. "He likes chasing gnomes. He's never seen any before."

"Percy's enjoying work, then?" said Harry, sitting down on one of the beds and watching the Chudley Cannons zooming in and out of the posters on the ceiling.

"Enjoying it?" said Ron darkly. "I don't reckon he'd come home if Dad didn't make him. He's obsessed. Just don't get him onto the subject of his boss. According to Mr. Crouch ... as I was saying to Mr. Crouch ... Mr. Crouch is of the opinion ... Mr. Crouch was telling me ... They'll be announcing their engagement any day now."

"Have you had a good summer, Harry?" said Hermione. "Did you get our food parcels and everything?"

"Yeah, thanks a lot, " said Harry. "They saved my life, those cakes.

"And have you heard from -?" Ron began, but at a look from Hermione he fell silent. Harry knew Ron had been about to ask about Sirius. Ron and Hermione had been so deeply involved in helping Sirius escape from the Ministry of Magic that they were almost as concerned about Harry's godfather as he was. However, discussing him in front of Ginny was a bad idea. Nobody but themselves and Professor Dumbledore knew about how Sirius had escaped, or believed in his innocence.

"I think they've stopped arguing," said Hermione, to cover the awkward moment, because Ginny was looking curiously from Ron to Harry. "Shall we go down and help your mum with dinner?"

"Yeah, all right," said Ron. The four of them left Ron's room and went back downstairs to find Mrs. Weasley alone in the kitchen, looking extremely bad-tempered.

"We're eating out in the garden," she said when they came in. "There's just not room for eleven people in here. Could you take the plates outside, girls? Bill and Charlie are setting up the tables. Knives and forks, please, you two," she said to Ron and Harry, pointing her wand a little more vigorously than she had intended at a pile of potatoes in the sink, which shot out of their skins so fast that they ricocheted off the walls and ceiling.

"Oh for heaven's sake," she snapped, now directing her wand at a dustpan, which hopped off the sideboard and started skating across the floor, scooping up the potatoes. "Those two!" she burst out savagely, now pulling pots and pans out of a cupboard, and Harry knew she meant Fred and George. I don't know what's going to happen to them, I really don't. No ambition, unless you count making as much

trouble as they possibly can...."

Mrs. Weasley slammed a large copper saucepan down on the kitchen table and began to wave her wand around inside it. A creamy sauce poured from the wand tip as she stirred.

"It's not as though they haven't got brains, she continued irritably, taking the saucepan over to the stove and lighting it with a further poke of her wand, "but they're wasting them, and unless they pull themselves together soon, they'll be in real trouble. I've had more owls from Hogwarts about them than the rest put together. If they carry on the way they're going, they'll end up in front of the Improper Use of Magic Office."

Mrs. Weasley jabbed her wand at the cutlery drawer, which shot open. Harry and Ron both jumped out of the way as several knives soared out of it, flew across the kitchen, and began chopping the potatoes, which had just been tipped back into the sink by the dustpan.

"I don't know where we went wrong with them," said Mrs. Weasley, putting down her wand and starting to pull out still more saucepans. "It's been the same for years, one thing after another, and they won't listen to - OH NOT AGAIN!"

She had picked up her wand from the table, and it had emitted a loud squeak and turned into a giant rubber mouse.

"One of their fake wands again!" she shouted. "How many times have I told them not to leave them lying around?"

She grabbed her real wand and turned around to find that the sauce on the stove was smoking.

"C'mon," Ron said hurriedly to Harry, seizing a handful of cutlery from the open drawer, "let's go and help Bill and Charlie."

They left Mrs. Weasley and headed out the back door into the yard.

They had only gone a few paces when Hermione's bandy-legged ginger cat, Crookshanks, came pelting out of the garden, bottle-brush tail held high in the air, chasing what looked like a muddy potato on legs. Harry recognized it instantly as a gnome. Barely ten inches high, its horny little feet pattered very fast as it sprinted across the yard and dived headlong into one of the Wellington boots that lay scattered around the door. Harry could hear the gnome giggling madly as Crookshanks inserted a paw into the boot, trying to reach it. Meanwhile, a very loud crashing noise was coming from the other side of the house. The source of the commotion was revealed as they entered the garden, and saw that Bill and Charlie both had their wands out, and were making two battered old tables fly high above the lawn, smashing into each other, each attempting to knock the other's out of the air. Fred and George were cheering, Ginny was laughing, and Hermione was hovering near the hedge, apparently torn between amusement and anxiety.

Bill's table caught Charlie's with a huge bang and knocked one of its legs off. There was a clatter from overhead, and they all looked up to see Percy's head poking out of a window on the second floor.

"Will you keep it down?!" he bellowed.

"Sorry, Perce," said Bill, grinning. "How're the cauldron bottoms coming on?"

"Very badly," said Percy peevishly, and he slammed the window shut. Chuckling, Bill and Charlie directed the tables safely onto the grass, end to end, and then, with a flick of his wand, Bill reattached the table leg and conjured tablecloths from nowhere.

By seven o'clock, the two tables were groaning under dishes and dishes of Mrs. Weasley's excellent cooking, and the nine Weasleys, Harry, and Hermione were settling themselves down to eat beneath a clear, deep-blue sky. To somebody who had been living on meals of increasingly stale cake all summer, this was paradise, and at first, Harry listened rather than talked as he helped himself to chicken and ham pie, boiled potatoes, and salad.

At the far end of the table, Percy was telling his father all about his report on cauldron bottoms.

"I've told Mr. Crouch that I'll have it ready by Tuesday," Percy was saying pompously. "That's a bit sooner than he expected it, but I like to keep on top of things. I think he'll be grateful I've done it in good time, I mean, its extremely busy in our department just now, what with all the arrangements for the World Cup. We're just not getting the support we need from the Department of Magical Games and Sports. Ludo Bagman -"

"I like Ludo," said Mr. Weasley mildly. "He was the one who got us such good tickets for the Cup. I did him a bit of a favor: His brother, Otto, got into a spot of trouble - a lawnmower with unnatural powers - I smoothed the whole thing over."

"Oh Bagman's likable enough, of course," said Percy dismissively, "but how he ever got to be Head of Department ... when I compare him to Mr. Crouch! I can't see Mr. Crouch losing a member of our department and not trying to find out what's happened to them. You realize Bertha Jorkins has been missing for over a month now? Went on holiday to Albania and never came back?"

"Yes, I was asking Ludo about that," said Mr. Weasley, frowning. "He says Bertha's gotten lost plenty of times before now - though must say, if it was someone in my department, I'd be worried. . . ."

"Oh Bertha's hopeless, all right," said Percy. "I hear she's been shunted from department to department for years, much more trouble than she's worth ... but all the same, Bagman ought to be trying to find her. Mr. Crouch has been taking a personal interest, she worked in our department at one time, you know, and I think Mr. Crouch was quite fond of her - but Bagman just keeps laughing and saying she

probably misread the map and ended up in Australia instead of Albania. However" - Percy heaved an impressive sigh and took a deep swig of elderflower wine - "we've got quite enough on our plates at the Department of International Magical Cooperation without trying to find members of other departments too. As you know, we've got another big event to organize right after the World Cup."

Percy cleared his throat significantly and looked down toward the end of the table where Harry, Ron, and Hermione were sitting. "You know the one I'm talking about, Father." He raised his voice slightly. "The top-secret one."

Ron rolled his eyes and muttered to Harry and Hermione, "He's been trying to get us to ask what that event is ever since he started work. Probably an exhibition of thick-bottomed cauldrons."

In the middle of the table, Mrs. Weasley was arguing with Bill about his earring, which seemed to be a recent acquisition.

". . . with a horrible great fang on it. Really, Bill, what do they say at the bank?"

"Mum,.no one at the bank gives a damn how I dress as long as I bring home plenty of treasure," said Bill patiently.

"And your hair's getting silly, dear," said Mrs. Weasley, fingering her wand lovingly." I wish you'd let me give it a trim. . . ."

"I like it," said Ginny, who was sitting beside Bill. "You're so old-fashioned, Mum. Anyway, it's nowhere near as long as Professor Dumbledore's...."

Next to Mrs. Weasley, Fred, George, and Charlie were all talking spiritedly about the World Cup.

"It's got to be Ireland," said Charlie thickly, through a mouthful of potato. "They flattened Peru in the semifinals."

"Bulgaria has got Viktor Krum, though," said Fred.

"Krum's one decent player, Ireland has got seven," said Charlie shortly. "I wish England had got through. That was embarrassing, that was."

"What happened?" said Harry eagerly, regretting more than ever his isolation from the wizarding world when he was stuck on Privet Drive.

"Went down to Transylvania, three hundred and ninety to ten," said Charlie gloomily. "Shocking performance. And Wales lost to Uganda, and Scotland was slaughtered by Luxembourg."

Harry had been on the Gryffindor House Quidditch team ever since his first year at Hogwarts and owned one of the best racing brooms in the world, a Firebolt. Flying came more naturally to Harry than anything else in the magical world, and he played in the position of Seeker on the Gryffindor House team.

Mr. Weasley conjured up candles to light the darkening garden before they had their homemade strawberry ice cream, and by the time they had finished, moths were fluttering low over the table, and the warm air was perfumed with the smells of grass and honeysuckle. Harry was feeling extremely well fed and at peace with the world as he watched several gnomes sprinting through the rosebushes, laughing madly and closely pursued by Crookshanks.

Ron looked carefully up the table to check that the rest of the family were all busy talking, then he said very quietly to Harry, "So - have you heard from Sirius lately?"

Hermione looked around, listening closely.

"Yeah," said Harry softly, "twice. He sounds okay. I wrote to him yesterday. He might write back while I'm here."

He suddenly remembered the reason he had written to Sirius, and for a moment was on the verge of telling Ron and Hermione about his scar hurting again, and about the dream that had awoken him ... but he really didn't want to worry them just now, not when he himself was feeling so happy and peaceful.

"Look at the time," Mrs. Weasley said suddenly, checking her wristwatch. "You really should be in bed, the whole lot of you you'll be up at the crack of dawn to get to the Cup. Harry, if you leave your school list out, I'll get your things for you tomorrow in Diagon Alley. I'm getting everyone else's. There might not be time after the World Cup, the match went on for five days last time."

"Wow - hope it does this time!" said Harry enthusiastically.

"Well, I certainly don't," said Percy sanctimoniously. "I shudder to think what the state of my in-tray would be if I was away from work for five days."

"Yeah, someone might slip dragon dung in it again, eh, Perce?" said Fred.

"That was a sample of fertilizer from Norway!" said Percy, going very red in the face. "It was nothing personal!"

"It was," Fred whispered to Harry as they got up from the table. "We sent it."

CHAPTER SIX - THE PORTKEY

Harry felt as though he had barely lain down to steep in Ron's room when he was being shaken awake by Mrs. Weasley.

"Time to go, Harry, dear," she whispered, moving away to wake Ron.

Harry felt around for his glasses, put them on, and sat up. It was still dark outside. Ron muttered indistinctly as his mother roused him. At the foot of Harry's mattress he saw two large, disheveled shapes emerging from tangles of blankets.

"'S' time already?" said Fred groggily.

They dressed in silence, too sleepy to talk, then, yawning and stretching, the four of them headed downstairs into the kitchen.

Mrs. Weasley was stirring the contents of a large pot on the stove, while Mr. Weasley was sitting at the table, checking a sheaf of large parchment tickets. He looked up as the boys entered and spread his arms so that they could see his clothes more clearly. He was wearing what appeared to be a golfing sweater and a very old pair of jeans, slightly too big for him and held up with a thick leather belt.

"What d'you think?" he asked anxiously. "We're supposed to go incognito - do I look like a Muggle, Harry?"

"Yeah," said Harry, smiling, "very good."

"Where're Bill and Charlie and Per-Per-Percy?" said George, failing to stifle a huge yawn.

"Well, they're Apparating, aren't they?" said Mrs. Weasley, heaving the large pot over to the table and starting to ladle porridge into bowls. "So they can have a bit of a lie-in."

Harry knew that Apparating meant disappearing from one place and reappearing almost instantly in another, but had never known any Hogwarts student to do it, and understood that it was very difficult.

"So they're still in bed?" said Fred grumpily, pulling his bowl of porridge toward him. "Why can't we Apparate too?"

"Because you're not of age and you haven't passed your test," snapped Mrs. Weasley. "And where have those girls got to?"

She bustled out of the kitchen and they heard her climbing the stairs.

"You have to pass a test to Apparate?" Harry asked.

"Oh yes," said Mr. Weasley, tucking the tickets safely into the back pocket of his jeans. "The Department of Magical Transportation had to fine a couple of people the other day for Apparating without a license. It's not easy, Apparition, and when it's not done property it can lead to nasty complications. This pair I'm talking about went and splinched themselves."

Everyone around the table except Harry winced.

"Er - splinched?" said Harry.

"They left half of themselves behind," said Mr. Weasley, now spooning large amounts of treacle onto his porridge. "So, of course, they were stuck. Couldn't move either way. Had to wait for the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad to sort them out. Meant a fair old bit of paperwork, I can tell you, what with the Muggles who spotted the body parts they'd left behind....."

Harry had a sudden vision of a pair of legs and an eyeball lying abandoned on the pavement of Privet Drive.

"Were they okay?" he asked, startled.

"Oh yes," said Mr. Weasley matter-of-factly. "But they got a heavy fine, and I don't think they'll be trying it again in a hurry. You don't mess around with Apparition. There are plenty of adult wizards who don't bother with it. Prefer brooms - slower, but safer."

"But Bill and Charlie and Percy can all do it?"

"Charlie had to take the test twice," said Fred, grinning. "He failed the first time. Apparated five miles south of where he meant to, right on top of some poor old dear doing her shopping, remember?"

"Yes, well, he passed the second time," said Mrs. Weasley, marching back into the kitchen amid hearty sniggers.

"Percy only passed two weeks ago," said George. "He's been Apparating downstairs every morning since, just to prove he can."

There were footsteps down the passageway and Hermione and Ginny came into the kitchen, both looking pale and drowsy.

"Why do we have to be up so early?" Ginny said, rubbing her eyes and sitting down at the table.

"We've got a bit of a walk," said Mr. Weasley.

"Walk?" said Harry. "What, are we walking to the World Cup?"

"No, no, that's miles away," said Mr. Weasley, smiling. "We only need to walk a short way. It's just that it's very difficult for a large number of wizards to congregate without attracting Muggle attention. We have to be very careful about

how we travel at the best of times, and on a huge occasion like the Quidditch World Cup..."

"George!" said Mrs. Weasley sharply, and they all jumped.

"What?" said George, in an innocent tone that deceived nobody.

"What is that in your pocket?"

"Nothing!"

"Don't you lie to me!"

Mrs. Weasley pointed her wand at George's pocket and said, "Accio!"

Several small, brightly colored objects zoomed out of George's pocket; he made a grab for them but missed, and they sped right into Mrs. Weasley's outstretched hand.

"We told you to destroy them!" said Mrs. Weasley furiously, holding up what were unmistakably more Ton-Tongue Toffees. "We told you to get rid of the lot! Empty your pockets, go on, both of you!"

It was an unpleasant scene; the twins had evidently been trying to smuggle as many toffees out of the house as possible, and it was only by using her Summoning Charm that Mrs. Weasley managed to find them all.

"Accio! Accio! Accio!" she shouted, and toffees zoomed from all sorts of unlikely places, including the lining of George's jacket and the turn-ups of Fred's jeans.

"We spent six months developing those!" Fred shouted at his mother as she threw the toffees away.

"Oh a fine way to spend six months!" she shrieked. "No wonder you didn't get more O.W.L.s!"

All in all, the atmosphere was not very friendly as they took their departure. Mrs. Weasley was still glowering as she kissed Mr. Weasley on the cheek, though not nearly as much as the twins, who had each hoisted their rucksacks onto their backs and walked out without a word to her.

"Well, have a lovely time," said Mrs. Weasley, "and behave yourselves," she called after the twins' retreating backs, but they did not look back or answer. "I'll send Bill, Charlie, and Percy along around midday," Mrs. Weasley said to Mr. Weasley, as he, Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny set off across the dark yard after Fred and George.

It was chilly and the moon was still out. Only a dull, greenish tinge along the horizon to their right showed that daybreak was drawing closer. Harry, having been thinking about thousands of wizards speeding toward the Quidditch World Cup, sped up to walk with Mr. Weasley.

"So how does everyone get there without all the Muggles noticing?" he asked.

"It's been a massive organizational problem," sighed Mr. Weasley. "The trouble is, about a hundred thousand wizards turn up at the World Cup, and of course, we just haven't got a magical site big enough to accommodate them all. There are places Muggles can't penetrate, but imagine trying to pack a hundred thousand wizards into Diagon Alley or platform nine and three-quarters. So we had to find a nice deserted moor, and set up as many anti-Muggle precautions as possible. The whole Ministry's been working on it for months. First, of course, we have to stagger the arrivals. People with cheaper tickets have to arrive two weeks beforehand. A limited number use Muggle transport, but we can't have too many clogging up their buses and trains - remember, wizards are coming from all over the world. Some Apparate, of course, but we have to set up safe points for them to appear, well away from Muggles. I believe there's a handy wood they're using as the Apparition point. For those who don't want to Apparate, or can't, we use Portkeys. They're objects that are used to transport wizards from one spot to another at a prearranged time. You can do large groups at a time if you need to. There have been two hundred Portkeys placed at strategic points around Britain, and the nearest one to us is up at the top of Stoatshead Hill, so that's where we're headed."

Mr. Weasley pointed ahead of them, where a large black mass rose beyond the village of Ottery St. Catchpole.

"What sort of objects are Portkeys?" said Harry curiously.

"Well, they can be anything," said Mr. Weasley. "Unobtrusive things, obviously, so Muggles don't go picking them up and playing with them ... stuff they'll just think is litter...."

They trudged down the dark, dank lane toward the village, the silence broken only by their footsteps. The sky lightened very slowly as they made their way through the village, its inky blackness diluting to deepest blue. Harry's hands and feet were freezing. Mr. Weasley kept checking his watch.

They didn't have breath to spare for talking as they began to climb Stoatshead Hill, stumbling occasionally in hidden rabbit holes, slipping on thick black tuffets of grass. Each breath Harry took was sharp in his chest and his legs were starting to seize up when, at last, his feet found level ground.

"Whew," panted Mr. Weasley, taking off his glasses and wiping them on his sweater. "Well, we've made good time - we've got ten minutes."

Hermione came over the crest of the hill last, clutching a stitch in her side.

"Now we just need the Portkey," said Mr. Weasley, replacing his glasses and squinting around at the ground. "It won't be big.... Come on..."

They spread out, searching. They had only been at it for a couple of minutes, however, when a shout rent the still air.

"Over here, Arthur! Over here, son, we've got it."

Two tall figures were silhouetted against the starry sky on the other side of the hilltop.

"Amos!" said Mr. Weasley, smiling as he strode over to the man who had shouted. The rest of them followed.

Mr. Weasley was shaking hands with a ruddy-faced wizard with a scrubby brown beard, who was holding a moldy-looking old boot in his other hand.

"This is Amos Diggory, everyone," said Mr. Weasley. "He works for the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. And I think you know his son, Cedric?"

Cedric Diggory was an extremely handsome boy of around seventeen. He was Captain and Seeker of the Hufflepuff House Quidditch team at Hogwarts.

"Hi," said Cedric, looking around at them all.

Everybody said hi back except Fred and George, who merely nodded. They had never quite forgiven Cedric for beating their team, Gryffindor, in the first Quidditch match of the previous year.

"Long walk, Arthur?" Cedric's father asked. "Not too bad," said Mr. Weasley. "We live just on the other side of the village there. You?"

"Had to get up at two, didn't we, Ced? I tell you, I'll be glad when he's got his Apparition test. Still ... not complaining ... Quidditch World Cup, wouldn't miss it for a sackful of Galleons - and the tickets cost about that. Mind you, looks like I got off easy. . . ." Amos Diggory peered good-naturedly around at the three Weasley boys, Harry, Hermione, and Ginny. "All these yours, Arthur?"

"Oh no, only the redheads," said Mr. Weasley, pointing out his children. "This is Hermione, friend of Ron's - and Harry, another friend -"

"Merlin's beard," said Amos Diggory, his eyes widening. "Harry? Harry Potter?"

"Er - yeah," said Harry.

Harry was used to people looking curiously at him when they met him, used to the way their eyes moved at once to the lightning scar on his forehead, but it always made him feel uncomfortable.

"Ced's talked about you, of course," said Amos Diggory. "Told us all about playing against you last year... I said to him, I said - Ced, that'll be something to tell your grandchildren, that will.... You beat Harry Potter!"

Harry couldn't think of any reply to this, so he remained silent. Fred and George were both scowling again. Cedric looked slightly embarrassed.

"Harry fell off his broom, Dad," he muttered. I told you ... it was an accident...."

"Yes, but you didn't fall off, did you?" roared Amos genially, slapping his son on his back. "Always modest, our Ced, always the gentleman ... but the best man won, I'm sure Harry'd say the same, wouldn't you, eh? One falls off his broom, one stays on, you don't need to be a genius to tell which one's the better flier!"

"Must be nearly time," said Mr. Weasley quickly, pulling out his watch again. "Do you know whether we're waiting for any more, Amos?"

"No, the Lovegoods have been there for a week already and the Fawcetts couldn't get tickets," said Mr. Diggory. "There aren't any more of us in this area, are there?"

"Not that I know of," said Mr. Weasley. "Yes, it's a minute off ... We'd better get ready...."

He looked around at Harry and Hermione.

"You just need to touch the Portkey, that's all, a finger will do -"

With difficulty, owing to their bulky backpacks, the nine of them crowded around the old boot held out by Amos Diggory.

They all stood there, in a tight circle, as a chill breeze swept over the hilltop. Nobody spoke. It suddenly occurred to Harry how odd this would look if a Muggle were to walk up here now ... nine people, two of them grown men, clutching this manky old boot in the semidarkness, waiting....

"Three. . ." muttered Mr. Weasley, one eye still on his watch, two. . . one. . ."

It happened immediately: Harry felt as though a hook just behind his navel had been suddenly jerked irresistibly forward. His feet left the ground; he could feel Ron and Hermione on either side of him, their shoulders banging into his; they were all speeding forward in a howl of wind and swirling color; his forefinger was stuck to the boot as though it was pulling him magnetically onward and then -

His feet slammed into the ground; Ron staggered into him and he fell over; the Portkey hit the ground near his head with a heavy thud.

Harry looked up. Mr. Weasley, Mr. Diggory, and Cedric were still standing, though looking very windswept; everybody else was on the ground.

"Seven past five from Stoatshead Hill," said a voice.

CHAPTER SEVEN - BAGMAN AND CROUCH

Harry disentangled himself from Ron and got to his feet. They had arrived on what appeared to be a deserted stretch of misty moor. In front of them was a pair of tired and grumpy-looking wizards, one of whom was holding a large gold watch, the other a thick roll of parchment and a quill. Both were dressed as Muggles, though very inexpertly: The man with the watch wore a tweed suit with thigh-length galoshes; his colleague, a kilt and a poncho.

"Morning, Basil," said Mr. Weasley, picking up the boot and handing it to the kilted wizard, who threw it into a large box of used Portkeys beside him; Harry could see an old newspaper, an empty drinks can, and a punctured football.

"Hello there, Arthur," said Basil wearily. "Not on duty, eh? It's all right for some.... We've been here all night.... You'd better get out of the way, we've got a big party coming in from the Black Forest at five fifteen. Hang on, I'll find your campsite.... Weasley ... Weasley...." He consulted his parchment list. "About a quarter of a mile's walk over there, first field you come to. Site manager's called Mr. Roberts. Diggory ... second field ... ask for Mr. Payne."

"Thanks, Basil," said Mr. Weasley, and he beckoned everyone to follow him.

They set off across the deserted moor, unable to make out much through the mist. After about twenty minutes, a small stone cottage next to a gate swam into view. Beyond it, Harry could just make out the ghostly shapes of hundreds and hundreds of tents, rising up the gentle slope of a large field toward a dark wood on the horizon. They said good-bye to the Diggorys and approached the cottage door.

A man was standing in the doorway, looking out at the tents. Harry knew at a glance that this was the only real Muggle for several acres. When he heard their footsteps, he turned his head to look at them.

"Morning!" said Mr. Weasley brightly.

"Morning," said the Muggle.

"Would you be Mr. Roberts?"

"Aye, I would," said Mr. Roberts. "And who're you?"

"Weasley - two tents, booked a couple of days ago?"

"Aye," said Mr. Roberts, consulting a list tacked to the door. "You've got a space up by the wood there. Just the one night?"

"That's it," said Mr. Weasley.

"You'll be paying now, then?" said Mr. Roberts.

"Ah - right - certainly -" said Mr. Weasley. He retreated a short distance from the cottage and beckoned Harry toward him. "Help me, Harry," he muttered, pulling a roll of Muggle money from his pocket and starting to peel the notes apart. "This one's a - a - a ten? Ah yes, I see the little number on it now... So this is a five?"

"A twenty," Harry corrected him in an undertone, uncomfortably aware of Mr. Roberts trying to catch every word.

"Ah yes, so it is.... I don't know, these little bits of paper..."

"You foreign?" said Mr. Roberts as Mr. Weasley returned with the correct notes.

"Foreign?" repeated Mr. Weasley, puzzled.

"You're not the first one who's had trouble with money," said Mr. Roberts, scrutinizing Mr. Weasley closely. "I had two try and pay me with great gold coins the size of hubcaps ten minutes ago."

"Did you really?" said Mr. Weasley nervously.

Mr. Roberts rummaged around in a tin for some change.

"Never been this crowded," he said suddenly, looking out over the misty field again. "Hundreds of pre-bookings. People usually just turn up...."

"Is that right?" said Mr. Weasley, his hand held out for his change, but Mr. Roberts didn't give it to him.

"Aye," he said thoughtfully. "People from all over. Loads of foreigners. And not just foreigners. Weirdos, you know? There's a bloke walking 'round in a kilt and a poncho."

"Shouldn't he?" said Mr. Weasley anxiously

"It's like some sort of... I dunno ... like some sort of rally," said Mr. Roberts. "They all seem to know each other. Like a big party."

At that moment, a wizard in plus-fours appeared out of thin air next to Mr. Roberts's front door.

"Obliviate!" he said sharply, pointing his wand at Mr. Roberts.

Instantly, Mr. Roberts's eyes slid out of focus, his brows unknitted, and a took of dreamy unconcern fell over his face. Harry recognized the symptoms of one who had just had his memory modified.

"A map of the campsite for you," Mr. Roberts said placidly to Mr. Weasley. "And your change."

"Thanks very much," said Mr. Weasley.

The wizard in plus-fours accompanied them toward the gate to the campsite. He

looked exhausted: His chin was blue with stubble and there were deep purple shadows under his eyes. Once out of earshot of Mr. Roberts, he muttered to Mr. Weasley, "Been having a lot of trouble with him. Needs a Memory Charm ten times a day to keep him happy. And Ludo Bagman's not helping. Trotting around talking about Bludgers and Quaffles at the top of his voice, not a worry about anti-Muggle security Blimey, I'll be glad when this is over. See you later, Arthur."

He Disapparated.

"I thought Mr. Bagman was Head of Magical Games and Sports," said Ginny, looking surprised. "He should know better than to talk about Bludgers near Muggles, shouldn't he?"

"He should," said Mr. Weasley, smiling, and leading them through the gates into the campsite, "but Ludo's always been a bit ... well . . . lax about security. You couldn't wish for a more enthusiastic head of the sports department though. He played Quidditch for England himself, you know. And he was the best Beater the Wimbourne Wasps ever had."

They trudged up the misty field between long rows of tents. Most looked almost ordinary; their owners had clearly tried to make them as Muggle-like as possible, but had slipped up by adding chimneys, or bellpulls, or weather vanes. However, here and there was a tent so obviously magical that Harry could hardly be surprised that Mr. Roberts was getting suspicious. Halfway up the field stood an extravagant confection of striped silk like a miniature palace, with several live peacocks tethered at the entrance. A little farther on they passed a tent that had three floors and several turrets; and a short way beyond that was a tent that had a front garden attached, complete with birdbath, sundial, and fountain.

"Always the same," said Mr. Weasley, smiling. "We can't resist showing off when we get together. Ah, here we are, look, this is us."

They had reached the very edge of the wood at the top of the field, and here was an empty space, with a small sign hammered into the ground that read WEEZLY.

"Couldn't have a better spot!" said Mr. Weasley happily. "The field is just on the other side of the wood there, we're as close as we could be." He hoisted his backpack from his shoulders. "Right," he said excitedly, "no magic allowed, strictly speaking, not when we're out in these numbers on Muggle land. We'll be putting these tents up by hand! Shouldn't be too difficult.... Muggles do it all the time.... Here, Harry, where do you reckon we should start?"

Harry had never been camping in his life; the Dursleys had never taken him on any kind of holiday, preferring to leave him with Mrs. Figg, an old neighbor. However, he and Hermione worked out where most of the poles and pegs should go, and though Mr. Weasley was more of a hindrance than a help, because he got thoroughly overexcited when it came to using the mallet, they finally managed to erect a pair of shabby two-man tents.

All of them stood back to admire their handiwork. Nobody looking at these tents would guess they belonged to wizards, Harry thought, but the trouble was that once Bill, Charlie, and Percy arrived, they would be a party of ten. Hermione seemed to have spotted this problem too; she gave Harry a quizzical look as Mr. Weasley dropped to his hands and knees and entered the first tent.

"We'll be a bit cramped," he called, "but I think we'll all squeeze in. Come and have a look."

Harry bent down, ducked under the tent flap, and felt his jaw drop. He had walked into what looked like an old-fashioned, three room flat, complete with bathroom and kitchen. Oddly enough, it was furnished in exactly the same sort of style as Mrs. Figg's house: There were crocheted covers on the mismatched chairs and a strong smell of cats.

"Well, it's not for long," said Mr. Weasley, mopping his bald patch with a handkerchief and peering in at the four bunk beds that stood in the bedroom. I borrowed this from Perkins at the office. Doesn't camp much anymore, poor fellow, he's got lumbago."

He picked up the dusty kettle and peered inside it. "We'll need water....

"There's a tap marked on this map the Muggle gave us," said Ron, who had followed Harry inside the tent and seemed completely unimpressed by its extraordinary inner proportions. "It's on the other side of the field."

"Well, why don't you, Harry, and Hermione go and get us some water then" - Mr. Weasley handed over the kettle and a couple of saucepans - "and the rest of us will get some wood for a fire?"

"But we've got an oven," said Ron. "Why can't we just -"

"Ron, anti-Muggle security!" said Mr. Weasley, his face shining with anticipation. "When real Muggles camp, they cook on fires outdoors. I've seen them at it!"

After a quick tour of the girls' tent, which was slightly smaller than the boys', though without the smell of cats, Harry, Ron, and Hermione set off across the campsite with the kettle and saucepans.

Now, with the sun newly risen and the mist lifting, they could see the city of tents that stretched in every direction. They made their way slowly through the rows, staring eagerly around. It was only just dawning on Harry how many witches and wizards there must be in the world; he had never really thought much about those in other countries.

Their fellow campers were starting to wake up. First to stir were the families with small children; Harry had never seen witches and wizards this young before. A tiny boy no older than two was crouched outside a large pyramid-shaped tent, holding a wand and poking happily at a slug in the grass, which was swelling

slowly to the size of a salami. As they drew level with him, his mother came hurrying out of the tent.

"How many times, Kevin? You don't - touch - Daddy's - wand - yecchh! "

She had trodden on the giant slug, which burst. Her scolding carried after them on the still air, mingling with the little boy's yells - "You bust slug! You bust slug!"

A short way farther on, they saw two little witches, barely older than Kevin, who were riding toy broomsticks that rose only high enough for the girls' toes to skim the dewy grass. A Ministry wizard had already spotted them; as he hurried past Harry, Ron, and Hermione he muttered distractedly, "In broad daylight! Parents having a lie-in, I suppose -"

Here and there adult wizards and witches were emerging from their tents and starting to cook breakfast. Some, with furtive looks around them, conjured fires with their wands; others were striking matches with dubious looks on their faces, as though sure this couldn't work. Three African wizards sat in serious conversation, all of them wearing long white robes and roasting what looked like a rabbit on a bright purple fire, while a group of middle-aged American witches sat gossiping happily beneath a spangled banner stretched between their tents that read: THE SALEM WITCHES' INSTITUTE. Harry caught snatches of conversation in strange languages from the inside of tents they passed, and though he couldn't understand a word, the tone of every single voice was excited.

"Er - is it my eyes, or has everything gone green?" said Ron.

It wasn't just Ron's eyes. They had walked into a patch of tents that were all covered with a thick growth of shamrocks, so that it looked as though small, oddly shaped hillocks had sprouted out of the earth. Grinning faces could be seen under those that had their flaps open. Then, from behind them, they heard their names.

"Harry! Ron! Hermione!"

It was Seamus Finnigan, their fellow Gryffindor fourth year. He was sitting in front of his own shamrock-covered tent, with a sandy-haired woman who had to be his mother, and his best friend, Dean Thomas, also of Gryffindor.

"Like the decorations?" said Seamus, grinning. "The Ministry's not too happy."

"Ah, why shouldn't we show our colors?" said Mrs. Finnigan. "You should see what the Bulgarians have got dangling all over their tents. You'll be supporting Ireland, of course?" she added, eyeing Harry, Ron, and Hermione beadily. When they had assured her that they were indeed supporting Ireland, they set off again, though, as Ron said, "Like we'd say anything else surrounded by that lot." I wonder what the Bulgarians have got dangling all over their tents?" said Hermione.

"Let's go and have a look," said Harry, pointing to a large patch of tents upfield,

where the Bulgarian flag - white, green, and red - was fluttering in the breeze.

The tents here had not been bedecked with plant life, but each and every one of them had the same poster attached to it, a poster of a very surly face with heavy black eyebrows. The picture was, of course, moving, but all it did was blink and scowl.

"Krum," said Ron quietly.

"What?" said Hermione.

"Krum!" said Ron. "Viktor Krum, the Bulgarian Seeker!"

"He looks really grumpy," said Hermione, looking around at the many Krums blinking and scowling at them.

"'Really grumpy?" Ron raised his eyes to the heavens. "Who cares what he looks like? He's unbelievable. He's really young too. Only just eighteen or something. He's a genius, you wait until tonight, you'll see."

There was already a small queue for the tap in the corner of the field. Harry, Ron, and Hermione joined it, right behind a pair of men who were having a heated argument. One of them was a very old wizard who was wearing a long flowery nightgown. The other was clearly a Ministry wizard; he was holding out a pair of pinstriped trousers and almost crying with exasperation.

"Just put them on, Archie, there's a good chap. You can't walk around like that, the Muggle at the gate's already getting suspicious -

I bought this in a Muggle shop," said the old wizard stubbornly. "Muggles wear them."

"Muggle women wear them, Archie, not the men, they wear these," said the Ministry wizard, and he brandished the pinstriped trousers.

"I'm not putting them on," said old Archie in indignation. "I like a healthy breeze 'round my privates, thanks."

Hermione was overcome with such a strong fit of the giggles at this point that she had to duck out of the queue and only returned when Archie had collected his water and moved away.

Walking more slowly now, because of the weight of the water, they made their way back through the campsite. Here and there, they saw more familiar faces: other Hogwarts students with their families. Oliver Wood, the old captain of Harry's House Quidditch team, who had just left Hogwarts, dragged Harry over to his parents' tent to introduce him, and told him excitedly that he had just been signed to the Puddlemere United reserve team. Next they were hailed by Ernie Macmillan, a Hufflepuff fourth year, and a little farther on they saw Cho Chang, a very pretty girl who played Seeker on the Ravenclaw team. She waved and smiled

at Harry, who slopped quite a lot of water down his front as he waved back. More to stop Ron from smirking than anything, Harry hurriedly pointed out a large group of teenagers whom he had never seen before.

"Who d'you reckon they are?" he said. "They don't go to Hogwarts, do they?"

"'Spect they go to some foreign school," said Ron. "I know there are others. Never met anyone who went to one, though. Bill had a penfriend at a school in Brazil ... this was years and years ago ... and he wanted to go on an exchange trip but Mum and Dad couldn't afford it. His penfriend got all offended when he said he wasn't going and sent him a cursed hat. It made his ears shrivel up."

Harry laughed but didn't voice the amazement he felt at hearing about other wizarding schools. He supposed, now that he saw representatives of so many nationalities in the campsite, that he had been stupid never to realize that Hogwarts couldn't be the only one. He glanced at Hermione, who looked utterly unsurprised by the information. No doubt she had run across the news about other wizarding schools in some book or other.

"You've been ages," said George when they finally got back to the Weasleys' tents.

"Met a few people," said Ron, setting the water down. "You've not got that fire started yet?"

"Dad's having fun with the matches," said Fred.

Mr. Weasley was having no success at all in lighting the fire, but it wasn't for lack of trying. Splintered matches littered the ground around him, but he looked as though he was having the time of his life.

"Oops!" he said as he managed to light a match and promptly dropped it in surprise.

"Come here, Mr. Weasley," said Hermione kindly, taking the box from him, and showing him how to do it properly.

At last they got the fire lit, though it was at least another hour before it was hot enough to cook anything. There was plenty to watch while they waited, however. Their tent seemed to be pitched right alongside a kind of thoroughfare to the field, and Ministry members kept hurrying up and down it, greeting Mr. Weasley cordially as they passed. Mr. Weasley kept up a running commentary, mainly for Harry's and Hermione's benefit; his own children knew too much about the Ministry to be greatly interested.

"That was Cuthbert Mockridge, Head of the Goblin Liaison Office.... Here comes Gilbert Wimple; he's with the Committee on Experimental Charms; he's had those horns for a while now... Hello, Arnie ... Arnold Peasegood, he's an Obliviator - member of the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad, you know... and that's Bode and Croaker ... they're Unspeakables...."

"They're what?"

"From the Department of Mysteries, top secret, no idea what they get up to...."

At last, the fire was ready, and they had just started cooking eggs and sausages when Bill, Charlie, and Percy came strolling out of the woods toward them.

"Just Apparated, Dad," said Percy loudly. "Ah, excellent, lunch!"

They were halfway through their plates of eggs and sausages when Mr. Weasley jumped to his feet, waving and grinning at a man who was striding toward them. "Aha!" he said. "The man of the moment! Ludo!"

Ludo Bagman was easily the most noticeable person Harry had seen so far, even including old Archie in his flowered nightdress. He was wearing long Quidditch robes in thick horizontal stripes of bright yellow and black. An enormous picture of a wasp was splashed across his chest. He had the look of a powerfully built man gone slightly to seed; the robes were stretched tightly across a large belly he surely had not had in the days when he had played Quidditch for England. His nose was squashed (probably broken by a stray Bludger, Harry thought), but his round blue eyes, short blond hair, and rosy complexion made him look like a very overgrown schoolboy.

"Ahoy there!" Bagman called happily. He was walking as though he had springs attached to the balls of his feet and was plainly in a state of wild excitement.

"Arthur, old man," he puffed as he reached the campfire, "what a day, eh? What a day! Could we have asked for more perfect weather? A cloudless night coming ... and hardly a hiccough in the arrangements.... Not much for me to do!"

Behind him, a group of haggard-looking Ministry wizards rushed past, pointing at the distant evidence of some sort of a magical fire that was sending violet sparks twenty feet into the air.

Percy hurried forward with his hand outstretched. Apparently his disapproval of the way Ludo Bagman ran his department did not prevent him from wanting to make a good impression.

"Ah - yes," said Mr. Weasley, grinning, "this is my son Percy. He's just started at the Ministry - and this is Fred - no, George, sorry - that's Fred - Bill, Charlie, Ron - my daughter, Ginny and Ron's friends, Hermione Granger and Harry Potter."

Bagman did the smallest of double takes when he heard Harry's name, and his eyes performed the familiar flick upward to the scar on Harry's forehead.

"Everyone," Mr. Weasley continued, "this is Ludo Bagman, you know who he is, it's thanks to him we've got such good tickets -"

Bagman beamed and waved his hand as if to say it had been nothing.

"Fancy a flutter on the match, Arthur?" he said eagerly, jingling what seemed to be a large amount of gold in the pockets of his yellow-and-black robes. "I've already got Roddy Pontner betting me Bulgaria will score first - I offered him nice odds, considering Ireland's front three are the strongest I've seen in years - and little Agatha Timms has put up half shares in her eel farm on a weeklong match."

"Oh ... go on then," said Mr. Weasley. "Let's see ... a Galleon on Ireland to win?"

"A Galleon?" Ludo Bagman looked slightly disappointed, but recovered himself. "Very well, very well ... any other takers?"

"They're a bit young to be gambling," said Mr. Weasley. "Molly wouldn't like -"

"We'll bet thirty-seven Galleons, fifteen Sickles, three Knuts," said Fred as he and George quickly pooled all their money, "that Ireland wins - but Viktor Krum gets the Snitch. Oh and we'll throw in a fake wand."

"You don't want to go showing Mr. Bagman rubbish like that," Percy hissed, but Bagman didn't seem to think the wand was rubbish at all; on the contrary, his boyish face shone with excitement as he took it from Fred, and when the wand gave a loud squawk and turned into a rubber chicken, Bagman roared with laughter.

"Excellent! I haven't seen one that convincing in years! I'd pay five Galleons for that!"

Percy froze in an attitude of stunned disapproval.

"Boys," said Mr. Weasley under his breath, "I don't want you betting.... That's all your savings .... Your mother -"

"Don't be a spoilsport, Arthur!" boomed Ludo Bagman, rattling his pockets excitedly. "They're old enough to know what they want! You reckon Ireland will win but Krum'll get the Snitch? Not a chance, boys, not a chance.... I'll give you excellent odds on that one .... We'll add five Galleons for the funny wand, then, shall we...."

Mr. Weasley looked on helplessly as Ludo Bagman whipped out a notebook and quill and began jotting down the twins' names.

"Cheers," said George, taking the slip of parchment Bagman handed him and tucking it away into the front of his robes. Bagman turned most cheerfully back to Mr. Weasley.

"Couldn't do me a brew, I suppose? I'm keeping an eye out for Barty Crouch. My Bulgarian opposite number's making difficulties, and I can't understand a word he's saying. Barty'll be able to sort it out. He speaks about a hundred and fifty languages."

"Mr. Crouch?" said Percy, suddenly abandoning his look of poker-stiff

disapproval and positively writhing with excitement. "He speaks over two hundred! Mermish and Gobbledegook and Troll. . ."

"Anyone can speak Troll," said Fred dismissively. "All you have to do is point and grunt."

Percy threw Fred an extremely nasty look and stoked the fire vigorously to bring the kettle back to the boil.

"Any news of Bertha Jorkins yet, Ludo?" Mr. Weasley asked as Bagman settled himself down on the grass beside them all.

"Not a dicky bird," said Bagman comfortably. "But she'll turn up. Poor old Bertha ... memory like a leaky cauldron and no sense of direction. Lost, you take my word for it. She'll wander back into the office sometime in October, thinking it's still July."

"You don't think it might be time to send someone to look for her?" Mr. Weasley suggested tentatively as Percy handed Bagman his tea.

"Barty Crouch keeps saying that," said Bagman, his round eyes widening innocently, "but we really can't spare anyone at the moment. Oh - talk of the devil! Barty!"

A wizard had just Apparated at their fireside, and he could not have made more of a contrast with Ludo Bagman, sprawled on the grass in his old Wasp robes. Barty Crouch was a stiff, upright, elderly man, dressed in an impeccably crisp suit and tie. The parting in his short gray hair was almost unnaturally straight, and his narrow toothbrush mustache looked as though he trimmed it using a slide rule. His shoes were very highly polished. Harry could see at once why Percy idolized him. Percy was a great believer in rigidly following rules, and Mr. Crouch had complied with the rule about Muggle dressing so thoroughly that he could have passed for a bank manager; Harry doubted even Uncle Vernon would have spotted him for what he really was.

"Pull up a bit of grass, Barry," said Ludo brightly, patting the ground beside him.

"No thank you, Ludo," said Crouch, and there was a bite of impatience in his voice. "I've been looking for you everywhere. The Bulgarians are insisting we add another twelve seats to the Top Box."

"Oh is that what they're after?" said Bagman. I thought the chap was asking to borrow a pair of tweezers. Bit of a strong accent."

"Mr. Crouch!" said Percy breathlessly, sunk into a kind of halfbow that made him look like a hunchback. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Oh," said Mr. Crouch, looking over at Percy in mild surprise. "Yes - thank you, Weatherby."

Fred and George choked into their own cups. Percy, very pink around the ears, busied himself with the kettle.

"Oh and I've been wanting a word with you too, Arthur," said Mr. Crouch, his sharp eyes falling upon Mr. Weasley. "Ali Bashir's on the warpath. He wants a word with you about your embargo on flying carpets."

Mr. Weasley heaved a deep sigh.

"I sent him an owl about that just last week. If I've told him once I've told him a hundred times: Carpets are defined as a Muggle Artifact by the Registry of Proscribed Charmable Objects, but will he listen?"

"I doubt it," said Mr. Crouch, accepting a cup from Percy. "He's desperate to export here."

"Well, they'll never replace brooms in Britain, will they?" said Bagman.

"Ali thinks there's a niche in the market for a family vehicle, said Mr. Crouch. "I remember my grandfather had an Axminster that could seat twelve - but that was before carpets were banned, of course."

He spoke as though he wanted to leave nobody in any doubt that all his ancestors had abided strictly by the law.

"So, been keeping busy, Barty?" said Bagman breezily.

"Fairly," said Mr. Crouch dryly. "Organizing Portkeys across five continents is no mean feat, Ludo."

"I expect you'll both be glad when this is over?" said Mr. Weasley.

Ludo Bagman looked shocked.

"Glad! Don't know when I've had more fun.... Still, it's not as though we haven't got anything to took forward to, eh, Barty? Eh? Plenty left to organize, eh?"

Mr. Crouch raised his eyebrows at Bagman.

"We agreed not to make the announcement until all the details -"

"Oh details!" said Bagman, waving the word away like a cloud of midges. "They've signed, haven't they? They've agreed, haven't they? I bet you anything these kids'll know soon enough anyway. I mean, it's happening at Hogwarts -"

"Ludo, we need to meet the Bulgarians, you know," said Mr. Crouch sharply, cutting Bagman's remarks short. "Thank you for the tea, Weatherby."

He pushed his undrunk tea back at Percy and waited for Ludo to rise; Bagman struggled to his feet, swigging down the last of his tea, the gold in his pockets chinking merrily.

"See you all later!" he said. "You'll be up in the Top Box with me - I'm commentating!" He waved, Barty Crouch nodded curtly, and both of them Disapparated.

"What's happening at Hogwarts, Dad?" said Fred at once. "What were they talking about?"

"You'll find out soon enough," said Mr.Weasley, smiling.

"It's classified information, until such time as the Ministry decides to release it," said Percy stiffly. "Mr. Crouch was quite right not to disclose it."

"Oh shut up, Weatherby," said Fred.

A sense of excitement rose like a palpable cloud over the campsite as the afternoon wore on. By dusk, the still summer air itself seemed to be quivering with anticipation, and as darkness spread like a curtain over the thousands of waiting wizards, the last vestiges of pretence disappeared: the Ministry seemed to have bowed to the inevitable and stopped fighting the signs of blatant magic now breaking out everywhere.

Salesmen were Apparating every few feet, carrying trays and pushing carts full of extraordinary merchandise. There were luminous rosettes - green for Ireland, red for Bulgaria - which were squealing the names of the players, pointed green hats bedecked with dancing shamrocks, Bulgarian scarves adorned with lions that really roared, flags from both countries that played their national anthems as they were waved; there were tiny models of Firebolts that really flew, and collectible figures of famous players, which strolled across the palm of your hand, preening themselves.

"Been saving my pocket money all summer for this," Ron told Harry as they and Hermione strolled through the salesmen, buying souvenirs. Though Ron purchased a dancing shamrock hat and a large green rosette, he also bought a small figure of Viktor Krum, the Bulgarian Seeker. The miniature Krum walked backward and forward over Ron's hand, scowling up at the green rosette above him.

"Wow, look at these!" said Harry, hurrying over to a cart piled high with what looked like brass binoculars, except that they were covered with all sorts of weird knobs and dials.

"Omnioculars," said the saleswizard eagerly. "You can replay action ... slow everything down ... and they flash up a play-by- play breakdown if you need it. Bargain - ten Galleons each."

"Wish I hadn't bought this now," said Ron, gesturing at his dancing shamrock hat and gazing longingly at the Omnioculars.

"Three pairs," said Harry firmly to the wizard.

"No - don't bother," said Ron, going red. He was always touchy about the fact that

Harry, who had inherited a small fortune from his parents, had much more money than he did.

"You won't be getting anything for Christmas," Harry told him, thrusting Omniocular into his and Hermione's hands. "For about ten years, mind."

"Fair enough," said Ron, grinning.

"Oooh, thanks, Harry," said Hermione. "And I'll get us some programs, look -"

Their money bags considerably lighter, they went back to the tents. Bill, Charlie, and Ginny were all sporting green rosettes too, and Mr. Weasley was carrying an Irish flag. Fred and George had no souvenirs as they had given Bagman all their gold.

And then a deep, booming gong sounded somewhere beyond the woods, and at once, green and red lanterns blazed into life in the trees, lighting a path to the field.

"It's time!" said Mr. Weasley, looking as excited as any of them. "Come on, let's go!"

CHAPTER EIGHT - THE QUIDDITCH WORLD CUP

Clutching their purchases, Mr. Weasley in the lead, they all hurried into the wood, following the lantern-lit trail. They could hear the sounds of thousands of people moving around them, shouts and laughter, snatches of singing. The atmosphere of feverish excitement was highly infectious; Harry couldn't stop grinning. They walked through the wood for twenty minutes, talking and joking loudly, until at last they emerged on the other side and found themselves in the shadow of a gigantic stadium. Though Harry could see only a fraction of the immense gold walls surrounding the field, he could tell that ten cathedrals would fit comfortably inside it.

"Seats a hundred thousand," said Mr. Weasley, spotting the awestruck look on Harry's face. "Ministry task force of five hundred have been working on it all year. Muggle Repelling Charms on every inch of it. Every time Muggles have got anywhere near here all year, they've suddenly remembered urgent appointments and had to dash away again ... bless them," he added fondly, leading the way toward the nearest entrance, which was already surrounded by a swarm of shouting witches and wizards.

"Prime seats!" said the Ministry witch at the entrance when she checked their tickets. "Top Box! Straight upstairs, Arthur, and as high as you can go."

The stairs into the stadium were carpeted in rich purple. They clambered upward with the rest of the crowd, which slowly filtered away through doors into the stands to their left and right. Mr. Weasley's party kept climbing, and at last they reached the top of the staircase and found themselves in a small box, set at the highest point of the stadium and situated exactly halfway between the golden goal posts. About twenty purple-and-gilt chairs stood in two rows here, and Harry, filing into the front seats with the Weasleys, looked down upon a scene the likes of which he could never have imagined.

A hundred thousand witches and wizards were taking their places in the seats, which rose in levels around the long oval field. Everything was suffused with a mysterious golden light, which seemed to come from the stadium itself. The field looked smooth as velvet from their lofty position. At either end of the field stood three goal hoops, fifty feet high; right opposite them, almost at Harry's eye level, was a gigantic blackboard. Gold writing kept dashing across it as though an invisible giant's hand were scrawling upon the blackboard and then wiping it off again; watching it, Harry saw that it was flashing advertisements across the field.

The Bluebottle: A Broom for All the Family - safe, reliable, and with Built-in Anti-Burgler Buzzer ... Mrs. Shower's All Purpose Magical Mess Remover: No Pain, No Stain! ... Gladrags Wizardwear - London, Paris, Hogsmeade...

Harry tore his eyes away from the sign and looked over his shoulder to see who else was sharing the box with them. So far it was empty, except for a tiny creature sitting in the second from last seat at the end of the row behind them. The creature, whose legs were so short they stuck out in front of it on the chair, was wearing a tea towel draped like a toga, and it had its face hidden in its hands. Yet those long, batlike ears were oddly familiar....

"Dobby?" said Harry incredulously.

The tiny creature looked up and stretched its fingers, revealing enormous brown eyes and a nose the exact size and shape of a large tomato. It wasn't Dobby - it was, however, unmistakably a house-elf, as Harry's friend Dobby had been. Harry had set Dobby free from his old owners, the Malfoy family.

"Did sir just call me Dobby?" squeaked the elf curiously from between its fingers. Its voice was higher even than Dobby's had been, a teeny, quivering squeak of a voice, and Harry suspected though it was very hard to tell with a house-elf - that this one might just be female. Ron and Hermione spun around in their seats to look. Though they had heard a lot about Dobby from Harry, they had never actually met him. Even Mr. Weasley looked around in interest.

"Sorry," Harry told the elf, "I just thought you were someone I knew."

"But I knows Dobby too, sir!" squeaked the elf. She was shielding her face, as though blinded by light, though the Top Box was not brightly lit. "My name is Winky, sir - and you, sir -" Her dark brown eyes widened to the size of side plates as they rested upon Harry's scar. "You is surely Harry Potter!"

"Yeah, I am," said Harry.

"But Dobby talks of you all the time, sir!" s he said, lowering her hands very slightly and looking awestruck.

"How is he?" said Harry. "How's freedom suiting him?"

"Ah, sir," said Winky, shaking her head, "ah sir, meaning no disrespect, sir, but I is not sure you did Dobby a favor, sir, when you is setting him free."

"Why?" said Harry, taken aback. "What's wrong with him?"

"Freedom is going to Dobby's head, sir, " said Winky sadly. "Ideas above his station, sir. Can't get another position, sir."

"Why not?" said Harry.

Winky lowered her voice by a half-octave and whispered, "He is wanting paying for his work, sir."

"Paying?" said Harry blankly. "Well - why shouldn't he be paid?"

Winky looked quite horrified at the idea and closed her fingers slightly so that her

face was half-hidden again.

"House-elves is not paid, sir!" she said in a muffled squeak. "No, no, no. I says to Dobby, I says, go find yourself a nice family and settle down, Dobby. He is getting up to all sorts of high jinks, sir, what is unbecoming to a house-elf. You goes racketing around like this, Dobby, I says, and next thing I hear you's up in front of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, like some common goblin."

"Well, it's about time he had a bit of fun," said Harry.

"House-elves is not supposed to have fun, Harry Potter," said Winky firmly, from behind her hands. "House-elves does what they is told. I is not liking heights at all, Harry Potter" - she glanced toward the edge of the box and gulped - "but my master sends me to the Top Box and I comes, sir."

"Why's he sent you up here, if he knows you don't like heights?" said Harry, frowning.

"Master - master wants me to save him a seat, Harry Potter. He is very busy," said Winky, tilting her head toward the empty space beside her. "Winky is wishing she is back in master's tent, Harry Potter, but Winky does what she is told. Winky is a good house-elf."

She gave the edge of the box another frightened look and hid her eyes completely again. Harry turned back to the others.

"So that's a house-elf?" Ron muttered. "Weird things, aren't they?"

"Dobby was weirder," said Harry fervently.

Ron pulled out his Omnioculars and started testing them, staring down into the crowd on the other side of the stadium.

"Wild!" he said, twiddling the replay knob on the side. I can make that old bloke down there pick his nose again ... and again ... and again. . ."

Hermione, meanwhile, was skimming eagerly through her velvetcovered, tasseled program.

"'A display from the team mascots will precede the match,'" she read aloud.

"Oh that's always worth watching," said Mr. Weasley. "National teams bring creatures from their native land, you know, to put on a bit of a show."

The box filled gradually around them over the next half hour. Mr. Weasley kept shaking hands with people who were obviously very important wizards. Percy jumped to his feet so often that he looked as though he were trying to sit on a hedgehog. When Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic himself, arrived, Percy bowed so low that his glasses fell off and shattered. Highly embarrassed, he

repaired them with his wand and thereafter remained in his seat, throwing jealous looks at Harry, whom Cornelius Fudge had greeted like an old friend. They had met before, and Fudge shook Harry's hand in a fatherly fashion, asked how he was, and introduced him to the wizards on either side of him.

"Harry Potter, you know," he told the Bulgarian minister loudly, who was wearing splendid robes of black velvet trimmed with gold and didn't seem to understand a word of English. "Harry Potter ... oh come on now, you know who he is ... the boy who survived You-Know-Who ... you do know who he is -"

The Bulgarian wizard suddenly spotted Harry's scar and started gabbling loudly and excitedly, pointing at it.

"Knew we'd get there in the end," said Fudge wearily to Harry. "I'm no great shakes at languages; I need Barty Crouch for this sort of thing. Ah, I see his house-elf's saving him a seat.... Good job too, these Bulgarian blighters have been trying to cadge all the best places ... ah, and here's Lucius!"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione turned quickly. Edging along the second row to three still-empty seats right behind Mr. Weasley were none other than Dobby the house-elf's former owners: Lucius Malfoy; his son, Draco; and a woman Harry supposed must be Draco's mother.

Harry and Draco Malfoy had been enemies ever since their very first journey to Hogwarts. A pale boy with a pointed face and white-blond hair, Draco greatly resembled his father. His mother was blonde too; tall and slim, she would have been nice-looking if she hadn't been wearing a look that suggested there was a nasty smell under her nose.

"Ah, Fudge," said Mr. Malfoy, holding out his hand as he reached the Minister of Magic. "How are you? I don't think you've met my wife, Narcissa? Or our son, Draco?"

"How do you do, how do you do?" said Fudge, smiling and bowing to Mrs. Malfoy. "And allow me to introduce you to Mr. Oblansk - Obalonsk - Mr. - well, he's the Bulgarian Minister of Magic, and he can't understand a word I'm saying anyway, so never mind. And let's see who else - you know Arthur Weasley, I daresay?"

It was a tense moment. Mr. Weasley and Mr. Malfoy looked at each other and Harry vividly recalled the last time they had come face-to-face: It had been in Flourish and Blotts' bookshop, and they had had a fight. Mr. Malfoy's cold gray eyes swept over Mr. Weasley, and then up and down the row.

"Good lord, Arthur," he said softly. "What did you have to sell to get seats in the Top Box? Surely your house wouldn't have fetched this much?"

Fudge, who wasn't listening, said, "Lucius has just given a very generous contribution to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, Arthur.

He's here as my guest."

"How - how nice," said Mr. Weasley, with a very strained smile.

Mr. Malfoy's eyes had returned to Hermione, who went slightly pink, but stared determinedly back at him. Harry knew exactly what was making Mr. Malfoy's lip curl like that. The Malfoys prided themselves on being purebloods; in other words, they considered anyone of Muggle descent, like Hermione, second-class. However, under the gaze of the Minister of Magic, Mr. Malfoy didn't dare say anything. He nodded sneeringly to Mr. Weasley and continued down the line to his seats. Draco shot Harry, Ron, and Hermione one contemptuous look, then settled himself between his mother and father.

"Slimy gits," Ron muttered as he, Harry, and Hermione turned to face the field again. Next moment, Ludo Bagman charged into the box.

"Everyone ready?" he said, his round face gleaming like a great, excited Edam. "Minister - ready to go?"

"Ready when you are, Ludo," said Fudge comfortably.

Ludo whipped out his wand, directed it at his own throat, and said "Sonorus!" and then spoke over the roar of sound that was now filling the packed stadium; his voice echoed over them, booming into every corner of the stands.

"Ladies and gentlemen. . . welcome! Welcome to the final of the four hundred and twenty-second Quidditch World Cup!"

The spectators screamed and clapped. Thousands of flags waved, adding their discordant national anthems to the racket. The huge blackboard opposite them was wiped clear of its last message (Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans - A Risk With Every Mouthful!) and now showed BULGARIA: 0, IRELAND: 0.

"And now, without further ado, allow me to introduce. . . the Bulgarian National Team Mascots!"

The right-hand side of the stands, which was a solid block of scarlet, roared its approval.

"I wonder what they've brought," said Mr. Weasley, leaning forward in his seat. "Aaah!" He suddenly whipped off his glasses and polished them hurriedly on his robes. "Veela!"

"What are veel -?"

But a hundred veela were now gliding out onto the field, and Harry's question was answered for him. Veela were women. . . the most beautiful women Harry had ever seen. . . except that they weren't - they couldn't be - human. This puzzled Harry for a moment while he tried to guess what exactly they could be; what could make their skin shine moon-bright like that, or their white-gold hair fan out behind

them without wind.. . but then the music started, and Harry stopped worrying about them not being human - in fact, he stopped worrying about anything at all.

The veela had started to dance, and Harry's mind had gone completely and blissfully blank. All that mattered in the world was that he kept watching the veela, because if they stopped dancing, terrible things would happen.

And as the veela danced faster and faster, wild, half-formed thoughts started chasing through Harry's dazed mind. He wanted to do something very impressive, right now. Jumping from the box into the stadium seemed a good idea. . . but would it be good enough?

"Harry, what are you doing?" said Hermione's voice from a long way off.

The music stopped. Harry blinked. He was standing up, and one of his legs was resting on the wall of the box. Next to him, Ron was frozen in an attitude that looked as though he were about to dive from a springboard.

Angry yells were filling the stadium. The crowd didn't want the veela to go. Harry was with them; he would, of course, be supporting Bulgaria, and he wondered vaguely why he had a large green shamrock pinned to his chest. Ron, meanwhile, was absentmindedly shredding the shamrocks on his hat. Mr. Weasley, smiling slightly, leaned over to Ron and tugged the hat out of his hands.

"You'll be wanting that," he said, "once Ireland have had their say."

"Huh?" said Ron, staring openmouthed at the veela, who had now lined up along one side of the field.

Hermione made a loud tutting noise. She reached up and pulled Harry back into his seat. "Honestly!" she said.

"And now," roared Ludo Bagman's voice, "kindly put your wands in the air. . . for the Irish National Team Mascots!"

Next moment, what seemed to be a great green-and-gold comet came zooming into the stadium. It did one circuit of the stadium, then split into two smaller comets, each hurtling toward the goal posts. A rainbow arced suddenly across the field, connecting the two balls of light. The crowd oooohed and aaaaahed, as though at a fireworks display. Now the rainbow faded and the balls of light reunited and merged; they had formed a great shimmering shamrock, which rose up into the sky and began to soar over the stands. Something like golden rain seemed to be falling from it - "Excellent!" yelled Ron as the shamrock soared over them, and heavy gold coins rained from it, bouncing off their heads and seats. Squinting up at the shamrock, Harry realized that it was actually comprised of thousands of tiny little bearded men with red vests, each carrying a minute lamp of gold or green.

"Leprechauns!" said Mr. Weasley over the tumultuous applause of the crowd,

many of whom were still fighting and rummaging around under their chairs to retrieve the gold.

"There you go," Ron yelled happily, stuffing a fistful of gold coins into Harry's hand, "for the Omniocculars! Now you've got to buy me a Christmas present, ha!"

The great shamrock dissolved, the leprechauns drifted down onto the field on the opposite side from the veela, and settled themselves cross-legged to watch the match.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, kindly welcome - the Bulgarian National Quidditch Team! I give you - Dimitrov!"

A scarlet-clad figure on a broomstick, moving so fast it was blurred, shot out onto the field from an entrance far below, to wild applause from the Bulgarian supporters.

"Ivanova!"

A second scarlet-robed player zoomed out.

"Zograf! Levski! Vulchanov! Volkov! Aaaaaaand - Krum!"

"That's him, that's him!" yelled Ron, following Krum with his Omniocculars. Harry quickly focused his own.

Viktor Krum was thin, dark, and sallow-skinned, with a large curved nose and thick black eyebrows. He looked like an overgrown bird of prey. It was hard to believe he was only eighteen.

"And now, please greet - the Irish National Quidditch Team!" yelled Bagman. "Presenting - Connolly! Ryan! Troy! Mullet! Moran! Quigley! Aaaaaand - Lynch!"

Seven green blurs swept onto the field; Harry spun a small dial on the side of his Omniocculars and slowed the players down enough to read the word "Firebolt" on each of their brooms and see their names, embroidered in silver, upon their backs.

"And here, all the way from Egypt, our referee, acclaimed Chairwizard of the International Association of Quidditch, Hassan Mostafa!"

A small and skinny wizard, completely bald but with a mustache to rival Uncle Vernon's, wearing robes of pure gold to match the stadium, strode out onto the field. A silver whistle was protruding from under the mustache, and he was carrying a large wooden crate under one arm, his broomstick under the other. Harry spun the speed dial on his Omniocculars back to normal, watching closely as Mostafa mounted his broomstick and kicked the crate open - four balls burst into the air: the scarlet Quaffle, the two black Bludgers, and (Harry saw it for the briefest moment, before it sped out of sight) the minuscule, winged Golden Snitch. With a sharp blast on his whistle, Mostafa shot into the air after the balls.

"Theeeeeeeey're OFF!" screamed Bagman. "And it's Mullet! Troy! Moran! Dimitrov! Back to Mullet! Troy! Levski! Moran!"

It was Quidditch as Harry had never seen it played before. He was pressing his Omnioculars so hard to his glasses that they were cutting into the bridge of his nose. The speed of the players was incredible - the Chasers were throwing the Quaffle to one another so fast that Bagman only had time to say their names. Harry spun the slow dial on the right of his Omnioculars again, pressed the play-by-play button on the top, and he was immediately watching in slow motion, while glittering purple lettering flashed across the lenses and the noise of the crowd pounded against his eardrums.

HAWKSHEAD ATTACKING FORMATION, he read as he watched the three Irish Chasers zoom closely together, Troy in the center, slightly ahead of Mullet and Moran, bearing down upon the Bulgarians. PORSKOFF PLOY flashed up next, as Troy made as though to dart upward with the Quaffle, drawing away the Bulgarian Chaser Ivanova and dropping the Quaffle to Moran. One of the Bulgarian Beaters, Volkov, swung hard at a passing Bludger with his small club, knocking it into Moran's path; Moran ducked to avoid the Bludger and dropped the Quaffle; and Levski, soaring beneath, caught it - "TROY SCORES!" roared Bagman, and the stadium shuddered with a roar of applause and cheers. "Ten zero to Ireland!"

"What?" Harry yelled, looking wildly around through his Omnioculars. "But Levski's got the Quaffle!"

"Harry, if you're not going to watch at normal speed, you're going to miss things!" shouted Hermione, who was dancing up and down, waving her arms in the air while Troy did a lap of honor around the field. Harry looked quickly over the top of his Omnioculars and saw that the leprechauns watching from the sidelines had all risen into the air again and formed the great, glittering shamrock. Across the field, the veela were watching them sulkily.

Furious with himself, Harry spun his speed dial back to normal as play resumed.

Harry knew enough about Quidditch to see that the Irish Chasers were superb. They worked as a seamless team, their movements so well coordinated that they appeared to be reading one another's minds as they positioned themselves, and the rosette on Harry's chest kept squeaking their names: "Troy - Mullet - Mo ran!" And within ten minutes, Ireland had scored twice more, bringing their lead to thirty-zero and causing a thunderous tide of roars and applause from the green-clad supporters.

The match became still faster, but more brutal. Volkov and Vulchanov, the Bulgarian Beaters, were whacking the Bludgers as fiercely as possible at the Irish Chasers, and were starting to prevent them from using some of their best moves; twice they were forced to scatter, and then, finally, Ivanova managed to break through their ranks; dodge the Keeper, Ryan; and score Bulgaria's first goal.

"Fingers in your ears!" bellowed Mr. Weasley as the veela started to dance in celebration. Harry screwed up his eyes too; he wanted to keep his mind on the game. After a few seconds, he chanced a glance at the field. The veela had stopped dancing, and Bulgaria was again in possession of the Quaffle.

"Dimitrov! Levski! Dimitrov! Ivanova - oh I say!" roared Bagman.

One hundred thousand wizards gasped as the two Seekers, Krum and Lynch, plummeted through the center of the Chasers, so fast that it looked as though they had just jumped from airplanes without parachutes. Harry followed their descent through his Omnioculars, squinting to see where the Snitch was -

"They're going to crash!" screamed Hermione next to Harry.

She was half right - at the very last second, Viktor Krum pulled out of the dive and spiraled off. Lynch, however, hit the ground with a dull thud that could be heard throughout the stadium. A huge groan rose from the Irish seats.

"Fool!" moaned Mr. Weasley. "Krum was feinting!"

"It's time-out!" yelled Bagman's voice, "as trained mediwizards hurry onto the field to examine Aidan Lynch!"

"He'll be okay, he only got ploughed!" Charlie said reassuringly to Ginny, who was hanging over the side of the box, looking horror-struck. "Which is what Krum was after, of course... ."

Harry hastily pressed the replay and play-by-play buttons on his Omnioculars, twiddled the speed dial, and put them back up to his eyes.

He watched as Krum and Lynch dived again in slow motion. WRONSKI DEFENSIVE FEINT - DANGEROUS SEEKER DIVERSION read the shining purple lettering across his lenses. He saw Krum's face contorted with concentration as he pulled out of the dive just in time, while Lynch was flattened, and he understood - Krum hadn't seen the Snitch at all, he was just making Lynch copy him. Harry had never seen anyone fly like that; Krum hardly looked as though he was using a broomstick at all; he moved so easily through the air that he looked unsupported and weightless. Harry turned his Omnioculars back to normal and focused them on Krum. He was now circling high above Lynch, who was being revived by mediwizards with cups of potion. Harry, focusing still more closely upon Krum's face, saw his dark eyes darting all over the ground a hundred feet below. He was using the time while Lynch was revived to look for the Snitch without interference.

Lynch got to his feet at last, to loud cheers from the green-clad supporters, mounted his Firebolt, and kicked back off into the air. His revival seemed to give Ireland new heart. When Mostafa blew his whistle again, the Chasers moved into action with a skill unrivaled by anything Harry had seen so far.

After fifteen more fast and furious minutes, Ireland had pulled ahead by ten more goals. They were now leading by one hundred and thirty points to ten, and the game was starting to get dirtier.

As Mullet shot toward the goal posts yet again, clutching the Quaffle tightly under her arm, the Bulgarian Keeper, Zograf, flew out to meet her. Whatever happened was over so quickly Harry didn't catch it, but a scream of rage from the Irish crowd, and Mostafa's long, shrill whistle blast, told him it had been a foul.

"And Mostafa takes the Bulgarian Keeper to task for cobbing -- excessive use of elbows!" Bagman informed the roaring spectators. "And - yes, it's a penalty to Ireland!"

The leprechauns, who had risen angrily into the air like a swarm of glittering hornets when Mullet had been fouled, now darted together to form the words "HA, HA, HA!" The veela on the other side of the field leapt to their feet, tossed their hair angrily, and started to dance again.

As one, the Weasley boys and Harry stuffed their fingers into their ears, but Hermione, who hadn't bothered, was soon tugging on Harry's arm. He turned to look at her, and she pulled his fingers impatiently out of his ears.

"Look at the referee!" she said, giggling.

Harry looked down at the field. Hassan Mostafa had landed right in front of the dancing veela, and was acting very oddly indeed. He was flexing his muscles and smoothing his mustache excitedly.

"Now, we can't have that!" said Ludo Bagman, though he sounded highly amused. "Somebody slap the referee!"

A mediwizard came tearing across the field, his fingers stuffed into his own ears, and kicked Mostafa hard in the shins. Mostafa seemed to come to himself; Harry, watching through the Omnioculars again, saw that he looked exceptionally embarrassed and had started shouting at the veela, who had stopped dancing and were looking mutinous.

"And unless I'm much mistaken, Mostafa is actually attempting to send off the Bulgarian team mascots!" said Bagman's voice. "Now there's something we haven't seen before. . . . Oh this could turn nasty. . .

It did: The Bulgarian Beaters, Volkov and Vulchanov, landed on either side of Mostafa and began arguing furiously with him, gesticulating toward the leprechauns, who had now gleefully formed the words "HEE, HEE, HEE." Mostafa was not impressed by the Bulgarians' arguments, however; he was jabbing his finger into the air, clearly telling them to get flying again, and when they refused, he gave two short blasts on his whistle.

"Two penalties for Ireland!" shouted Bagman, and the Bulgarian crowd howled

with anger. "And Volkov and Vulchanov had better get back on those brooms. . . yes. . . there they go. . . and Troy takes the Quaffle. .

Play now reached a level of ferocity beyond anything they had yet seen. The Beaters on both sides were acting without mercy: Volkov and Vulchanov in particular seemed not to care whether their clubs made contact with Bludger or human as they swung them violently through the air. Dimitrov shot straight at Moran, who had the Quaffle, nearly knocking her off her broom.

"Foul!" roared the Irish supporters as one, all standing up in a great wave of green.

"Foul!" echoed Ludo Bagman's magically magnified voice. "Dimitrov skins Moran - deliberately flying to collide there - and it's got to be another penalty - yes, there's the whistle!"

The leprechauns had risen into the air again, and this time, they formed a giant hand, which was making a very rude sign indeed at the veela across the field. At this, the veela lost control. Instead of dancing, they launched themselves across the field and began throwing what seemed to be handfuls of fire at the leprechauns. Watching through his Omnioculars, Harry saw that they didn't look remotely beautiful now. On the contrary, their faces were elongating into sharp, cruel-beaked bird heads, and long, scaly wings were bursting from their shoulders -

"And that, boys," yelled Mr. Weasley over the tumult of the crowd below, "is why you should never go for looks alone!"

Ministry wizards were flooding onto the field to separate the veela and the leprechauns, but with little success; meanwhile, the pitched battle below was nothing to the one taking place above. Harry turned this way and that, staring through his Omnioculars, as the Quaffie changed hands with the speed of a bullet.

"Levski - Dimitrov - Moran - Troy - Mullet - Ivanova - Moran again - Moran - MORAN SCORES!"

But the cheers of the Irish supporters were barely heard over the shrieks of the veela, the blasts now issuing from the Ministry members' wands, and the furious roars of the Bulgarians. The game recommenced immediately; now Levski had the Quaffle, now Dimitrov -

The Irish Beater Quigley swung heavily at a passing Bludger, and hit it as hard as possible toward Krum, who did not duck quickly enough. It hit him full in the face.

There was a deafening groan from the crowd; Krum's nose looked broken, there was blood everywhere, but Hassan Mostafa didn't blow his whistle. He had become distracted, and Harry couldn't blame him; one of the veela had thrown a handful of fire and set his broom tail alight.

Harry wanted someone to realize that Krum was injured; even though he was

supporting Ireland, Krum was the most exciting player on the field. Ron obviously felt the same.

"Time-out! Ah, come on, he can't play like that, look at him -"

"Look at Lynch!" Harry yelled.

For the Irish Seeker had suddenly gone into a dive, and Harry was quite sure that this was no Wronski Feint; this was the real thing...

"He's seen the Snitch!" Harry shouted. "He's seen it! Look at him go!"

Half the crowd seemed to have realized what was happening; the Irish supporters rose in another great wave of green, screaming their Seeker on. . . but Krum was on his tail. How he could see where he was going, Harry had no idea; there were flecks of blood flying through the air behind him, but he was drawing level with Lynch now as the pair of them hurtled toward the ground again -

"They're going to crash!" shrieked Hermione.

"They're not!" roared Ron.

"Lynch is!" yelled Harry.

And he was right - for the second time, Lynch hit the ground with tremendous force and was immediately stampeded by a horde of angry veela.

"The Snitch, where's the Snitch?" bellowed Charlie, along the row.

"He's got it - Krum's got it - it's all over!" shouted Harry.

Krum, his red robes shining with blood from his nose, was rising gently into the air, his fist held high, a glint of gold in his hand.

The scoreboard was flashing BULGARIA: 160, IRELAND: 170 across the crowd, who didn't seem to have realized what had happened. Then, slowly, as though a great jumbo jet were revving up, the rumbling from the Ireland supporters grew louder and louder and erupted into screams of delight.

"IRELAND WINS!" Bagman shouted, who like the Irish, seemed to be taken aback by the sudden end of the match.

"KRUM GETS THE SNITCH - BUT IRELAND WINS -- good lord, I don't think any of us were expecting that!"

"What did he catch the Snitch for?" Ron bellowed, even as he jumped up and down, applauding with his hands over his head. "He ended it when Ireland were a hundred and sixty points ahead, the idiot!"

"He knew they were never going to catch up!" Harry shouted back over all the noise, also applauding loudly. "The Irish Chasers were too good. . . . He wanted to

end it on his terms, that's all. . .

"He was very brave, wasn't he?" Hermione said, leaning forward to watch Krum land as a swarm of mediwizards blasted a path through the battling leprechauns and veela to get to him. "He looks a terrible mess. . ."

Harry put his Omniocculars to his eyes again. It was hard to see what was happening below, because leprechauns were zooming delightedly all over the field, but he could just make out Krum, surrounded by mediwizards. He looked surlier than ever and refused to let them mop him up. His team members were around him, shaking their heads and looking dejected; a short way away, the Irish players were dancing gleefully in a shower of gold descending from their mascots. Flags were waving all over the stadium, the Irish national anthem blared from all sides; the veela were shrinking back into their usual, beautiful selves now, though looking dispirited and forlorn.

"Vell, ve fought bravely," said a gloomy voice behind Harry. He looked around; it was the Bulgarian Minister of Magic.

"You can speak English!" said Fudge, sounding outraged. "And you've been letting me mime everything all day!"

"Veil, it vos very funny," said the Bulgarian minister, shrugging.

"And as the Irish team performs a lap of honor, flanked by their mascots, the Quidditch World Cup itself is brought into the Top Box!" roared Bagman.

Harry's eyes were suddenly dazzled by a blinding white light, as the Top Box was magically illuminated so that everyone in the stands could see the inside. Squinting toward the entrance, he saw two panting wizards carrying a vast golden cup into the box, which they handed to Cornelius Fudge, who was still looking very disgruntled that he'd been using sign language all day for nothing.

"Let's have a really loud hand for the gallant losers - Bulgaria!" Bagman shouted.

And up the stairs into the box came the seven defeated Bulgarian players. The crowd below was applauding appreciatively; Harry could see thousands and thousands of Omniocular lenses flashing and winking in their direction.

One by one, the Bulgarians filed between the rows of seats in the box, and Bagman called out the name of each as they shook hands with their own minister and then with Fudge. Krum, who was last in line, looked a real mess. Two black eyes were blooming spectacularly on his bloody face. He was still holding the Snitch. Harry noticed that he seemed much less coordinated on the ground. He was slightly duck-footed and distinctly round-shouldered. But when Krum's name was announced, the whole stadium gave him a resounding, earsplitting roar.

And then came the Irish team. Aidan Lynch was being supported by Moran and Connolly; the second crash seemed to have dazed him and his eyes looked

strangely unfocused. But he grinned happily as Troy and Quigley lifted the Cup into the air and the crowd below thundered its approval. Harry's hands were numb with clapping.

At last, when the Irish team had left the box to perform another lap of honor on their brooms (Aidan Lynch on the back of Confolly's, clutching hard around his waist and still grinning in a bemused sort of way), Bagman pointed his wand at his throat and muttered, "Quietus."

"They'll be talking about this one for years," he said hoarsely, "a really unexpected twist, that. . . . shame it couldn't have lasted longer. . . . Ah yes... . yes, I owe you. . . how much?"

For Fred and George had just scrambled over the backs of their seats and were standing in front of Ludo Bagman with broad grins on their faces, their hands outstretched.

CHAPTER NINE - THE DARK MARK

Don't tell your mother you've been gambling," Mr. Weasley implored Fred and George as they all made their way slowly down the purple-carpeted stairs.

"Don't worry, Dad," said Fred gleefully, "we've got big plans for this money. We don't want it confiscated."

Mr. Weasley looked for a moment as though he was going to ask what these big plans were, but seemed to decide, upon reflection, that he didn't want to know.

They were soon caught up in the crowds now flooding out of the stadium and back to their campsites. Raucous singing was borne toward them on the night air as they retraced their steps along the lantern-lit path, and leprechauns kept shooting over their heads, cackling and waving their lanterns. When they finally reached the tents, nobody felt like sleeping at all, and given the level of noise around them, Mr. Weasley agreed that they could all have one last cup of cocoa together before turning in. They were soon arguing enjoyably about the match; Mr. Weasley got drawn into a disagreement about cobbing with Charlie, and it was only when Ginny fell asleep right at the tiny table and spilled hot chocolate all over the floor that Mr. Weasley called a halt to the verbal replays and insisted that everyone go to bed. Hermione and Ginny went into the next tent, and Harry and the rest of the Weasleys changed into pajamas and clambered into their bunks. From the other side of the campsite they could still hear much singing and the odd echoing bang.

"Oh I am glad I'm not on duty," muttered Mr. Weasley sleepily. "I wouldn't fancy having to go and tell the Irish they've got to stop celebrating."

Harry, who was on a top bunk above Ron, lay staring up at the canvas ceiling of the tent, watching the glow of an occasional leprechaun lantern flying overhead, and picturing again some of Krum's more spectacular moves. He was itching to get back on his own Firebolt and try out the Wronski Feint. . . . Somehow Oliver Wood had never managed to convey with all his wriggling diagrams what that move was supposed to look like.. . . Harry saw himself in robes that had his name on the back, and imagined the sensation of hearing a hundred-thousand-strong crowd roar, as Ludo Bagman's voice echoed throughout the stadium, "I give you. . . Potter!"

Harry never knew whether or not he had actually dropped off to sleep - his fantasies of flying like Krum might well have slipped into actual dreams - all he knew was that, quite suddenly, Mr. Weasley was shouting.

"Get up! Ron - Harry - come on now, get up, this is urgent!"

Harry sat up quickly and the top of his head hit canvas.

"S' matter?" he said.

Dimly, he could tell that something was wrong. The noises in the campsite had changed. The singing had stopped. He could hear screams, and the sound of people running. He slipped down from the bunk and reached for his clothes, but Mr. Weasley, who had pulled on his jeans over his own pajamas, said, "No time, Harry - just grab a jacket and get outside - quickly!"

Harry did as he was told and hurried out of the tent, Ron at his heels.

By the light of the few fires that were still burning, he could see people running away into the woods, fleeing something that was moving across the field toward them, something that was emitting odd flashes of light and noises like gunfire. Loud jeering, roars of laughter, and drunken yells were drifting toward them; then came a burst of strong green light, which illuminated the scene.

A crowd of wizards, tightly packed and moving together with wands pointing straight upward, was marching slowly across the field. Harry squinted at them. . . . They didn't seem to have faces. . . . Then he realized that their heads were hooded and their faces masked. High above them, floating along in midair, four struggling figures were being contorted into grotesque shapes. It was as though the masked wizards on the ground were puppeteers, and the people above them were marionettes operated by invisible strings that rose from the wands into the air. Two of the figures were very small.

More wizards were joining the marching group, laughing and pointing up at the floating bodies. Tents crumpled and fell as the marching crowd swelled. Once or twice Harry saw one of the marchers blast a tent out of his way with his wand. Several caught fire. The screaming grew louder.

The floating people were suddenly illuminated as they passed over a burning tent and Harry recognized one of them: Mr. Roberts, the campsite manager. The other three looked as though they might be his wife and children. One of the marchers below flipped Mrs. Roberts upside down with his wand; her nightdress fell down to reveal voluminous drawers and she struggled to cover herself up as the crowd below her screeched and hooted with glee.

"That's sick," Ron muttered, watching the smallest Muggle child, who had begun to spin like a top, sixty feet above the ground, his head flopping limply from side to side. "That is really sick. . . ."

Hermione and Ginny came hurrying toward them, pulling coats over their nightdresses, with Mr. Weasley right behind them. At the same moment, Bill, Charlie, and Percy emerged from the boys' tent, fully dressed, with their sleeves rolled up and their wands out.

"We're going to help the Ministry!" Mr. Weasley shouted over all the noise, rolling up his own sleeves. "You lot - get into the woods, and stick together. I'll come and fetch you when we've sorted this out!"

Bill, Charlie, and Percy were already sprinting away toward the oncoming marchers; Mr. Weasley tore after them. Ministry wizards were dashing from every direction toward the source of the trouble. The crowd beneath the Roberts family was coming ever closer.

"C'mon," said Fred, grabbing Ginny's hand and starting to pull her toward the wood. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and George followed. They all looked back as they reached the trees. The crowd beneath the Roberts family was larger than ever; they could see the Ministry wizards trying to get through it to the hooded wizards in the center, but they were having great difficulty. It looked as though they were scared to perform any spell that might make the Roberts family fall.

The colored lanterns that had lit the path to the stadium had been extinguished. Dark figures were blundering through the trees; children were crying; anxious shouts and panicked voices were reverberating around them in the cold night air. Harry felt himself being pushed hither and thither by people whose faces he could not see. Then he heard Ron yell with pain.

"What happened?" said Hermione anxiously, stopping so abruptly that Harry walked into her. "Ron, where are you? Oh this is stupid - lumos!"

She illuminated her wand and directed its narrow beam across the path. Ron was lying sprawled on the ground.

"Tripped over a tree root," he said angrily, getting to his feet again.

"Well, with feet that size, hard not to," said a drawling voice from behind them.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione turned sharply. Draco Malfoy was standing alone nearby, leaning against a tree, looking utterly relaxed. His arms folded, he seemed to have been watching the scene at the campsite through a gap in the trees.

Ron told Malfoy to do something that Harry knew he would never have dared say in front of Mrs. Weasley.

"Language, Weasley," said Malfoy, his pale eyes glittering. "Hadn't you better be hurrying along, now? You wouldn't like her spotted, would you?"

He nodded at Hermione, and at the same moment, a blast like a bomb sounded from the campsite, and a flash of green light momentarily lit the trees around them.

"What's that supposed to mean?" said Hermione defiantly. "Granger, they're after Muggles, "said Malfoy. "D'you want to be showing off your knickers in midair? Because if you do, hang around. . . they're moving this way, and it would give us all a laugh."

"Hermione's a witch," Harry snarled.

"Have it your own way, Potter," said Malfoy, grinning maliciously. "If you think

they can't spot a Mudblood, stay where you are."

"You watch your mouth!" shouted Ron. Everybody present knew that "Mudblood" was a very offensive term for a witch or wizard of Muggle parentage.

"Never mind, Ron," said Hermione quickly, seizing Ron's arm to restrain him as he took a step toward Malfoy.

There came a bang from the other side of the trees that was louder than anything they had heard. Several people nearby screamed. Malfoy chuckled softly.

"Scare easily, don't they?" he said lazily. "I suppose your daddy told you all to hide? What's he up to - trying to rescue the Muggles?"

"Where're your parents?" said Harry, his temper rising. "Out there wearing masks, are they?"

Malfoy turned his face to Harry, still smiling.

"Well. . . if they were, I wouldn't be likely to tell you, would I, Potter?"

"Oh come on," said Hermione, with a disgusted look at Malfoy, "let's go and find the others."

"Keep that big bushy head down, Granger," sneered Malfoy.

"Come on," Hermione repeated, and she pulled Harry and Ron up the path again.

"I'll bet you anything his dad is one of that masked lot!" said Ron hotly.

"Well, with any luck, the Ministry will catch him!" said Hermione fervently. "Oh I can't believe this. Where have the others got to?"

Fred, George, and Ginny were nowhere to be seen, though the path was packed with plenty of other people, all looking nervously over their shoulders toward the commotion back at the campsite. A huddle of teenagers in pajamas was arguing vociferously a little way along the path. When they saw Harry, Ron, and Hermione, a girl with thick curly hair turned and said quickly, "Oü est Madame Maxime? Nous l'avons perdue -"

"Er - what?" said Ron.

"Oh. . ." The girl who had spoken turned her back on him, and as they walked on they distinctly heard her say, "Ogwarts."

"Beauxbatons," muttered Hermione.

"Sorry?" said Harry.

"They must go to Beauxbatons," said Hermione. "You know... Beauxbatons Academy of Magic. . . I read about it in An Appraisal ofMagical Education in Europe."

"Oh. . . yeah. . . right," said Harry.

"Fred and George can't have gone that far," said Ron, pulling out his wand, lighting it like Hermione's, and squinting up the path. Harry dug in the pockets of his jacket for his own wand - but it wasn't there. The only thing he could find was his Omniocculars.

"Ah, no, I don't believe it. . . I've lost my wand!"

"You're kidding!"

Ron and Hermione raised their wands high enough to spread the narrow beams of light farther on the ground; Harry looked all around him, but his wand was nowhere to be seen.

"Maybe it's back in the tent," said Ron.

"Maybe it fell out of your pocket when we were running?" Hermione suggested anxiously.

"Yeah," said Harry, "maybe. .

He usually kept his wand with him at all times in the wizarding world, and finding himself without it in the midst of a scene like this made him feel very vulnerable.

A rustling noise nearby made all three of them jump. Winky the house-elf was fighting her way out of a clump of bushes nearby. She was moving in a most peculiar fashion, apparently with great difficulty; it was as though someone invisible were trying to hold her back.

"There is bad wizards about!" she squeaked distractedly as she leaned forward and labored to keep running. "People high - high in the air! Winky is getting out of the way!"

And she disappeared into the trees on the other side of the path, panting and squeaking as she fought the force that was restraining her.

"What's up with her?" said Ron, looking curiously after Winky. "Why can't she run properly?"

"Bet she didn't ask permission to hide," said Harry. He was thinking of Dobby: Every time he had tried to do something the Malfoys wouldn't like, the house-elf had been forced to start beating himself up.

"You know, house-elves get a very raw deal!" said Hermione indignantly. "It's slavery, that's what it is! That Mr. Crouch made her go up to the top of the stadium, and she was terrified, and he's got her bewitched so she can't even run when they start trampling tents! Why doesn't anyone do something about it?"

"Well, the elves are happy, aren't they?" Ron said. "You heard old Winky back at the match.. . 'House-elves is not supposed to have fun'. . . that's what she likes,

being bossed around. . . ."

"It's people like you, Ron," Hermione began hotly, "who prop up rotten and unjust systems, just because they're too lazy to -"

Another loud bang echoed from the edge of the wood.

"Let's just keep moving, shall we?" said Ron, and Harry saw him glance edgily at Hermione. Perhaps there was truth in what Malfoy had said; perhaps Hermione was in more danger than they were. They set off again, Harry still searching his pockets, even though he knew his wand wasn't there.

They followed the dark path deeper into the wood, still keeping an eye out for Fred, George, and Ginny. They passed a group of goblins who were cackling over a sack of gold that they had undoubtedly won betting on the match, and who seemed quite unperturbed by the trouble at the campsite. Farther still along the path, they walked into a patch of silvery light, and when they looked through the trees, they saw three tall and beautiful veela standing in a clearing, surrounded by a gaggle of young wizards, all of whom were talking very loudly.

"I pull down about a hundred sacks of Galleons a year!" one of them shouted. "I'm a dragon killer for the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures."

"No, you're not!" yelled his friend. "You're a dishwasher at the Leaky Cauldron. . . . but I'm a vampire hunter, I've killed about ninety so far -"

A third young wizard, whose pimples were visible even by the dim, silvery light of the veela, now cut in, "I'm about to become the youngest ever Minister of Magic, I am."

Harry snorted with laughter. He recognized the pimply wizard: His name was Stan Shunpike, and he was in fact a conductor on the triple-decker Knight Bus. He turned to tell Ron this, but Ron's face had gone oddly slack, and next second Ron was yelling, "Did I tell you I've invented a broomstick that'll reach Jupiter?"

"Honestly!" said Hermione, and she and Harry grabbed Ron firmly by the arms, wheeled him around, and marched him away. By the time the sounds of the veela and their admirers had faded completely, they were in the very heart of the wood. They seemed to be alone now; everything was much quieter.

Harry looked around. "I reckon we can just wait here, you know. We'll hear anyone coming a mile off."

The words were hardly out of his mouth, when Ludo Bagman emerged from behind a tree right ahead of them.

Even by the feeble light of the two wands, Harry could see that a great change had come over Bagman. He no longer looked buoyant and rosy-faced; there was no more spring in his step. He looked very white and strained.

"Who's that?" he said, blinking down at them, trying to make out their faces. "What are you doing in here, all alone?"

They looked at one another, surprised.

"Well - there's a sort of riot going on," said Ron.

Bagman stared at him.

"What?"

"At the campsite. . . some people have got hold of a family of Muggles. . .

Bagman swore loudly.

"Damn them!" he said, looking quite distracted, and without another word, he Disapparated with a small pop!

"Not exactly on top of things, Mr. Bagman, is he?" said Hermione, frowning.

"He was a great Beater, though," said Ron, leading the way off the path into a small clearing, and sitting down on a patch of dry grass at the foot of a tree. "The Wimbourne Wasps won the league three times in a row while he was with them."

He took his small figure of Krum out of his pocket, set it down on the ground, and watched it walk around. Like the real Krum, the model was slightly duck-footed and round-shouldered, much less impressive on his splayed feet than on his broomstick. Harry was listening for noise from the campsite. Everything seemed much quieter; perhaps the riot was over.

"I hope the others are okay," said Hermione after a while.

"They'll be fine," said Ron.

"Imagine if your dad catches Lucius Malfoy," said Harry, sitting down next to Ron and watching the small figure of Krum slouching over the fallen leaves. "He's always said he'd like to get something on him."

"That'd wipe the smirk off old Draco's face, all right," said Ron.

"Those poor Muggles, though," said Hermione nervously. "What if they can't get them down?"

"They will," said Ron reassuringly. "They'll find a way."

"Mad, though, to do something like that when the whole Ministry of Magic's out here tonight!" said Hermione. "I mean, how do they expect to get away with it? Do you think they've been drinking, or are they just -"

But she broke off abruptly and looked over her shoulder. Harry and Ron looked quickly around too. It sounded as though someone was staggering toward their clearing. They waited, listening to the sounds of the uneven steps behind the dark

trees. But the footsteps came to a sudden halt.

"Hello?" called Harry.

There was silence. Harry got to his feet and peered around the tree. It was too dark to see very far, but he could sense somebody standing just beyond the range of his vision.

"Who's there?" he said.

And then, without warning, the silence was rent by a voice unlike any they had heard in the wood; and it uttered, not a panicked shout, but what sounded like a spell.

"MORSMORDRE!"

And something vast, green, and glittering erupted from the patch of darkness Harry's eyes had been struggling to penetrate; it flew up over the treetops and into the sky.

"What the - ?" gasped Ron as he sprang to his feet again, staring up at the thing that had appeared.

For a split second, Harry thought it was another leprechaun formation. Then he realized that it was a colossal skull, comprised of what looked like emerald stars, with a serpent protruding from its mouth like a tongue. As they watched, it rose higher and higher, blazing in a haze of greenish smoke, etched against the black sky like a new constellation.

Suddenly, the wood all around them erupted with screams. Harry didn't understand why, but the only possible cause was the sudden appearance of the skull, which had now risen high enough to illuminate the entire wood like some grisly neon sign. He scanned the darkness for the person who had conjured the skull, but he couldn't see anyone.

"Who's there?" he called again.

"Harry, come on, move!" Hermione had seized the collar of his jacket and was tugging him backward.

"What's the matter?" Harry said, startled to see her face so white and terrified.

"It's the Dark Mark, Harry!" Hermione moaned, pulling him as hard as she could. "You-Know-Who's sign!"

"Voldemort's - "Harry, come on!"

Harry turned - Ron was hurriedly scooping up his miniature Krum - the three of them started across the clearing - but before they had taken a few hurried steps, a series of popping noises announced the arrival of twenty wizards, appearing from thin air, surrounding them.

Harry whirled around, and in an instant, he registered one fact: Each of these wizards had his wand out, and every wand was pointing right at himself, Ron, and Hermione.

Without pausing to think, he yelled, "DUCK!"

He seized the other two and pulled them down onto the ground.

"STUPEFY!" roared twenty voices - there was a blinding series of flashes and Harry felt the hair on his head ripple as though a powerful wind had swept the clearing. Raising his head a fraction of an inch he saw jets of fiery red light flying over them from the wizards' wands, crossing one another, bouncing off tree trunks, rebounding into the darkness--

"Stop!" yelled a voice he recognized. "STOP! That's my son!"

Harry's hair stopped blowing about. He raised his head a little higher. The wizard in front of him had lowered his wand. He rolled over and saw Mr. Weasley striding toward them, looking terrified.

"Ron - Harry" - his voice sounded shaky - "Hermione - are you all right?"

"Out of the way, Arthur," said a cold, curt voice.

It was Mr. Crouch. He and the other Ministry wizards were closing in on them. Harry got to his feet to face them. Mr. Crouch's face was taut with rage.

"Which of you did it?" he snapped, his sharp eyes darting between them. "Which of you conjured the Dark Mark?"

"We didn't do that!" said Harry, gesturing up at the skull.

"We didn't do anything!" said Ron, who was rubbing his elbow and looking indignantly at his father. "What did you want to attack us for?"

"Do not lie, sir!" shouted Mr. Crouch. His wand was still pointing directly at Ron, and his eyes were popping - he looked slightly mad. "You have been discovered at the scene of the crime!"

"Barty," whispered a witch in a long woolen dressing gown, "they're kids, Barty, they'd never have been able to

"Where did the Mark come from, you three?" said Mr. Weasley quickly.

"Over there," said Hermione shakily, pointing at the place where they had heard the voice. "There was someone behind the trees. . . they shouted words - an incantation -"

"Oh, stood over there, did they?" said Mr. Crouch, turning his popping eyes on Hermione now, disbelief etched all over his face. "Said an incantation, did they? You seem very well informed about how that Mark is summoned, missy -"

But none of the Ministry wizards apart from Mr. Crouch seemed to think it remotely likely that Harry, Ron, or Hermione had conjured the skull; on the contrary, at Hermione's words, they had all raised their wands again and were pointing in the direction she had indicated, squinting through the dark trees.

"We're too late," said the witch in the woolen dressing gown, shaking her head. "They'll have Disapparated."

"I don't think so," said a wizard with a scrubby brown beard. It was Amos Diggory, Cedric's father. "Our Stunners went right through those trees. . . . There's a good chance we got them. . .

"Amos, be careful!" said a few of the wizards warningly as Mr. Diggory squared his shoulders, raised his wand, marched across the clearing, and disappeared into the darkness. Hermione watched him vanish with her hands over her mouth.

A few seconds later, they heard Mr. Diggory shout.

"Yes! We got them! There's someone here! Unconscious! It's - but - blimey. .

"You've got someone?" shouted Mr. Crouch, sounding highly disbelieving. "Who? Who is it?"

They heard snapping twigs, the rustling of leaves, and then crunching footsteps as Mr. Diggory reemerged from behind the trees. He was carrying a tiny, limp figure in his arms. Harry recognized the tea towel at once. It was Winky.

Mr. Crouch did not move or speak as Mr. Diggory deposited his elf on the ground at his feet. The other Ministry wizards were all staring at Mr. Crouch. For a few seconds Crouch remained transfixed, his eyes blazing in his white face as he stared down at Winky. Then he appeared to come to life again.

"This - cannot - be," he said jerkily. "No -"

He moved quickly around Mr. Diggory and strode off toward the place where he had found Winky.

"No point, Mr. Crouch," Mr. Diggory called after him. "There's no one else there."

But Mr. Crouch did not seem prepared to take his word for it. They could hear him moving around and the rustling of leaves as he pushed the bushes aside, searching.

"Bit embarrassing," Mr. Diggory said grimly, looking down at Winky's unconscious form. "Barty Crouch's house-elf. . . I mean to say..."

"Come off it, Amos," said Mr. Weasley quietly, "you don't seriously think it was the elf? The Dark Mark's a wizard's sign. It requires a wand."

"Yeah," said Mr. Diggory, "and she had a wand."

"What?" said Mr. Weasley.

"Here, look." Mr. Diggory held up a wand and showed it to Mr. Weasley. "Had it in her hand. So that's clause three of the Code of Wand Use broken, for a start. No non-human creature is permitted to carry or use a wand."

Just then there was another pop, and Ludo Bagman Apparated right next to Mr. Weasley. Looking breathless and disorientated, he spun on the spot, goggling upward at the emerald-green skull.

"The Dark Mark!" he panted, almost trampling Winky as he turned inquiringly to his colleagues. "Who did it? Did you get them? Barry! What's going on?"

Mr. Crouch had returned empty-handed. His face was still ghostly white, and his hands and his toothbrush mustache were both twitching.

"Where have you been, Barty?" said Bagman. "Why weren't you at the match? Your elf was saving you a seat too - gulping gargoyles!" Bagman had just noticed Winky lying at his feet. "What happened to her?"

"I have been busy, Ludo," said Mr. Crouch, still talking in the same jerky fashion, barely moving his lips. "And my elf has been stunned."

"Stunned? By you lot, you mean? But why - ?"

Comprehension dawned suddenly on Bagman's round, shiny face; he looked up at the skull, down at Winky, and then at Mr. Crouch.

"No!" he said. "Winky? Conjure the Dark Mark? She wouldn't know how! She'd need a wand, for a start!"

"And she had one," said Mr. Diggory. "I found her holding one, Ludo. If it's all right with you, Mr. Crouch, I think we should hear what she's got to say for herself."

Crouch gave no sign that he had heard Mr. Diggory, but Mr. Diggory seemed to take his silence for assent. He raised his own wand, pointed it at Winky, and said, "Ennervate!"

Winky stirred feebly. Her great brown eyes opened and she blinked several times in a bemused sort of way. Watched by the silent wizards, she raised herself shakily into a sitting position.

She caught sight of Mr. Diggory's feet, and slowly, tremulously, raised her eyes to stare up into his face; then, more slowly still, she looked up into the sky. Harry could see the floating skull reflected twice in her enormous, glassy eyes. She gave a gasp, looked wildly around the crowded clearing, and burst into terrified sobs.

"Elf!" said Mr. Diggory sternly. "Do you know who I am? I'm a member of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures!"

Winky began to rock backward and forward on the ground, her breath coming in

sharp bursts. Harry was reminded forcibly of Dobby in his moments of terrified disobedience.

"As you see, elf, the Dark Mark was conjured here a short while ago," said Mr. Diggory. "And you were discovered moments later, right beneath it! An explanation, if you please!"

"I - I - I is not doing it, sir!" Winky gasped. "I is not knowing how, sir!"

"You were found with a wand in your hand!" barked Mr. Diggory, brandishing it in front of her. And as the wand caught the green light that was filling the clearing from the skull above, Harry recognized it

"Hey - that's mine!" he said

Everyone in the clearing looked at him.

"Excuse me?" said Mr. Diggory, incredulously.

"That's my wand!" said Harry. "I dropped it!"

"You dropped it?" repeated Mr. Diggory in disbelief. "Is this a confession? You threw it aside after you conjured the Mark?"

"Amos, think who you're talking to!" said Mr. Weasley, very angrily. "Is Harry Potter likely to conjure the Dark Mark?"

"Er - of course not," mumbled Mr. Diggory. "Sorry. . . carried away. .

"I didn't drop it there, anyway," said Harry, jerking his thumb toward the trees beneath the skull. "I missed it right after we got into the wood."

"So," said Mr. Diggory, his eyes hardening as he turned to look at Winky again, cowering at his feet. "You found this wand, eh, elf? And you picked it up and thought you'd have some fun with it, did you?"

"I is not doing magic with it, sir!" squealed Winky, tears streaming down the sides of her squashed and bulbous nose. "I is. . . I is. . . I is just picking it up, sir! i is not making the Dark Mark, sir, i is not knowing how!"

"It wasn't her!" said Hermione. She looked very nervous, speaking up in front of all these Ministry wizards, yet determined all the same. "Winky's got a squeaky little voice, and the voice we heard doing the incantation was much deeper!" She looked around at Harry and Ron, appealing for their support. "It didn't sound anything like Winky, did it?"

"No," said Harry, shaking his head. "It definitely didn't sound like an elf."

"Yeah, it was a human voice," said Ron.

"Well, we'll soon see," growled Mr. Diggory, looking unimpressed. "There's a

simple way of discovering the last spell a wand performed, elf, did you know that?"

Winky trembled and shook her head frantically, her ears flapping, as Mr. Diggory raised his own wand again and placed it tip to tip with Harry's.

"Prior Incantato!" roared Mr. Diggory.

Harry heard Hermione gasp, horrified, as a gigantic serpent-tongued skull erupted from the point where the two wands met, but it was a mere shadow of the green skull high above them; it looked as though it were made of thick gray smoke: the ghost of a spell.

"Deletrius!" Mr. Diggory shouted, and the smoky skull vanished in a wisp of smoke.

"So," said Mr. Diggory with a kind of savage triumph, looking down upon Winky, who was still shaking convulsively.

"I is not doing it!" she squealed, her eyes rolling in terror. "I is not, I is not, I is not knowing how! I is a good elf, I isn't using wands, I isn't knowing how!"

"You've been caught red-handed, elf!" Mr. Diggory roared. "Caught with the guilty wand in your hand!"

"Amos," said Mr. Weasley loudly, "think about it. . . precious few wizards know how to do that spell. . . . Where would she have learned it?"

"Perhaps Amos is suggesting," said Mr. Crouch, cold anger in every syllable, "that I routinely teach my servants to conjure the Dark Mark?"

There was a deeply unpleasant silence. Amos Diggory looked horrified. "Mr. Crouch.. . not. . . not at all.

"You have now come very close to accusing the two people in this clearing who are least likely to conjure that Mark!" barked Mr. Crouch. "Harry Potter - and myself. I suppose you are familiar with the boy's story, Amos?"

"Of course - everyone knows -" muttered Mr. Diggory, looking highly discomforted.

"And I trust you remember the many proofs I have given, over a long career, that I despise and detest the Dark Arts and those who practice them?" Mr. Crouch shouted, his eyes bulging again.

"Mr. Crouch, I - I never suggested you had anything to do with it!" Amos Diggory muttered again, now reddening behind his scrubby brown beard.

"If you accuse my elf, you accuse me, Diggory!" shouted Mr. Crouch. "Where else would she have learned to conjure it?"

"She - she might've picked it up anywhere -"

"Precisely, Amos," said Mr. Weasley. "She might have picked it up anywhere.. . . Winky?" he said kindly, turning to the elf, but she flinched as though he too was shouting at her. "Where exactly did you find Harry's wand?"

Winky was twisting the hem of her tea towel so violently that it was fraying beneath her fingers.

"I - I is finding it. . . finding it there, sir. . . ." she whispered, "there . . . in the trees, sir.

"You see, Amos?" said Mr. Weasley. "Whoever conjured the Mark could have Disapparated right after they'd done it, leaving Harry's wand behind. A clever thing to do, not using their own wand, which could have betrayed them. And Winky here had the misfortune to come across the wand moments later and pick it up."

"But then, she'd have been only a few feet away from the real culprit!" said Mr. Diggory impatiently. "Elf? Did you see anyone?"

Winky began to tremble worse than ever. Her giant eyes flickered from Mr. Diggory, to Ludo Bagman, and onto Mr. Crouch. Then she gulped and said, "I is seeing no one, sir. . . no one. .

"Amos," said Mr. Crouch curtly, "I am fully aware that, in the ordinary course of events, you would want to take Winky into your department for questioning. I ask you, however, to allow me to deal with her."

Mr. Diggory looked as though he didn't think much of this suggestion at all, but it was clear to Harry that Mr. Crouch was such an important member of the Ministry that he did not dare refuse him.

"You may rest assured that she will be punished," Mr. Crouch added coldly.

"M-m-master. . ." Winky stammered, looking up at Mr. Crouch, her eyes brimming with tears. "M-m-master, p-p-please. . ."

Mr. Crouch stared back, his face somehow sharpened, each line upon it more deeply etched. There was no pity in his gaze.

"Winky has behaved tonight in a manner I would not have believed possible," he said slowly. "I told her to remain in the tent. I told her to stay there while I went to sort out the trouble. And I find that she disobeyed me. This means clothes."

"No!" shrieked Winky, prostrating herself at Mr. Crouch's feet. "No, master! Not clothes, not clothes!"

Harry knew that the only way to turn a house-elf free was to present it with proper garments. It was pitiful to see the way Winky clutched at her tea towel as she

sobbed over Mr. Crouch's feet.

"But she was frightened!" Hermione burst out angrily, glaring at Mr. Crouch. "Your elf's scared of heights, and those wizards in masks were levitating people! You can't blame her for wanting to get out of their way!"

Mr. Crouch took a step backward, freeing himself from contact with the elf, whom he was surveying as though she were something filthy and rotten that was contaminating his over-shined shoes.

"I have no use for a house-elf who disobeys me," he said coldly, looking over at Hermione. "I have no use for a servant who forgets what is due to her master, and to her master's reputation."

Winky was crying so hard that her sobs echoed around the clearing. There was a very nasty silence, which was ended by Mr. Weasley, who said quietly, "Well, I think I'll take my lot back to the tent, if nobody's got any objections. Amos, that wand's told us all it can - if Harry could have it back, please -"

Mr. Diggory handed Harry his wand and Harry pocketed it.

"Come on, you three," Mr. Weasley said quietly. But Hermione didn't seem to want to move; her eyes were still upon the sobbing elf. "Hermione!" Mr. Weasley said, more urgently. She turned and followed Harry and Ron out of the clearing and off through the trees.

"What's going to happen to Winky?" said Hermione, the moment they had left the clearing.

"I don't know," said Mr. Weasley.

"The way they were treating her!" said Hermione furiously. "Mr. Diggory, calling her 'elf' all the time. . . and Mr. Crouch! He knows she didn't do it and he's still going to sack her! He didn't care how frightened she'd been, or how upset she was - it was like she wasn't even human!"

"Well, she's not," said Ron.

Hermione rounded on him.

"That doesn't mean she hasn't got feelings, Ron. It's disgusting the way -"

"Hermione, I agree with you," said Mr. Weasley quickly, beckoning her on, "but now is not the time to discuss elf rights. I want to get back to the tent as fast as we can. What happened to the others?"

"We lost them in the dark," said Ron. "Dad, why was everyone so uptight about that skull thing?"

"I'll explain everything back at the tent," said Mr. Weasley tensely.

But when they reached the edge of the wood, their progress was impeded. A large crowd of frightened-looking witches and wizards was congregated there, and when they saw Mr. Weasley coming toward them, many of them surged forward.

"What's going on in there?"

"Who conjured it?"

"Arthur - it's not - Him?"

"Of course it's not Him," said Mr. Weasley impatiently. "We don't know who it was; it looks like they Disapparated. Now excuse me, please, I want to get to bed."

He led Harry, Ron, and Hermione through the crowd and back into the campsite. All was quiet now; there was no sign of the masked wizards, though several ruined tents were still smoking.

Charlie's head was poking out of the boys' tent.

"Dad, what's going on?" he called through the dark. "Fred, George, and Ginny got back okay, but the others -"

"I've got them here," said Mr. Weasley, bending down and entering the tent. Harry, Ron, and Hermione entered after him.

Bill was sitting at the small kitchen table, holding a bedsheet to his arm, which was bleeding profusely. Charlie had a large rip in his shirt, and Percy was sporting a bloody nose. Fred, George, and Ginny looked unhurt, though shaken.

"Did you get them, Dad?" said Bill sharply. "The person who conjured the Mark?"

"No," said Mr. Weasley. "We found Barry Crouch's elf holding Harry's wand, but we're none the wiser about who actually conured the Mark."

"What?" said Bill, Charlie, and Percy together. "Harry's wand?" said Fred.

"Mr. Crouch's elf" said Percy, sounding thunderstruck.

With some assistance from Harry, Ron, and Hermione, Mr. Weasley explained what had happened in the woods. When they had finished their story, Percy swelled indignantly.

"Well, Mr. Crouch is quite right to get rid of an elf like that!" he said. "Running away when he'd expressly told her not to. . . embarrassing him in front of the whole Ministry. . . how would that have looked, if she'd been brought up in front of the Department for the Regulation and Control -"

"She didn't do anything - she was just in the wrong place at the wrong time!" Hermione snapped at Percy, who looked very taken aback. Hermione had always got on fairly well with Percy - better, indeed, than any of the others.

"Hermione, a wizard in Mr. Crouch's position can't afford a house-elf who's going to run amok with a wand!" said Percy pompously, recovering himself.

"She didn't run amok!" shouted Hermione. "She just picked it up off the ground!"

"Look, can someone just explain what that skull thing was?" said Ron impatiently. "It wasn't hurting anyone. . . . Why's it such a big deal?"

"I told you, it's You-Know-Who's symbol, Ron," said Hermione, before anyone else could answer. "I read about it in The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts."

"And it hasn't been seen for thirteen years," said Mr. Weasley quietly. "Of course people panicked. . . it was almost like seeing You-Know-Who back again."

"I don't get it," said Ron, frowning. "I mean. . . it's still only a shape in the sky. . .

"Ron, You-Know-Who and his followers sent the Dark Mark into the air whenever they killed," said Mr. Weasley. "The terror it inspired. . . you have no idea, you're too young. Just picture coming home and finding the Dark Mark hovering over your house, and knowing what you're about to find inside. . . ." Mr. Weasley winced. "Everyone's worst fear. . . the very worst..

There was silence for a moment. Then Bill, removing the sheet from his arm to check on his cut, said, "Well, it didn't help us tonight, whoever conjured it. It scared the Death Eaters away the moment they saw it. They all Disapparated before we'd got near enough to unmask any of them. We caught the Robertses before they hit the ground, though. They're having their memories modified right now."

"Death Eaters?" said Harry. "What are Death Eaters?"

"It's what You-Know-Who's supporters called themselves," said Bill. "I think we saw what's left of them tonight - the ones who managed to keep themselves out of Azkaban, anyway."

"We can't prove it was them, Bill," said Mr. Weasley. "Though it probably was," he added hopelessly.

"Yeah, I bet it was!" said Ron suddenly . "Dad, we met Draco Malfoy in the woods, and he as good as told us his dad was one of those nutters in masks! And we all know the Malfoys were right in with You-Know-Who!"

"But what were Voldemort's supporters -" Harry began. Everybody flinched - like most of the wizarding world, the Weasleys always avoided saying Voldemort's name. "Sorry," said Harry quickly. "What were You-Know-Who's supporters up to, levitating Muggles? I mean, what was the point?"

"The point?" said Mr. Weasley with a hollow laugh. "Harry, that's their idea of fun. Half the Muggle killings back when You-Know-Who was in power were done for fun. I suppose they had a few drinks tonight and couldn't resist reminding

us all that lots of them are still at large. A nice little reunion for them," he finished disgustedly.

"But if they were the Death Eaters, why did they Disapparate when they saw the Dark Mark?" said Ron. "They'd have been pleased to see it, wouldn't they?"

"Use your brains, Ron," said Bill. "If they really were Death Eaters, they worked very hard to keep out of Azkaban when You-Know-Who lost power, and told all sorts of lies about him forcing them to kill and torture people. I bet they'd be even more frightened than the rest of us to see him come back. They denied they'd ever been involved with him when he lost his powers, and went back to their daily lives. . . . I don't reckon he'd be over-pleased with them, do you?"

"So. . . whoever conjured the Dark Mark. . ." said Hermione slowly, "were they doing it to show support for the Death Eaters, or to scare them away?"

"Your guess is as good as ours, Hermione," said Mr. Weasley. "But I'll tell you this. . . it was only the Death Eaters who ever knew how to conjure it. I'd be very surprised if the person who did it hadn't been a Death Eater once, even if they're not now. . Listen, it's very late, and if your mother hears what's happened she'll be worried sick. We'll get a few more hours sleep and then try and get an early Portkey out of here."

Harry got back into his bunk with his head buzzing. He knew he ought to feel exhausted: It was nearly three in the morning, but he felt wide-awake - wide-awake, and worried.

Three days ago - it felt like much longer, but it had only been three days - he had awoken with his scar burning. And tonight, for the first time in thirteen years, Lord Voldemort's mark had appeared in the sky. What did these things mean?

He thought of the letter he had written to Sirius before leaving Privet Drive. Would Sirius have gotten it yet? When would he reply? Harry lay looking up at the canvas, but no flying fantasies came to him now to ease him to sleep, and it was a long time after Charlie's snores filled the tent that Harry finally dozed off.

CHAPTER TEN - MAYHEM AT THE MINISTRY

Mr. Weasley woke them after only a few hours sleep. He used magic to pack up the tents, and they left the campsite as quickly as possible, passing Mr. Roberts at the door of his cottage. Mr. Roberts had a strange, dazed look about him, and he waved them off with a vague "Merry Christmas."

"He'll be all right," said Mr. Weasley quietly as they marched off onto the moor. "Sometimes, when a person's memory's modified, it makes him a bit disorientated for a while...and that was a big thing they had to make him forget."

They heard urgent voices as they approached the spot where the Portkeys lay, and when they reached it, they found a great number of witches and wizards gathered around Basil, the keeper of the Portkeys, all clamoring to get away from the campsite as quickly as possible. Mr. Weasley had a hurried discussion with Basil; they joined the queue, and were able to take an old rubber tire back to Stoatshead Hill before the sun had really risen. They walked back through Ottery St. Catchpole and up the damp lane toward the Burrow in the dawn light, talking very little because they were so exhausted, and thinking longingly of their breakfast. As they rounded the corner and the Burrow came into view, a cry echoed along the lane.

"Oh thank goodness, thank goodness!"

Mrs. Weasley, who had evidently been waiting for them in the front yard, came running toward them, still wearing her bedroom slippers, her face pale and strained, a rolled-up copy of the Daily Prophet clutched in her hand.

"Arthur - I've been so worried - so worried-"

She flung her arms around Mr. Weasley's neck, and the Daily Prophet fell out of her limp hand onto the ground. Looking down, Harry saw the headline: SCENES OF TERROR AT THE QUIDDITCH WORLD CUP, complete with a twinkling black-and-white photograph of the Dark Mark over the treetops.

"You're all right," Mrs. Weasley muttered distractedly, releasing Mr. Weasley and staring around at them all with red eyes, "you're alive. . . . Oh boys. .

And to everybody's surprise, she seized Fred and George and pulled them both into such a tight hug that their heads banged together.

"Ouch! Mum - you're strangling us -"

"I shouted at you before you left!" Mrs. Weasley said, starting to sob. "It's all I've been thinking about! What if You-Know-Who had got you, and the last thing I ever said to you was that you didn't get enough OW.L.s? Oh Fred. . . George. ."

"Come on, now, Molly, we're all perfectly okay," said Mr. Weasley soothingly, prising her off the twins and leading her back toward the house. "Bill," he added in an undertone, "pick up that paper, I want to see what it says. . ."

When they were all crammed into the tiny kitchen, and Hermione had made Mrs. Weasley a cup of very strong tea, into which Mr. Weasley insisted on pouring a shot of Ogdens Old Firewhiskey, Bill handed his father the newspaper. Mr. Weasley scanned the front page while Percy looked over his shoulder.

"I knew it," said Mr. Weasley heavily. "Ministry blunders. . . culprits not apprehended. . . lax security. . . Dark wizards running unchecked... national disgrace. . . Who wrote this? Ah. . . of course. . . Rita Skeeter."

"That woman's got it in for the Ministry of Magic!" said Percy furiously. "Last week she was saying we're wasting our time quibbling about cauldron thickness, when we should be stamping out vampires! As if it wasn't specifically stated in paragraph twelve of the Guidelines for the Treatment of Non-Wizard Part-Humans --"

"Do us a favor, Perce," said Bill, yawning, "and shut up."

"I'm mentioned," said Mr. Weasley, his eyes widening behind his glasses as he reached the bottom of the Daily Prophet article.

"Where?" spluttered Mrs. Weasley, choking on her tea and whiskey. "If I'd seen that, I'd have known you were alive!"

"Not by name," said Mr. Weasley. "Listen to this: 'If the terrified wizards and witches who waited breathlessly for news at the edge of the wood expected reassurance from the Ministry ofMagic, they were sadly disappointed. A Ministry official emerged some time after the appearance of the Dark Mark alleging that nobody had been hurt, but reflising to give any more information. Whether this statement will be enough to quash the rumors that several bodies were removed from the woods an hour later, remains to be seen.' Oh really," said Mr. Weasley in exasperation, handing the paper to Percy. "Nobody was hurt. What was I supposed to say? Rumors that several bodies were removed from the woods. . . well, there certainly will be rumors now she's printed that."

He heaved a deep sigh. "Molly, I'm going to have to go into the office; this is going to take some smoothing over."

"I'll come with you, Father," said Percy importantly. "Mr. Crouch will need all hands on deck. And I can give him my cauldron report in person."

He bustled out of the kitchen. Mrs. Weasley looked most upset. "Arthur, you're supposed to be on holiday! This hasn't got anything to do with your office; surely they can handle this without you?"

"I've got to go, Molly," said Mr. Weasley. "I've made things worse. I'll just change

into my robes and I'll be off. . . ."

"Mrs. Weasley," said Harry suddenly, unable to contain himself, "Hedwig hasn't arrived with a letter for me, has she?"

"Hedwig, dear?" said Mrs. Weasley distractedly. "No. . . no, there hasn't been any post at all."

Ron and Hermione looked curiously at Harry. With a meaningful look at both of them he said, "All right if I go and dump my stuff in your room, Ron?"

"Yeah. . . think I will too," said Ron at once. "Hermione?"

"Yes," she said quickly, and the three of them marched out of the kitchen and up the stairs.

"What's up, Harry?" said Ron, the moment they had closed the door of the attic room behind them.

"There's something I haven't told you," Harry said. "On Saturday morning, I woke up with my scar hurting again."

Ron's and Hermione's reactions were almost exactly as Harry had imagined them back in his bedroom on Privet Drive. Hermione gasped and started making suggestions at once, mentioning a number of reference books, and everybody from Albus Dumbledore to Madam Pomfrey, the Hogwarts nurse. Ron simply looked dumbstruck.

"But - he wasn't there, was he? You-Know-Who? I mean - last time your scar kept hurting, he was at Hogwarts, wasn't he?"

"I'm sure he wasn't on Privet Drive," said Harry. "But I was dreaming about him.. . him and Peter - you know, Wormtail. I can't remember all of it now, but they were plotting to kill...someone."

He had teetered for a moment on the verge of saying "me," but couldn't bring himself to make Hermione look any more horrified than she already did.

"It was only a dream," said Ron bracingly. "Just a nightmare."

"Yeah, but was it, though?" said Harry, turning to look out of the window at the brightening sky. "It's weird, isn't it?. . . My scar hurts, and three days later the Death Eaters are on the march, and Voldemort's sign's up in the sky again."

"Don't - say - his - name!" Ron hissed through gritted teeth.

"And remember what Professor Trelawney said?" Harry went on, ignoring Ron. "At the end of last year?"

Professor Trelawney was their Divination teacher at Hogwarts. Hermione's terrified look vanished as she let out a derisive snort.

"Oh Harry, you aren't going to pay attention to anything that old fraud says?"

"You weren't there," said Harry. "You didn't hear her. This time was different. I told you, she went into a trance - a real one. And she said the Dark Lord would rise again. . . greater and more terrible than ever before. . . and he'd manage it because his servant was going to go back to him. . . and that night Wormtail escaped."

There was a silence in which Ron fidgeted absentmindedly with a hole in his Chudley Cannons bedspread.

"Why were you asking if Hedwig had come, Harry?" Hermione asked. "Are you expecting a letter?"

"I told Sirius about my scar," said Harry, shrugging. "I'm waiting for his answer."

"Good thinking!" said Ron, his expression clearing. "I bet Sirius'll know what to do!"

"I hoped he'd get back to me quickly," said Harry.

"But we don't know where Sirius is. . . he could be in Africa or somewhere, couldn't he?" said Hermione reasonably. "Hedwig's not going to manage that journey in a few days."

"Yeah, I know," said Harry, but there was a leaden feeling in his stomach as he looked out of the window at the Hedwig-free sky.

"Come and have a game of Quidditch in the orchard, Harry" said Ron. "Come on - three on three, Bill and Charlie and Fred and George will play. .. . You can try out the Wronski Feint... ."

"Ron," said Hermione, in an I-don't-think-you're-being-very-sensitive sort of voice, "Harry doesn't want to play Quidditch right now... . He's worried, and he's tired. . . . We all need to go to bed..."

"Yeah, I want to play Quidditch," said Harry suddenly. "Hang on, I'll get my Firebolt."

Hermione left the room, muttering something that sounded very much like "Boys."

Neither Mr. Weasley nor Percy was at home much over the following week. Both left the house each morning before the rest of the family got up, and returned well after dinner every night.

"It's been an absolute uproar," Percy told them importantly the Sunday evening before they were due to return to Hogwarts. "I've been putting out fires all week. People keep sending Howlers, and of course, if you don't open a Howler straight away, it explodes. Scorch marks all over my desk and my best quill reduced to cinders."

"Why are they all sending Howlers?" asked Ginny, who was mending her copy of One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi with Spellotape on the rug in front of the living room fire.

"Complaining about security at the World Cup," said Percy. "They want compensation for their ruined property. Mundungus Fletcher's put in a claim for a twelve-bedroomed tent with en-suite Jacuzzi, but I've got his number. I know for a fact he was sleeping under a cloak propped on sticks."

Mrs. Weasley glanced at the grandfather clock in the corner. Harry liked this clock. It was completely useless if you wanted to know the time, but otherwise very informative. It had nine golden hands, and each of them was engraved with one of the Weasley family's names. There were no numerals around the face, but descriptions of where each family member might be. "Home," "school," and "work" were there, but there was also "traveling," "lost," "hospital," "prison," and, in the position where the number twelve would be on a normal clock, "mortal peril."

Eight of the hands were currently pointing to the "home" position, but Mr. Weasley's, which was the longest, was still pointing to "work." Mrs. Weasley sighed.

"Your father hasn't had to go into the office on weekends since the days of You-Know-Who," she said. "They're working him far too hard. His dinner's going to be ruined if he doesn't come home soon."

"Well, Father feels he's got to make up for his mistake at the match, doesn't he?" said Percy. "If truth be told, he was a tad unwise to make a public statement without clearing it with his Head of Department first -"

"Don't you dare blame your father for what that wretched Skeeter woman wrote!" said Mrs. Weasley, flaring up at once.

"If Dad hadn't said anything, old Rita would just have said it was disgraceful that nobody from the Ministry had commented," said Bill, who was playing chess with Ron. "Rita Skeeter never makes anyone look good. Remember, she interviewed all the Gringotts' Charm Breakers once, and called me 'a long-haired pillock'?"

"Well, it is a bit long, dear," said Mrs. Weasley gently. "If you'd just let me -"

"No, Mum."

Rain lashed against the living room window. Hermione was immersed in The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 4, copies of which Mrs. Weasley had bought for her, Harry, and Ron in Diagon Alley. Charlie was darning a fireproof balaclava. Harry was polishing his Firebolt, the broomstick servicing kit Hermione had given him for his thirteenth birthday open at his feet. Fred and George were sitting in a far corner, quills out, talking in whispers, their heads bent over a piece of parchment.

"What are you two up to?" said Mrs. Weasley sharply, her eyes on the twins.

"Homework," said Fred vaguely.

"Don't be ridiculous, you're still on holiday," said Mrs. Weasley.

"Yeah, we've left it a bit late," said George.

"You're not by any chance writing out a new order form, are you?" said Mrs. Weasley shrewdly. "You wouldn't be thinking of restarting Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, by any chance?"

"Now, Mum," said Fred, looking up at her, a pained look on his face. "If the Hogwarts Express crashed tomorrow, and George and I died, how would you feel to know that the last thing we ever heard from you was an unfounded accusation?"

Everyone laughed, even Mrs. Weasley.

"Oh your father's coming!" she said suddenly, looking up at the clock again.

Mr. Weasley's hand had suddenly spun from "work" to "traveling"; a second later it had shuddered to a halt on "home" with the others, and they heard him calling from the kitchen.

"Coming, Arthur!" called Mrs. Weasley, hurrying out of the room.

A few moments later, Mr. Weasley came into the warm living room carrying his dinner on a tray. He looked completely exhausted.

"Well, the fat's really in the fire now," he told Mrs. Weasley as he sat down in an armchair near the hearth and toyed unenthusiastically with his somewhat shriveled cauliflower. "Rita Skeeter's been ferreting around all week, looking for more Ministry mess-ups to report. And now she's found out about poor old Bertha going missing, so that'll be the headline in the Prophet tomorrow. I told Bagman he should have sent someone to look for her ages ago."

"Mr. Crouch has been saying it for weeks and weeks," said Percy swiftly.

"Crouch is very lucky Rita hasn't found out about Winky," said Mr. Weasley irritably. "There'd be a week's worth of headlines in his house-elf being caught holding the wand that conjured the Dark Mark."

"I thought we were all agreed that that elf, while irresponsible, did not conjure the Mark?" said Percy hotly.

"If you ask me, Mr. Crouch is very lucky no one at the Daily Prophet knows how mean he is to elves!" said Hermione angrily.

"Now look here, Hermione!" said Percy. "A high-ranking Ministry official like Mr. Crouch deserves unswerving obedience from his servants -"

"His slave, you mean!" said Hermione, her voice rising passionately, "because he didn't pay Winky, did he?"

"I think you'd all better go upstairs and check that you've packed properly!" said Mrs. Weasley, breaking up the argument. "Come on now, all of you. . . ."

Harry repacked his broomstick servicing kit, put his Firebolt over his shoulder, and went back upstairs with Ron. The rain sounded even louder at the top of the house, accompanied by loud whistlings and moans from the wind, not to mention sporadic howls from the ghoul who lived in the attic. Pigwidgeon began twittering and zooming around his cage when they entered. The sight of the half-packed trunks seemed to have sent him into a frenzy of excitement.

"Bung him some Owl Treats," said Ron, throwing a packet across to Harry. "It might shut him up."

Harry poked a few Owl Treats through the bars of Pigwidgeon's cage, then turned to his trunk. Hedwig's cage stood next to it, still empty.

"It's been over a week," Harry said, looking at Hedwig's deserted perch. "Ron, you don't reckon Sirius has been caught, do you?"

"Nah, it would've been in the Daily Prophet," said Ron. "The Ministry would want to show they'd caught someone, wouldn't they?"

"Yeah, I suppose. . . ."

"Look, here's the stuff Mum got for you in Diagon Alley. And she's got some gold out of your vault for you. . . and she's washed all your socks."

He heaved a pile of parcels onto Harry's camp bed and dropped the money bag and a load of socks next to it. Harry started unwrapping the shopping. Apart from The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 4, by Miranda Goshawk, he had a handful of new quills, a dozen rolls of parchment, and refills for his potion-making kit - he had been running low on spine of lionfish and essence of belladonna. He was just piling underwear into his cauldron when Ron made a loud noise of disgust behind him.

"What is that supposed to be?"

He was holding up something that looked to Harry like a long, maroon velvet dress. It had a moldy-looking lace frill at the collar and matching lace cuffs.

There was a knock on the door, and Mrs. Weasley entered, carrying an armful of freshly laundered Hogwarts robes.

"Here you are," she said, sorting them into two piles. "Now, mind you pack them properly so they don't crease."

"Mum, you've given me Ginny's new dress," said Ron, handing it out to her.

"Of course I haven't," said Mrs. Weasley. "That's for you. Dress robes."

"What?" said Ron, looking horror-struck.

"Dress robes!" repeated Mrs. Weasley. "It says on your school list that you're supposed to have dress robes this year. . . robes for formal occasions."

"You've got to be kidding," said Ron in disbelief. "I'm not wearing that, no way."

"Everyone wears them, Ron!" said Mrs. Weasley crossly. "They're all like that! Your father's got some for smart parties!"

"I'll go starkers before I put that on," said Ron stubbornly.

"Don't be so silly," said Mrs. Weasley. "You've got to have dress robes, they're on your list! I got some for Harry too. . . show him, Harry... ."

In some trepidation, Harry opened the last parcel on his camp bed. It wasn't as bad as he had expected, however; his dress robes didn't have any lace on them at all - in fact, they were more or less the same as his school ones, except that they were bottle green instead of black.

"I thought they'd bring out the color of your eyes, dear," said Mrs. Weasley fondly.

"Well, they're okay!" said Ron angrily, looking at Harry's robes. "Why couldn't I have some like that?"

"Because. . . well, I had to get yours secondhand, and there wasn't a lot of choice!" said Mrs. Weasley, flushing.

Harry looked away. He would willingly have split all the money in his Gringotts vault with the Weasleys, but he knew they would never take it.

"I'm never wearing them," Ron was saying stubbornly. "Never."

"Fine," snapped Mrs. Weasley. "Go naked. And, Harry, make sure you get a picture of him. Goodness knows I could do with a laugh."

She left the room, slamming the door behind her. There was a funny spluttering noise from behind them. Pigwidgeon was choking on an overlarge Owl Treat.

"Why is everything I own rubbish?" said Ron furiously, striding across the room to unstick Pigwidgeon's beak.

CHAPTER ELEVEN - ABOARD THE HOGWART EXPRESS

There was a definite end-of-the-holidays gloom in the air when Harry awoke next morning. Heavy rain was still splattering against the window as he got dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt; they would change into their school robes on the Hogwarts Express.

He, Ron, Fred, and George had just reached the first-floor landing on their way down to breakfast, when Mrs. Weasley appeared at the foot of the stairs, looking harassed.

"Arthur!" she called up the staircase. "Arthur! Urgent message from the Ministry!"

Harry flattened himself against the wall as Mr. Weasley came clattering past with his robes on back-to-front and hurtled out of sight. When Harry and the others entered the kitchen, they saw Mrs. Weasley rummaging anxiously in the drawers - "I've got a quill here somewhere!" - and Mr. Weasley bending over the fire, talking to -

Harry shut his eyes hard and opened them again to make sure that they were working properly.

Amos Diggory's head was sitting in the middle of the flames like a large, bearded egg. It was talking very fast, completely unperturbed by the sparks flying around it and the flames licking its ears.

". . . Muggle neighbors heard bangs and shouting, so they went and called those what-d'you-call-'ems - please-men. Arthur, you've got to get over there --"

"Here!" said Mrs. Weasley breathlessly, pushing a piece of parchment, a bottle of ink, and a crumpled quill into Mr. Weasley's hands.

"- it's a real stroke of luck I heard about it," said Mr. Diggory's head. "I had to come into the office early to send a couple of owls, and I found the Improper Use of Magic lot all setting off -- if Rita Skeeter gets hold of this one, Arthur --"

"What does Mad-Eye say happened?" asked Mr. Weasley, unscrewing the ink bottle, loading up his quill, and preparing to take notes.

Mr. Diggory's head rolled its eyes. "Says he heard an intruder in his yard. Says he was creeping toward the house, but was ambushed by his dustbins."

"What did the dustbins do?" asked Mr. Weasley, scribbling frantically.

"Made one hell of a noise and fired rubbish everywhere, as far as I can tell," said Mr. Diggory. "Apparently one of them was still rocketing around when the please-men turned up -"

Mr. Weasley groaned.

"And what about the intruder?"

"Arthur, you know Mad-Eye," said Mr. Diggory's head, rolling its eyes again. "Someone creeping into his yard in the dead of night? More likely there's a very shell-shocked cat wandering around somewhere, covered in potato peelings. But if the Improper Use of Magic lot get their hands on Mad-Eye, he's had it -- think of his record -- we've got to get him off on a minor charge, something in your department -- what are exploding dustbins worth?"

"Might be a caution," said Mr. Weasley, still writing very fast, his brow furrowed. "Mad-Eye didn't use his wand? He didn't actually attack anyone?"

"I'll bet he leapt out of bed and started jinxing everything he could reach through the window," said Mr. Diggory, "but they'll have a job proving it, there aren't any casualties."

"All right, I'm off," Mr. Weasley said, and he stuffed the parchment with his notes on it into his pocket and dashed out of the kitchen again.

Mr. Diggory's head looked around at Mrs. Weasley.

"Sorry about this, Molly," it said, more calmly, "bothering you so early and everything...but Arthur's the only one who can get Mad-Eye off, and Mad-Eye's supposed to be starting his new job today. Why he had to choose last night. ."

"Never mind, Amos," said Mrs. Weasley. "Sure you won't have a bit of toast or anything before you go?"

"Oh go on, then," said Mr. Diggory.

Mrs. Weasley took a piece of buttered toast from a stack on the kitchen table, put it into the fire tongs, and transferred it into Mr. Diggory's mouth.

"Fanks," he said in a muffled voice, and then, with a small pop, vanished.

Harry could hear Mr. Weasley calling hurried good-byes to Bill, Charlie, Percy, and the girls. Within five minutes, he was back in the kitchen, his robes on the right way now, dragging a comb through his hair.

"I'd better hurry - you have a good term, boys, said Mr. Weasley to Harry, Ron, and the twins, fastening a cloak over his shoulders and preparing to Disapparate. "Molly, are you going to be all right taking the kids to King's Cross?"

"Of course I will," she said. "You just look after Mad-Eye, we'll be fine."

As Mr. Weasley vanished, Bill and Charlie entered the kitchen.

"Did someone say Mad-Eye?" Bill asked. "What's he been up to now."

"He says someone tried to break into his house last night," said Mrs. Weasley.

"Mad-Eye Moody?" said George thoughtfully, spreading marmalade on his toast. "Isn't he that nutter -"

"Your father thinks very highly of Mad-Eye Moody," said Mrs. Weasley sternly.

"Yeah, well, Dad collects plugs, doesn't he?" said Fred quietly as Mrs. Weasley left the room. "Birds of a feather. . ."

"Moody was a great wizard in his time," said Bill.

"He's an old friend of Dumbledore's, isn't he?" said Charlie.

"Dumbledore's not what you'd call normal, though, is he?" said Fred. "I mean, I know he's a genius and everything.. ."

"Who is Mad-Eye?" asked Harry.

"He's retired, used to work at the Ministry," said Charlie. "I met him once when Dad took me into work with him. He was an Auror - one of the best. . . a Dark wizard catcher," he added, seeing Harry's blank look "Half the cells in Azkaban are full because of him. He made himself loads of enemies, though. . . the families of people he caught, mainly. . . and I heard he's been getting really paranoid in his old age. Doesn't trust anyone anymore. Sees Dark wizards everywhere."

Bill and Charlie decided to come and see everyone off at King's Cross station, but Percy, apologizing most profusely, said that he really needed to get to work.

"I just can't justify taking more time off at the moment," he told them. "Mr. Crouch is really starting to rely on me."

"Yeah, you know what, Percy?" said George seriously. "I reckon he'll know your name soon."

Mrs. Weasley had braved the telephone in the village post office to order three ordinary Muggle taxis to take them into London.

"Arthur tried to borrow Ministry cars for us," Mrs. Weasley whispered to Harry as they stood in the rain-washed yard, watching the taxi drivers heaving six heavy Hogwarts trunks into their cars. "But there weren't any to spare. . . . Oh dear, they don't look happy, do they?"

Harry didn't like to tell Mrs. Weasley that Muggle taxi drivers rarely transported overexcited owls, and Pigwidgeon was making an earsplitting racket. Nor did it help that a number of Filibuster's Fabulous No-Heat, Wet-Start Fireworks went off unexpectedly when Fred's trunk sprang open, causing the driver carrying it to yell with fright and pain as Crookshanks clawed his way up the man's leg.

The journey was uncomfortable, owing to the fact that they were jammed in the back of the taxis with their trunks. Crookshanks took quite a while to recover from the fireworks, and by the time they entered London, Harry, Ron, and Hermione

were all severely scratched. They were very relieved to get out at King's Cross, even though the rain was coming down harder than ever, and they got soaked carrying their trunks across the busy road and into the station.

Harry was used to getting onto platform nine and three-quarters by now. It was a simple matter of walking straight through the apparently solid barrier dividing platforms nine and ten. The only tricky part was doing this in an unobtrusive way, so as to avoid attracting Muggle attention. They did it in groups today; Harry, Ron, and Hermione (the most conspicuous, since they were accompanied by Pigwidgeon and Crookshanks) went first; they leaned casually against the barrier, chatting unconcernedly, and slid sideways through it. . . and as they did so, platform nine and three-quarters materialized in front of them.

The Hogwarts Express, a gleaming scarlet steam engine, was already there, clouds of steam billowing from it, through which the many Hogwarts students and parents on the platform appeared like dark ghosts. Pigwidgeon became noisier than ever in response to the hooting of many owls through the mist. Harry, Ron, and Hermione set off to find seats, and were soon stowing their luggage in a compartment halfway along the train. They then hopped back down onto the platform to say good-bye to Mrs. Weasley, Bill, and Charlie.

"I might be seeing you all sooner than you think," said Charlie, grinning, as he hugged Ginny good-bye.

"Why?" said Fred keenly.

"You'll see," said Charlie. "Just don't tell Percy I mentioned it.. . it's 'classified information, until such time as the Ministry sees fit to release it,' after all."

"Yeah, I sort of wish I were back at Hogwarts this year," said Bill, hands in his pockets, looking almost wistfully at the train.

"Why?" said George impatiently.

"You're going to have an interesting year," said Bill, his eyes twinkling. "I might even get time off to come and watch a bit of it."

"A bit of what?" said Ron.

But at that moment, the whistle blew, and Mrs. Weasley chivvied them toward the train doors.

"Thanks for having us to stay, Mrs. Weasley," said Hermione as they climbed on board, closed the door, and leaned out of the window to talk to her.

"Yeah, thanks for everything, Mrs. Weasley," said Harry.

"Oh it was my pleasure, dears," said Mrs. Weasley. "I'd invite you for Christmas, but...well, I expect you're all going to want to stay at Hogwarts, what with. . . one thing and another."

"Mum!" said Ron irritably. "What d'you three know that we don't?"

"You'll find out this evening, I expect," said Mrs. Weasley, smiling. "It's going to be very exciting - mind you, I'm very glad they've changed the rules -"

"What rules?" said Harry, Ron, Fred, and George together.

"I'm sure Professor Dumbledore will tell you. . . . Now, behave, won't you? Won't you, Fred? And you, George?"

The pistons hissed loudly and the train began to move.

"Tell us what's happening at Hogwarts!" Fred bellowed out of the window as Mrs. Weasley, Bill, and Charlie sped away from them. "What rules are they changing?"

But Mrs. Weasley only smiled and waved. Before the train had rounded the corner, she, Bill, and Charlie had Disapparated.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione went back to their compartment. The thick rain splattering the windows made it very difficult to see out of them. Ron undid his trunk, pulled out his maroon dress robes, and flung them over Pigwidgeon's cage to muffle his hooting.

"Bagman wanted to tell us what's happening at Hogwarts," he said grumpily, sitting down next to Harry. "At the World Cup, remember? But my own mother won't say. Wonder what --"

"Shh!" Hermione whispered suddenly, pressing her finger to her lips and pointing toward the compartment next to theirs. Harry and Ron listened, and heard a familiar drawling voice drifting in through the open door.

". . . Father actually considered sending me to Durmstrang rather than Hogwarts, you know. He knows the headmaster, you see. Well, you know his opinion of Dumbledore - the man's such a Mudblood-lover - and Durmstrang doesn't admit that sort of riffraff. But Mother didn't like the idea of me going to school so far away. Father says Durmstrang takes a far more sensible line than Hogwarts about the Dark Arts. Durmstrang students actually learn them, not just the defense rubbish we do. . . ."

Hermione got up, tiptoed to the compartment door, and slid it shut, blocking out Malfoy's voice.

"So he thinks Durmstrang would have suited him, does he?" she said angrily. "I wish he had gone, then we wouldn't have to put up with him."

"Durmstrang's another wizarding school?" said Harry.

"Yes," said Hermione sniffily, "and it's got a horrible reputation. According to An Appraisal ofMagical Education in Europe, it puts a lot of emphasis on the Dark Arts."

"I think I've heard of it," said Ron vaguely. "Where is it? What country?"

"Well, nobody knows, do they?" said Hermione, raising her eyebrows.

"Er - why not?" said Harry.

"There's traditionally been a lot of rivalry between all the magic schools. Durmstrang and Beauxbatons like to conceal their whereabouts so nobody can steal their secrets," said Hermione matter-of-factly.

"Come off it," said Ron, starting to laugh. "Durmstrang's got to be about the same size as Hogwarts -- how are you going to hide a great big castle?"

"But Hogwarts is hidden," said Hermione, in surprise. "Everyone knows that.. . well, everyone who's read Hogwarts, A History, anyway."

"Just you, then," said Ron. "So go on - how d'you hide a place like Hogwarts?"

"It's bewitched," said Hermione. "If a Muggle looks at it, all they see is a moldering old ruin with a sign over the entrance saying DANGER, DO NOT ENTER, UNSAFE."

"So Durmstrang'll just look like a ruin to an outsider too?"

"Maybe," said Hermione, shrugging, "or it might have Muggle-repelling charms on it, like the World Cup stadium. And to keep foreign wizards from finding it, they'll have made it Unplottable -"

"Come again?"

"Well, you can enchant a building so it's impossible to plot on a map, can't you?"

"Er. . . if you say so," said Harry.

"But I think Durmstrang must be somewhere in the far north," said Hermione thoughtfully. "Somewhere very cold, because they've got fur capes as part of their uniforms."

"Ah, think of the possibilities," said Ron dreamily. "It would've been so easy to push Malfoy off a glacier and make it look like an accident... . Shame his mother likes him. . . ."

The rain became heavier and heavier as the train moved farther north. The sky was so dark and the windows so steamy that the lanterns were lit by midday. The lunch trolley came rattling along the corridor, and Harry bought a large stack of Cauldron Cakes for them to share.

Several of their friends looked in on them as the afternoon progressed, including Seamus Finnigan, Dean Thomas, and Neville Longbottom, a round-faced, extremely forgetful boy who had been brought up by his formidable witch of a grandmother. Seamus was still wearing his Ireland rosette. Some of its magic

seemed to be wearing off now; it was still squeaking "Troy - Mullet - Moran!" but in a very feeble and exhausted sort of way. After half an hour or so, Hermione, growing tired of the endless Quidditch talk, buried herself once more in The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 4, and started trying to learn a Summoning Charm.

Neville listened jealously to the others' conversation as they relived the Cup match.

"Gran didn't want to go," he said miserably. "Wouldn't buy tickets. It sounded amazing though."

"It was," said Ron. "Look at this, Neville. . .

He rummaged in his trunk up in the luggage rack and pulled out the miniature figure of Viktor Krum.

"Oh wow," said Neville enviously as Ron tipped Krum onto his pudgy hand.

"We saw him right up close, as well," said Ron. "We were in the Top Box -"

"For the first and last time in your life, Weasley."

Draco Malfoy had appeared in the doorway. Behind him stood Crabbe and Goyle, his enormous, thuggish cronies, both of whom appeared to have grown at least a foot during the summer. Evidently they had overheard the conversation through the compartment door, which Dean and Seamus had left ajar.

"Don't remember asking you to join us, Malfoy," said Harry coolly.

"Weasley. . . what is that?" said Malfoy, pointing at Pigwidgeon's cage. A sleeve of Ron's dress robes was dangling from it, swaying with the motion of the train, the moldy lace cuff very obvious.

Ron made to stuff the robes out of sight, but Malfoy was too quick for him; he seized the sleeve and pulled.

"Look at this!" said Malfoy in ecstasy, holding up Ron's robes and showing Crabbe and Goyle, "Weasley, you weren't thinking of wearing these, were you? I mean - they were very fashionable in about eighteen ninety. . .

"Eat dung, Malfoy!" said Ron, the same color as the dress robes as he snatched them back out of Malfoy's grip. Malfoy howled with derisive laughter; Crabbe and Goyle guffawed stupidly.

"So. . . going to enter, Weasley? Going to try and bring a bit of glory to the family name? There's money involved as well, you know. . . you'd be able to afford some decent robes if you won. . . ."

"What are you talking about?" snapped Ron.

'Are you going to enter?' Malfoy repeated. "I suppose you will, Potter? You never miss a chance to show off, do you?"

"Either explain what you're on about or go away, Malfoy," said Hermione testily, over the top of The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 4.

A gleeful smile spread across Malfoy's pale face

"Don't tell me you don't know?" he said delightedly. "You've got a father and brother at the Ministry and you don't even know? My God, my father told me about it ages ago. . . heard it from Cornelius Fudge. But then, Father's always associated with the top people at the Ministry. . . . Maybe your father's too junior to know about it, Weasley. . . yes. . . they probably don't talk about important stuff in front of him. . . ."

Laughing once more, Malfoy beckoned to Crabbe and Goyle, and the three of them disappeared.

Ron got to his feet and slammed the sliding compartment door so hard behind them that the glass shattered.

"Ron!" said Hermione reproachfully, and she pulled out her wand, muttered "Reparo!" and the glass shards flew back into a single pane and back into the door.

"Well.. . making it look like he knows everything and we don't.. . ." Ron snarled. "Father's always associated with the top peopie at the Ministry.'. . . Dad could've got a promotion any time... he just likes it where he is. . . ."

"Of course he does," said Hermione quietly. "Don't let Malfoy get to you, Ron -"

"Him! Get to me!? As if!" said Ron, picking up one of the remaining Cauldron Cakes and squashing it into a pulp.

Ron's bad mood continued for the rest of the journey. He didn't talk much as they changed into their school robes, and was still glowering when the Hogwarts Express slowed down at last and finally stopped in the pitch-darkness of Hogsmeade station.

As the train doors opened, there was a rumble of thunder overhead. Hermione bundled up Crookshanks in her cloak and Ron left his dress robes over Pigwidgeon as they left the train, heads bent and eyes narrowed against the downpour. The rain was now coming down so thick and fast that it was as though buckets of ice-cold water were being emptied repeatedly over their heads.

"Hi, Hagrid!" Harry yelled, seeing a gigantic silhouette at the far end of the platform.

"All righ', Harry?" Hagrid bellowed back, waving. "See yeh at the feast if we don' drown!"

First years traditionally reached Hogwarts Castle by sailing across the lake with Hagrid.

"Oooh, I wouldn't fancy crossing the lake in this weather," said Hermione fervently, shivering as they inched slowly along the dark platform with the rest of the crowd. A hundred horseless carriages stood waiting for them outside the station. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Neville climbed gratefully into one of them, the door shut with a snap, and a few moments later, with a great lurch, the long procession of carriages was rumbling and splashing its way up the track toward Hogwarts Castle.

CHAPTER TWELVE - THE TRIWIZARD TOURNAMENT

Through the gates, flanked with statues of winged boars, and up the sweeping drive the carriages trundled, swaying dangerously in what was fast becoming a gale. Leaning against the window, Harry could see Hogwarts coming nearer, its many lighted windows blurred and shimmering behind the thick curtain of rain. Lightning flashed across the sky as their carriage came to a halt before the great oak front doors, which stood at the top of a flight of stone steps. People who had occupied the carriages in front were already hurrying up the stone steps into the castle. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Neville jumped down from their carriage and dashed up the steps too, looking up only when they were safely inside the cavernous, torch-lit entrance hall, with its magnificent marble staircase.

"Blimey," said Ron, shaking his head and sending water everywhere, "if that keeps up the lake's going to overflow. I'm soak - ARRGH!"

A large, red, water-filled balloon had dropped from out of the ceiling onto Ron's head and exploded. Drenched and sputtering, Ron staggered sideways into Harry, just as a second water bomb dropped - narrowly missing Hermione, it burst at Harry's feet, sending a wave of cold water over his sneakers into his socks. People all around them shrieked and started pushing one another in their efforts to get out of the line of fire. Harry looked up and saw, floating twenty feet above them, Peeves the Poltergeist, a little man in a bell-covered hat and orange bow tie, his wide, malicious face contorted with concentration as he took aim again.

"PEEVES!" yelled an angry voice. "Peeves, come down here at ONCE!"

Professor McGonagall, Deputy Headmistress and head of Gryffindor House, had come dashing out of the Great Hall; she skidded on the wet floor and grabbed Hermione around the neck to stop herself from falling.

"Ouch - sorry, Miss Granger -"

"That's all right, Professor!" Hermione gasped, massaging her throat.

"Peeves, get down here NOW!" barked Professor McGonagall, straightening her pointed hat and glaring upward through her square-rimmed spectacles.

"Not doing nothing!" cackled Peeves, lobbing a water bomb at several fifth-year girls, who screamed and dived into the Great Hall. "Already wet, aren't they? Little squirts! Wheeeeeeeeee!" And he aimed another bomb at a group of second years who had just arrived.

"I shall call the headmaster!" shouted Professor McGonagall. "I'm warning you, Peeves -"

Peeves stuck out his tongue, threw the last of his water bombs into the air, and zoomed off up the marble staircase, cackling insanely.

"Well, move along, then!" said Professor McGonagall sharply to the bedraggled crowd. "Into the Great Hall, come on!"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione slipped and slid across the entrance hall and through the double doors on the right, Ron muttering furiously under his breath as he pushed his sopping hair off his face.

The Great Hall looked its usual splendid self, decorated for the start-of-term feast. Golden plates and goblets gleamed by the light of hundreds and hundreds of candles, floating over the tables in midair. The four long House tables were packed with chattering students; at the top of the Hall, the staff sat along one side of a fifth table, facing their pupils. It was much warmer in here. Harry, Ron, and Hermione walked past the Slytherins, the Ravenclaws, and the Hufflepuffs, and sat down with the rest of the Gryffindors at the far side of the Hall, next to Nearly Headless Nick, the Gryffindor ghost. Pearly white and semitransparent, Nick was dressed tonight in his usual doublet, but with a particularly large ruff, which served the dual purpose of looking extra-festive, and insuring that his head didn't wobble too much on his partially severed neck.

"Good evening," he said, beaming at them.

"Says who?" said Harry, taking off his sneakers and emptying them of water. "Hope they hurry up with the Sorting. I'm starving."

The Sorting of the new students into Houses took place at the start of every school year, but by an unlucky combination of circumstances, Harry hadn't been present at one since his own. He was quite looking forward to it. Just then, a highly excited, breathless voice called down the table.

"Hiya, Harry!"

It was Colin Creevey, a third year to whom Harry was something of a hero.

"Hi, Colin," said Harry warily.

"Harry, guess what? Guess what, Harry? My brother's starting! My brother Dennis!"

"Er - good," said Harry.

"He's really excited!" said Colin, practically bouncing up and down in his seat. "I just hope he's in Gryffindor! Keep your fingers crossed, eh, Harry?"

"Er - yeah, all right," said Harry. He turned back to Hermione, Ron, and Nearly Headless Nick. "Brothers and sisters usually go in the same Houses, don't they?" he said. He was judging by the Weasleys, all seven of whom had been put into Gryffindor.

"Oh no, not necessarily," said Hermione. "Parvati Patil's twin's in Ravenclaw, and they're identical. You'd think they'd be together, wouldn't you?"

Harry looked up at the staff table. There seemed to be rather more empty seats there than usual. Hagrid, of course, was still fighting his way across the lake with the first years; Professor McGonagall was presumably supervising the drying of the entrance hall floor, but there was another empty chair too, and Harry couldn't think who else was missing.

"Where's the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher?" said Hermione, who was also looking up at the teachers.

They had never yet had a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher who had lasted more than three terms. Harry's favorite by far had been Professor Lupin, who had resigned last year. He looked up and down the staff table. There was definitely no new face there.

"Maybe they couldn't get anyone!" said Hermione, looking anxious.

Harry scanned the table more carefully. Tiny little Professor Flitwick, the Charms teacher, was sitting on a large pile of cushions beside Professor Sprout, the Herbology teacher, whose hat was askew over her flyaway gray hair. She was talking to Professor Sinistra of the Astronomy department. On Professor Sinistra's other side was the sallow-faced, hook-nosed, greasy-haired Potions master, Snape - Harry's least favorite person at Hogwarts. Harry's loathing of Snape was matched only by Snape's hatred of him, a hatred which had, if possible, intensified last year, when Harry had helped Sirius escape right under Snape's overlarge nose - Snape and Sirius had been enemies since their own school days.

On Snape's other side was an empty seat, which Harry guessed was Professor McGonagall's. Next to it, and in the very center of the table, sat Professor Dumbledore, the headmaster, his sweeping silver hair and beard shining in the candlelight, his magnificent deep green robes embroidered with many stars and moons. The tips of Dumbledore's long, thin fingers were together and he was resting his chin upon them, staring up at the ceiling through his half-moon spectacles as though lost in thought. Harry glanced up at the ceiling too. It was enchanted to look like the sky outside, and he had never seen it look this stormy. Black and purple clouds were swirling across it, and as another thunderclap sounded outside, a fork of lightning flashed across it.

"Oh hurry up," Ron moaned, beside Harry, "I could eat a hippogriff."

The words were no sooner out of his mouth than the doors of the Great Hall opened and silence fell. Professor McGonagall was leading a long line of first years up to the top of the Hall. If Harry, Ron, and Hermione were wet, it was nothing to how these first years looked. They appeared to have swum across the lake rather than sailed. All of them were shivering with a combination of cold and nerves as they filed along the staff table and came to a halt in a line facing the rest of the school - all of them except the smallest of the lot, a boy with mousy hair, who was wrapped in what Harry recognized as Hagrid's moleskin overcoat. The coat was so big for him that it hooked as though he were draped in a furry black

circus tent. His small face protruded from over the collar, looking almost painfully excited. When he had lined up with his terrified-looking peers, he caught Colin Creevey's eye, gave a double thumbs-up, and mouthed, I fell in the lake! He looked positively delighted about it.

Professor McGonagall now placed a three-legged stool on the ground before the first years and, on top of it, an extremely old, dirty patched wizard's hat. The first years stared at it. So did everyone else. For a moment, there was silence. Then a long tear near the brim opened wide like a mouth, and the hat broke into song:

A thousand years or more ago,

When I was newly sewn,

There lived four wizards of renown,

Whose names are still well known:

Bold Gryffindor, from wild moor,

Fair Ravenclaw, from glen,

Sweet Hufflepuff, from valley broad,

Shrewd Slytherin, from fin.

They shared a wish, a hope, a dream,

They hatched a daring plan

To educate young sorcerers

Thus Hogwarts School began.

Now each of these four founders

Formed their own house, for each

Did value different virtues

In the ones they had to teach.

By Gryffindor, the bravest were

Prized far beyond the rest;

For Ravenclaw, the cleverest

Would always be the best;

For Hufflepuff, hard workers were

Most worthy of admission;

And power-hungry Slytherin

Loved those of great ambition.

While still alive they did divide

Their favorites from the throng,

Yet how to pick the worthy ones

When they were dead and gone?

'Twas Gryffindor who found the way,

He whipped me off his head

The founders put some brains in me

So I could choose instead!

Now slip me snug about your ears,

I've never yet been wrong,

I'll have a look inside your mind

And tell where you belong!

The Great Hall rang with applause as the Sorting Hat finished.

"That's not the song it sang when it Sorted us," said Harry, clapping along with everyone else.

"Sings a different one every year," said Ron. "It's got to be a pretty boring life, hasn't it, being a hat? I suppose it spends all year making up the next one."

Professor McGonagall was now unrolling a large scroll of parchment.

"When I call out your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool," she told the first years. "When the hat announces your House, you will go and sit at the appropriate table.

"Ackerley, Stewart!"

A boy walked forward, visibly trembling from head to foot, picked up the Sorting Hat, put it on, and sat down on the stool.

"RAVENCLAW!" shouted the hat.

Stewart Ackerley took off the hat and hurried into a seat at the Ravenclaw table, where everyone was applauding him. Harry caught a glimpse of Cho, the Ravenclaw Seeker, cheering Stewart Ackerley as he sat down. For a fleeting second, Harry had a strange desire to join the Ravenclaw table too.

"Baddock, Malcolm!"

"SLYTHERIN!"

The table on the other side of the hall erupted with cheers; Harry could see Malfoy clapping as Baddock joined the Slytherins. Harry wondered whether Baddock knew that Slytherin House had turned out more Dark witches and wizards than any other. Fred and George hissed Malcolm Baddock as he sat down.

"Branstone, Eleanor!"

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

"Cauldwell, Owen!"

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

"Creevey, Dennis!"

Tiny Dennis Creevey staggered forward, tripping over Hagrid's moleskin, just as Hagrid himself sidled into the Hall through a door behind the teachers' table. About twice as tall as a normal man, and at least three times as broad, Hagrid, with his long, wild, tangled black hair and beard, looked slightly alarming - a misleading impression, for Harry, Ron, and Hermione knew Hagrid to possess a very kind nature. He winked at them as he sat down at the end of the staff table and watched Dennis Creevey putting on the Sorting Hat. The rip at the brim opened wide-- -

"GRYFFINDOR!" the hat shouted.

Hagrid clapped along with the Gryffindors as Dennis Creevey, beaming widely, took off the hat, placed it back on the stool, and hurried over to join his brother.

"Colin, I fell in!" he said shrilly, throwing himself into an empty seat. "It was brilliant! And something in the water grabbed me and pushed me back in the boat!"

"Cool!" said Colin, just as excitedly. "It was probably the giant squid, Dennis!"

"Wow!" said Dennis, as though nobody in their wildest dreams could hope for more than being thrown into a storm-tossed, fathoms-deep lake, and pushed out of it again by a giant sea monster.

"Dennis! Dennis! See that boy down there? The one with the black hair and glasses? See him? Know who he is, Dennis?"

Harry looked away, staring very hard at the Sorting Hat, now Sorting Emma Dobbs.

The Sorting continued; boys and girls with varying degrees of fright on their faces moving one by one to the three-legged stool, the line dwindling slowly as

Professor McGonagall passed the L's.

"Oh hurry up," Ron moaned, massaging his stomach.

"Now, Ron, the Sorting's much more important than food," said Nearly Headless Nick as "Madley, Laura!" became a Hufflepuff.

"Course it is, if you're dead," snapped Ron.

"I do hope this year's batch of Gryffindors are up to scratch," said Nearly Headless Nick, applauding as "McDonald, Natalie!" joined the Gryffindor table. "We don't want to break our winning streak, do we?"

Gryffindor had won the Inter-House Championship for the last three years in a row.

"Pritchard, Graham!"

"SLYTHERIN!"

"Quirke, Orla!"

"RAVENCLAW!"

And finally, with "Whitby, Kevin!" ("HUFFLEPUFF!"), the Sorting ended. Professor McGonagall picked up the hat and the stool and carried them away.

"About time," said Ron, seizing his knife and fork and looking expectantly at his golden plate.

Professor Dumbledore had gotten to his feet. He was smiling around at the students, his arms opened wide in welcome.

"I have only two words to say to you," he told them, his deep voice echoing around the Hall. "Tuck in."

"Hear, hear!" said Harry and Ron loudly as the empty dishes filled magically before their eyes.

Nearly Headless Nick watched mournfully as Harry, Ron, and Hermione loaded their own plates.

"Aaah, 'at's be'er," said Ron, with his mouth full of mashed potato.

"You're lucky there's a feast at all tonight, you know," said Nearly Headless Nick. "There was trouble in the kitchens earlier."

"Why? Wha' 'appened?" said Harry, through a sizable chunk of steak.

"Peeves, of course," said Nearly Headless Nick, shaking his head, which wobbled dangerously. He pulled his ruff a little higher up on his neck. "The usual argument, you know. He wanted to attend the feast - well, it's quite out of the question, you

know what he's like, utterly uncivilized, can't see a plate of food without throwing it. We held a ghost's council - the Fat Friar was all for giving him the chance - but most wisely, in my opinion, the Bloody Baron put his foot down."

The Bloody Baron was the Slytherin ghost, a gaunt and silent specter covered in silver bloodstains. He was the only person at Hogwarts who could really control Peeves.

"Yeah, we thought Peeves seemed hacked off about something," said Ron darkly. "So what did he do in the kitchens?"

"Oh the usual," said Nearly Headless Nick, shrugging. "Wreaked havoc and mayhem. Pots and pans everywhere. Place swimming in soup. Terrified the house-elves out of their wits--"

Clang.

Hermione had knocked over her golden goblet. Pumpkin juice spread steadily over the tablecloth, staining several feet of white linen orange, but Hermione paid no attention.

"There are house-elves here?" she said, staring, horror-struck, at Nearly Headless Nick. "Here at Hogwarts?"

"Certainly," said Nearly Headless Nick, looking surprised at her reaction. "The largest number in any dwelling in Britain, I believe. Over a hundred."

"I've never seen one!" said Hermione.

"Well, they hardly ever leave the kitchen by day, do they?" said Nearly Headless Nick. "They come out at night to do a bit of cleaning.. . see to the fires and so on.. . . I mean, you're not supposed to see them, are you? That's the mark of a good house-elf, isn't it, that you don't know it's there?"

Hermione stared at him.

"But they get paid?" she said. "They get holidays, don't they? And - and sick leave, and pensions, and everything?"

Nearly Headless Nick chortled so much that his ruff slipped and his head flopped off, dangling on the inch or so of ghostly skin and muscle that still attached it to his neck.

"Sick leave and pensions?" he said, pushing his head back onto his shoulders and securing it once more with his ruff. "House-elves don't want sick leave and pensions!"

Hermione looked down at her hardly touched plate of food, then put her knife and fork down upon it and pushed it away from her.

"Oh c'mon, 'Er-my-knee," said Ron, accidentally spraying Harry with bits of

Yorkshire pudding. "Oops -- sorry, 'Arry --" He swallowed. "You won't get them sick leave by starving yourself!"

"Slave labor," said Hermione, breathing hard through her nose. "That's what made this dinner. Slave labor."

And she refused to eat another bite.

The rain was still drumming heavily against the high, dark glass. Another clap of thunder shook the windows, and the stormy ceiling flashed, illuminating the golden plates as the remains of the first course vanished and were replaced, instantly, with puddings.

"Treacle tart, Hermione!" said Ron, deliberately wafting its smell toward her. "Spotted dick, look! Chocolate gateau!"

But Hermione gave him a look so reminiscent of Professor McGonagall that he gave up.

When the puddings too had been demolished, and the last crumbs had faded off the plates, leaving them sparkling clean, Albus Dumbledore got to his feet again. The buzz of chatter filling the Hall ceased almost at once, so that only the howling wind and pounding rain could be heard.

"So!" said Dumbledore, smiling around at them all. "Now that we are all fed and watered," ("Hmph!" said Hermione) "I must once more ask for your attention, while I give out a few notices.

"Mr. Filch, the caretaker, has asked me to tell you that the list of objects forbidden inside the castle has this year been extended to include Screaming Yo-yos, Fanged Frisbees, and Ever-Bashing Boomerangs. The full list comprises some four hundred and thirty-seven items, I believe, and can be viewed in Mr. Filch's office, if anybody would like to check it."

The corners of Dumbledore's mouth twitched. He continued, "As ever, I would like to remind you all that the forest on the grounds is out-of-bounds to students, as is the village of Hogsmeade to all below third year.

"It is also my painful duty to inform you that the Inter-House Quidditch Cup will not take place this year."

"What?" Harry gasped. He looked around at Fred and George, his fellow members of the Quidditch team. They were mouthing soundlessly at Dumbledore, apparently too appalled to speak. Dumbhedore went on, "This is due to an event that will be starting in October, and continuing throughout the school year, taking up much of the teachers' time and energy - but I am sure you will all enjoy it immensely. I have great pleasure in announcing that this year at Hogwarts -"

But at that moment, there was a deafening rumble of thunder and the doors of the Great Hall banged open.

A man stood in the doorway, leaning upon a long staff, shrouded in a black traveling cloak. Every head in the Great Hall swiveled toward the stranger, suddenly brightly illuminated by a fork of lightning that flashed across the ceiling. He lowered his hood, shook out a long mane of grizzled, dark gray hair, then began to walk up toward the teachers' table.

A dull clunk echoed through the Hall on his every other step. He reached the end of the top table, turned right, and limped heavily toward Dumbledore. Another flash of lightning crossed the ceiling. Hermione gasped.

The lightning had thrown the man's face into sharp relief, and it was a face unlike any Harry had ever seen. It looked as though it had been carved out of weathered wood by someone who had only the vaguest idea of what human faces are supposed to look like, and was none too skilled with a chisel. Every inch of skin seemed to be scarred. The mouth looked like a diagonal gash, and a large chunk of the nose was missing. But it was the man's eyes that made him frightening.

One of them was small, dark, and beady. The other was large, round as a coin, and a vivid, electric blue. The blue eye was moving ceaselessly, without blinking, and was rolling up, down, and from side to side, quite independently of the normal eye - and then it rolled right over, pointing into the back of the man's head, so that all they could see was whiteness.

The stranger reached Dumbledore. He stretched out a hand that was as badly scarred as his face, and Dumbhedore shook it, muttering words Harry couldn't hear. He seemed to be making some inquiry of the stranger, who shook his head unsmilingly and replied in an undertone. Dumbledore nodded and gestured the man to the empty seat on his right-hand side.

The stranger sat down, shook his mane of dark gray hair out of his face, pulled a plate of sausages toward him, raised it to what was left of his nose, and sniffed it. He then took a small knife out of his pocket, speared a sausage on the end of it, and began to eat. His normal eye was fixed upon the sausages, but the blue eye was still darting restlessly around in its socket, taking in the Hall and the students.

"May I introduce our new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher?" said Dumbledore brightly into the silence. "Professor Moody."

It was usual for new staff members to be greeted with applause, but none of the staff or students chapped except Dumbledore and Hagrid, who both put their hands together and applauded, but the sound echoed dismally into the silence, and they stopped fairly quickly. Everyone else seemed too transfixed by Moody's bizarre appearance to do more than stare at him.

"Moody?" Harry muttered to Ron. "Mad-Eye Moody? The one your dad went to help this morning?"

"Must be," said Ron in a low, awed voice.

"What happened to him?" Hermione whispered. "What happened to his face?"

"Dunno," Ron whispered back, watching Moody with fascination.

Moody seemed totally indifferent to his less-than-warm welcome. Ignoring the jug of pumpkin juice in front of him, he reached again into his traveling cloak, pulled out a hip flask, and took a long draught from it. As he lifted his arm to drink, his cloak was pulled a few inches from the ground, and Harry saw, below the table, several inches of carved wooden leg, ending in a clawed foot.

Dumbledore cleared his throat.

"As I was saying," he said, smiling at the sea of students before him, all of whom were still gazing transfixed at Mad-Eye Moody, "we are to have the honor of hosting a very exciting event over the coming months, an event that has not been held for over a century. It is my very great pleasure to inform you that the Triwizard Tournament will be taking place at Hogwarts this year."

"You're JOKING!" said Fred Weasley loudly.

The tension that had filled the Hall ever since Moody's arrival suddenly broke. Nearly everyone laughed, and Dumbledore chuckled appreciatively.

"I am not joking, Mr. Weasley," he said, "though now that you mention it, I did hear an excellent one over the summer about a troll, a hag, and a leprechaun who all go into a bar.

Professor McGonagall cleared her throat loudly.

"Er - but maybe this is not the time.. . no. . ." said Dumbledore, "where was I? Ah yes, the Triwizard Tournament. . . well, some of you will not know what this tournament involves, so I hope those who do know will forgive me for giving a short explanation, and allow their attention to wander freely.

"The Triwizard Tournament was first established some seven hundred years ago as a friendly competition between the three largest European schools of wizardry: Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, and Durmstrang. A champion was selected to represent each school, and the three champions competed in three magical tasks. The schools took it in turns to host the tournament once every five years, and it was generally agreed to be a most excellent way of establishing ties between young witches and wizards of different nationalities - until, that is, the death toll mounted so high that the tournament was discontinued."

"Death toll?" Hermione whispered, looking alarmed. But her anxiety did not seem to be shared by the majority of students in the Hall; many of them were whispering excitedly to one another, and Harry himself was far more interested in hearing about the tournament than in worrying about deaths that had happened hundreds of years ago.

"There have been several attempts over the centuries to reinstate the tournament,"

Dumbledore continued, "none of which has been very successful. However, our own departments of International Magical Cooperation and Magical Games and Sports have decided the time is ripe for another attempt. We have worked hard over the summer to ensure that this time, no champion will find himself or herself in mortal danger.

"The heads of Beauxbatons and Durmstrang will be arriving with their short-listed contenders in October, and the selection of the three champions will take place at Halloween. An impartial judge will decide which students are most worthy to compete for the Triwizard Cup, the glory of their school, and a thousand Galleons personal prize money."

"I'm going for it!" Fred Weasley hissed down the table, his face lit with enthusiasm at the prospect of such glory and riches. He was not the only person who seemed to be visualizing himself as the Hogwarts champion. At every House table, Harry could see people either gazing raptly at Dumbledore, or else whispering fervently to their neighbors. But then Dumbledore spoke again, and the Hall quieted once more.

"Eager though I know all of you will be to bring the Triwizard Cup to Hogwarts," he said, "the heads of the participating schools, along with the Ministry of Magic, have agreed to impose an age restriction on contenders this year. Only students who are of age - that is to say, seventeen years or older - will be allowed to put forward their names for consideration. This" -- Dumbledore raised his voice slightly, for several people had made noises of outrage at these words, and the Weasley twins were suddenly looking furious - "is a measure we feel is necessary, given that the tournament tasks will still be difficult and dangerous, whatever precautions we take, and it is highly unlikely that students below sixth and seventh year will be able to cope with them. I will personally be ensuring that no underage student hoodwinks our impartial judge into making them Hog-warts champion." His light blue eyes twinkled as they flickered over Fred's and George's mutinous faces. "I therefore beg you not to waste your time submitting yourself if you are under seventeen.

"The delegations from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang will be arriving in October and remaining with us for the greater part of this year. I know that you will all extend every courtesy to our foreign guests while they are with us, and will give your whole-hearted support to the Hogwarts champion when he or she is selected. And now, it is late, and I know how important it is to you all to be alert and rested as you enter your lessons tomorrow morning. Bedtime! Chop chop!"

Dumbledore sat down again and turned to talk to Mad-Eye Moody. There was a great scraping and banging as all the students got to their feet and swarmed toward the double doors into the entrance hall.

"They can't do that!" said George Weasley, who had not joined the crowd moving toward the door, but was standing up and glaring at Dumbledore. "We're seventeen in April, why can't we have a shot?"

"They're not stopping me entering," said Fred stubbornly, also scowling at the top table. "The champions'll get to do all sorts of stuff you'd never be allowed to do normally. And a thousand Galleons prize money!"

"Yeah," said Ron, a faraway look on his face. "Yeah, a thousand Galleons. . ."

"Come on," said Hermione, "we'll be the only ones left here if you don't move."

Harry, Ron, Hermione, Fred, and George set off for the entrance hall, Fred and George debating the ways in which Dumbledore might stop those who were under seventeen from entering the tournament.

"Who's this impartial judge who's going to decide who the champions are?" said Harry.

"Dunno," said Fred, "but it's them we'll have to fool. I reckon a couple of drops of Aging Potion might do it, George.. ."

"Dumbledore knows you're not of age, though," said Ron.

"Yeah, but he's not the one who decides who the champion is, is he?" said Fred shrewdly. "Sounds to me like once this judge knows who wants to enter, he'll choose the best from each school and never mind how old they are. Dumbledore's trying to stop us giving our names."

"People have died, though!" said Hermione in a worried voice as they walked through a door concealed behind a tapestry and started up another, narrower staircase.

"Yeah," said Fred airily, "but that was years ago, wasn't it? Anyway, where's the fun without a bit of risk? Hey, Ron, what if we find out how to get 'round Dumbledore? Fancy entering?"

"What d'you reckon?" Ron asked Harry. "Be cool to enter, wouldn't it? But I s'pose they might want someone older.... Dunno if we've learned enough.. .

"I definitely haven't," came Nevihle's gloomy voice from behind Fred and George.

"I expect my gran'd want me to try, though. She's always going on about how I should be upholding the family honor. I'll just have to -- oops. . ."

Neville's foot had sunk right through a step halfway up the staircase. There were many of these trick stairs at Hogwarts; it was second nature to most of the older students to jump this particular step, but Neville's memory was notoriously poor. Harry and Ron seized him under the armpits and pulled him out, while a suit of armor at the top of the stairs creaked and clanked, laughing wheezily.

"Shut it, you," said Ron, banging down its visor as they passed. They made their way up to the entrance to Gryffindor Tower, which was concealed behind a large portrait of a fat lady in a pink silk dress.

"Password?" she said as they approached.

"Balderdash," said George, "a prefect downstairs told me."

The portrait swung forward to reveal a hole in the wall through which they all climbed. A crackling fire warmed the circular common room, which was full of squashy armchairs and tables. Hermione cast the merrily dancing flames a dark look, and Harry distinctly heard her mutter "Slave labor" before bidding them good night and disappearing through the doorway to the girls' dormitory.

Harry, Ron, and Neville climbed up the last, spiral staircase until they reached their own dormitory, which was situated at the top of the tower. Five four-poster beds with deep crimson hangings stood against the walls, each with its owner's trunk at the foot. Dean and Seamus were already getting into bed; Seamus had pinned his Ireland rosette to his headboard, and Dean had tacked up a poster of Viktor Krum over his bedside table. His old poster of the West Ham football team was pinned right next to it.

"Mental," Ron sighed, shaking his head at the completely stationary soccer players.

Harry, Ron, and Neville got into their pajamas and into bed. Someone - a house-elf, no doubt - had placed warming pans between the sheets. It was extremely comfortable, lying there in bed and listening to the storm raging outside.

"I might go in for it, you know," Ron said sleepily through the darkness, "if Fred and George find out how to. . . the tournament. . . you never know, do you?"

"S'pose not. .. ."

Harry rolled over in bed, a series of dazzling new pictures forming in his mind's eye. . . . He had hoodwinked the impartial judge into believing he was seventeen. . . he had become Hogwarts champion. . . he was standing on the grounds, his arms raised in triumph in front of the whole school, all of whom were applauding and screaming. . . he had just won the Triwizard Tournament. Cho's face stood out particularly clearly in the blurred crowd, her face glowing with admiration....

Harry grinned into his pillow, exceptionally glad that Ron couldn't see what he could.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN - MAD-EYE MOODY

The storm had blown itself out by the following morning, though the ceiling in the Great Hall was still gloomy; heavy clouds of pewter gray swirled overhead as Harry, Ron, and Hermione examined their new course schedules at breakfast. A few seats along, Fred, George, and Lee Jordan were discussing magical methods of aging themselves and bluffing their way into the Triwizard Tournament.

"Today's not bad.. . outside all morning," said Ron, who was running his finger down the Monday column of his schedule. "Herbology with the Hufflepuffs and Care of Magical Creatures... damn it, we're still with the Slytherins. . . ."

"Double Divination this afternoon," Harry groaned, looking down. Divination was his least favorite subject, apart from Potions. Professor Trelawney kept predicting Harry's death, which he found extremely annoying.

"You should have given it up like me, shouldn't you?" said Hermione briskly, buttering herself some toast. "Then you'd be doing something sensible like Arithmancy."

"You're eating again, I notice," said Ron, watching Hermione adding liberal amounts of jam to her toast too.

"I've decided there are better ways of making a stand about elf rights," said Hermione haughtily.

"Yeah. . . and you were hungry," said Ron, grinning.

There was a sudden rustling noise above them, and a hundred owls came soaring through the open windows carrying the morning mail. Instinctively, Harry looked up, but there was no sign of white among the mass of brown and gray. The owls circled the tables, looking for the people to whom their letters and packages were addressed. A large tawny owl soared down to Neville Longbottom and deposited a parcel into his lap - Neville almost always forgot to pack something. On the other side of the Hall Draco Malfoy's eagle owl had landed on his shoulder, carrying what looked like his usual supply of sweets and cakes from home. Trying to ignore the sinking feeling of disappointment in his stomach, Harry returned to his porridge. Was it possible that something had happened to Hedwig, and that Sirius hadn't even got his letter?

His preoccupation lasted all the way across the sodden vegetable patch until they arrived in greenhouse three, but here he was distracted by Professor Sprout showing the class the ugliest plants Harry had ever seen. Indeed, they looked less like plants than thick, black, giant slugs, protruding vertically out of the soil. Each was squirming slightly and had a number of large, shiny swellings upon it, which appeared to be full of liquid.

"Bubotubers," Professor Sprout told them briskly. "They need squeezing. You will collect the pus -"

"The what?" said Seamus Finnigan, sounding revolted.

"Pus, Finnigan, pus," said Professor Sprout, "and it's extremely valuable, so don't waste it. You will collect the pus, I say, in these bottles. Wear your dragon-hide gloves; it can do funny things to the skin when undiluted, bubotuber pus."

Squeezing the bubotubers was disgusting, but oddly satisfying. As each swelling was popped, a large amount of thick yellowish-green liquid burst forth, which smelled strongly of petrol. They caught it in the bottles as Professor Sprout had indicated, and by the end of the lesson had collected several pints.

"This'll keep Madam Pomfrey happy," said Professor Sprout, stoppering the last bottle with a cork. "An excellent remedy for the more stubborn forms of acne, bubotuber pus. Should stop students resorting to desperate measures to rid themselves of pimples."

"Like poor Eloise Midgen," said Hannah Abbott, a Hufflepuff, in a hushed voice. "She tried to curse hers off."

"Silly girl," said Professor Sprout, shaking her head. "But Madam Pomfrey fixed her nose back on in the end."

A booming bell echoed from the castle across the wet grounds, signaling the end of the lesson, and the class separated; the Hufflepuffs climbing the stone steps for Transfiguration, and the Gryffindors heading in the other direction, down the sloping lawn toward Hagrid's small wooden cabin, which stood on the edge of the Forbidden Forest.

Hagrid was standing outside his hut, one hand on the collar of his enormous black boarhound, Fang. There were several open wooden crates on the ground at his feet, and Fang was whimpering and straining at his collar, apparently keen to investigate the contents more closely. As they drew nearer, an odd rattling noise reached their ears, punctuated by what sounded like minor explosions.

"Mornin'!" Hagrid said, grinning at Harry, Ron, and Hermione. "Be'er wait fer the Slytherins, they won' want ter miss this - Blast-Ended Skrewts!"

"Come again?" said Ron.

Hagrid pointed down into the crates.

"Eurgh!" squealed Lavender Brown, jumping backward. "Eurgh" just about summed up the Blast-Ended Skrewts in Harry's opinion. They looked like deformed, shell-less lobsters, horribly pale and slimy-looking, with legs sticking out in very odd places and no visible heads. There were about a hundred of them in each crate, each about six inches long, crawling over one another, bumping blindly into the sides of the boxes. They were giving off a very powerful smell of

rotting fish. Every now and then, sparks would fly out of the end of a skrewt, and with a small phut, it would be propelled forward several inches.

"On'y jus' hatched," said Hagrid proudly, "so yeh'll be able ter raise 'em yerselves! Thought we'd make a bit of a project of it!"

"And why would we want to raise them?" said a cold voice.

The Slytherins had arrived. The speaker was Draco Malfoy. Crabbe and Goyle were chuckling appreciatively at his words.

Hagrid looked stumped at the question.

"I mean, what do they do?" asked Malfoy. "What is the point of them?"

Hagrid opened his mouth, apparently thinking hard; there was a few seconds' pause, then he said roughly, "Tha's next lesson, Malfoy. Yer jus' feedin' 'em today. Now, yeh'll wan' ter try 'em on a few diff'rent things - I've never had 'em before, not sure what they'll go fer - I got ant eggs an' frog livers an' a bit o' grass snake - just try 'em out with a bit of each."

"First pus and now this," muttered Seamus.

Nothing but deep affection for Hagrid could have made Harry, Ron, and Hermione pick up squelchy handfuls of frog liver and lower them into the crates to tempt the Blast-Ended Skrewts. Harry couldn't suppress the suspicion that the whole thing was entirely pointless, because the skrewts didn't seem to have mouths.

"Ouch!" yelled Dean Thomas after about ten minutes. "It got me."

Hagrid hurried over to him, looking anxious.

"Its end exploded!" said Dean angrily, showing Hagrid a burn on his hand.

"Ah, yeah, that can happen when they blast off," said Hagrid, nodding.

"Eurgh!" said Lavender Brown again. "Eurgh, Hagrid, what's that pointy thing on it?"

"Ah, some of 'em have got stings," said Hagrid enthusiastically (Lavender quickly withdrew her hand from the box). "I reckon they're the males. . . . The females've got sorta sucker things on their bellies. . . . I think they might be ter suck blood."

"Well, I can certainly see why we're trying to keep them alive," said Malfoy sarcastically. "Who wouldn't want pets that can burn, sting, and bite all at once?"

"Just because they're not very pretty, it doesn't mean they're not useful," Hermione snapped. "Dragon blood's amazingly magical, but you wouldn't want a dragon for a pet, would you?"

Harry and Ron grinned at Hagrid, who gave them a furtive smile from behind his

bushy beard. Hagrid would have liked nothing better than a pet dragon, as Harry, Ron, and Hermione knew only too well - he had owned one for a brief period during their first year, a vicious Norwegian Ridgeback by the name of Norbert. Hagrid simply loved monstrous creatures, the more lethal, the better.

"Well, at least the skrewts are small," said Ron as they made their way back up to the castle for lunch an hour later.

"They are now," said Hermione in an exasperated voice, "but once Hagrid's found out what they eat, I expect they'll be six feet long."

"Well, that won't matter if they turn out to cure seasickness or something, will it?" said Ron, grinning slyly at her.

"You know perfectly well I only said that to shut Malfoy up," said Hermione. "As a matter of fact I think he's right. The best thing to do would be to stamp on the lot of them before they start attacking us all."

They sat down at the Gryffindor table and helped themselves to lamb chops and potatoes. Hermione began to eat so fast that Harry and Ron stared at her.

"Er - is this the new stand on elf rights?" said Ron. "You're going to make yourself puke instead?"

"No," said Hermione, with as much dignity as she could muster with her mouth bulging with sprouts. "I just want to get to the library."

"What?" said Ron in disbelief. "Hermione - it's the first day back! We haven't even got homework yet!"

Hermione shrugged and continued to shovel down her food as though she had not eaten for days. Then she leapt to her feet, said, "See you at dinner!" and departed at high speed.

When the bell rang to signal the start of afternoon lessons, Harry and Ron set off for North Tower where, at the top of a tightly spiraling staircase, a silver stepladder led to a circular trapdoor in the ceiling, and the room where Professor Trelawney lived.

The familiar sweet perfume spreading from the fire met their nostrils as they emerged at the top of the stepladder. As ever, the curtains were all closed; the circular room was bathed in a dim reddish light cast by the many lamps, which were all draped with scarves and shawls. Harry and Ron walked through the mass of occupied chintz chairs and poufs that cluttered the room, and sat down at the same small circular table.

"Good day," said the misty voice of Professor Trelawney right behind Harry, making him jump.

A very thin woman with enormous glasses that made her eyes appear far too large

for her face, Professor Trelawney was peering down at Harry with the tragic expression she always wore whenever she saw him. The usual large amount of beads, chains, and bangles glittered upon her person in the firelight.

"You are preoccupied, my dear," she said mournfully to Harry. "My inner eye sees past your brave face to the troubled soul within. And I regret to say that your worries are not baseless. I see difficult times ahead for you, alas. . . most difficult.. . I fear the thing you dread will indeed come to pass. . . and perhaps sooner than you think..."

Her voice dropped almost to a whisper. Ron rolled his eyes at Harry, who looked stonily back. Professor Trelawney swept past them and seated herself in a large winged armchair before the fire, facing the class. Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil, who deeply admired Professor Trelawney, were sitting on poufs very close to her.

"My dears, it is time for us to consider the stars," she said. "The movements of the planets and the mysterious portents they reveal only to those who understand the steps of the celestial dance. Human destiny may be deciphered by the planetary rays, which intermingle. . ."

But Harry's thoughts had drifted. The perfumed fire always made him feel sleepy and dull-witted, and Professor Trelawney's rambling talks on fortune-telling never held him exactly spellbound - though he couldn't help thinking about what she had just said to him. "I fear the thing you dread will indeed come to pass...'"

But Hermione was right, Harry thought irritably, Professor Trelawney really was an old fraud. He wasn't dreading anything at the moment at all. . . well, unless you counted his fears that Sirius had been caught. . . but what did Professor Trelawney know? He had long since come to the conclusion that her brand of fortunetelling was really no more than lucky guesswork and a spooky manner.

Except, of course, for that time at the end of last term, when she had made the prediction about Voldemort rising again. . . and Dumbledore himself had said that he thought that trance had been genuine, when Harry had described it to him.

"Harry!" Ron muttered.

"What?"

Harry looked around; the whole class was staring at him. He sat up straight; he had been almost dozing off, lost in the heat and his thoughts.

"I was saying, my dear, that you were clearly born under the baleful influence of Saturn," said Professor Trelawney, a faint note of resentment in her voice at the fact that he had obviously not been hanging on her words.

"Born under - what, sorry?" said Harry.

"Saturn, dear, the planet Saturn!" said Professor Trelawney, sounding definitely

irritated that he wasn't riveted by this news. "I was saying that Saturn was surely in a position of power in the heavens at the moment of your birth. . . . Your dark hair. . . your mean stature...tragic losses so young in life. . . I think I am right in saying, my dear, that you were born in midwinter?"

"No," said Harry, "I was born in July."

Ron hastily turned his laugh into a hacking cough.

Half an hour later, each of them had been given a complicated circular chart, and was attempting to fill in the position of the planets at their moment of birth. It was dull work, requiring much consultation of timetables and calculation of angles.

"I've got two Neptunes here," said Harry after a while, frowning down at his piece of parchment, "that can't be right, can it?"

"Aaaaah," said Ron, imitating Professor Trelawney's mystical whisper, "when two Neptunes appear in the sky, it is a sure sign that a midget in glasses is being born, Harry. . . ."

Seamus and Dean, who were working nearby, sniggered loudly, though not loudly enough to mask the excited squeals from Lavender Brown - "Oh Professor, look! I think I've got an unaspected planet! Oooh, which one's that, Professor?"

"It is Uranus, my dear," said Professor Trelawney, peering down at the chart.

"Can I have a look at Uranus too, Lavender?" said Ron.

Most unfortunately, Professor Trelawney heard him, and it was this, perhaps, that made her give them so much homework at the end of the class.

"A detailed analysis of the way the planetary movements in the coming month will affect you, with reference to your personal chart," she snapped, sounding much more like Professor McGonagall than her usual airy-fairy self. "I want it ready to hand in next Monday, and no excuses!"

"Miserable old bat," said Ron bitterly as they joined the crowds descending the staircases back to the Great Hall and dinner. "That'll take all weekend, that will. . ."

"Lots of homework?" said Hermione brightly, catching up with them. "Professor Vector didn't give us any at all!"

"Well, bully for Professor Vector," said Ron moodily.

They reached the entrance hall, which was packed with people queuing for dinner. They had just joined the end of the line, when a loud voice rang out behind them.

"Weasley! Hey, Weasley!"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione turned. Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were standing

there, each looking thoroughly pleased about something.

"What?" said Ron shortly.

"Your dad's in the paper, Weasley!" said Malfoy, brandishing a copy of the Daily Prophet and speaking very loudly, so that everyone in the packed entrance hall could hear. "Listen to this!

FURTHER MISTAKES AT THE MINISTRY OF MAGIC

It seems as though the Ministry of Magic's troubles are not yet at an end, writes Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent. Recently under fire for its poor

crowd control at the Quidditch World Cup, and still unable to account for the disappearance of one of its witches, the Ministry was plunged into fresh embarrassment yesterday by the antics of Arnold Weasley, of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office."

Malfoy looked up.

"Imagine them not even getting his name right, Weasley. It's almost as though he's a complete nonentity, isn't it?" he crowed.

Everyone in the entrance hall was listening now. Malfoy straightened the paper with a flourish and read on:

Arnold Weasley, who was charged with possession of a flying car two years ago, was yesterday involved in a tussle with several Muggle law-keepers ("policemen") over a number of highly aggressive dustbins. Mr. Weasley appears to have rushed to the aid of "Mad-Eye" Moody, the aged ex-Auror who retired from the Ministry when no longer able to tell the difference between a handshake and attempted murder. Unsurprisingly, Mr. Weasley found, upon arrival at Mr. Moody's heavily guarded house, that Mr. Moody had once again raised a false alarm. Mr. Weasley was forced to modify several memories before he could escape from the policemen, but refused to answer Daily Prophet questions about why he had involved the Ministry in such an undignified and potentially embarrassing scene.

"And there's a picture, Weasley!" said Malfoy, flipping the paper over and holding it up. "A picture of your parents outside their house - if you can call it a house! Your mother could do with losing a bit of weight, couldn't she?"

Ron was shaking with fury. Everyone was staring at him.

"Get stuffed, Malfoy," said Harry. "C'mon, Ron. . ."

"Oh yeah, you were staying with them this summer, weren't you, Potter?" sneered Malfoy. "So tell me, is his mother really that porky, or is it just the picture?"

"You know your mother, Malfoy?" said Harry - both he and Hermione had grabbed the back of Ron's robes to stop him from launching himself at Malfoy -

"that expression she's got, like she's got dung under her nose? Has she always looked like that, or was it just because you were with her?"

Malfoy's pale face went slightly pink.

"Don't you dare insult my mother, Potter."

"Keep your fat mouth shut, then," said Harry, turning away.

BANG!

Several people screamed - Harry felt something white-hot graze the side of his face - he plunged his hand into his robes for his wand, but before he'd even touched it, he heard a second loud BANG, and a roar that echoed through the entrance hall.

"OH NO YOU DON'T, LADDIE!"

Harry spun around. Professor Moody was limping down the marble staircase. His wand was out and it was pointing right at a pure white ferret, which was shivering on the stone-flagged floor, exactly where Malfoy had been standing.

There was a terrified silence in the entrance hall. Nobody but Moody was moving a muscle. Moody turned to look at Harry -- at least, his normal eye was looking at Harry; the other one was pointing into the back of his head.

"Did he get you?" Moody growled. His voice was low and gravelly.

"No," said Harry, "missed."

"LEAVE IT!" Moody shouted.

"Leave - what?" Harry said, bewildered.

"Not you - him!" Moody growled, jerking his thumb over his shoulder at Crabbe, who had just frozen, about to pick up the white ferret. It seemed that Moody's rolling eye was magical and could see out of the back of his head.

Moody started to limp toward Crabbe, Goyle, and the ferret, which gave a terrified squeak and took off, streaking toward the dungeons.

"I don't think so!" roared Moody, pointing his wand at the ferret again - it flew ten feet into the air, fell with a smack to the floor, and then bounced upward once more.

"I don't like people who attack when their opponent's back's turned," growled Moody as the ferret bounced higher and higher, squealing in pain. "Stinking, cowardly, scummy thing to do..."

The ferret flew through the air, its legs and tail flailing helplessly.

"Never - do - that - again -" said Moody, speaking each word as the ferret hit the

stone floor and bounced upward again.

"Professor Moody!" said a shocked voice.

Professor McGonagall was coming down the marble staircase with her arms full of books.

"Hello, Professor McGonagall," said Moody calmly, bouncing the ferret still higher.

"What - what are you doing?" said Professor McGonagall, her eyes following the bouncing ferret's progress through the air.

"Teaching," said Moody.

"Teach - Moody, is that a student?" shrieked Professor McGonagall, the books spilling out of her arms.

"Yep," said Moody.

"No!" cried Professor McGonagall, running down the stairs and pulling out her wand; a moment later, with a loud snapping noise, Draco Malfoy had reappeared, lying in a heap on the floor with his sleek blond hair all over his now brilliantly pink face. He got to his feet, wincing.

"Moody, we never use Transfiguration as a punishment!" said Professor McGonagall wealdy. "Surely Professor Dumbledore told you that?"

"He might've mentioned it, yeah," said Moody, scratching his chin unconcernedly, "but I thought a good sharp shock -"

"We give detentions, Moody! Or speak to the offender's Head of House!"

"I'll do that, then," said Moody, staring at Malfoy with great dislike.

Malfoy, whose pale eyes were still watering with pain and humiliation, looked malevolently up at Moody and muttered something in which the words "my father" were distinguishable.

"Oh yeah?" said Moody quietly, limping forward a few steps, the dull clunk of his wooden leg echoing around the hall. "Well, I know your father of old, boy... . You tell him Moody's keeping a close eye on his son. . . you tell him that from me. . . . Now, your Head of House'll be Snape, will it?"

"Yes," said Malfoy resentfully.

"Another old friend," growled Moody. "I've been looking forward to a chat with old Snape. . . . Come on, you. . ."

And he seized Malfoy's upper arm and marched him off toward the dungeons.

Professor McGonagall stared anxiously after them for a few moments, then waved

her wand at her fallen books, causing them to soar up into the air and back into her arms.

"Don't talk to me," Ron said quietly to Harry and Hermione as they sat down at the Gryffindor table a few minutes later, surrounded by excited talk on all sides about what had just happened.

"Why not?" said Hermione in surprise.

"Because I want to fix that in my memory forever," said Ron, his eyes closed and an uplifted expression on his face. "Draco Malfoy, the amazing bouncing ferret."

Harry and Hermione both laughed, and Hermione began doling beef casserole onto each of their plates.

"He could have really hurt Malfoy, though," she said. "It was good, really, that Professor McGonagall stopped it -"

"Hermione!" said Ron furiously, his eyes snapping open again, "you're ruining the best moment of my life!"

Hermione made an impatient noise and began to eat at top speed again.

"Don't tell me you're going back to the library this evening?" said Harry, watching her.

"Got to," said Hermione thickly. "Loads to do."

"But you told us Professor Vector -"

"It's not schoolwork," she said. Within five minutes, she had cleared her plate and departed. No sooner had she gone than her seat was taken by Fred Weasley.

"Moody!" he said. "How cool is he?"

"Beyond cool," said George, sitting down opposite Fred. "Supercool," said the twins' best friend, Lee Jordan, sliding into the seat beside George. "We had him this afternoon," he told Harry and Ron.

"What was it like?" said Harry eagerly.

Fred, George, and Lee exchanged looks full of meaning.

"Never had a lesson like it," said Fred.

"He knows, man," said Lee.

"Knows what?" said Ron, leaning forward.

"Knows what it's like to be out there doing it," said George impressively.

"Doing what?" said Harry.

"Fighting the Dark Arts," said Fred.

"He's seen it all," said George.

"Mazing," said Lee.

Ron dived into his bag for his schedule.

"We haven't got him till Thursday!" he said in a disappointed voice.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN - THE UNFORGIVABLE CURSES

The next two days passed without great incident, unless you counted Neville melting his sixth cauldron in Potions. Professor Snape, who seemed to have attained new levels of vindictiveness over the summer, gave Nevihle detention, and Neville returned from it in a state of nervous collapse, having been made to disembowel a barrel full of horned toads.

"You know why Snape's in such a foul mood, don't you?" said Ron to Harry as they watched Hermione teaching Neville a Scouring Charm to remove the frog guts from under his fingernails.

"Yeah," said Harry. "Moody."

It was common knowledge that Snape really wanted the Dark Arts job, and he had now failed to get it for the fourth year running. Snape had disliked all of their previous Dark Arts teachers, and shown it - but he seemed strangely wary of displaying overt animosity to Mad-Eye Moody. Indeed, whenever Harry saw the two of them together - at mealtimes, or when they passed in the corridors - he had the distinct impression that Snape was avoiding Moody's eye, whether magical or normal.

"I reckon Snape's a bit scared of him, you know," Harry said thoughtfully.

"Imagine if Moody turned Snape into a horned toad," said Ron, his eyes misting over, "and bounced him all around his dungeon..."

The Gryffindor fourth years were looking forward to Moody's first lesson so much that they arrived early on Thursday lunchtime and queued up outside his classroom before the bell had even rung. The only person missing was Hermione, who turned up just in time for the lesson.

"Been in the -"

"Library." Harry finished her sentence for her. "C'mon, quick, or we won't get decent seats."

They hurried into three chairs right in front of the teacher's desk, took out their copies of The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protection, and waited, unusually quiet. Soon they heard Moody's distinctive clunking footsteps coming down the corridor, and he entered the room, looking as strange and frightening as ever. They could just see his clawed, wooden foot protruding from underneath his robes.

"You can put those away," he growled, stumping over to his desk and sitting down, "those books. You won't need them."

They returned the books to their bags, Ron looking excited.

Moody took out a register, shook his long mane of grizzled gray hair out of his twisted and scarred face, and began to call out names, his normal eye moving steadily down the list while his magical eye swiveled around, fixing upon each student as he or she answered.

"Right then," he said, when the last person had declared themselves present, "I've had a letter from Professor Lupin about this class. Seems you've had a pretty thorough grounding in tackling Dark creatures - you've covered boggarts, Red Caps, hinkypunks, grindylows, Kappas, and werewolves, is that right?"

There was a general murmur of assent.

"But you're behind - very behind - on dealing with curses," said Moody. "So I'm here to bring you up to scratch on what wizards can do to each other. I've got one year to teach you how to deal with Dark -"

"What, aren't you staying?" Ron blurted out.

Moody's magical eye spun around to stare at Ron; Ron looked extremely apprehensive, but after a moment Moody smiled - the first time Harry had seen him do so. The effect was to make his heavily scarred face look more twisted and contorted than ever, but it was nevertheless good to know that he ever did anything as friendly as smile. Ron looked deeply relieved.

"You'll be Arthur Weasley's son, eh?" Moody said. "Your father got me out of a very tight corner a few days ago. .. . Yeah, I'm staying just the one year. Special favor to Dumbledore. . . . One year, and then back to my quiet retirement."

He gave a harsh laugh, and then clapped his gnarled hands together.

"So - straight into it. Curses. They come in many strengths and forms. Now, according to the Ministry of Magic, I'm supposed to teach you countercurses and leave it at that. I'm not supposed to show you what illegal Dark curses look like until you're in the sixth year. You're not supposed to be old enough to deal with it till then. But Professor Dumbledore's got a higher opinion of your nerves, he reckons you can cope, and I say, the sooner you know what you're up against, the better. How are you supposed to defend yourself against something you've never seen? A wizard who's about to put an illegal curse on you isn't going to tell you what he's about to do. He's not going to do it nice and polite to your face. You need to be prepared. You need to be alert and watchful. You need to put that away, Miss Brown, when I'm talking."

Lavender jumped and blushed. She had been showing Parvati her completed horoscope under the desk. Apparently Moody's magical eye could see through solid wood, as well as out of the back of his head.

"So. . . do any of you know which curses are most heavily punished by wizarding law?"

Several hands rose tentatively into the air, including Ron's and Hermione's. Moody pointed at Ron, though his magical eye was still fixed on Lavender.

"Er," said Ron tentatively, "my dad told me about one.. . . Is it called the Imperius Curse, or something?"

"Ah, yes," said Moody appreciatively. "Your father would know that one. Gave the Ministry a lot of trouble at one time, the Imperius Curse."

Moody got heavily to his mismatched feet, opened his desk drawer, and took out a glass jar. Three large black spiders were scuttling around inside it. Harry felt Ron recoil slightly next to him - Ron hated spiders.

Moody reached into the jar, caught one of the spiders, and held it in the palm of his hand so that they could all see it. He then pointed his wand at it and muttered, "Imperio!"

The spider leapt from Moody's hand on a fine thread of silk and began to swing backward and forward as though on a trapeze. It stretched out its legs rigidly, then did a back flip, breaking the thread and landing on the desk, where it began to cartwheel in circles. Moody jerked his wand, and the spider rose onto two of its hind legs and went into what was unmistakably a tap dance.

Everyone was laughing - everyone except Moody.

"Think it's funny, do you?" he growled. "You'd like it, would you, if I did it to you?"

The laughter died away almost instantly.

"Total control," said Moody quietly as the spider balled itself up and began to roll over and over. "I could make it jump out of the window, drown itself, throw itself down one of your throats. . ."

Ron gave an involuntary shudder.

"Years back, there were a lot of witches and wizards being controlled by the Imperius Curse," said Moody, and Harry knew he was talking about the days in which Voldemort had been all-powerful. "Some job for the Ministry, trying to sort out who was being forced to act, and who was acting of their own free will.

"The Imperius Curse can be fought, and I'll be teaching you how, but it takes real strength of character, and not everyone's got it. Better avoid being hit with it if you can. CONSTANT VIGILANCE!" he barked, and everyone jumped.

Moody picked up the somersaulting spider and threw it back into the jar.

"Anyone else know one? Another illegal curse?"

Hermione's hand flew into the air again and so, to Harry's slight surprise, did Neville's. The only class in which Neville usually volunteered information was

Herbology which was easily his best subject. Neville looked surprised at his own daring.

"Yes?" said Moody, his magical eye rolling right over to fix on Neville.

"There's one - the Cruciatus Curse," said Neville in a small but distinct voice.

Moody was looking very intently at Neville, this time with both eyes.

"Your name's Longbottom?" he said, his magical eye swooping down to check the register again.

Neville nodded nervously, but Moody made no further inquiries. Turning back to the class at large, he reached into the jar for the next spider and placed it upon the desktop, where it remained motionless, apparently too scared to move.

"The Cruciatus Curse," said Moody. "Needs to be a bit bigger for you to get the idea," he said, pointing his wand at the spider. "Engorgio!"

The spider swelled. It was now larger than a tarantula. Abandoning all pretense, Ron pushed his chair backward, as far away from Moody's desk as possible.

Moody raised his wand again, pointed it at the spider, and muttered, "Crucio!"

At once, the spider's legs bent in upon its body; it rolled over and began to twitch horribly, rocking from side to side. No sound came from it, but Harry was sure that if it could have given voice, it would have been screaming. Moody did not remove his wand, and the spider started to shudder and jerk more violently - "Stop it!" Hermione said shrilly."

Harry looked around at her. She was looking, not at the spider, but at Neville, and Harry, following her gaze, saw that Neville's hands were clenched upon the desk in front of him, his knuckles white, his eyes wide and horrified.

Moody raised his wand. The spider's legs relaxed, but it continued to twitch.

"Reducio," Moody muttered, and the spider shrank back to its proper size. He put it back into the jar.

"Pain," said Moody softly. "You don't need thumbscrews or knives to torture someone if you can perform the Cruciatus Curse. . . . That one was very popular once too.

"Right. . . anyone know any others?"

Harry looked around. From the looks on everyone's faces, he guessed they were all wondering what was going to happen to the last spider. Hermione's hand shook slightly as, for the third time, she raised it into the air.

"Yes?" said Moody, looking at her.

"Avada Kedavra," Hermione whispered.

Several people looked uneasily around at her, including Ron.

"Ah," said Moody, another slight smile twisting his lopsided mouth. "Yes, the last and worst. Avada Kedavra. .. the Killing Curse."

He put his hand into the glass jar, and almost as though it knew what was coming, the third spider scuttled frantically around the bottom of the jar, trying to evade Moody's fingers, but he trapped it, and placed it upon the desktop. It started to scuttle frantically across the wooden surface.

Moody raised his wand, and Harry felt a sudden thrill of foreboding.

"Avada Kedavra!" Moody roared.

There was a flash of blinding green light and a rushing sound, as though a vast, invisible something was soaring through the air - instantaneously the spider rolled over onto its back, unmarked, but unmistakably dead. Several of the students stifled cries; Ron had thrown himself backward and almost toppled off his seat as the spider skidded toward him.

Moody swept the dead spider off the desk onto the floor.

"Not nice," he said calmly. "Not pleasant. And there's no countercurse. There's no blocking it. Only one known person has ever survived it, and he's sitting right in front of me."

Harry felt his face redden as Moody's eyes (both of them) looked into his own. He could feel everyone else looking around at him too. Harry stared at the blank blackboard as though fascinated by it, but not really seeing it at all....

So that was how his parents had died. . . exactly like that spider. Had they been unblemished and unmarked too? Had they simply seen the flash of green light and heard the rush of speeding death, before life was wiped from their bodies?

Harry had been picturing his parents' deaths over and over again for three years now, ever since he'd found out they had been murdered, ever since he'd found out what had happened that night: Wormtail had betrayed his parents' whereabouts to Voldemort, who had come to find them at their cottage. How Voldemort had killed Harry's father first. How James Potter had tried to hold him off, while he shouted at his wife to take Harry and run. . . Voldemort had advanced on Lily Potter, told her to move aside so that he could kill Harry.. . how she had begged him to kill her instead, refused to stop shielding her son.. . and so Voldemort had murdered her too, before turning his wand on Harry.

Harry knew these details because he had heard his parents' voices when he had fought the dementors last year - for that was the terrible power of the dementors: to force their victims to relive the worst memories of their lives, and drown, powerless, in their own despair.

Moody was speaking again, from a great distance, it seemed to Harry. With a massive effort, he pulled himself back to the present and listened to what Moody was saying.

"Avada Kedavra's a curse that needs a powerful bit of magic behind it - you could all get your wands out now and point them at me and say the words, and I doubt I'd get so much as a nosebleed. But that doesn't matter. I'm not here to teach you how to do it.

"Now, if there's no countercurse, why am I showing you? Because you've got to know. You've got to appreciate what the worst is. You don't want to find yourself in a situation where you're facing it. CONSTANT VIGILANCE!" he roared, and the whole class jumped again.

"Now. . . those three curses - Avada Kedavra, Imperius, and Cruciatus - are known as the Unforgivable Curses. The use of any one of them on a fellow human being is enough to earn a life sentence in Azkaban. That's what you're up against. That's what I've got to teach you to fight. You need preparing. You need arming. But most of all, you need to practice constant, never-ceasing vigilance. Get out your quills. . . copy this down. . . ."

They spent the rest of the lesson taking notes on each of the Unforgivable Curses. No one spoke until the bell rang - but when Moody had dismissed them and they had left the classroom, a torrent of talk burst forth. Most people were discussing the curses in awed voices - "Did you see it twitch?" "- and when he killed it - just like that!"

They were talking about the lesson, Harry thought, as though it had been some sort of spectacular show, but he hadn't found it very entertaining - and nor, it seemed, had Hermione.

"Hurry up," she said tensely to Harry and Ron.

"Not the ruddy library again?" said Ron.

"No," said Hermione curtly, pointing up a side passage. "Neville." Neville was standing alone, halfway up the passage, staring at the stone wall opposite him with the same horrified, wide-eyed look he had worn when Moody had demonstrated the Cruciatus Curse.

"Neville?" Hermione said gently.

Neville looked around.

"Oh hello," he said, his voice much higher than usual. "Interesting lesson, wasn't it? I wonder what's for dinner, I'm - I'm starving, aren't you?"

"Neville, are you all right?" said Hermione.

"Oh yes, I'm fine," Neville gabbled in the same unnaturally high voice. "Very

interesting dinner - I mean lesson - what's for eating?"

Ron gave Harry a startled look.

"Neville, what - ?"

But an odd clunking noise sounded behind them, and they turned to see Professor Moody limping toward them. All four of them fell silent, watching him apprehensively, but when he spoke, it was in a much lower and gentler growl than they had yet heard.

"It's all right, sonny," he said to Neville. "Why don't you come up to my office? Come on. . . we can have a cup of tea. . . ."

Neville looked even more frightened at the prospect of tea with Moody. He neither moved nor spoke. Moody turned his magical eye upon Harry.

"You all right, are you, Potter?"

"Yes," said Harry, almost defiantly.

Moody's blue eye quivered slightly in its socket as it surveyed Harry. Then he said, "You've got to know. It seems harsh, maybe, but you've got to know. No point pretending. . . well.. . come on, Longbottom, I've got some books that might interest you."

Neville looked pleadingly at Harry, Ron, and Hermione, but they didn't say anything, so Neville had no choice but to allow himself to be steered away, one of Moody's gnarled hands on his shoulder.

"What was that about?" said Ron, watching Neville and Moody turn the corner.

"I don't know," said Hermione, looking pensive.

"Some lesson, though, eh?" said Ron to Harry as they set off for the Great Hall. "Fred and George were right, weren't they? He really knows his stuff, Moody, doesn't he? When he did Avada Kedavra, the way that spider just died, just snuffed it right -"

But Ron fell suddenly silent at the look on Harry's face and didn't speak again until they reached the Great Hall, when he said he supposed they had better make a start on Professor Trelawney's predictions tonight, since they would take hours.

Hermione did not join in with Harry and Ron's conversation during dinner, but ate furiously fast, and then left for the library again. Harry and Ron walked back to Gryffindor Tower, and Harry, who had been thinking of nothing else all through dinner, now raised the subject of the Unforgivable Curses himself.

"Wouldn't Moody and Dumbledore be in trouble with the Ministry if they knew we'd seen the curses?" Harry asked as they approached the Fat Lady.

"Yeah, probably," said Ron. "But Dumbledore's always done things his way, hasn't he, and Moody's been getting in trouble for years, I reckon. Attacks first and asks questions later - look at his dustbins. Balderdash."

The Fat Lady swung forward to reveal the entrance hole, and they climbed into the Gryffindor common room, which was crowded and noisy.

"Shall we get our Divination stuff, then?" said Harry.

"I s'pose," Ron groaned.

They went up to the dormitory to fetch their books and charts, to find Neville there alone, sitting on his bed, reading. He looked a good deal calmer than at the end of Moody's lesson, though still not entirely normal. His eyes were rather red.

"You all right, Neville?" Harry asked him.

"Oh yes," said Neville, "I'm fine, thanks. Just reading this book Professor Moody lent me. . ."

He held up the book: Magical Water Plants of the Mediterranean.

"Apparently, Professor Sprout told Professor Moody I'm really good at Herbology," Neville said. There was a faint note of pride in his voice that Harry had rarely heard there before. "He thought I'd like this."

Telling Neville what Professor Sprout had said, Harry thought, had been a very tactful way of cheering Neville up, for Neville very rarely heard that he was good at anything. It was the sort of thing Professor Lupin would have done.

Harry and Ron took their copies of Unfogging the Future back down to the common room, found a table, and set to work on their predictions for the coming month. An hour later, they had made very little progress, though their table was littered with bits of parchment bearing sums and symbols, and Harry's brain was as fogged as though it had been filled with the fumes from Professor Trelawney's fire.

"I haven't got a clue what this lot's supposed to mean," he said, staring down at a long list of calculations.

"You know," said Ron, whose hair was on end because of all the times he had run his fingers through it in frustration, "I think it's back to the old Divination standby."

"What - make it up?"

"Yeah," said Ron, sweeping the jumble of scrawled notes off the table, dipping his pen into some ink, and starting to write.

"Next Monday," he said as he scribbled, "I am likely to develop a cough, owing to the unlucky conjunction of Mars and Jupiter." He looked up at Harry. "You know

her - just put in loads of misery, she'll lap it up."

"Right," said Harry, crumpling up his first attempt and lobbing it over the heads of a group of chattering first years into the fire. "Okay. . . on Monday, I will be in danger of- er - burns."

"Yeah, you will be," said Ron darkly, "we're seeing the skrewts again on Monday. Okay, Tuesday, I'll. . . erm. .

"Lose a treasured possession," said Harry, who was flicking through Unfogging the Future for ideas.

"Good one," said Ron, copying it down. "Because of... erm. . . Mercury. Why don't you get stabbed in the back by someone you thought was a friend?"

"Yeah. . . cool. . ." said Harry, scribbling it down, "because... Venus is in the twelfth house."

"And on Wednesday, I think I'll come off worst in a fight."

"Aaah, I was going to have a fight. Okay, I'll lose a bet."

"Yeah, you'll be betting I'll win my fight. ..

They continued to make up predictions (which grew steadily more tragic) for another hour, while the common room around them slowly emptied as people went up to bed. Crookshanks wandered over to them, leapt lightly into an empty chair, and stared inscrutably at Harry, rather as Hermione might look if she knew they weren't doing their homework properly.

Staring around the room, trying to think of a kind of misfortune he hadn't yet used, Harry saw Fred and George sitting together against the opposite wall, heads together, quills out, poring over a single piece of parchment. It was most unusual to see Fred and George hidden away in a corner and working silently; they usually liked to be in the thick of things and the noisy center of attention. There was something secretive about the way they were working on the piece of parchment, and Harry was reminded of how they had sat together writing something back at the Burrow. He had thought then that it was another order form for Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, but it didn't look like that this time; if it had been, they would surely have let Lee Jordan in on the joke. He wondered whether it had anything to do with entering the Triwizard Tournament.

As Harry watched, George shook his head at Fred, scratched out something with his quill, and said, in a very quiet voice that nevertheless carried across the almost deserted room, "No - that sounds like we're accusing him. Got to be careful. . ."

Then George looked over and saw Harry watching him. Harry grinned and quickly returned to his predictions - he didn't want George to think he was eavesdropping. Shortly after that, the twins rolled up their parchment, said good night, and went off to bed.

Fred and George had been gone ten minutes or so when the portrait hole opened and Hermione climbed into the common room carrying a sheaf of parchment in one hand and a box whose contents rattled as she walked in the other. Crookshanks arched his back, purring.

"Hello," she said, "I've just finished!"

"So have I!" said Ron triumphantly, throwing down his quill.

Hermione sat down, laid the things she was carrying in an empty armchair, and pulled Ron's predictions toward her.

"Not going to have a very good month, are you?" she said sardonically as Crookshanks curled up in her lap.

"Ah well, at least I'm forewarned," Ron yawned.

"You seem to be drowning twice," said Hermione.

"Oh am I?" said Ron, peering down at his predictions. "I'd better change one of them to getting trampled by a rampaging hippogriff."

"Don't you think it's a bit obvious you've made these up?" said Hermione.

"How dare you!" said Ron, in mock outrage. "We've been working like house-elves here!"

Hermione raised her eyebrows.

"It's just an expression," said Ron hastily.

Harry laid down his quill too, having just finished predicting his own death by decapitation.

"What's in the box?" he asked, pointing at it.

"Funny you should ask," said Hermione, with a nasty look at Ron. She took off the lid and showed them the contents.

Inside were about fifty badges, all of different colors, but all bearing the same letters: S. P. E .W.

"Spew?" said Harry, picking up a badge and looking at it. "What's this about?"

"Not spew," said Hermione impatiently. "It's S-P-E-W. Stands for the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare."

"Never heard of it," said Ron.

"Well, of course you haven't," said Hermione briskly, "I've only just started it."

"Yeah?" said Ron in mild surprise. "How many members have you got?"

"Well - if you two join - three," said Hermione.

"And you think we want to walk around wearing badges saying 'spew,' do you?" said Ron.

"S-P-E-W!" said Hermione hotly. "I was going to put Stop the Outrageous Abuse of Our Fellow Magical Creatures and Campaign for a Change in Their Legal Status - but it wouldn't fit. So that's the heading of our manifesto."

She brandished the sheaf of parchment at them.

"I've been researching it thoroughly in the library. Elf enslavement goes back centuries. I can't believe no one's done anything about it before now."

"Hermione - open your ears," said Ron loudly. "They. Like. It. They like being enslaved!"

"Our short-term aims," said Hermione, speaking even more loudly than Ron, and acting as though she hadn't heard a word, "are to secure house-elves fair wages and working conditions. Our long-term aims include changing the law about non-wand use, and trying to get an elf into the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, because they're shockingly underrepresented."

"And how do we do all this?" Harry asked.

"We start by recruiting members," said Hermione happily. "I thought two Sickles to join - that buys a badge - and the proceeds can fund our leaflet campaign. You're treasurer, Ron - I've got you a collecting tin upstairs - and Harry, you're secretary, so you might want to write down everything I'm saying now, as a record of our first meeting."

There was a pause in which Hermione beamed at the pair of them, and Harry sat, torn between exasperation at Hermione and amusement at the look on Ron's face. The silence was broken, not by Ron, who in any case looked as though he was temporarily dumbstruck, but by a soft tap, tap on the window. Harry looked across the now empty common room and saw, illuminated by the moonlight, a snowy owl perched on the windowsill.

"Hedwig!" he shouted, and he launched himself out of his chair and across the room to pull open the window.

Hedwig flew inside, soared across the room, and landed on the table on top of Harry's predictions.

"About time!" said Harry, hurrying after her.

"She's got an answer!" said Ron excitedly, pointing at the grubby piece of parchment tied to Hedwig's leg.

Harry hastily untied it and sat down to read, whereupon Hedwig fluttered onto his

knee, hooting softly.

"What does it say?" Hermione asked breathlessly.

The letter was very short, and looked as though it had been scrawled in a great hurry. Harry read it aloud:

Harry -

I'm flying north immediately. This news about your scar is the latest in a series of strange rumors that have reached me here. If it hurts again, go straight to Dumbledore - they're saying he's got Mad-Eye out of retirement, which means he's reading the signs, even if no one else is.

I'll be in touch soon. My best to Ron and Hermione. Keep your eyes open, Harry.

Sirius

Harry looked up at Ron and Hermione, who stared back at him.

"He's flying north?" Hermione whispered. "He's coming back?"

"Dumbledore's reading what signs?" said Ron, looking perplexed. "Harry - what's up?"

For Harry had just hit himself in the forehead with his fist, jolting Hedwig out of his lap.

"I shouldn't've told him!" Harry said furiously.

"What are you on about?" said Ron in surprise.

"It's made him think he's got to come back!" said Harry, now slamming his fist on the table so that Hedwig landed on the back of Ron's chair, hooting indignantly. "Coming back, because he thinks I'm in trouble! And there's nothing wrong with me! And I haven't got anything for you," Harry snapped at Hedwig, who was clicking her beak expectantly, "you'll have to go up to the Owlery if you want food."

Hedwig gave him an extremely offended look and took off for the open window, cuffing him around the head with her outstretched wing as she went.

"Harry," Hermione began, in a pacifying sort of voice.

"I'm going to bed," said Harry shortly. "See you in the morning."

Upstairs in the dormitory he pulled on his pajamas and got into his four-poster, but he didn't feel remotely tired.

If Sirius came back and got caught, it would be his, Harry's, fault. Why hadn't he kept his mouth shut? A few seconds' pain and he'd had to blab. . . . If he'd just had the sense to keep it to himself.

He heard Ron come up into the dormitory a short while later, but did not speak to him. For a long time, Harry lay staring up at the dark canopy of his bed. The dormitory was completely silent, and, had he been less preoccupied, Harry would have realized that the absence of Neville's usual snores meant that he was not the only one lying awake.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN - BEAUXBATONS AND DURMSTRANG

Early next morning, Harry woke with a plan fully formed in his mind, as though his sleeping brain had been working on it all night. He got up, dressed in the pale dawn light, left the dormitory without waking Ron, and went back down to the deserted common room. Here he took a piece of parchment from the table upon which his Divination homework still lay and wrote the following letter:

Dear Sirius,

I reckon I just imagined my scar hurting, I was half asleep when I wrote to you last time. There's no point coming back, everything's fine here. Don't worry about me, my head feels completely normal.

Harry

He then climbed out of the portrait hole, up through the silent castle (held up only briefly by Peeves, who tried to overturn a large vase on him halfway along the fourth-floor corridor), finally arriving at the Owlery, which was situated at the top of West Tower.

The Owlery was a circular stone room, rather cold and drafty, because none of the windows had glass in them. The floor was entirely covered in straw, owl droppings, and the regurgitated skeletons of mice and voles. Hundreds upon hundreds of owls of every breed imaginable were nestled here on perches that rose right up to the top of the tower, nearly all of them asleep, though here and there a round amber eye glared at Harry. He spotted Hedwig nestled between a barn owl and a tawny, and hurried over to her, sliding a little on the dropping-strewn floor.

It took him a while to persuade her to wake up and then to look at him, as she kept shuffling around on her perch, showing him her tail. She was evidently still furious about his lack of gratitude the previous night. In the end, it was Harry suggesting she might be too tired, and that perhaps he would ask Ron to borrow Pigwidgeon, that made her stick out her leg and allow him to tie the letter to it.

"Just find him, all right?" Harry said, stroking her back as he carried her on his arm to one of the holes in the wall. "Before the dementors do."

She nipped his finger, perhaps rather harder than she would ordinarily have done, but hooted softly in a reassuring sort of way all the same. Then she spread her wings and took off into the sunrise. Harry watched her fly out of sight with the familiar feeling of unease back in his stomach. He had been so sure that Sirius's reply would alleviate his worries rather than increasing them.

"That was a lie, Harry," said Hermione sharply over breakfast, when he told her and Ron what he had done. "You didn't imagine your scar hurting and you know

it."

"So what?" said Harry. "He's not going back to Azkaban because of me."

"Drop it," said Ron sharply to Hermione as she opened her mouth to argue some more, and for once, Hermione heeded him, and fell silent.

Harry did his best not to worry about Sirius over the next couple of weeks. True, he could not stop himself from looking anxiously around every morning when the post owls arrived, nor, late at night before he went to sleep, prevent himself from seeing horrible visions of Sirius, cornered by dementors down some dark London street, but betweentimes he tried to keep his mind off his godfather. He wished he still had Quidditch to distract him; nothing worked so well on a troubled mind as a good, hard training session. On the other hand, their lessons were becoming more difficult and demanding than ever before, particularly Moody's Defense Against the Dark Arts.

To their surprise, Professor Moody had announced that he would be putting the Imperius Curse on each of them in turn, to demonstrate its power and to see whether they could resist its effects.

"But - but you said it's illegal, Professor," said Hermione uncertainly as Moody cleared away the desks with a sweep of his wand, leaving a large clear space in the middle of the room. "You said - to use it against another human was -"

"Dumbledore wants you taught what it feels like," said Moody, his magical eye swiveling onto Hermione and fixing her with an eerie, unblinking stare. "If you'd rather learn the hard way - when someone's putting it on you so they can control you completely - fine by me. You're excused. Off you go."

He pointed one gnarled finger toward the door. Hermione went very pink and muttered something about not meaning that she wanted to leave. Harry and Ron grinned at each other. They knew Hermione would rather eat bubotuber pus than miss such an important lesson.

Moody began to beckon students forward in turn and put the Imperius Curse upon them. Harry watched as, one by one, his classmates did the most extraordinary things under its influence. Dean Thomas hopped three times around the room, singing the national anthem. Lavender Brown imitated a squirrel. Neville performed a series of quite astonishing gymnastics he would certainly not have been capable of in his normal state. Not one of them seemed to be able to fight off the curse, and each of them recovered only when Moody had removed it.

"Potter," Moody growled, "you next."

Harry moved forward into the middle of the classroom, into the space that Moody had cleared of desks. Moody raised his wand, pointed it at Harry, and said, '1mperio!"

It was the most wonderful feeling. Harry felt a floating sensation as every thought and worry in his head was wiped gently away, leaving nothing but a vague, untraceable happiness. He stood there feeling immensely relaxed, only dimly aware of everyone watching him.

And then he heard Mad-Eye Moody's voice, echoing in some distant chamber of his empty brain: Jump onto the desk. . . jump onto the desk. . .

Harry bent his knees obediently, preparing to spring.

Jump onto the desk....

Why, though? Another voice had awoken in the back of his brain.

Stupid thing to do, really, said the voice.

Jump onto the desk....

No, I don't think I will, thanks, said the other voice, a little more firmly. . . no, I don't really want to.

Jump! NOW!

The next thing Harry felt was considerable pain. He had both jumped and tried to prevent himself from jumping - the result was that he'd smashed headlong into the desk knocking it over, and, by the feeling in his legs, fractured both his kneecaps.

"Now, that's more like it!" growled Moody's voice, and suddenly, Harry felt the empty, echoing feeling in his head disappear. He remembered exactly what was happening, and the pain in his knees seemed to double.

"Look at that, you lot. . . Potter fought! He fought it, and he damn near beat it! We'll try that again, Potter, and the rest of you, pay attention - watch his eyes, that's where you see it - very good, Potter, very good indeed! They'll have trouble controlling you!"

"The way he talks," Harry muttered as he hobbled out of the Defense Against the Dark Arts class an hour later (Moody had insisted on putting Harry through his paces four times in a row, until Harry could throw off the curse entirely), "you'd think we were all going to be attacked any second."

"Yeah, I know," said Ron, who was skipping on every alternate step. He had had much more difficulty with the curse than Harry, though Moody assured him the effects would wear off by lunchtime. "Talk about paranoid. . ." Ron glanced nervously over his shoulder to check that Moody was definitely out of earshot and went on. "No wonder they were glad to get shot of him at the Ministry. Did you hear him telling Seamus what he did to that witch who shouted 'Boo' behind him on April Fools' Day? And when are we supposed to read up on resisting the Imperius Curse with everything else we've got to do?"

All the fourth years had noticed a definite increase in the amount of work they were required to do this term. Professor McGonagall explained why, when the class gave a particularly loud groan at the amount of Transfiguration homework she had assigned.

"You are now entering a most important phase of your magical education!" she told them, her eyes glinting dangerously behind her square spectacles. "Your Ordinary Wizarding Levels are drawing closer --"

"We don't take O.W.L.s till fifth year!" s aid Dean Thomas indignantly.

"Maybe not, Thomas, but believe me, you need all the preparation you can get! Miss Granger remains the only person in this class who has managed to turn a hedgehog into a satisfactory pincushion. I might remind you that your pincushion, Thomas, still curls up in fright if anyone approaches it with a pin!"

Hermione, who had turned rather pink again, seemed to be trying not to look too pleased with herself.

Harry and Ron were deeply amused when Professor Trelawney told them that they had received top marks for their homework in their next Divination class. She read out large portions of their predictions, commending them for their unflinching acceptance of the horrors in store for them - but they were less amused when she asked them to do the same thing for the month after next; both of them were running out of ideas for catastrophes.

Meanwhile Professor Binns, the ghost who taught History of Magic, had them writing weekly essays on the goblin rebellions of the eighteenth century. Professor Snape was forcing them to research antidotes. They took this one seriously, as he had hinted that he might be poisoning one of them before Christmas to see if their antidote worked. Professor Flitwick had asked them to read three extra books in preparation for their lesson on Summoning Charms.

Even Hagrid was adding to their workload. The Blast-Ended Skrewts were growing at a remarkable pace given that nobody had yet discovered what they ate. Hagrid was delighted, and as part of their "project," suggested that they come down to his hut on alternate evenings to observe the skrewts and make notes on their extraordinary behavior.

"I will not," said Draco Malfoy flatly when Hagrid had proposed this with the air of Father Christmas pulling an extra-large toy out of his sack. "I see enough of these foul things during lessons, thanks."

Hagrid's smile faded off his face.

"Yeh'll do wha' yer told," he growled, "or I'll be takin' a leaf outta Professor Moody's book. . . . I hear yeh made a good ferret, Malfoy."

The Gryffindors roared with laughter. Malfoy flushed with anger, but apparently

the memory of Moody's punishment was still sufficiently painful to stop him from retorting. Harry, Ron, and Hermione returned to the castle at the end of the lesson in high spirits; seeing Hagrid put down Malfoy was particularly satisfying, especially because Malfoy had done his very best to get Hagrid sacked the previous year.

When they arrived in the entrance hall, they found themselves unable to proceed owing to the large crowd of students congregated there, all milling around a large sign that had been erected at the foot of the marble staircase. Ron, the tallest of the three, stood on tiptoe to see over the heads in front of them and read the sign aloud to the other two:

TRIWIZARD TOURNAMENT

THE DELEGATIONS FROM BEAUXBATONS AND

DURMSTRANG WILL BE ARRIVING AT 6 O'CLOCK

ON FRIDAY THE 30TH OF OCTOBER. LESSONS WILL

END HALF AN HOUR EARLY --

"Brilliant!" said Harry. "It's Potions last thing on Friday! Snape won't have time to poison us all!"

STUDENTS WILL RETURN THEIR BAGS AND BOOKS

TO THEIR DORMITORIES AND ASSEMBLE IN FRONT

OF THE CASTLE TO GREET OUR GUESTS BEFORE

THE WELCOMING FEAST.

"Only a week away!" said Ernie Macmillan of Hufflepuff, emerging from the crowd, his eyes gleaming. "I wonder if Cedric knows? Think I'll go and tell him. . . ."

"Cedric?" said Ron blankly as Ernie hurried off.

"Diggory," said Harry. "He must be entering the tournament."

"That idiot, Hogwarts champion?" said Ron as they pushed their way through the chattering crowd toward the staircase.

"He's not an idiot. You just don't like him because he beat Gryffindor at Quidditch," said Hermione. "I've heard he's a really good student - and he's a prefect."

She spoke as though this settled the matter.

"You only like him because he's handsome," said Ron scathingly.

"Excuse me, I don't like people just because they're handsome!" said Hermione indignantly.

Ron gave a loud false cough, which sounded oddly like "Lockhart!"

The appearance of the sign in the entrance hall had a marked effect upon the inhabitants of the castle. During the following week, there seemed to be only one topic of conversation, no matter where Harry went: the Triwizard Tournament. Rumors were flying from student to student like highly contagious germs: who was going to try for Hogwarts champion, what the tournament would involve, how the students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang differed from themselves.

Harry noticed too that the castle seemed to be undergoing an extra-thorough cleaning. Several grimy portraits had been scrubbed, much to the displeasure of their subjects, who sat huddled in their frames muttering darkly and wincing as they felt their raw pink faces. The suits of armor were suddenly gleaming and moving without squeaking, and Argus Filch, the caretaker, was behaving so ferociously to any students who forgot to wipe their shoes that he terrified a pair of first-year girls into hysterics.

Other members of the staff seemed oddly tense too.

"Longbottom, kindly do not reveal that you can't even perform a simple Switching Spell in front of anyone from Durmstrang!" Professor McGonagall barked at the end of one particularly difficult lesson, during which Neville had accidentally transplanted his own ears onto a cactus.

When they went down to breakfast on the morning of the thirtieth of October, they found that the Great Hall had been decorated overnight. Enormous silk banners hung from the walls, each of them representing a Hogwarts House: red with a gold lion for Gryffiindor, blue with a bronze eagle for Ravenclaw, yellow with a black badger for Hufflepuff, and green with a silver serpent for Slytherin. Behind the teachers' table, the largest banner of all bore the Hogwarts coat of arms: lion, eagle, badger, and snake united around a large letter H.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat down beside Fred and George at the Gryffindor table. Once again, and most unusually, they were sitting apart from everyone else and conversing in low voices. Ron led the way over to them.

"It's a bummer, all right," George was saying gloomily to Fred. "But if he won't talk to us in person, we'll have to send him the letter after all. Or we'll stuff it into his hand. He can't avoid us forrever.

"Who's avoiding you?" said Ron, sitting down next to them.

"Wish you would," said Fred, looking irritated at the interruption.

"What's a bummer?" Ron asked George.

"Having a nosy git like you for a brother," said George.

"You two got any ideas on the Triwizard Tournament yet?" Harry asked. "Thought any more about trying to enter?"

"I asked McGonagall how the champions are chosen but she wasn't telling," said George bitterly. "She just told me to shut up and get on with transfiguring my raccoon."

"Wonder what the tasks are going to be?" said Ron thoughtfully. "You know, I bet we could do them, Harry. We've done dangerous stuff before. . . ."

"Not in front of a panel of judges, you haven't," said Fred. "McGonagall says the champions get awarded points according to how well they've done the tasks."

"Who are the judges?" Harry asked.

"Well, the Heads of the participating schools are always on the panel," said Hermione, and everyone looked around at her, rather surprised, "because all three of them were injured during the Tournament of 1792, when a cockatrice the champions were supposed to be catching went on the rampage."

She noticed them all looking at her and said, with her usual air of impatience that nobody else had read all the books she had, "It's all in Hogwarts, A History. Though, of course, that book's not entirely reliable. A Revised History of Hogwarts would be a more accurate title. Or A Highly Biased and Selective History of Hogwarts, Which Glosses Over the Nastier Aspects of the School."

"What are you on about?" said Ron, though Harry thought he knew what was coming.

"House-elves!" said Hermione, her eyes flashing. "Not once, in over a thousand pages, does Hogwarts, A History mention that we are all colluding in the oppression of a hundred slaves!"

Harry shook his head and applied himself to his scrambled eggs. His and Ron's lack of enthusiasm had done nothing whatsoever to curb Hermione's determination to pursue justice for house-elves.

True, both of them had paid two Sickles for a S.P.E.W. badge, but they had only done it to keep her quiet. Their Sickles had been wasted, however; if anything, they seemed to have made Hermione more vociferous. She had been badgering Harry and Ron ever since, first to wear the badges, then to persuade others to do the same, and she had also taken to rattling around the Gryffindor common room every evening, cornering people and shaking the collecting tin under their noses.

"You do realize that your sheets are changed, your fires lit, your classrooms cleaned, and your food cooked by a group of magical creatures who are unpaid and enslaved?" she kept saying fiercely.

Some people, like Neville, had paid up just to stop Hermione from glowering at them. A few seemed mildly interested in what she had to say, but were reluctant to take a more active role in campaigning. Many regarded the whole thing as a joke.

Ron now rolled his eyes at the ceiling, which was flooding them all in autumn sunlight, and Fred became extremely interested in his bacon (both twins had refused to buy a S.P.E.W. badge). George, however, leaned in toward Hermione.

"Listen, have you ever been down in the kitchens, Hermione?"

"No, of course not," said Hermione curtly, "I hardly think students are supposed to -"

"Well, we have," said George, indicating Fred, "loads of times, to nick food. And we've met them, and they're happy. They think they've got the best job in the world -"

"That's because they're uneducated and brainwashed!" Hermione began hotly, but her next few words were drowned out by the sudden whooshing noise from overhead, which announced the arrival of the post owls. Harry looked up at once, and saw Hedwig soaring toward him. Hermione stopped talking abruptly; she and Ron watched Hedwig anxiously as she fluttered down onto Harry's shoulder, folded her wings, and held out her leg wearily.

Harry pulled off Sirius's reply and offered Hedwig his bacon rinds, which she ate gratefully. Then, checking that Fred and George were safely immersed in further discussions about the Triwizard Tournament, Harry read out Sirius's letter in a whisper to Ron and Hermione.

Nice try, Harry.

I'm back in the country and well hidden. I want you to keep me posted on everything that's going on at Hogwarts. Don't use Hedwig, keep changing owls, and don't worry about me, just watch out for yourself Don't forget what I said about your scar.

Sirius

"Why d'you have to keep changing owls?" Ron asked in a low voice.

"Hedwig'll attract too much attention," said Hermione at once. "She stands out. A snowy owl that keeps returning to wherever he's hiding. . . I mean, they're not native birds, are they?"

Harry rolled up the letter and slipped it inside his robes, wondering whether he felt more or less worried than before. He supposed that Sirius managing to get back without being caught was something. He couldn't deny either that the idea that Sirius was much nearer was reassuring; at least he wouldn't have to wait so long for a response every time he wrote.

"Thanks, Hedwig," he said, stroking her. She hooted sleepily, dipped her beak briefly into his goblet of orange juice, then took off again, clearly desperate for a good long sleep in the Owlery.

There was a pleasant feeling of anticipation in the air that day. Nobody was very attentive in lessons, being much more interested in the arrival that evening of the people from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang; even Potions was more bearable than usual, as it was half an hour shorter. When the bell rang early, Harry, Ron, and Hermione hurried up to Gryffindor Tower, deposited their bags and books as they had been instructed, pulled on their cloaks, and rushed back downstairs into the entrance hall.

The Heads of Houses were ordering their students into lines.

"Weasley, straighten your hat," Professor McGonagall snapped at Ron. "Miss Patil, take that ridiculous thing out of your hair."

Parvati scowled and removed a large ornamental butterfly from the end of her plait.

"Follow me, please," said Professor McGonagall. "First years in front. . . no pushing.. .

They filed down the steps and lined up in front of the castle. It was a cold, clear evening; dusk was falling and a pale, transparent-looking moon was already shining over the Forbidden Forest. Harry, standing between Ron and Hermione in the fourth row from the front, saw Dennis Creevey positively shivering with anticipation among the other first years.

"Nearly six," said Ron, checking his watch and then staring down the drive that led to the front gates. "How d'you reckon they're coming? The train?"

"I doubt it," said Hermione.

"How, then? Broomsticks?" Harry suggested, looking up at the starry sky.

"I don't think so. . . not from that far away.. .

"A Portkey?" Ron suggested. "Or they could Apparate - maybe you're allowed to do it under seventeen wherever they come from?"

"You can't Apparate inside the Hogwarts grounds, how often do I have to tell you?" said Hermione impatiently.

They scanned the darkening grounds excitedly, but nothing was moving; everything was still, silent, and quite as usual. Harry was starting to feel cold. He wished they'd hurry up. .. . Maybe the foreign students were preparing a dramatic entrance. . . . He remembered what Mr. Weasley had said back at the campsite before the Quidditch World Cup: "always the same - we can't resist showing off when we get together. .."

And then Dumbledore called out from the back row where he stood with the other teachers - "Aha! Unless I am very much mistaken, the delegation from Beauxbatons approaches!"

"Where?" said many students eagerly, all looking in different directions.

"There!" yelled a sixth year, pointing over the forest.

Something large, much larger than a broomstick - or, indeed, a hundred broomsticks - was hurtling across the deep blue sky toward the castle, growing larger all the time.

"It's a dragon!" shrieked one of the first years, losing her head completely.

"Don't be stupid. . . it's a flying house!" said Dennis Creevey.

Dennis's guess was closer. . . . As the gigantic black shape skimmed over the treetops of the Forbidden Forest and the lights shining from the castle windows hit it, they saw a gigantic, powderblue, horse-drawn carriage, the size of a large house, soaring toward them, pulled through the air by a dozen winged horses, all palominos, and each the size of an elephant.

The front three rows of students drew backward as the carriage hurtled ever lower, coming in to land at a tremendous speed - then, with an almighty crash that made Neville jump backward onto a Slytherin fifth year's foot, the horses' hooves, larger than dinner plates, hit the ground. A second later, the carriage landed too, bouncing upon its vast wheels, while the golden horses tossed their enormous heads and rolled large, fiery red eyes.

Harry just had time to see that the door of the carriage bore a coat of arms (two crossed, golden wands, each emitting three stars) before it opened.

A boy in pale blue robes jumped down from the carriage, bent forward, fumbled for a moment with something on the carriage floor, and unfolded a set of golden steps. He sprang back respectfully. Then Harry saw a shining, high-heeled black shoe emerging from the inside of the carriage - a shoe the size of a child's sled - followed, almost immediately, by the largest woman he had ever seen in his life. The size of the carriage, and of the horses, was immediately explained. A few people gasped.

Harry had only ever seen one person as large as this woman in his life, and that was Hagrid; he doubted whether there was an inch difference in their heights. Yet somehow - maybe simply because he was used to Hagrid - this woman (now at the foot of the steps, and looking around at the waiting, wide-eyed crowd) seemed even more unnaturally large. As she stepped into the light flooding from the entrance hall, she was revealed to have a handsome, olive-skinned face; large, black, liquid-looking eyes; and a rather beaky nose. Her hair was drawn back in a shining knob at the base of her neck. She was dressed from head to foot in black satin, and many magnificent opals gleamed at her throat and on her thick fingers.

Dumbledore started to clap; the students, following his lead, broke into applause too, many of them standing on tiptoe, the better to look at this woman.

Her face relaxed into a gracious smile and she walked forward toward Dumbledore, extending a glittering hand. Dumbledore, though tall himself, had barely to bend to kiss it.

"My dear Madame Maxime," he said. "Welcome to Hogwarts."

"Dumbly-dort," said Madame Maxime in a deep voice. "I 'ope I find you well?"

"In excellent form, I thank you," said Dumbledore.

"My pupils," said Madame Maxime, waving one of her enormous hands carelessly behind her.

Harry, whose attention had been focused completely upon Madame Maxime, now noticed that about a dozen boys and girls, all, by the look of them, in their late teens, had emerged from the carriage and were now standing behind Madame Maxime. They were shivering, which was unsurprising, given that their robes seemed to be made of fine silk, and none of them were wearing cloaks. A few had wrapped scarves and shawls around their heads. From what Harry could see of them (they were standing in Madame Maxime's enormous shadow), they were staring up at Hogwarts with apprehensive looks on their faces.

"As Karkaroff arrived yet?" Madame Maxime asked.

"He should be here any moment," said Dumbledore. "Would you like to wait here and greet him or would you prefer to step inside and warm up a trifle?"

"Warm up, I think," said Madame Maxime. "But ze 'orses -"

"Our Care of Magical Creatures teacher will be delighted to take care of them," said Dumbledore, "the moment he has returned from dealing with a slight situation that has arisen with some of his other - er - charges."

"Skrewts," Ron muttered to Harry, grinning.

"My steeds require - er - forceful 'andling," said Madame Maxime, looking as though she doubted whether any Care of Magical Creatures teacher at Hogwarts could be up to the job. "Zey are very strong. . . ."

"I assure you that Hagrid will be well up to the job," said Dumbledore, smiling.

"Very well," said Madame Maxime, bowing slightly. "Will you please inform zis 'Agrid zat ze 'orses drink only single-malt whiskey?"

"It will be attended to," said Dumbledore, also bowing.

"Come," said Madame Maxime imperiously to her students, and the Hogwarts crowd parted to allow her and her students to pass up the stone steps.

"How big d'you reckon Durmstrang's horses are going to be?" Seamus Finnigan said, leaning around Lavender and Parvati to address Harry and Ron.

"Well, if they're any bigger than this lot, even Hagrid won't be able to handle them," said Harry. "That's if he hasn't been attacked by his skrewts. Wonder what's up with them?"

"Maybe they've escaped," said Ron hopefully.

"Oh don't say that," said Hermione with a shudder. "Imagine that lot loose on the grounds. . . ."

They stood, shivering slightly now, waiting for the Durmstrang party to arrive. Most people were gazing hopefully up at the sky.

For a few minutes, the silence was broken only by Madame Maxime's huge horses snorting and stamping. But then - "Can you hear something?" said Ron suddenly.

Harry listened; a loud and oddly eerie noise was drifting toward them from out of the darkness: a muffled rumbling and sucking sound, as though an immense vacuum cleaner were moving along a riverbed.

"The lake!" yelled Lee Jordan, pointing down at it. "Look at the lake!"

From their position at the top of the lawns overlooking the grounds, they had a clear view of the smooth black surface of the water - except that the surface was suddenly not smooth at all. Some disturbance was taking place deep in the center; great bubbles were forming on the surface, waves were now washing over the muddy banks - and then, out in the very middle of the lake, a whirlpool appeared, as if a giant plug had just been pulled out of the lake's floor. .

What seemed to be a long, black pole began to rise slowly out of the heart of the whirlpool. . . and then Harry saw the rigging....

"It's a mast!" he said to Ron and Hermione.

Slowly, magnificently, the ship rose out of the water, gleaming in the moonlight. It had a strangely skeletal look about it, as though it were a resurrected wreck, and the dim, misty lights shimmering at its portholes looked like ghostly eyes. Finally, with a great sloshing noise, the ship emerged entirely, bobbing on the turbulent water, and began to glide toward the bank. A few moments later, they heard the splash of an anchor being thrown down in the shallows, and the thud of a plank being lowered onto the bank.

People were disembarking; they could see their silhouettes passing the lights in the ship's portholes. All of them, Harry noticed, seemed to be built along the lines of Crabbe and Goyle... but then, as they drew nearer, walking up the lawns into the light streaming from the entrance hall, he saw that their bulk was really due to the fact that they were wearing cloaks of some kind of shaggy, matted fur. But the man who was leading them up to the castle was wearing furs of a different sort:

sleek and silver, like his hair.

"Dumbledore!" he called heartily as he walked up the slope. "How are you, my dear fellow, how are you?"

"Blooming, thank you, Professor Karkaroff," Dumbledore replied. Karkaroff had a fruity, unctuous voice; when he stepped into the light pouring from the front doors of the castle they saw that he was tall and thin like Dumbledore, but his white hair was short, and his goatee (finishing in a small curl) did not entirely hide his rather weak chin. When he reached Dumbledore, he shook hands with both of his own.

"Dear old Hogwarts," he said, looking up at the castle and smiling; his teeth were rather yellow, and Harry noticed that his smile did not extend to his eyes, which remained cold and shrewd. "How good it is to be here, how good.. . . Viktor, come along, into the warmth. . . you don't mind, Dumbledore? Viktor has a slight head cold..."

Karkaroff beckoned forward one of his students. As the boy passed, Harry caught a glimpse of a prominent curved nose and thick black eyebrows. He didn't need the punch on the arm Ron gave him, or the hiss in his ear, to recognize that profile.

"Harry - it's Krum!"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN - THE GOBLET OF FIRE

I don't believe it!" Ron said, in a stunned voice, as the Hogwarts students filed back up the steps behind the party from Durmstrang. "Krum, Harry! Viktor Krum!"

"For heaven's sake, Ron, he's only a Quidditch player," said Hermione.

"Only a Quidditch player?" Ron said, looking at her as though he couldn't believe his ears. "Hermione - he's one of the best Seekers in the world! I had no idea he was still at school!"

As they recrossed the entrance hall with the rest of the Hogwarts students heading for the Great Hall, Harry saw Lee Jordan jumping up and down on the soles of his feet to get a better look at the back of Krum's head. Several sixth-year girls were frantically searching their pockets as they walked - "Oh I don't believe it, I haven't got a single quill on me -"

"D'you think he'd sign my hat in lipstick?"

"Really," Hermione said loftily as they passed the girls, now squabbling over the lipstick.

"I'm getting his autograph if I can," said Ron. "You haven't got a quill, have you, Harry?"

"Nope, they're upstairs in my bag," said Harry.

They walked over to the Gryffindor table and sat down. Ron took care to sit on the side facing the doorway, because Krum and his fellow Durmstrang students were still gathered around it, apparently unsure about where they should sit. The students from Beauxbatons had chosen seats at the Ravenclaw table. They were looking around the Great Hall with glum expressions on their faces. Three of them were still clutching scarves and shawls around their heads.

"It's not that cold," said Hermione defensively. "Why didn't they bring cloaks?"

"Over here! Come and sit over here!" Ron hissed. "Over here! Hermione, budge up, make a space -"

"What?"

"Too late," said Ron bitterly.

Viktor Krum and his fellow Durmstrang students had settled themselves at the Slytherin table. Harry could see Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle looking very smug about this. As he watched, Malfoy bent forward to speak to Krum.

"Yeah, that's right, smarm up to him, Malfoy," said Ron scathingly. "I bet Krum can see right through him, though. . . bet he gets people fawning over him all the time.. . . Where d'you reckon they're going to sleep? We could offer him a space in our dormitory, Harry. . . I wouldn't mind giving him my bed, I could kip on a camp bed."

Hermione snorted.

"They look a lot happier than the Beauxbatons lot," said Harry. The Durmstrang students were pulling off their heavy furs and looking up at the starry black ceiling with expressions of interest; a couple of them were picking up the golden plates and goblets and examining them, apparently impressed.

Up at the staff table, Filch, the caretaker, was adding chairs. He was wearing his moldy old tailcoat in honor of the occasion. Harry was surprised to see that he added four chairs, two on either side of Dumbledore's.

"But there are only two extra people," Harry said. "Why's Filch putting out four chairs, who else is coming?"

"Eh?" said Ron vaguely. He was still staring avidly at Krum.

When all the students had entered the Hall and settled down at their House tables, the staff entered, filing up to the top table and taking their seats. Last in line were Professor Dumbledore, Professor Karkaroff, and Madame Maxime. When their headmistress appeared, the pupils from Beauxbatons leapt to their feet. A few of the Hogwarts students laughed. The Beauxbatons party appeared quite unembarrassed, however, and did not resume their seats until Madame Maxime had sat down on Dumbledore's left-hand side. Dumbledore remained standing, and a silence fell over the Great Hall.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, ghosts and - most particularly - guests," said Dumbledore, beaming around at the foreign students. "I have great pleasure in welcoming you all to Hogwarts. I hope and trust that your stay here will be both comfortable and enjoyable."

One of the Beauxbatons girls still clutching a muffler around her head gave what was unmistakably a derisive laugh.

"No one's making you stay!" Hermione whispered, bristling at her.

"The tournament will be officially opened at the end of the feast," said Dumbledore. "I now invite you all to eat, drink, and make yourselves at home!"

He sat down, and Harry saw Karkaroff lean forward at once and engage him in conversation.

The plates in front of them filled with food as usual. The house-elves in the kitchen seemed to have pulled out all the stops; there was a greater variety of dishes in front of them than Harry had ever seen, including several that were

definitely foreign.

"What's that?" said Ron, pointing at a large dish of some sort of shellfish stew that stood beside a large steak-and-kidney pudding.

"Bouillabaisse," said Hermione.

"Bless you," said Ron.

"It's French," said Hermione, "I had it on holiday summer before last. It's very nice."

"I'll take your word for it," said Ron, helping himself to black pudding.

The Great Hall seemed somehow much more crowded than usual, even though there were barely twenty additional students there; perhaps it was because their differently colored uniforms stood out so clearly against the black of the Hogwarts' robes. Now that they had removed their furs, the Durmstrang students were revealed to be wearing robes of a deep bloodred.

Hagrid sidled into the Hall through a door behind the staff table twenty minutes after the start of the feast. He slid into his seat at the end and waved at Harry, Ron, and Hermione with a very heavily bandaged hand.

"Skrewts doing all right, Hagrid?" Harry called.

"Thrivin'," Hagrid called back happily.

"Yeah, I'll just bet they are," said Ron quietly. "Looks like they've finally found a food they like, doesn't it? Hagrid's fingers."

At that moment, a voice said, "Excuse me, are you wanting ze bouillabaisse?"

It was the girl from Beauxbatons who had laughed during Dumbledore's speech. She had finally removed her muffler. A long sheet of silvery-blonde hair fell almost to her waist. She had large, deep blue eyes, and very white, even teeth.

Ron went purple. He stared up at her, opened his mouth to reply, but nothing came out except a faint gurgling noise.

"Yeah, have it," said Harry, pushing the dish toward the girl.

"You 'ave finished wiz it?"

"Yeah," Ron said breathlessly. "Yeah, it was excellent."

The girl picked up the dish and carried it carefully off to the Ravenclaw table. Ron was still goggling at the girl as though he had never seen one before. Harry started to laugh. The sound seemed to jog Ron back to his senses.

"She's a veela!" he said hoarsely to Harry.

"Of course she isn't!" said Hermione tartly. "I don't see anyone else gaping at her like an idiot!"

But she wasn't entirely right about that. As the girl crossed the Hall, many boys' heads turned, and some of them seemed to have become temporarily speechless, just like Ron.

"I'm telling you, that's not a normal girl!" said Ron, leaning sideways so he could keep a clear view of her. "They don't make them like that at Hogwarts!"

"They make them okay at Hogwarts," said Harry without thinking. Cho happened to be sitting only a few places away from the girl with the silvery hair.

"When you've both put your eyes back in," said Hermione briskly, "you'll be able to see who's just arrived."

She was pointing up at the staff table. The two remaining empty seats had just been filled. Ludo Bagman was now sitting on Professor Karkaroff's other side, while Mr. Crouch, Percy's boss, was next to Madame Maxime.

"What are they doing here?" said Harry in surprise.

"They organized the Triwizard Tournament, didn't they?" said Hermione. "I suppose they wanted to be here to see it start."

When the second course arrived they noticed a number of unfamiliar desserts too. Ron examined an odd sort of pale blancmange closely, then moved it carefully a few inches to his right, so that it would be clearly visible from the Ravenclaw table. The girl who looked like a veela appeared to have eaten enough, however, and did not come over to get it.

Once the golden plates had been wiped clean, Dumbledore stood up again. A pleasant sort of tension seemed to fill the Hall now. Harry felt a slight thrill of excitement, wondering what was coming. Several seats down from them, Fred and George were leaning forward, staring at Dumbledore with great concentration.

"The moment has come," said Dumbledore, smiling around at the sea of upturned faces. "The Triwizard Tournament is about to start. I would like to say a few words of explanation before we bring in the casket --"

"The what?" Harry muttered.

Ron shrugged.

"- just to clarify the procedure that we will be following this year. But first, let me introduce, for those who do not know them, Mr. Bartemius Crouch, Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation" - there was a smattering of polite applause - "and Mr. Ludo Bagman, Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports."

There was a much louder round of applause for Bagman than for Crouch, perhaps because of his fame as a Beater, or simply because he looked so much more likable. He acknowledged it with a jovial wave of his hand. Bartemius Crouch did not smile or wave when his name was announced. Remembering him in his neat suit at the Quidditch World Cup, Harry thought he looked strange in wizard's robes. His toothbrush mustache and severe parting looked very odd next to Dumbledore's long white hair and beard.

"Mr. Bagman and Mr. Crouch have worked tirelessly over the last few months on the arrangements for the Triwizard Tournament," Dumbledore continued, "and they will be joining myself, Professor Karkaroff, and Madame Maxime on the panel that will judge the champions' efforts."

At the mention of the word "champions," the attentiveness of the listening students seemed to sharpen. Perhaps Dumbledore had noticed their sudden stillness, for he smiled as he said, "The casket, then, if you please, Mr. Filch."

Filch, who had been lurking unnoticed in a far corner of the Hall, now approached Dumbledore carrying a great wooden chest encrusted with jewels. It looked extremely old. A murmur of excited interest rose from the watching students; Dennis Creevey actually stood on his chair to see it properly, but, being so tiny, his head hardly rose above anyone else's.

"The instructions for the tasks the champions will face this year have already been examined by Mr. Crouch and Mr. Bagman," said Dumbledore as Filch placed the chest carefully on the table before him, "and they have made the necessary arrangements for each challenge. There will be three tasks, spaced throughout the school year, and they will test the champions in many different ways.. their magical prowess - their daring - their powers of deduction - and, of course, their ability to cope with danger."

At this last word, the Hall was filled with a silence so absolute that nobody seemed to be breathing.

"As you know, three champions compete in the tournament," Dumbledore went on calmly, "one from each of the participating schools. They will be marked on how well they perform each of the Tournament tasks and the champion with the highest total after task three will win the Triwizard Cup. The champions will be chosen by an impartial selector: the Goblet of Fire."

Dumbledore now took out his wand and tapped three times upon the top of the casket. The lid creaked slowly open. Dumbledore reached inside it and pulled out a large, roughly hewn wooden cup. It would have been entirely unremarkable had it not been full to the brim with dancing blue-white flames.

Dumbledore closed the casket and placed the goblet carefully on top of it, where it would be clearly visible to everyone in the Hall.

"Anybody wishing to submit themselves as champion must write their name and

school clearly upon a slip of parchment and drop it into the goblet," said Dumbledore. "Aspiring champions have twenty-four hours in which to put their names forward. Tomorrow night, Halloween, the goblet will return the names of the three it has judged most worthy to represent their schools. The goblet will be placed in the entrance hall tonight, where it will be freely accessible to all those wishing to compete.

"To ensure that no underage student yields to temptation," said Dumbledore, "I will be drawing an Age Line around the Goblet of Fire once it has been placed in the entrance hall. Nobody under the age of seventeen will be able to cross this line.

"Finally, I wish to impress upon any of you wishing to compete that this tournament is not to be entered into lightly. Once a champion has been selected by the Goblet of Fire, he or she is obliged to see the tournament through to the end. The placing of your name in the goblet constitutes a binding, magical contract. There can be no change of heart once you have become a champion. Please be very sure, therefore, that you are wholeheartedly prepared to play before you drop your name into the goblet. Now, I think it is time for bed. Good night to you all."

"An Age Line!" Fred Weasley said, his eyes glinting, as they all made their way across the Hall to the doors into the entrance hall. "Well, that should be fooled by an Aging Potion, shouldn't it? And once your name's in that goblet, you're laughing - it can't tell whether you're seventeen or not!"

"But I don't think anyone under seventeen will stand a chance," said Hermione, "we just haven't learned enough. . ."

"Speak for yourself," said George shortly. "You'll try and get in, won't you, Harry?"

Harry thought briefly of Dumbledore's insistence that nobody under seventeen should submit their name, but then the wonderful picture of himself winning the Triwizard Tournament filled his mind again. .. . He wondered how angry Dumbledore would be if someone younger than seventeen did find a way to get over the Age Line.

"Where is he?" said Ron, who wasn't listening to a word of this conversation, but looking through the crowd to see what had become of Krum. "Dumbledore didn't say where the Durmstrang people are sleeping, did he?"

But this query was answered almost instantly; they were level with the Slytherin table now, and Karkaroff had just bustled up to his students.

"Back to the ship, then," he was saying. "Viktor, how are you feeling? Did you eat enough? Should I send for some mulled wine from the kitchens?"

Harry saw Krum shake his head as he pulled his furs back on. "Professor, Ivood like some vine," said one of the other Durmstrang boys hopefully.

"I wasn't offering it to you, Poliakoff," snapped Karkaroff, his warmly paternal air vanishing in an instant. "I notice you have dribbled food all down the front of your robes again, disgusting boy -"

Karkaroff turned and led his students toward the doors, reaching them at exactly the same moment as Harry, Ron, and Hermione. Harry stopped to let him walk through first.

"Thank you," said Karkaroff carelessly, glancing at him. And then Karkaroff froze. He turned his head back to Harry and stared at him as though he couldn't believe his eyes. Behind their headmaster, the students from Durmstrang came to a halt too. Karkaroff's eyes moved slowly up Harry's face and fixed upon his scar. The Durmstrang students were staring curiously at Harry too. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw comprehension dawn on a few of their faces. The boy with food all down his front nudged the girl next to him and pointed openly at Harry's forehead.

"Yeah, that's Harry Potter," said a growling voice from behind them.

Professor Karkaroff spun around. Mad-Eye Moody was standing there, leaning heavily on his staff, his magical eye glaring unblinkingly at the Durmstrang headmaster.

The color drained from Karkaroff's face as Harry watched. A terrible look of mingled fury and fear came over him.

"You!" he said, staring at Moody as though unsure he was really seeing him.

"Me," said Moody grimly. "And unless you've got anything to say to Potter, Karkaroff, you might want to move. You're blocking the doorway."

It was true; half the students in the Hall were now waiting behind them, looking over one another's shoulders to see what was causing the holdup.

Without another word, Professor Karkaroff swept his students away with him. Moody watched him until he was out of sight, his magical eye fixed upon his back, a look of intense dislike upon his mutilated face.

As the next day was Saturday, most students would normally have breakfasted late. Harry, Ron, and Hermione, however, were not alone in rising much earlier than they usually did on weekends. When they went down into the entrance hall, they saw about twenty people milling around it, some of them eating toast, all examining the Goblet of Fire. It had been placed in the center of the hall on the stool that normally bore the Sorting Hat. A thin golden line had been traced on the floor, forming a circle ten feet around it in every direction.

"Anyone put their name in yet?" Ron asked a third-year girl eagerly.

"All the Durmstrang lot," she replied. "But I haven't seen anyone from Hogwarts yet."

"Bet some of them put it in last night after we'd all gone to bed," said Harry. "I would've if it had been me. . . wouldn't have wanted everyone watching. What if the goblet just gobbed you right back out again?"

Someone laughed behind Harry. Turning, he saw Fred, George, and Lee Jordan hurrying down the staircase, all three of them looking extremely excited.

"Done it," Fred said in a triumphant whisper to Harry, Ron, and Hermione. "Just taken it."

"What?" said Ron.

"The Aging Potion, dung brains," said Fred.

"One drop each," said George, rubbing his hands together with glee. "We only need to be a few months older."

"We're going to split the thousand Galleons between the three of us if one of us wins," said Lee, grinning broadly.

"I'm not sure this is going to work, you know," said Hermione warningly. "I'm sure Dumbledore will have thought of this."

Fred, George, and Lee ignored her.

"Ready?" Fred said to the other two, quivering with excitement. "C'mon, then - I'll go first -"

Harry watched, fascinated, as Fred pulled a slip of parchment out of his pocket bearing the words Fred Weasley - Hogwarts. Fred walked right up to the edge of the line and stood there, rocking on his toes like a diver preparing for a fifty-foot drop. Then, with the eyes of every person in the entrance hall upon him, he took a great breath and stepped over the line.

For a split second Harry thought it had worked - George certainly thought so, for he let out a yell of triumph and leapt after Fred - but next moment, there was a loud sizzling sound, and both twins were hurled out of the golden circle as though they had been thrown by an invisible shot-putter. They landed painfully, ten feet away on the cold stone floor, and to add insult to injury, there was a loud popping noise, and both of them sprouted identical long white beards.

The entrance hall rang with laughter. Even Fred and George joined in, once they had gotten to their feet and taken a good look at each other's beards.

"I did warn you," said a deep, amused voice, and everyone turned to see Professor Dumbledore coming out of the Great Hall. He surveyed Fred and George, his eyes twinkling. "I suggest you both go up to Madam Pomfrey. She is already tending to Miss Fawcett, of Ravenclaw, and Mr. Summers, of Hufflepuff, both of whom decided to age themselves up a little too. Though I must say, neither of their beards is anything like as fine as yours."

Fred and George set off for the hospital wing, accompanied by Lee, who was howling with laughter, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione, also chortling, went in to breakfast.

The decorations in the Great Hall had changed this morning. As it was Halloween, a cloud of live bats was fluttering around the enchanted ceiling, while hundreds of carved pumpkins leered from every corner. Harry led the way over to Dean and Seamus, who were discussing those Hogwarts students of seventeen or over who might be entering.

"There's a rumor going around that Warrington got up early and put his name in," Dean told Harry. "That big bloke from Slytherin who looks like a sloth."

Harry, who had played Quidditch against Warrington, shook his head in disgust.

"We can't have a Slytherin champion!"

"And all the Hufflepuffs are talking about Diggory," said Seamus contemptuously. "But I wouldn't have thought he'd have wanted to risk his good looks."

"Listen!" said Hermione suddenly.

People were cheering out in the entrance hall. They all swiveled around in their seats and saw Angelina Johnson coming into the Hall, grinning in an embarrassed sort of way. A tall black girl who played Chaser on the Gryffindor Quidditch team, Angelina came over to them, sat down, and said, "Well, I've done it! Just put my name in!"

"You're kidding!" said Ron, looking impressed.

"Are you seventeen, then?" asked Harry.

"Course she is, can't see a beard, can you?" said Ron.

"I had my birthday last week," said Angelina.

"Well, I'm glad someone from Gryffindor's entering," said Hermione. "I really hope you get it, Angelina!"

"Thanks, Hermione," said Angelina, smiling at her.

Yeah, better you than Pretty-Boy Diggory, said Seamus, causing several Hufflepuffs passing their table to scowl heavily at him.

"What're we going to do today, then?" Ron asked Harry and Hermione when they had finished breakfast and were leaving the Great Hall.

"We haven't been down to visit Hagrid yet," said Harry.

"Okay," said Ron, "just as long as he doesn't ask us to donate a few fingers to the skrewts."

A look of great excitement suddenly dawned on Hermione's face.

"I've just realized - I haven't asked Hagrid to join S.P.E.W. yet!" she said brightly. "Wait for me, will you, while I nip upstairs and get the badges?"

"What is it with her?" said Ron, exasperated, as Hermione ran away up the marble staircase.

"Hey, Ron," said Harry suddenly. "It's your friend. . ."

The students from Beauxbatons were coming through the front doors from the grounds, among them, the veela-girl. Those gathered around the Goblet of Fire stood back to let them pass, watching eagerly.

Madame Maxime entered the hall behind her students and organized them into a line. One by one, the Beauxbatons students stepped across the Age Line and dropped their slips of parchment into the blue-white flames. As each name entered the fire, it turned briefly red and emitted sparks.

"What d'you reckon'll happen to the ones who aren't chosen?" Ron muttered to Harry as the veela-girl dropped her parchment into the Goblet of Fire. "Reckon they'll go back to school, or hang around to watch the tournament?"

"Dunno," said Harry. "Hang around, I suppose... . Madame Maxime's staying to judge, isn't she?"

When all the Beauxbatons students had submitted their names, Madame Maxime led them back out of the hall and out onto the grounds again.

"Where are they sleeping, then?" said Ron, moving toward the front doors and staring after them.

A loud rattling noise behind them announced Hermione's reappearance with the box of S. P. E.W. badges.

"Oh good, hurry up," said Ron, and he jumped down the stone steps, keeping his eyes on the back of the veela-girl, who was now halfway across the lawn with Madame Maxime.

As they neared Hagrid's cabin on the edge of the Forbidden Forest, the mystery of the Beauxbatons' sleeping quarters was solved. The gigantic powder-blue carriage in which they had arrived had been parked two hundred yards from Hagrid's front door, and the students were climbing back inside it. The elephantine flying horses that had pulled the carriage were now grazing in a makeshift paddock alongside it.

Harry knocked on Hagrid's door, and Fang's booming barks answered instantly.

"Bout time!" said Hagrid, when he'd flung open the door. "Thought you lot'd forgotten where I live!"

"We've been really busy, Hag -" Hermione started to say, but then she stopped

dead, looking up at Hagrid, apparently lost for words.

Hagrid was wearing his best (and very horrible) hairy brown suit, plus a checked yellow-and-orange tie. This wasn't the worst of it, though; he had evidently tried to tame his hair, using large quantities of what appeared to be axle grease. It was now slicked down into two bunches - perhaps he had tried a ponytail like Bill's, but found he had too much hair. The look didn't really suit Hagrid at all. For a moment, Hermione goggled at him, then, obviously deciding not to comment, she said, "Erm - where are the skrewts."

"Out by the pumpkin patch," said Hagrid happily. "They're get-tin' massive, mus' be nearly three foot long now. On'y trouble is, they've started killin' each other."

"Oh no, really?" said Hermione, shooting a repressive look at Ron, who, staring at Hagrid's odd hairstyle, had just opened his mouth to say something about it.

"Yeah," said Hagrid sadly. "S' okay, though, I've got 'em in separate boxes now. Still got abou' twenty."

"Well, that's lucky," said Ron. Hagrid missed the sarcasm.

Hagrid's cabin comprised a single room, in one corner of which was a gigantic bed covered in a patchwork quilt. A similarly enormous wooden table and chairs stood in front of the fire beneath the quantity of cured hams and dead birds hanging from the ceiling. They sat down at the table while Hagrid started to make tea, and were soon immersed in yet more discussion of the Triwizard Tournament. Hagrid seemed quite as excited about it as they were.

"You wait," he said, grinning. "You jus' wait. Yer going ter see some stuff yeh've never seen before. Firs' task. . . ah, but I'm not supposed ter say."

"Go on, Hagrid!" Harry, Ron, and Hermione urged him, but he just shook his head, grinning.

"I don' want ter spoil it fer yeh," said Hagrid. "But it's gonna be spectacular, I'll tell yeh that. Them champions're going ter have their work cut out. Never thought I'd live ter see the Triwizard Tournament played again!"

They ended up having lunch with Hagrid, though they didn't eat much - Hagrid had made what he said was a beef casserole, but after Hermione unearthed a large talon in hers, she, Harry, and Ron rather lost their appetites. However, they enjoyed themselves trying to make Hagrid tell them what the tasks in the tournament were going to be, speculating which of the entrants were likely to be selected as champions, and wondering whether Fred and George were beardless yet.

A light rain had started to fall by midafternoon; it was very cozy sitting by the fire, listening to the gentle patter of the drops on the window, watching Hagrid darning his socks and arguing with Hermione about house-elves - for he flatly refused to

join S.P.E.W. when she showed him her badges.

"It'd be doin' 'em an unkindness, Hermione," he said gravely, threading a massive bone needle with thick yellow yarn. "It's in their nature ter look after humans, that's what they like, see? Yeh'd be makin' 'em unhappy ter take away their work, an' insutin' 'em if yeh tried ter pay 'em."

"But Harry set Dobby free, and he was over the moon about it!" said Hermione. "And we heard he's asking for wages now!"

"Yeah, well, yeh get weirdos in every breed. I'm not sayin' there isn't the odd elf who'd take freedom, but yeh'll never persuade most of 'em ter do it - no, nothin' doin', Hermione."

Hermione looked very cross indeed and stuffed her box of badges back into her cloak pocket.

By half past five it was growing dark, and Ron, Harry, and Hermione decided it was time to get back up to the castle for the Halloween feast - and, more important, the announcement of the school champions.

"I'll come with yeh," said Hagrid, putting away his darning. "Jus' give us a sec."

Hagrid got up, went across to the chest of drawers beside his bed, and began searching for something inside it. They didn't pay too much attention until a truly horrible smell reached their nostrils. Coughing, Ron said, "Hagrid, what's that?"

"Eh?" said Hagrid, turning around with a large bottle in his hand. "Don' yeh like it?"

"Is that aftershave?" said Hermione in a slightly choked voice.

"Er - eau de cologne," Hagrid muttered. He was blushing.

"Maybe it's a bit much," he said gruffly. "I'll go take it off, hang on..."

He stumped out of the cabin, and they saw him washing himself vigorously in the water barrel outside the window.

"Eau de cologne?" said Hermione in amazement. "Hagrid?"

"And what's with the hair and the suit?" said Harry in an undertone.

"Look!" said Ron suddenly, pointing out of the window. Hagrid had just straightened up and turned 'round. If he had been blushing before, it was nothing to what he was doing now. Getting to their feet very cautiously, so that Hagrid wouldn't spot them, Harry, Ron, and Hermione peered through the window and saw that Madame Maxime and the Beauxbatons students had just emerged from their carriage, clearly about to set off for the feast too. They couldn't hear what Hagrid was saying, but he was talking to Madame Maxime with a rapt, misty-eyed expression Harry had only ever seen him wear once before - when he had been

looking at the baby dragon, Norbert.

"He's going up to the castle with her!" said Hermione indignantly. "I thought he was waiting for us!"

Without so much as a backward glance at his cabin, Hagrid was trudging off up the grounds with Madame Maxime, the Beaux-batons students following in their wake, jogging to keep up with their enormous strides.

"He fancies her!" said Ron incredulously. "Well, if they end up having children, they'll be setting a world record - bet any baby of theirs would weigh about a ton."

They let themselves out of the cabin and shut the door behind them. It was surprisingly dark outside. Drawing their cloaks more closely around themselves, they set off up the sloping lawns.

"Ooh it's them, look!" Hermione whispered.

The Durmstrang party was walking up toward the castle from the lake. Viktor Krum was walking side by side with Karkaroff, and the other Durmstrang students were straggling along behind them. Ron watched Krum excitedly, but Krum did not look around as he reached the front doors a little ahead of Hermione, Ron, and Harry and proceeded through them.

When they entered the candlelit Great Hall it was almost full. The Goblet of Fire had been moved; it was now standing in front of Dumbledore's empty chair at the teachers' table. Fred and George - clean-shaven again - seemed to have taken their disappointment fairly well.

"Hope it's Angelina," said Fred as Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat down.

"So do I!" said Hermione breathlessly. "Well, we'll soon know!"

The Halloween feast seemed to take much longer than usual. Perhaps because it was their second feast in two days, Harry didn't seem to fancy the extravagantly prepared food as much as he would have normally. Like everyone else in the Hall, judging by the constantly craning necks, the impatient expressions on every face, the fidgeting, and the standing up to see whether Dumbledore had finished eating yet, Harry simply wanted the plates to clear, and to hear who had been selected as champions.

At long last, the golden plates returned to their original spotless state; there was a sharp upswing in the level of noise within the Hall, which died away almost instantly as Dumbledore got to his feet. On either side of him, Professor Karkaroff and Madame Maxime looked as tense and expectant as anyone. Ludo Bagman was beaming and winking at various students. Mr. Crouch, however, looked quite uninterested, almost bored.

"Well, the goblet is almost ready to make its decision," said Dumbledore. "I estimate that it requires one more minute. Now, when the champions' names are

called, I would ask them please to come up to the top of the Hall, walk along the staff table, and go through into the next chamber" - he indicated the door behind the staff table - "where they will be receiving their first instructions."

He took out his wand and gave a great sweeping wave with it; at once, all the candles except those inside the carved pumpkins were extinguished, plunging them into a state of semidarkness. The Goblet of Fire now shone more brightly than anything in the whole Hall, the sparkling bright, bluey-whiteness of the flames almost painful on the eyes. Everyone watched, waiting. . . . A few people kept checking their watches. . .

"Any second," Lee Jordan whispered, two seats away from Harry.

The flames inside the goblet turned suddenly red again. Sparks began to fly from it. Next moment, a tongue of flame shot into the air, a charred piece of parchment fluttered out of it - the whole room gasped.

Dumbledore caught the piece of parchment and held it at arm's length, so that he could read it by the light of the flames, which had turned back to blue-white.

"The champion for Durmstrang," he read, in a strong, clear voice, "will be Viktor Krum."

"No surprises there!" yelled Ron as a storm of applause and cheering swept the Hall. Harry saw Viktor Krum rise from the Slytherin table and slouch up toward Dumbledore; he turned right, walked along the staff table, and disappeared through the door into the next chamber.

"Bravo, Viktor!" boomed Karkaroff, so loudly that everyone could hear him, even over all the applause. "Knew you had it in you!"

The clapping and chatting died down. Now everyone's attention was focused again on the goblet, which, seconds later, turned red once more. A second piece of parchment shot out of it, propelled by the flames.

"The champion for Beauxbatons," said Dumbledore, "is Fleur Delacour!"

"It's her, Ron!" Harry shouted as the girl who so resembled a veela got gracefully to her feet, shook back her sheet of silvery blonde hair, and swept up between the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables.

"Oh look, they're all disappointed," Hermione said over the noise, nodding toward the remainder of the Beauxbatons party. "Disappointed" was a bit of an understatement, Harry thought. Two of the girls who had not been selected had dissolved into tears and were sobbing with their heads on their arms.

When Fleur Delacour too had vanished into the side chamber, silence fell again, but this time it was a silence so stiff with excitement you could almost taste it. The Hogwarts champion next...

And the Goblet of Fire turned red once more; sparks showered out of it; the tongue of flame shot high into the air, and from its tip Dumbledore pulled the third piece of parchment.

"The Hogwarts champion," he called, "is Cedric Diggory!"

"No! " said Ron loudly, but nobody heard him except Harry; the uproar from the next table was too great. Every single Hufflepuff had jumped to his or her feet, screaming and stamping, as Cedric made his way past them, grinning broadly, and headed off toward the chamber behind the teachers' table. Indeed, the applause for Cedric went on so long that it was some time before Dumbledore could make himself heard again.

"Excellent!" Dumbledore called happily as at last the tumult died down. "Well, we now have our three champions. I am sure I can count upon all of you, including the remaining students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, to give your champions every ounce of support you can muster. By cheering your champion on, you will contribute in a very real --"

But Dumbledore suddenly stopped speaking, and it was apparent to everybody what had distracted him.

The fire in the goblet had just turned red again. Sparks were flying out of it. A long flame shot suddenly into the air, and borne upon it was another piece of parchment.

Automatically, it seemed, Dumbledore reached out a long hand and seized the

parchment. He held it out and stared at the name written upon it. There was a long pause, during which Dumbledore stared at the slip in his hands, and everyone in the room stared at Dumbledore. And then Dumbledore cleared his throat and read out - "Harry Potter."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN - THE FOUR CHAMPIONS

Harry sat there, aware that every head in the Great Hall had turned to look at him. He was stunned. He felt numb. He was surely dreaming. He had not heard correctly.

There was no applause. A buzzing, as though of angry bees, was starting to fill the Hall; some students were standing up to get a better look at Harry as he sat, frozen, in his seat.

Up at the top table, Professor McGonagall had got to her feet and swept past Ludo Bagman and Professor Karkaroff to whisper urgently to Professor Dumbledore, who bent his ear toward her, frowning slightly.

Harry turned to Ron and Hermione; beyond them, he saw the long Gryffindor table all watching him, openmouthed.

"I didn't put my name in," Harry said blankly. "You know I didn't."

Both of them stared just as blankly back.

At the top table, Professor Dumbledore had straightened up, nodding to Professor McGonagall.

"Harry Potter!" he called again. "Harry! Up here, if you please!"

"Go on," Hermione whispered, giving Harry a slight push.

Harry got to his feet, trod on the hem of his robes, and stumbled slightly. He set off up the gap between the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tables. It felt like an immensely long walk; the top table didn't seem to be getting any nearer at all, and he could feel hundreds and hundreds of eyes upon him, as though each were a searchlight. The buzzing grew louder and louder. After what seemed like an hour, he was right in front of Dumbledore, feeling the stares of all the teachers upon him.

"Well.. . through the door, Harry," said Dumbledore. He wasn't smiling.

Harry moved off along the teachers' table. Hagrid was seated right at the end. He did not wink at Harry, or wave, or give any of his usual signs of greeting. He looked completely astonished and stared at Harry as he passed like everyone else. Harry went through the door out of the Great Hall and found himself in a smaller room, lined with paintings of witches and wizards. A handsome fire was roaring in the fireplace opposite him.

The faces in the portraits turned to look at him as he entered. He saw a wizened witch flit out of the frame of her picture and into the one next to it, which

contained a wizard with a walrus mustache. The wizened witch started whispering in his ear.

Viktor Krum, Cedric Diggory, and Fleur Delacour were grouped around the fire. They looked strangely impressive, silhouetted against the flames. Krum, hunched-up and brooding, was leaning against the mantelpiece, slightly apart from the other two. Cedric was standing with his hands behind his back, staring into the fire. Fleur Delacour looked around when Harry walked in and threw back her sheet of long, silvery hair.

"What is it?" she said. "Do zey want us back in ze Hall?"

She thought he had come to deliver a message. Harry didn't know how to explain what had just happened. He just stood there, looking at the three champions. It struck him how very tall all of them were.

There was a sound of scurrying feet behind him, and Ludo Bagman entered the room. He took Harry by the arm and led him forward.

"Extraordinary!" he muttered, squeezing Harry's arm. "Absolutely extraordinary! Gentlemen. . . lady," he added, approaching the fireside and addressing the other three. "May I introduce - incredible though it may seem - the fourth Triwizard champion?"

Viktor Krum straightened up. His surly face darkened as he surveyed Harry. Cedric looked nonplussed. He looked from Bagman to Harry and back again as though sure he must have misheard what Bagman had said. Fleur Delacour, however, tossed her hair, smiling, and said, "Oh, vairy funny joke, Meester Bagman."

"Joke?" Bagman repeated, bewildered. "No, no, not at all! Harry's name just came out of the Goblet of Fire!"

Krum's thick eyebrows contracted slightly. Cedric was still looking politely bewildered. Fleur frowned.

"But evidently zair 'as been a mistake," she said contemptuously to Bagman. "E cannot compete. 'E is too young."

"Well. . . it is amazing," said Bagman, rubbing his smooth chin and smiling down at Harry. "But, as you know, the age restriction was only imposed this year as an extra safety measure. And as his name's come out of the goblet.. . I mean, I don't think there can be any ducking out at this stage. . . . It's down in the rules, you're obliged. . . Harry will just have to do the best he --"

The door behind them opened again, and a large group of people came in: Professor Dumbledore, followed closely by Mr. Crouch, Professor Karkaroff, Madame Maxime, Professor McGonagall, and Professor Snape. Harry heard the buzzing of the hundreds of students on the other side of the wall, before Professor

McGonagall closed the door.

"Madame Maxime!" said Fleur at once, striding over to her headmistress. "Zey are saying zat zis little boy is to compete also!"

Somewhere under Harry's numb disbelief he felt a ripple of anger. Little boy?

Madame Maxime had drawn herself up to her full, and considerable, height. The top of her handsome head brushed the candle-filled chandelier, and her gigantic black-satin bosom swelled.

"What is ze meaning of zis, Dumbly-dorr?" she said imperiously. "I'd rather like to know that myself, Dumbledore," said Professor Karkaroff. He was wearing a steely smile, and his blue eyes were like chips of ice. "Two Hogwarts champions? I don't remember anyone telling me the host school is allowed two champions - or have I not read the rules carefully enough?"

He gave a short and nasty laugh.

"C'est impossible," said Madame Maxime, whose enormous hand with its many superb opals was resting upon Fleur's shoulder. "Ogwarts cannot 'ave two champions. It is most injust."

"We were under the impression that your Age Line would keep out younger contestants, Dumbledore," said Karkaroff, his steely smile still in place, though his eyes were colder than ever. "Otherwise, we would, of course, have brought along a wider selection of candidates from our own schools."

"It's no one's fault but Potter's, Karkaroff," said Snape softly. His black eyes were alight with malice. "Don't go blaming Dumbledore for Potter's determination to break rules. He has been crossing lines ever since he arrived here -"

"Thank you, Severus," said Dumbledore firmly, and Snape went quiet, though his eyes still glinted malevolently through his curtain of greasy black hair.

Professor Dumbledore was now looking down at Harry, who looked right back at him, trying to discern the expression of the eyes behind the half-moon spectacles.

"Did you put your name into the Goblet of Fire, Harry?" he asked calmly.

"No," said Harry. He was very aware of everybody watching him closely. Snape made a soft noise of impatient disbelief in the shadows.

"Did you ask an older student to put it into the Goblet of Fire for you?" said Professor Dumbledore, ignoring Snape.

"No," said Harry vehemently.

"Ah, but of course 'e is lying!" cried Madame Maxime. Snape was now shaking his head, his lip curling.

"He could not have crossed the Age Line," said Professor McGonagall sharply. "I am sure we are all agreed on that -"

"Dumbly-dorr must 'ave made a mistake wiz ze line," said Madame Maxime, shrugging.

"It is possible, of course," said Dumbledore politely.

"Dumbledore, you know perfectly well you did not make a mistake!" said Professor McGonagall angrily. "Really, what nonsense! Harry could not have crossed the line himself, and as Professor Dumbledore believes that he did not persuade an older student to do it for him, I'm sure that should be good enough for everybody else!"

She shot a very angry look at Professor Snape.

"Mr. Crouch.. . Mr. Bagman," said Karkaroff, his voice unctuous once more, "you are our - er - objective judges. Surely you will agree that this is most irregular?"

Bagman wiped his round, boyish face with his handkerchief and looked at Mr. Crouch, who was standing outside the circle of the firelight, his face half hidden in shadow. He looked slightly eerie, the half darkness making him look much older, giving him an almost skull-like appearance. When he spoke, however, it was in his usual curt voice.

"We must follow the rules, and the rules state clearly that those people whose names come out of the Goblet of Fire are bound to compete in the tournament."

"Well, Barty knows the rule book back to front," said Bagman, beaming and turning back to Karkaroff and Madame Maxime, as though the matter was now closed.

"I insist upon resubmitting the names of the rest of my students," said Karkaroff. He had dropped his unctuous tone and his smile now. His face wore a very ugly look indeed. "You will set up the Goblet of Fire once more, and we will continue adding names until each school has two champions. It's only fair, Dumbledore."

"But Karkaroff, it doesn't work like that," said Bagman. "The Goblet of Fire's just gone out - it won't reignite until the start of the next tournament -"

"- in which Durmstrang will most certainly not be competing!" exploded Karkaroff. "After all our meetings and negotiations and compromises, I little expected something of this nature to occur! I have half a mind to leave now!"

"Empty threat, Karkaroff," growled a voice from near the door. "You can't leave your champion now. He's got to compete. They've all got to compete. Binding magical contract, like Dumbledore said. Convenient, eh?"

Moody had just entered the room. He limped toward the fire, and with every right step he took, there was a loud clunk.

"Convenient?" said Karkaroff. "I'm afraid I don't understand you, Moody."

Harry could tell he was trying to sound disdainful, as though what Moody was saying was barely worth his notice, but his hands gave him away; they had balled themselves into fists.

"Don't you?" said Moody quietly. "It's very simple, Karkaroff. Someone put Potter's name in that goblet knowing he'd have to compete if it came out."

"Evidently, someone 'oo wished to give 'Ogwarts two bites at ze apple!" said Madame Maxime.

"I quite agree, Madame Maxime," said Karkaroff, bowing to her. "I shall be lodging complaints with the Ministry of Magic and the International Confederation of Wizards -"

"If anyone's got reason to complain, it's Potter," growled Moody, "but. . . funny thing. . . I don't hear him saying a word. . .

"Why should 'e complain?" burst out Fleur Delacour, stamping her foot. "E 'as ze chance to compete, 'asn't 'e? We 'ave all been 'oping to be chosen for weeks and weeks! Ze honor for our schools! A thousand Galleons in prize money - zis is a chance many would die for!"

"Maybe someone's hoping Potter is going to die for it," said Moody, with the merest trace of a growl.

An extremely tense silence followed these words. Ludo Bagman, who was looking very anxious indeed, bounced nervously up and down on his feet and said, "Moody, old man. . . what a thing to say!"

"We all know Professor Moody considers the morning wasted if he hasn't discovered six plots to murder him before lunchtime," said Karkaroff loudly. "Apparently he is now teaching his students to fear assassination too. An odd quality in a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Dumbledore, but no doubt you had your reasons.

"Imagining things, am I?" growled Moody. "Seeing things, eh? It was a skilled witch or wizard who put the boy's name in that goblet. . .

"Ah, what evidence is zere of zat?" said Madame Maxime, throwing up her huge hands.

"Because they hoodwinked a very powerful magical object!" said Moody. "It would have needed an exceptionally strong Confundus Charm to bamboozle that goblet into forgetting that only three schools compete in the tournament.. . . I'm guessing they submitted Potter's name under a fourth school, to make sure he was the only one in his category.. . ."

"You seem to have given this a great deal of thought, Moody," said Karkaroff

coldly, "and a very ingenious theory it is - though of course, I heard you recently got it into your head that one of your birthday presents contained a cunningly disguised basilisk egg, and smashed it to pieces before realizing it was a carriage clock. So you'll understand if we don't take you entirely seriously. . . ."

"There are those who'll turn innocent occasions to their advantage," Moody retorted in a menacing voice. "It's my job to think the way Dark wizards do, Karkaroff - as you ought to remember...

"Alastor!" said Dumbledore warningly. Harry wondered for a moment whom he was speaking to, but then realized "Mad-Eye" could hardly be Moody's real first name. Moody fell silent, though still surveying Karkaroff with satisfaction - Karkaroff's face was burning.

"How this situation arose, we do not know," said Dumbledore, speaking to everyone gathered in the room. "It seems to me, however, that we have no choice but to accept it. Both Cedric and Harry have been chosen to compete in the Tournament. This, therefore, they will do. . .

"Ah, but Dumbly-dorr -"

"My dear Madame Maxime, if you have an alternative, I would be delighted to hear it."

Dumbledore waited, but Madame Maxime did not speak, she merely glared. She wasn't the only one either. Snape looked furious; Karkaroff livid; Bagman, however, looked rather excited.

"Well, shall we crack on, then?" he said, rubbing his hands together and smiling around the room. "Got to give our champions their instructions, haven't we? Barty, want to do the honors?"

Mr. Crouch seemed to come out of a deep reverie.

"Yes," he said, "instructions. Yes . . . the first task . . ."

He moved forward into the firelight. Close up, Harry thought he looked ill. There were dark shadows beneath his eyes and a thin, papery look about his wrinkled skin that had not been there at the Quidditch World Cup.

"The first task is designed to test your daring," he told Harry, Cedric, Fleur, and Viktor, "so we are not going to be telling you what it is. Courage in the face of the unknown is an important quality in a wizard. . . very important.

"The first task will take place on November the twenty-fourth, in front of the other students and the panel of judges.

"The champions are not permitted to ask for or accept help of any kind from their teachers to complete the tasks in the tournament. The champions will face the first challenge armed only with their wands. They will receive information about the

second task when the first is over. Owing to the demanding and time-consuming nature of the tournament, the champions are exempted from end-of-year tests."

Mr. Crouch turned to look at Dumbledore.

"I think that's all, is it, Albus?"

"I think so," said Dumbledore, who was looking at Mr. Crouch with mild concern. "Are you sure you wouldn't like to stay at Hogwarts tonight, Barty?"

"No, Dumbledore, I must get back to the Ministry," said Mr. Crouch. "It is a very busy, very difficult time at the moment.... I've left young Weatherby in charge.. . . Very enthusiastic. . . a little overenthusiastic, if truth be told. . .

"You'll come and have a drink before you go, at least?" said Dumbledore.

"Come on, Barry, I'm staying!" said Bagman brightly. "It's all happening at Hogwarts now, you know, much more exciting here than at the office!"

"I think not, Ludo," said Crouch with a touch of his old impatience.

"Professor Karkaroff - Madame Maxime - a nightcap?" said Dumbledore.

But Madame Maxime had already put her arm around Fleur's shoulders and was leading her swiftly out of the room. Harry could hear them both talking very fast in French as they went off into the Great Hall. Karkaroff beckoned to Krum, and they, too, exited, though in silence.

"Harry, Cedric, I suggest you go up to bed," said Dumbledore, smiling at both of them. "I am sure Gryffindor and Hufflepuff are waiting to celebrate with you, and it would be a shame to deprive them of this excellent excuse to make a great deal of mess and noise."

Harry glanced at Cedric, who nodded, and they left together.

The Great Hall was deserted now; the candles had burned low, giving the jagged smiles of the pumpkins an eerie, flickering quality.

"So," said Cedric, with a slight smile. "We're playing against each other again!"

"I s'pose," said Harry. He really couldn't think of anything to say. The inside of his head seemed to be in complete disarray, as though his brain had been ransacked.

"So. . . tell me. . ." said Cedric as they reached the entrance hall, which was now lit only by torches in the absence of the Goblet of Fire. "How did you get your name in?"

"I didn't," said Harry, staring up at him. "I didn't put it in. I was telling the truth."

"Ah. . . okay," said Cedric. Harry could tell Cedric didn't believe him. "Well . . . see you, then."

Instead of going up the marble staircase, Cedric headed for a door to its right. Harry stood listening to him going down the stone steps beyond it, then, slowly, he started to climb the marble ones.

Was anyone except Ron and Hermione going to believe him, or would they all think he'd put himself in for the tournament? Yet how could anyone think that, when he was facing competitors who'd had three years' more magical education than he had - when he was now facing tasks that not only sounded very dangerous, but which were to be performed in front of hundreds of people? Yes, he'd thought about it. . . he'd fantasized about it.. . but it had been a joke, really, an idle sort of dream. . . he'd never really, seriously considered entering. .

But someone else had considered it. . . someone else had wanted him in the tournament, and had made sure he was entered. Why? To give him a treat? He didn't think so, somehow...

To see him make a fool of himself? Well, they were likely to get their wish. .

But to get him killed?

Was Moody just being his usual paranoid self? Couldn't someone have put Harry's name in the goblet as a trick, a practical joke? Did anyone really want him dead?

Harry was able to answer that at once. Yes, someone wanted him dead, someone had wanted him dead ever since he had been a year old. . . Lord Voldemort. But how could Voldemort have ensured that Harry's name got into the Goblet of Fire? Voldemort was supposed to be far away, in some distant country, in hiding, alone. . . feeble and powerless....

Yet in that dream he had had, just before he had awoken with his scar hurting, Voldemort had not been alone. . . he had been talking to Wormtail.. . plotting Harry's murder.

Harry got a shock to find himself facing the Fat Lady already. He had barely noticed where his feet were carrying him. It was also a surprise to see that she was not alone in her frame. The wizened witch who had flitted into her neighbor's painting when he had joined the champions downstairs was now sitting smugly beside the Fat Lady. She must have dashed through every picture lining seven staircases to reach here before him. Both she and the Fat Lady were looking down at him with the keenest interest.

"Well, well, well," said the Fat Lady, "Violet's just told me everything. Who's just been chosen as school champion, then?"

"Balderdash," said Harry dully.

"It most certainly isn't!" said the pale witch indignantly.

"No, no, Vi, it's the password," said the Fat Lady soothingly, and she swung forward on her hinges to let Harry into the common room.

The blast of noise that met Harry's ears when the portrait opened almost knocked him backward. Next thing he knew, he was being wrenched inside the common room by about a dozen pairs of hands, and was facing the whole of Gryffindor House, all of whom were screaming, applauding, and whistling.

"You should've told us you'd entered!" bellowed Fred; he looked half annoyed, half deeply impressed.

"How did you do it without getting a beard? Brilliant!" roared George.

"I didn't," Harry said. "I don't know how -"

But Angelina had now swooped down upon him; "Oh if it couldn't be me, at least it's a Gryffindor -"

"You'll be able to pay back Diggory for that last Quidditch match, Harry!" shrieked Katie Bell, another of the Gryffindor Chasers.

"We've got food, Harry, come and have some -"

"I'm not hungry, I had enough at the feast -"

But nobody wanted to hear that he wasn't hungry; nobody wanted to hear that he hadn't put his name in the goblet; not one single person seemed to have noticed that he wasn't at all in the mood to celebrate. . . . Lee Jordan had unearthed a Gryffindor banner from somewhere, and he insisted on draping it around Harry like a cloak. Harry couldn't get away; whenever he tried to sidle over to the staircase up to the dormitories, the crowd around him closed ranks, forcing another butterbeer on him, stuffing crisps and peanuts into his hands. . . . Everyone wanted to know how he had done it, how he had tricked Dumbledore's Age Line and managed to get his name into the goblet....

"I didn't," he said, over and over again, "I don't know how it happened."

But for all the notice anyone took, he might just as well not have answered at all.

"I'm tired!" he bellowed finally, after nearly half an hour. "No, seriously, George - I'm going to bed -"

He wanted more than anything to find Ron and Hermione, to find a bit of sanity, but neither of them seemed to be in the common room. Insisting that he needed to sleep, and almost flattening the little Creevey brothers as they attempted to waylay him at the foot of the stairs, Harry managed to shake everyone off and climb up to the dormitory as fast as he could.

To his great relief, he found Ron was lying on his bed in the otherwise empty dormitory, still fully dressed. He looked up when Harry slammed the door behind him.

"Where've you been?" Harry said.

"Oh hello," said Ron.

He was grinning, but it was a very odd, strained sort of grin. Harry suddenly became aware that he was still wearing the scarlet Gryffindor banner that Lee had tied around him. He hastened to take it off, but it was knotted very tightly. Ron lay on the bed without moving, watching Harry struggle to remove it.

"So," he said, when Harry had finally removed the banner and thrown it into a corner. "Congratulations."

"What d'you mean, congratulations?" said Harry, staring at Ron. There was definitely something wrong with the way Ron was smiling: It was more like a grimace.

"Well. . . no one else got across the Age Line," said Ron. "Not even Fred and George. What did you use - the Invisibility Cloak?"

"The Invisibility Cloak wouldn't have got me over that line," said Harry slowly.

"Oh right," said Ron. "I thought you might've told me if it was the cloak. . . because it would've covered both of us, wouldn't it? But you found another way, did you?"

"Listen," said Harry, "I didn't put my name in that goblet. Someone else must've done it."

Ron raised his eyebrows.

"What would they do that for?"

"I dunno," said Harry. He felt it would sound very melodramatic to say, "To kill me."

Ron's eyebrows rose so high that they were in danger of disappearing into his hair.

"It's okay, you know, you can tell me the truth," he said. "If you don't want everyone else to know, fine, but I don't know why you're bothering to lie, you didn't get into trouble for it, did you? That friend of the Fat Lady's, that Violet, she's already told us all Dumbledore's letting you enter. A thousand Galleons prize money, eh? And you don't have to do end-of-year tests either. . ."

"I didn't put my name in that goblet!" said Harry, starting to feel angry.

"Yeah, okay," said Ron, in exactly the same sceptical tone as Cedric. "Only you said this morning you'd have done it last night, and no one would've seen you.. . . I'm not stupid, you know."

"You're doing a really good impression of it," Harry snapped.

"Yeah?" said Ron, and there was no trace of a grin, forced or otherwise, on his face now. "You want to get to bed, Harry. I expect you'll need to be up early

tomorrow for a photo-call or something."

He wrenched the hangings shut around his four-poster, leaving Harry standing there by the door, staring at the dark red velvet curtains, now hiding one of the few people he had been sure would believe him.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN - THE WEIGHING OF THE WANDS

When Harry woke up on Sunday morning, it took him a moment to remember why he felt so miserable and worried. Then the memory of the previous night rolled over him. He sat up and ripped back the curtains of his own four-poster, intending to talk to Ron, to force Ron to believe him - only to find that Ron's bed was empty; he had obviously gone down to breakfast.

Harry dressed and went down the spiral staircase into the common room. The moment he appeared, the people who had already finished breakfast broke into applause again. The prospect of going down into the Great Hall and facing the rest of the Gryffindors, all treating him like some sort of hero, was not inviting; it was that, however, or stay here and allow himself to be cornered by the Creevey brothers, who were both beckoning frantically to him to join them. He walked resolutely over to the portrait hole, pushed it open, climbed out of it, and found himself face-to-face with Hermione.

"Hello," she said, holding up a stack of toast, which she was carrying in a napkin. "I brought you this. . . . Want to go for a walk?"

"Good idea," said Harry gratefully.

They went downstairs, crossed the entrance hall quickly without looking in at the Great Hall, and were soon striding across the lawn toward the lake, where the Durmstrang ship was moored, reflected blackly in the water. It was a chilly morning, and they kept moving, munching their toast, as Harry told Hermione exactly what had happened after he had left the Gryffindor table the night before. To his immense relief, Hermione accepted his story without question.

"Well, of course I knew you hadn't entered yourself," she said when he'd finished telling her about the scene in the chamber off the Hall. "The look on your face when Dumbledore read out your name! But the question is, who did put it in? Because Moody's right, Harry... I don't think any student could have done it. . . they'd never be able to fool the Goblet, or get over Dumbledore's -"

"Have you seen Ron?" Harry interrupted.

Hermione hesitated.

"Erm. . . yes. . . he was at breakfast," she said.

"Does he still think I entered myself?"

"Well. . . no, I don't think so . . . not really," said Hermione awkwardly.

"What's that supposed to mean, 'not really'?"

"Oh Harry, isn't it obvious?" Hermione said despairingly. "He's jealous!"

"Jealous?" Harry said incredulously. "Jealous of what? He wants to make a prat of himself in front of the whole school, does he?"

"Look," said Hermione patiently, "it's always you who gets all the attention, you know it is. I know it's not your fault," she added quickly, seeing Harry open his mouth furiously. "I know you don't ask for it.. . but - well - you know, Ron's got all those brothers to compete against at home, and you're his best friend, and you're really famous - he's always shunted to one side whenever people see you, and he puts up with it, and he never mentions it, but I suppose this is just one time too many. . .

"Great," said Harry bitterly. "Really great. Tell him from me I'll swap any time he wants. Tell him from me he's welcome to it.... People gawping at my forehead everywhere I go. . ."

"I'm not teiling him anything," Hermione said shortly. "Tell him yourself. It's the only way to sort this out."

"I'm not running around after him trying to make him grow up!" Harry said, so loudly that several owls in a nearby tree took flight in alarm. "Maybe he'll believe I'm not enjoying myself once I've got my neck broken or -"

"That's not funny," said Hermione quietly. "That's not funny at all." She looked extremely anxious. "Harry, I've been thinking - you know what we've got to do, don't you? Straight away, the moment we get back to the castle?"

"Yeah, give Ron a good kick up the -"

"Write to Sirius. You've got to tell him what's happened. He asked you to keep him posted on everything that's going on at Hogwarts. . . . It's almost as if he expected something like this to happen. I brought some parchment and a quill out with me -"

"Come off it," said Harry, looking around to check that they couldn't be overheard, but the grounds were quite deserted. "He came back to the country just because my scar twinged. He'll probably come bursting right into the castle if I tell him someone's entered me in the Triwizard Tournament -"

"He'd want you to tell him," said Hermione sternly. "He's going to find out anyway."

"How?"

"Harry, this isn't going to be kept quiet," said Hermione, very seriously. "This tournament's famous, and you're famous. I'll be really surprised if there isn't anything in the Daily Prophet about you competing. . . . You're already in half the books about You-Know-Who, you know.. . and Sirius would rather hear it from you, I know he would."

"Okay, okay, I'll write to him," said Harry, throwing his last piece of toast into the lake. They both stood and watched it floating there for a moment, before a large tentacle rose out of the water and scooped it beneath the surface. Then they returned to the castle.

"Whose owl am I going to use?" Harry said as they climbed the stairs. "He told me not to use Hedwig again."

"Ask Ron if you can borrow -"

"I'm not asking Ron for anything," Harry said flatly.

"Well, borrow one of the school owls, then, anyone can use them," said Hermione.

They went up to the Owlery. Hermione gave Harry a piece of parchment, a quill, and a bottle of ink, then strolled around the long lines of perches, looking at all the different owls, while Harry sat down against a wall and wrote his letter.

Dear Sirius,

You told me to keep you posted on what's happening at Hogwarts, so here goes - I don't know if you've heard, but the Triwizard Tournament's happening this year and on Saturday night I got picked as a fourth champion. I don't who put my name in the Goblet of Fire, because I didn't. The other Hogwarts champion is Cedric Diggory, from Hufflepuff

He paused at this point, thinking. He had an urge to say something about the large weight of anxiety that seemed to have settled inside his chest since last night, but he couldn't think how to translate this into words, so he simply dipped his quill back into the ink bottle and wrote,

Hope you're okay, and Buckbeak - Harry

"Finished," he told Hermione, getting to his feet and brushing straw off his robes. At this, Hedwig fluttered down onto his shoulder and held out her leg.

"I can't use you," Harry told her, looking around for the school owls. "I've got to use one of these."

Hedwig gave a very loud hoot and took off so suddenly that her talons cut into his shoulder. She kept her back to Harry all the time he was tying his letter to the leg of a large barn owl. When the barn owl had flown off, Harry reached out to stroke Hedwig, but she clicked her beak furiously and soared up into the rafters out of reach.

"First Ron, then you," Harry said angrily. "This isn't my fault."

If Harry had thought that matters would improve once everyone got used to the idea of him being champion, the following day showed him how mistaken he was. He could no longer avoid the rest of the school once he was back at lessons - and it

was clear that the rest of the school, just like the Gryffindors, thought Harry had entered himself for the tournament. Unlike the Gryffindors, however, they did not seem impressed.

The Hufflepuffs, who were usually on excellent terms with the Gryffindors, had turned remarkably cold toward the whole lot of them. One Herbology lesson was enough to demonstrate this. It was plain that the Hufflepuffs felt that Harry had stolen their champion's glory; a feeling exacerbated, perhaps, by the fact that Hufflepuff House very rarely got any glory, and that Cedric was one of the few who had ever given them any, having beaten Gryffindor once at Quidditch. Ernie Macmillan and Justin FinchFletchley, with whom Harry normally got on very well, did not talk to him even though they were repotting Bouncing Bulbs at the same tray - though they did laugh rather unpleasantly when one of the Bouncing Bulbs wriggled free from Harry's grip and smacked him hard in the face. Ron wasn't talking to Harry either. Hermione sat between them, making very forced conversation, but though both answered her normally, they avoided making eye contact with each other. Harry thought even Professor Sprout seemed distant with him - but then, she was Head of Hufflepuff House.

He would have been looking forward to seeing Hagrid under normal circumstances, but Care of Magical Creatures meant seeing the Slytherins too - the first time he would come face-to-face with them since becoming champion.

Predictably, Malfoy arrived at Hagrid's cabin with his familiar sneer firmly in place.

"Ah, look, boys, it's the champion," he said to Crabbe and Goyle the moment he got within earshot of Harry. "Got your autograph books? Better get a signature now, because I doubt he's going to be around much longer. . . . Half the Triwizard champions have died.. . how long d'you reckon you're going to last, Potter? Ten minutes into the first task's my bet."

Crabbe and Goyle guffawed sycophantically, but Malfoy had to stop there, because Hagrid emerged from the back of his cabin balancing a teetering tower of crates, each containing a very large Blast-Ended Skrewt. To the class's horror, Hagrid proceeded to explain that the reason the skrewts had been killing one another was an excess of pent-up energy, and that the solution would be for each student to fix a leash on a skrewt and take it for a short walk. The only good thing about this plan was that it distracted Malfoy completely.

"Take this thing for a walk?" he repeated in disgust, staring into one of the boxes. "And where exactly are we supposed to fix the leash? Around the sting, the blasting end, or the sucker?"

"Roun' the middle," said Hagrid, demonstrating. "Er - yeh might want ter put on yer dragon-hide gloves, jus' as an extra precaution, like. Harry - you come here an' help me with this big one....

Hagrid's real intention, however, was totalk to Harry away from the rest of the class. He waited until everyone else had set off with their skrewts, then turned to Harry and said, very seriously, "So - yer competin', Harry. In the tournament. School champion."

"One of the champions," Harry corrected him.

Hagrid's beetle-black eyes looked very anxious under his wild eyebrows.

"No idea who put yeh in fer it, Harry?"

"You believe I didn't do it, then?" said Harry, concealing with difficulty the rush of gratitude he felt at Hagrid's words.

"Course I do," Hagrid grunted. "Yeh say it wasn' you, an' I believe yeh - an' Dumbledore believes yer, an' all."

"Wish I knew who did do it," said Harry bitterly.

The pair of them looked out over the lawn; the class was widely scattered now, and all in great difficulty. The skrewts were now over three feet long, and extremely powerful. No longer shell-less and colorless, they had developed a kind of thick, grayish, shiny armor. They looked like a cross between giant scorpions and elongated crabs - but still without recognizable heads or eyes. They had become immensely strong and very hard to control.

"Look like they're havin' fun, don' they?" Hagrid said happily. Harry assumed he was talking about the skrewts, because his classmates certainly weren't; every now and then, with an alarming bang, one of the skrewts' ends would explode, causing it to shoot forward several yards, and more than one person was being dragged along on their stomach, trying desperately to get back on their feet.

"Ah, I don' know, Harry," Hagrid sighed suddenly, looking back down at him with a worried expression on his face. "School champion. . . everythin' seems ter happen ter you, doesn' it?"

Harry didn't answer. Yes, everything did seem to happen to him. . . that was more or less what Hermione had said as they had walked around the lake, and that was the reason, according to her, that Ron was no longer talking to him.

The next few days were some of Harry's worst at Hogwarts. The closest he had ever come to feeling like this had been during those months, in his second year, when a large part of the school had suspected him of attacking his fellow students. But Ron had been on his side then. He thought he could have coped with the rest of the school's behavior if he could just have had Ron back as a friend, but he wasn't going to try and persuade Ron to talk to him if Ron didn't want to. Nevertheless, it was lonely with dislike pouring in on him from all sides.

He could understand the Hufflepuffs' attitude, even if he didn't like it; they had their own champion to support. He expected nothing less than vicious insults from

the Slytherins - he was highly unpopular there and always had been, because he had helped Gryffindor beat them so often, both at Quidditch and in the Inter-House Championship. But he had hoped the Ravenclaws might have found it in their hearts to support him as much as Cedric. He was wrong, however. Most Ravenclaws seemed to think that he had been desperate to earn himself a bit more fame by tricking the goblet into accepting his name.

Then there was the fact that Cedric looked the part of a champion so much more than he did. Exceptionally handsome, with his straight nose, dark hair, and gray eyes, it was hard to say who was receiving more admiration these days, Cedric or Viktor Krum. Harry actually saw the same sixth-year girls who had been so keen to get Krum's autograph begging Cedric to sign their school bags one lunchtime.

Meanwhile there was no reply from Sirius, Hedwig was refusing to come anywhere near him, Professor Trelawney was predicting his death with even more certainty than usual, and he did so badly at Summoning Charms in Professor Flitwick's class that he was given extra homework - the only person to get any, apart from Neville.

"It's really not that difficult, Harry," Hermione tried to reassure him as they left Flitwick's class - she had been making objects zoom across the room to her all lesson, as though she were some sort of weird magnet for board dusters, wastepaper baskets, and lunascopes. "You just weren't concentrating properly -"

"Wonder why that was," said Harry darkly as Cedric Diggory walked past, surrounded by a large group of simpering girls, all of whom looked at Harry as though he were a particularly large Blast-Ended Skrewt. "Still - never mind, eh? Double Potions to look forward to this afternoon. . ."

Double Potions was always a horrible experience, but these days it was nothing short of torture. Being shut in a dungeon for an hour and a half with Snape and the Slytherins, all of whom seemed determined to punish Harry as much as possible for daring to become school champion, was about the most unpleasant thing Harry could imagine. He had already struggled through one Friday's worth, with Hermione sitting next to him intoning "ignore them, ignore them, ignore them" under her breath, and he couldn't see why today should be any better.

When he and Hermione arrived at Snape's dungeon after lunch, they found the Slytherins waiting outside, each and every one of them wearing a large badge on the front of his or her robes. For one wild moment Harry thought they were S.P.E.W. badges - then he saw that they all bore the same message, in luminous red letters that burnt brightly in the dimly lit underground passage:

SUPPORT CEDRIC DIGGORY--

THE REAL HOGWARTS CHAMPION!

"Like them, Potter?" said Malfoy loudly as Harry approached. "And this isn't all they do - look!"

He pressed his badge into his chest, and the message upon it vanished, to be replaced by another one, which glowed green:

POTTER STINKS!

The Slytherins howled with laughter. Each of them pressed their badges too, until the message POTTER STINKS was shining brightly all around Harry. He felt the heat rise in his face and neck.

"Oh very funny," Hermione said sarcastically to Pansy Parkinson and her gang of Slytherin girls, who were laughing harder than anyone, "really witty."

Ron was standing against the wall with Dean and Seamus. He wasn't laughing, but he wasn't sticking up for Harry either.

"Want one, Granger?" said Malfoy, holding out a badge to Hermione. "I've got loads. But don't touch my hand, now. I've just washed it, you see; don't want a Mudblood sliming it up."

Some of the anger Harry had been feeling for days and days seemed to burst through a dam in his chest. He had reached for his wand before he'd thought what he was doing. People all around them scrambled out of the way, backing down the corridor.

"Harry!" Hermione said warningly.

"Go on, then, Potter," Malfoy said quietly, drawing out his own wand. "Moody's not here to look after you now - do it, if you've got the guts -"

For a split second, they looked into each other's eyes, then, at exactly the same time, both acted.

"Funnunculus!" Harry yelled.

"Densaugeo!" screamed Malfoy.

Jets of light shot from both wands, hit each other in midair, and ricocheted off at angles -- Harry's hit Goyle in the face, and Malfoy's hit Hermione. Goyle bellowed and put his hands to his nose, where great ugly boils were springing up - Hermione, whimpering in panic, was clutching her mouth.

"Hermione!"

Ron had hurried forward to see what was wrong with her; Harry turned and saw Ron dragging Hermione's hand away from her face. It wasn't a pretty sight. Hermione's front teeth - already larger than average - were now growing at an alarming rate; she was looking more and more like a beaver as her teeth elongated, past her bottom lip, toward her chin - panic-stricken, she felt them and let out a terrified cry.

"And what is all this noise about?" said a soft, deadly voice.

Snape had arrived. The Slytherins clamored to give their explanations; Snape pointed a long yellow finger at Malfoy and said, "Explain."

"Potter attacked me, sir -"

"We attacked each other at the same time!" Harry shouted.

"- and he hit Goyle - look -"

Snape examined Goyle, whose face now resembled something that would have been at home in a book on poisonous fungi.

"Hospital wing, Goyle," Snape said calmly.

"Malfoy got Hermione!" Ron said. "Look!"

He forced Hermione to show Snape her teeth - she was doing her best to hide them with her hands, though this was difficult as they had now grown down past her collar. Pansy Parkinson and the other Slytherin girls were doubled up with silent giggles, pointing at Hermione from behind Snape's back.

Snape looked coldly at Hermione, then said, "I see no difference.".

Hermione let out a whimper; her eyes filled with tears, she turned on her heel and ran, ran all the way up the corridor and out of sight.

It was lucky, perhaps, that both Harry and Ron started shouting at Snape at the same time; lucky their voices echoed so much in the stone corridor, for in the confused din, it was impossible for him to hear exactly what they were calling him. He got the gist, however.

"Let's see," he said, in his silkiest voice. "Fifty points from Gryffindor and a detention each for Potter and Weasley. Now get inside, or it'll be a week's worth of detentions."

Harry's ears were ringing. The injustice of it made him want to curse Snape into a thousand slimy pieces. He passed Snape, walked with Ron to the back of the dungeon, and slammed his bag down onto the table. Ron was shaking with anger too - for a moment, it felt as though everything was back to normal between them, but then Ron turned and sat down with Dean and Seamus instead, leaving Harry alone at his table. On the other side of the dungeon, Malfoy turned his back on Snape and pressed his badge, smirking. POTTER STINKS flashed once more across the room.

Harry sat there staring at Snape as the lesson began, picturing horrific things happening to him. . . . If only he knew how to do the Cruciatus Curse. . . he'd have Snape flat on his back like that spider, jerking and twitching.

"Antidotes!" said Snape, looking around at them all, his cold black eyes glittering unpleasantly. "You should all have prepared your recipes now. I want you to brew

them carefully, and then, we will be selecting someone on whom to test one. . ."

Snape's eyes met Harry's, and Harry knew what was coming. Snape was going to poison him. Harry imagined picking up his cauldron, and sprinting to the front of the class, and bringing it down on Snape's greasy head - And then a knock on the dungeon door burst in on Harry's thoughts.

It was Colin Creevey; he edged into the room, beaming at Harry, and walked up to Snape's desk at the front of the room.

"Yes?" said Snape curtly.

"Please, sir, I'm supposed to take Harry Potter upstairs." Snape stared down his hooked nose at Colin, whose smile faded from his eager face.

"Potter has another hour of Potions to complete," said Snape coldly. "He will come upstairs when this class is finished."

Colin went pink.

"Sir - sir, Mr. Bagman wants him," he said nervously. "All the champions have got to go, I think they want to take photographs. . ."

Harry would have given anything he owned to have stopped Colin saying those last few words. He chanced half a glance at Ron, but Ron was staring determinedly at the ceiling.

"Very well, very well," Snape snapped. "Potter, leave your things here, I want you back down here later to test your antidote."

"Please, sir - he's got to take his things with him," squeaked Cohn. "All the champions..."

"Very well!" said Snape. "Potter - take your bag and get out of my sight!"

Harry swung his bag over his shoulder, got up, and headed for the door. As he walked through the Slytherin desks, POTTER STINKS flashed at him from every direction.

"It's amazing, isn't it, Harry?" said Colin, starting to speak the moment Harry had closed the dungeon door behind him. "Isn't it, though? You being champion?"

"Yeah, really amazing," said Harry heavily as they set off toward the steps into the entrance hall. "What do they want photos for, Colin?"

"The Daily Prophet, I think!"

"Great," said Harry dully. "Exactly what I need. More publicity."

"Good luck!" said Colin when they had reached the right room. Harry knocked on the door and entered.

He was in a fairly small classroom; most of the desks had been pushed away to the back of the room, leaving a large space in the middle; three of them, however, had been placed end-to-end in front of the blackboard and covered with a long length of velvet. Five chairs had been set behind the velvet-covered desks, and Ludo Bagman was sitting in one of them, talking to a witch Harry had never seen before, who was wearing magenta robes.

Viktor Krum was standing moodily in a corner as usual and not talking to anybody. Cedric and Fheur were in conversation. Fheur looked a good deal happier than Harry had seen her so far; she kept throwing back her head so that her long silvery hair caught the light. A paunchy man, holding a large black camera that was smoking slightly, was watching Fleur out of the corner of his eye.

Bagman suddenly spotted Harry, got up quickly, and bounded forward.

"Ah, here he is! Champion number four! In you come, Harry, in you come.. . nothing to worry about, it's just the wand weighing ceremony, the rest of the judges will be here in a moment -"

"Wand weighing?" Harry repeated nervously.

"We have to check that your wands are fully functional, no problems, you know, as they're your most important tools in the tasks ahead," said Bagman. "The expert's upstairs now with Dumbledore. And then there's going to be a little photo shoot. This is Rita Skeeter," he added, gesturing toward the witch in magenta robes. "She's doing a small piece on the tournament for the Daily Prophet. .. ."

"Maybe not that small, Ludo," said Rita Skeeter, her eyes on Harry.

Her hair was set in elaborate and curiously rigid curls that contrasted oddly with her heavy-jawed face. She wore jeweled spectacles. The thick fingers clutching her crocodile-skin handbag ended in two-inch nails, painted crimson.

"I wonder if I could have a little word with Harry before we start?" she said to Bagman, but still gazing fixedly at Harry. "The youngest champion, you know. . . to add a bit of color?"

"Certainly!" cried Bagman. "That is - if Harry has no objection?"

"Er -" said Harry.

"Lovely," said Rita Skeeter, and in a second, her scarlet-taloned fingers had Harry's upper arm in a surprisingly strong grip, and she was steering him out of the room again and opening a nearby door.

"We don't want to be in there with all that noise," she said. "Let's see . . . ah, yes, this is nice and cozy."

It was a broom cupboard. Harry stared at her.

"Come along, dear - that's right - lovely," said Rita Skeeter again, perching herself precariously upon an upturned bucket, pushing Harry down onto a cardboard box, and closing the door, throwing them into darkness. "Let's see now. ."

She unsnapped her crocodile-skin handbag and pulled out a handful of candles, which she lit with a wave of her wand and magicked into midair, so that they could see what they were doing.

"You won't mind, Harry, if I use a Quick-Quotes Quill? It leaves me free to talk to you normally. .."

"A what?" said Harry.

Rita Skeeter's smile widened. Harry counted three gold teeth. She reached again into her crocodile bag and drew out a long acid-green quill and a roll of parchment, which she stretched out between them on a crate of Mrs. Skower's All-Purpose Magical Mess Remover. She put the tip of the green quill into her mouth, sucked it for a moment with apparent relish, then placed it upright on the parchment, where it stood balanced on its point, quivering slightly.

"Testing. . . my name is Rita Skeeter, Daily Prophet reporter."

Harry hooked down quickly at the quill. The moment Rita Skeeter had spoken, the green quill had started to scribble, skidding across the parchment:

Attractive blonde Rita Skeeter, forty-three, who's savage quill has punctured many inflated reputations -

"Lovely," said Rita Skeeter, yet again, and she ripped the top piece of parchment off, crumpled it up, and stuffed it into her handbag. Now she leaned toward Harry and said, "So, Harry... what made you decide to enter the Triwizard Tournament?"

"Er -" said Harry again, but he was distracted by the quill. Even though he wasn't speaking, it was dashing across the parchment, and in its wake he could make out a fresh sentence:

An ugly scar, souvenier of a tragic past, disfigures the otherwise charming face of Harry Potter, whose eyes --

"Ignore the quill, Harry," said Rita Skeeter firmly. Reluctantly Harry looked up at her instead. "Now -- why did you decide to enter the tournament, Harry?"

"I didn't," said Harry. "I don't know how my name got into the Goblet of Fire. I didn't put it in there."

Rita Skeeter raised one heavily penciled eyebrow.

"Come now, Harry, there's no need to be scared of getting into trouble. We all know you shouldn't really have entered at all. But don't worry about that. Our readers hove a rebel."

"But I didn't enter," Harry repeated. "I don't know who -"

"How do you feel about the tasks ahead?" said Rita Skeeter. "Excited? Nervous?"

"I haven't really thought. . . yeah, nervous, I suppose," said Harry. His insides squirmed uncomfortably as he spoke.

"Champions have died in the past, haven't they?" said Rita Skeeter briskly. "Have you thought about that at all?"

"Well. . . they say it's going to be a lot safer this year," said Harry.

The quill whizzed across the parchment between them, back and forward as though it were skating.

"Of course, you've looked death in the face before, haven't you?" said Rita Skeeter, watching him closely. "How would you say that's affected you?"

"Er," said Harry, yet again.

"Do you think that the trauma in your past might have made you keen to prove yourself? To live up to your name? Do you think that perhaps you were tempted to enter the Triwizard Tournament because - "

"I didn't enter," said Harry, starting to feel irritated.

"Can you remember your parents at all?" said Rita Skeeter, talking over him.

"No," said Harry.

"How do you think they'd feel if they knew you were competing in the Triwizard Tournament? Proud? Worried? Angry?"

Harry was feeling really annoyed now. How on earth was he to know how his parents would feel if they were alive? He could feel Rita Skeeter watching him very intently. Frowning, he avoided her gaze and hooked down at words the quill had just written:

Tears fill those startlingly green eyes as our conversation turns to the parents he can barely remember.

"I have NOT got tears in my eyes!" said Harry loudly.

Before Rita Skeeter could say a word, the door of the broom cupboard was pulled open. Harry looked around, blinking in the bright light. Albus Dumbledore stood there, looking down at both of them, squashed into the cupboard.

"Dumbledore!" cried Rita Skeeter, with every appearance of delight - but Harry noticed that her quill and the parchment had suddenly vanished from the box of Magical Mess Remover, and Rita's clawed fingers were hastily snapping shut the clasp of her crocodile-skin bag. "How are you?" she said, standing up and holding

out one of her large, mannish hands to Dumbledore. "I hope you saw my piece over the summer about the International Confederation of Wizards' Conference?"

"Enchantingly nasty," said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling. "I particularly enjoyed your description of me as an obsolete dingbat."

Rita Skeeter didn't look remotely abashed.

"I was just making the point that some of your ideas are a little old-fashioned, Dumbhedore, and that many wizards in the street -"

"I will be delighted to hear the reasoning behind the rudeness, Rita," said Dumbledore, with a courteous bow and a smile, "but I'm afraid we will have to discuss the matter later. The Weighing of the Wands is about to start, and it cannot take place if one of our champions is hidden in a broom cupboard."

Very glad to get away from Rita Skeeter, Harry hurried back into the room. The other champions were now sitting in chairs near the door, and he sat down quickly next to Cedric, hooking up at the velvet-covered table, where four of the five judges were now sitting - Professor Karkaroff, Madame Maxime, Mr. Crouch, and Ludo Bagman. Rita Skeeter settled herself down in a corner; Harry saw her slip the parchment out of her bag again, spread it on her knee, suck the end of the Quick-Quotes Quill, and place it once more on the parchment.

"May I introduce Mr. Ollivander?" said Dumbledore, taking his place at the judges' table and talking to the champions. "He will be checking your wands to ensure that they are in good condition before the tournament."

Harry hooked around, and with a jolt of surprise saw an old wizard with large, pale eyes standing quietly by the window. Harry had met Mr. Ollivander before - he was the wand-maker from whom Harry had bought his own wand over three years ago in Diagon Alley.

"Mademoiselle Delacour, could we have you first, please?" said Mr. Ollivander, stepping into the empty space in the middle of the room.

Fleur Delacour swept over to Mr. Olhivander and handed him her wand.

"Hmm..." he said.

He twirled the wand between his long fingers like a baton and it emitted a number of pink and gold sparks. Then he held it chose to his eyes and examined it carefully.

"Yes," he said quietly, "nine and a half inches. . . inflexible.. rosewood.. . and containing. . . dear me. . ."

"An 'air from ze 'ead of a veela," said Fleur. "One of my grandmuzzer's."

So Fleur was part veela, thought Harry, making a mental note to tell Ron. . . then

he remembered that Ron wasn't speaking to him.

"Yes," said Mr. Ollivander, "yes, I've never used veela hair myself, of course. I find it makes for rather temperamental wands...however, to each his own, and if this suits you.."

Mr. Ollivander ran his fingers along the wand, apparently checking for scratches or bumps; then he muttered, "Orchideous!" and a bunch of flowers burst from the wand tip.

"Very well, very well, it's in fine working order," said Mr. Ollivander, scooping up the flowers and handing them to Fleur with her wand. "Mr. Diggory, you next."

Fleur glided back to her seat, smiling at Cedric as he passed her.

"Ah, now, this is one of mine, isn't it?" said Mr. Ollivander, with much more enthusiasm, as Cedric handed over his wand. "Yes, I remember it well. Containing a single hair from the tail of a particularly fine male unicorn. . . must have been seventeen hands; nearly gored me with his horn after I plucked his tail. Twelve and a quarter inches. . . ash. . . pleasantly springy. It's in fine condition...You treat it regularly?"

"Polished it last night," said Cedric, grinning.

Harry hooked down at his own wand. He could see finger marks all over it. He gathered a fistful of robe from his knee and tried to rub it clean surreptitiously. Several gold sparks shot out of the end of it. Fleur Delacour gave him a very patronizing look, and he desisted.

Mr. Ollivander sent a stream of silver smoke rings across the room from the tip of Cedric's wand, pronounced himself satisfied, and then said, "Mr. Krum, if you please."

Viktor Krum got up and slouched, round-shouldered and duck-footed, toward Mr. Ollivander. He thrust out his wand and stood scowling, with his hands in the pockets of his robes.

"Hmm," said Mr. Olhivander, "this is a Gregorovitch creation, unless I'm much mistaken? A fine wand-maker, though the styling is never quite what I. . . however. ."

He lifted the wand and examined it minutely, turning it over and over before his eyes.

"Yes.. . hornbeam and dragon heartstring?" he shot at Krum, who nodded. "Rather thicker than one usually sees. . . quite rigid. . . ten and a quarter inches. . . Avis!"

The hornbeam wand let off a blast hike a gun, and a number of small, twittering birds flew out of the end and through the open window into the watery sunlight.

"Good," said Mr. Ollivander, handing Krum back his wand. "Which leaves. . . Mr. Potter."

Harry got to his feet and walked past Krum to Mr. Ollivander. He handed over his wand.

"Aaaah, yes," said Mr. Ohlivander, his pale eyes suddenly gleaming. "Yes, yes, yes. How well I remember."

Harry could remember too. He could remember it as though it had happened yesterday....

Four summers ago, on his eleventh birthday, he had entered Mr. Ollivander's shop with Hagrid to buy a wand. Mr. Ollivander had taken his measurements and then started handing him wands to try. Harry had waved what felt like every wand in the shop, until at last he had found the one that suited him - this one, which was made of holly, eleven inches long, and contained a single feather from the tail of a phoenix. Mr. Ollivander had been very surprised that Harry had been so compatible with this wand. "Curious," he had said, "curious," and not until Harry asked what was curious had Mr. Olhivander explained that the phoenix feather in Harry's wand had come from the same bird that had supplied the core of Lord Voldemort's.

Harry had never shared this piece of information with anybody. He was very fond of his wand, and as far as he was concerned its relation to Voldemort's wand was something it couldn't help - rather as he couldn't help being related to Aunt Petunia. However, he really hoped that Mr. Ollivander wasn't about to tell the room about it. He had a funny feeling Rita Skeeter's Quick-Quotes Quill might just explode with excitement if he did.

Mr. Ollivander spent much longer examining Harry's wand than anyone else's. Eventually, however, he made a fountain of wine shoot out of it, and handed it back to Harry, announcing that it was still in perfect condition.

"Thank you all," said Dumbledore, standing up at the judges' table. "You may go back to your lessons now - or perhaps it would be quicker just to go down to dinner, as they are about to end -"

Feeling that at last something had gone right today, Harry got up to leave, but the man with the black camera jumped up and cleared his throat.

"Photos, Dumbledore, photos!" cried Bagman excitedly. "All the judges and champions, what do you think, Rita?"

"Er - yes, let's do those first," said Rita Skeeter, whose eyes were upon Harry again. "And then perhaps some individual shots."

The photographs took a long time. Madame Maxime cast everyone else into shadow wherever she stood, and the photographer couldn't stand far enough back

to get her into the frame; eventually she had to sit while everyone else stood around her. Karkaroff kept twirling his goatee around his finger to give it an extra curl; Krum, whom Harry would have thought would have been used to this sort of thing, skulked, half-hidden, at the back of the group. The photographer seemed keenest to get Fleur at the front, but Rita Skeeter kept hurrying forward and dragging Harry into greater prominence. Then she insisted on separate shots of all the champions. At last, they were free to go.

Harry went down to dinner. Hermione wasn't there - he supposed she was still in the hospital wing having her teeth fixed. He ate alone at the end of the table, then returned to Gryffindor Tower, thinking of all the extra work on Summoning Charms that he had to do. Up in the dormitory, he came across Ron.

"You've had an owl," said Ron brusquely the moment he walked in. He was pointing at Harry's pillow. The school barn owl was waiting for him there.

"Oh - right," said Harry.

"And we've got to do our detentions tomorrow night, Snape's dungeon," said Ron.

He then walked straight out of the room, not looking at Harry. For a moment, Harry considered going after him - he wasn't sure whether he wanted to talk to him or hit him, both seemed quite appealing - but the lure of Sirius's answer was too strong. Harry strode over to the barn owl, took the letter off its leg, and unrolled it.

Harry -

I can't say everything I would like to in a letter, it's too risky

in case the owl is intercepted - we need to talk face-to-face. Can you ensure that you are alone by the fire in Gryffindor Tower at one o'clock in the morning on the 22nd ofNovember?

I know better than anyone that you can look after yourself and while you're around Dumbledore and Moody I don't think anyone will be able to hurt you. However, someone seems to be having a good try. Entering you in that tournament would have been very risky, especially right under Dumbkdore's nose.

Be on the watch, Harry. I still want to hear about anything unusual. Let me know about the 22nd ofNovember as quickly as you can.

Sirius

CHAPTER NINETEEN - THE HUNGARIAN HORNTAIL

The prospect of talking face-to-face with Sirius was all that sustained Harry over the next fortnight, the only bright spot on a horizon that had never looked darker. The shock of finding himself school champion had worn off slightly now, and the fear of what was facing him had started to sink in. The first task was drawing steadily nearer; he felt as though it were crouching ahead of him hike some horrific monster, barring his path. He had never suffered nerves like these; they were way beyond anything he had experienced before a Quidditch match, not even his last one against Slytherin, which had decided who would win the Quidditch Cup. Harry was finding it hard to think about the future at all; he felt as though his whole life had been heading up to, and would finish with, the first task.

Admittedly, he didn't see how Sirius was going to make him feel any better about having to perform an unknown piece of difficult and dangerous magic in front of hundreds of people, but the mere sight of a friendly face would be something at the moment. Harry wrote back to Sirius saying that he would be beside the common room fire at the time Sirius had suggested; and he and Hermione spent a long time going over plans for forcing any stragglers out of the common room on the night in question. If the worst came to the worst, they were going to drop a bag of Dungbombs, but they hoped they wouldn't have to resort to that - Filch would skin them alive.

In the meantime, life became even worse for Harry within the confines of the castle, for Rita Skeeter had published her piece about the Triwizard Tournament, and it had turned out to be not so much a report on the tournament as a highly colored life story of Harry. Much of the front page had been given over to a picture of Harry; the article (continuing on pages two, six, and seven) had been all about Harry, the names of the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang champions (misspelled) had been squashed into the last line of the article, and Cedric hadn't been mentioned at all.

The article had appeared ten days ago, and Harry still got a sick, burning feeling of shame in his stomach every time he thought about it. Rita Skeeter had reported him saying an awful lot of things that he couldn't remember ever saying in his life, let alone in that broom cupboard.

I suppose I get my strength from my parents. I know they'd be very proud of me if they could see me now. . . . Yes, sometimes at night I still cry about them, I'm not ashamed to admit it. . . . I know nothing will hurt me during the tournament, because they're watching over me. . .

But Rita Skeeter had gone even further than transforming his "er's" into long, sickly sentences: She had interviewed other people about him too.

Harry has at last found love at Hogwarts. His close friend, Colin Creevey, says that Harry is rarely seen out of the company of one Hermione Granger, a stunningly pretty Muggle-born girl who, like Harry, is one of the top students in the school.

From the moment the article had appeared, Harry had had to endure people -- Slytherins, mainly -- quoting it at him as he passed and making sneering comments.

"Want a hanky, Potter, in case you start crying in Transfiguration?"

"Since when have you been one of the top students in the school, Potter? Or is this a school you and Longbottom have set up together?"

"Hey - Harry!"

"Yeah, that's right!" Harry found himself shouting as he wheeled around in the corridor, having had just about enough. "I've just been crying my eyes out over my dead mum, and I'm just off to do a bit more. . .

"No - it was just - you dropped your quill."

It was Cho. Harry felt the color rising in his face.

"Oh - right - sorry," he muttered, taking the quill back.

"Er. . . good luck on Tuesday," she said. "I really hope you do well."

Which left Harry feeling extremely stupid.

Hermione had come in for her fair share of unpleasantness too, but she hadn't yet started yelling at innocent bystanders; in fact, Harry was full of admiration for the way she was handling the situation.

"Stunningly pretty? Her?" Pansy Parkinson had shrieked the first time she had come face-to-face with Hermione after Rita's article had appeared. "What was she judging against - a chipmunk?"

"Ignore it," Hermione said in a dignified voice, holding her head in the air and stalking past the sniggering Slytherin girls as though she couldn't hear them. "Just ignore it, Harry."

But Harry couldn't ignore it. Ron hadn't spoken to him at all since he had told him about Snape's detentions. Harry had half hoped they would make things up during the two hours they were forced to pickle rats' brains in Snape's dungeon, but that had been the day Rita's article had appeared, which seemed to have confirmed Ron's belief that Harry was really enjoying all the attention.

Hermione was furious with the pair of them; she went from one to the other, trying to force them to talk to each other, but Harry was adamant: He would talk to Ron again only if Ron admitted that Harry hadn't put his name in the Goblet of Fire and

apologized for calling him a liar.

"I didn't start this," Harry said stubbornly. "It's his problem."

"You miss him!" Hermione said impatiently. "And I know he misses you -"

"Miss him?" said Harry. "I don't miss him. . .

But this was a downright lie. Harry liked Hermione very much, but she just wasn't the same as Ron. There was much hess laughter and a lot more hanging around in the library when Hermione was your best friend. Harry still hadn't mastered Summoning Charms, he seemed to have developed something of a block about them, and Hermione insisted that learning the theory would help. They consequently spent a lot of time poring over books during their lunchtimes.

Viktor Krum was in the library an awful lot too, and Harry wondered what he was up to. Was he studying, or was he looking for things to help him through the first task? Hermione often complained about Krum being there - not that he ever bothered them - but because groups of giggling girls often turned up to spy on him from behind bookshelves, and Hermione found the noise distracting.

"He's not even good-looking!" she muttered angrily, glaring at Krum's sharp profile. "They only like him because he's famous! They wouldn't look twice at him if he couldn't do that WonkyFaint thing -"

"Wronski Feint," said Harry, through gritted teeth. Quite apart from liking to get Quidditch terms correct, it caused him another pang to imagine Ron's expression if he could have heard Hermione talking about Wonky-Faints.

It is a strange thing, but when you are dreading something, and would give anything to slow down time, it has a disobliging habit of speeding up. The days until the first task seemed to slip by as though someone had fixed the clocks to work at double speed. Harry's feeling of barely controlled panic was with him wherever he went, as everpresent as the snide comments about the Daily Prophet article.

On the Saturday before the first task, all students in the third year and above were permitted to visit the village of Hogsmeade. Hermione told Harry that it would do him good to get away from the castle for a bit, and Harry didn't need much persuasion.

"What about Ron, though?" he said. "Don't you want to go with him?"

"Oh. . . well.. ." Hermione went slightly pink. "I thought we might meet up with him in the Three Broomsticks. . . ."

"No," said Harry flatly.

"Oh Harry, this is so stupid -"

"I'll come, but I'm not meeting Ron, and I'm wearing my Invisibility Cloak."

"Oh all right then. . ." Hermione snapped, "but I hate talking to you in that cloak, I never know if I'm looking at you or not."

So Harry put on his Invisibility Cloak in the dormitory, went back downstairs, and together he and Hermione set off for Hogsmeade.

Harry felt wonderfully free under the cloak; he watched other students walking past them as they entered the village, most of them sporting Support Cedric Diggory! badges, but no horrible remarks came his way for a change, and nobody was quoting that stupid article.

"People keep looking at me now," said Hermione grumpily as they came out of Honeydukes Sweetshop later, eating large cream-filled chocolates. "They think I'm talking to myself."

"Don't move your lips so much then."

"Come on, please just take off your cloak for a bit, no one's going to bother you here."

"Oh yeah?" said Harry. "Look behind you."

Rita Skeeter and her photographer friend had just emerged from the Three Broomsticks pub. Talking in low voices, they passed right by Hermione without hooking at her. Harry backed into the wall of Honeydukes to stop Rita Skeeter from hitting him with her crocodile-skin handbag. When they were gone, Harry said, "She's staying in the village. I bet she's coming to watch the first task."

As he said it, his stomach flooded with a wave of molten panic. He didn't mention this; he and Hermione hadn't discussed what was coming in the first task much; he had the feeling she didn't want to think about it.

"She's gone," said Hermione, looking right through Harry toward the end of the street. "Why don't we go and have a butterbeer in the Three Broomsticks, it's a bit cold, isn't it? You don't have to talk to Ron!" she added irritably, correctly interpreting his silence.

The Three Broomsticks was packed, mainly with Hogwarts students enjoying their free afternoon, but also with a variety of magical people Harry rarely saw anywhere else. Harry supposed that as Hogsmeade was the only all-wizard village in Britain, it was a bit of a haven for creatures like hags, who were not as adept as wizards at disguising themselves.

It was very hard to move through crowds in the Invisibility Cloak, in case you accidentally trod on someone, which tended to lead to awkward questions. Harry edged slowly toward a spare table in the corner while Hermione went to buy drinks. On his way through the pub, Harry spotted Ron, who was sitting with Fred, George, and Lee Jordan. Resisting the urge to give Ron a good hard poke in the

back of the head, he finally reached the table and sat down at it.

Hermione joined him a moment later and slipped him a butterbeer under his cloak.

"I look like such an idiot, sitting here on my own," she muttered. "Lucky I brought something to do."

And she pulled out a notebook in which she had been keeping a record of S.P.E.W. members. Harry saw his and Ron's names at the top of the very short list. It seemed a long time ago that they had sat making up those predictions together, and Hermione had turned up and appointed them secretary and treasurer.

"You know, maybe I should try and get some of the villagers involved in S.P.E.W.," Hermione said thoughtfully, looking around the pub.

"Yeah, right," said Harry. He took a swig of butterbeer under his cloak. "Hermione, when are you going to give up on this spew stuff?"

"When house-elves have decent wages and working conditions!" she hissed back. "You know, I'm starting to think it's time for more direct action. I wonder how you get into the school kitchens?"

"No idea, ask Fred and George," said Harry.

Hermione lapsed into thoughtful silence, while Harry drank his butterbeer, watching the people in the pub. All of them looked cheerful and relaxed. Ernie Macmillan and Hannah Abbot were swapping Chocolate Frog cards at a nearby table; both of them sporting Support Cedric Diggory! badges on their cloaks. Right over by the door he saw Cho and a large group of her Ravenclaw friends. She wasn't wearing a Cedric badge though. . . . This cheered up Harry very slightly.

What wouldn't he have given to be one of these peophe, sitting around laughing and talking, with nothing to worry about but homework? He imagined how it would have felt to be here if his name hadn't come out of the Goblet of Fire. He wouldn't be wearing the Invisibility Cloak, for one thing. Ron would be sitting with him. The three of them would probably be happily imagining what deadly dangerous task the school champions would be facing on Tuesday. He'd have been really hooking forward to it, watching them do whatever it was...cheering on Cedric with everyone else, safe in a seat at the back of the stands...

He wondered how the other champions were feeling. Every time he had seen Cedric lately, he had been surrounded by admirers and looking nervous but excited. Harry glimpsed Fleur Delacour from time to time in the corridors; she looked exactly as she always did, haughty and unruffled. And Krum just sat in the library, poring over books.

Harry thought of Sirius, and the tight, tense knot in his chest seemed to ease slightly. He would be speaking to him in just over twelve hours, for tonight was

the night they were meeting at the common room fire - assuming nothing went wrong, as everything else had done lately...

"Look, it's Hagrid!" said Hermione.

The back of Hagrid's enormous shaggy head - he had mercifully abandoned his bunches - emerged over the crowd. Harry wondered why he hadn't spotted him at once, as Hagrid was so large, but standing up carefully, he saw that Hagrid had been leaning low, talking to Professor Moody. Hagrid had his usual enormous tankard in front of him, but Moody was drinking from his hip flask. Madam Rosmerta, the pretty landlady, didn't seem to think much of this; she was looking askance at Moody as she collected glasses from tables around them. Perhaps she thought it was an insult to her mulled mead, but Harry knew better. Moody had told them all during their last Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson that he preferred to prepare his own food and drink at all times, as it was so easy for Dark wizards to poison an unattended cup.

As Harry watched, he saw Hagrid and Moody get up to leave. He waved, then remembered that Hagrid couldn't see him. Moody, however, paused, his magical eye on the corner where Harry was standing. He tapped Hagrid in the small of the back (being unable to reach his shoulder), muttered something to him, and then the pair of them made their way back across the pub toward Harry and Hermione's table.

"All right, Hermione?" said Hagrid loudly.

"Hello," said Hermione, smiling back.

Moody limped around the table and bent down; Harry thought he was reading the S.P.E.W. notebook, until he muttered, "Nice cloak, Potter."

Harry stared at him in amazement. The large chunk missing from Moody's nose was particularly obvious at a few inches' distance. Moody grinned.

"Can your eye - I mean, can you - ?"

"Yeah, it can see through Invisibility Cloaks," Moody said quietly. "And it's come in useful at times, I can tell you."

Hagrid was beaming down at Harry too. Harry knew Hagrid couldn't see him, but Moody had obviously told Hagrid he was there. Hagrid now bent down on the pretext of reading the S.P.E.W. notebook as well, and said in a whisper so low that only Harry could hear it, "Harry, meet me tonight at midnight at me cabin. Wear that cloak."

Straightening up, Hagrid said loudly, "Nice ter see yeh, Hermione," winked, and departed. Moody followed him.

"Why does Hagrid want me to meet him at midnight?" Harry said, very surprised.

"Does he?" said Hermione, looking startled. "I wonder what he's up to? I don't know whether you should go, Harry. . . ." She looked nervously around and hissed, "It might make you late for Sirius."

It was true that going down to Hagrid's at midnight would mean cutting his meeting with Sirius very fine indeed; Hermione suggested sending Hedwig down to Hagrid's to tell him he couldn't go - always assuming she would consent to take the note, of course - Harry, however, thought it better just to be quick at whatever Hagrid wanted him for. He was very curious to know what this might be; Hagrid had never asked Harry to visit him so late at night.

At half past eleven that evening, Harry, who had pretended to go up to bed early, pulled the Invisibility Cloak back over himself and crept back downstairs through the common room. Quite a few people were still in there. The Creevey brothers had managed to get hold of a stack of Support Cedric Diggory! badges and were trying to bewitch them to make them say Support Harry Potter! instead. So far, however, all they had managed to do was get the badges stuck on POTTER STINKS. Harry crept past them to the portrait hole and waited for a minute or so, keeping an eye on his watch. Then Hermione opened the Fat Lady for him from outside as they had planned. He slipped past her with a whispered "Thanks!" and set off through the castle.

The grounds were very dark. Harry walked down the lawn toward the lights shining in Hagrid's cabin. The inside of the enormous Beauxbatons carriage was also lit up; Harry could hear Madame Maxime talking inside it as he knocked on Hagrid's front door.

"You there, Harry?" Hagrid whispered, opening the door and looking around.

"Yeah," said Harry, slipping inside the cabin and pulling the cloak down off his head. "What's up?"

"Got summat ter show yeh," said Hagrid.

There was an air of enormous excitement about Hagrid. He was wearing a flower that resembled an oversized artichoke in his buttonhole. It looked as though he had abandoned the use of axle grease, but he had certainly attempted to comb his hair - Harry could see the comb's broken teeth tangled in it.

"What're you showing me?" Harry said warily, wondering if the skrewts had laid eggs, or Hagrid had managed to buy another giant three-headed dog off a stranger in a pub.

"Come with me, keep quiet, an' keep yerself covered with that cloak," said Hagrid. "We won' take Fang, he won' like it. . .

"Listen, Hagrid, I can't stay long. . . . I've got to be back up at the castle by one o'clock -"

But Hagrid wasn't listening; he was opening the cabin door and striding off into the night. Harry hurried to follow and found, to his great surprise, that Hagrid was leading him to the Beauxbatons carriage.

"Hagrid, what - ?"

"Shhh!" said Hagrid, and he knocked three times on the door bearing the crossed golden wands.

Madame Maxime opened it. She was wearing a silk shawl wrapped around her massive shoulders. She smiled when she saw Hagrid.

"Ah, 'Agrid . . . it is time?"

"Bong-sewer," said Hagrid, beaming at her, and holding out a hand to help her down the golden steps.

Madame Maxime closed the door behind her, Hagrid offered her his arm, and they set off around the edge of the paddock containing Madame Maxime's giant winged horses, with Harry, totally bewildered, running to keep up with them. Had Hagrid wanted to show him Madame Maxime? He could see her any old time he wanted.. . she wasn't exactly hard to miss....

But it seemed that Madame Maxime was in for the same treat as Harry, because after a while she said playfully, "Wair is it you are taking me, 'Agrid?"

"Yeh'll enjoy this," said Hagrid gruffly, "worth seein', trust me. On'y - don' go tellin' anyone I showed yeh, right? Yeh're not s'posed ter know."

"Of course not," said Madame Maxime, fluttering her long black eyelashes.

And still they walked, Harry getting more and more irritated as he jogged along in their wake, checking his watch every now and then. Hagrid had some harebrained scheme in hand, which might make him miss Sirius. If they didn't get there soon, he was going to turn around, go straight back to the castle, and leave Hagrid to enjoy his moonlit stroll with Madame Maxime.

But then - when they had walked so far around the perimeter of the forest that the castle and the lake were out of sight - Harry heard something. Men were shouting up ahead. . . then came a deafening, earsplitting roar. . .

Hagrid led Madame Maxime around a clump of trees and came to a halt. Harry hurried up alongside them - for a split second, he thought he was seeing bonfires, and men darting around them - and then his mouth fell open.

Dragons.

Four fully grown, enormous, vicious-looking dragons were rearing onto their hind legs inside an enclosure fenced with thick planks of wood, roaring and snorting - torrents of fire were shooting into the dark sky from their open, fanged mouths,

fifty feet above the ground on their outstretched necks. There was a silvery-blue one with long, pointed horns, snapping and snarling at the wizards on the ground; a smooth-scaled green one, which was writhing and stamping with all its might; a red one with an odd fringe of fine gold spikes around its face, which was shooting mushroom-shaped fire clouds into the air; and a gigantic black one, more lizard-hike than the others, which was nearest to them.

At least thirty wizards, seven or eight to each dragon, were attempting to control them, pulling on the chains connected to heavy leather straps around their necks and legs. Mesmerized, Harry looked up, high above him, and saw the eyes of the black dragon, with vertical pupils like a cat's, bulging with either fear or rage, he couldn't tell which. . . . It was making a horrible noise, a yowling, screeching scream.

"Keep back there, Hagrid!" yelled a wizard near the fence, straining on the chain he was holding. "They can shoot fire at a range of twenty feet, you know! I've seen this Horntail do forty!"

"Is'n' it beautiful?" said Hagrid softly.

"It's no good!" yelled another wizard. "Stunning Spells, on the count of three!"

Harry saw each of the dragon keepers pull out his wand.

"Stupefy!" they shouted in unison, and the Stunning Spells shot into the darkness like fiery rockets, bursting in showers of stars on the dragons' scaly hides -

Harry watched the dragon nearest to them teeter dangerously on its back legs; its jaws stretched wide in a silent howl; its nostrils were suddenly devoid of flame, though still smoking - then, very slowly, it fell. Several tons of sinewy, scaly-black dragon hit the ground with a thud that Harry could have sworn made the trees behind him quake.

The dragon keepers lowered their wands and walked forward to their fallen charges, each of which was the size of a small hill. They hurried to tighten the chains and fasten them securely to iron pegs, which they forced deep into the ground with their wands.

"Wan' a closer look?" Hagrid asked Madame Maxime excitedly. The pair of them moved right up to the fence, and Harry followed. The wizard who had warned Hagrid not to come any closer turned, and Harry realized who it was: Charlie Weasley.

"All right, Hagrid?" he panted, coming over to talk. "They should be okay now - we put them out with a Sleeping Draft on the way here, thought it might be better for them to wake up in the dark and the quiet - but, like you saw, they weren't happy, not happy at all -"

"What breeds you got here, Charlie?" said Hagrid, gazing at the closest dragon, the

black one, with something chose to reverence. Its eyes were still just open. Harry could see a strip of gleaming yellow beneath its wrinkled black eyelid.

"This is a Hungarian Horntail," said Charlie. "There's a Common Welsh Green over there, the smaller one -- a Swedish Short-Snout, that blue-gray -- and a Chinese Fireball, that's the red."

Charlie looked around; Madame Maxime was strolling away around the edge of the enclosure, gazing at the stunned dragons.

"I didn't know you were bringing her, Hagrid," Charlie said, frowning. "The champions aren't supposed to know what's coming - she's bound to tell her student, isn't she?"

"Jus' thought she'd like ter see 'em," shrugged Hagrid, still gazing, enraptured, at the dragons.

"Really romantic date, Hagrid," said Charlie, shaking his head.

"Four. . ." said Hagrid, "so it's one fer each o' the champions, is it? What've they gotta do - fight 'em?"

"Just get past them, I think," said Charlie. "We'll be on hand if it gets nasty, Extinguishing Spells at the ready. They wanted nesting mothers, I don't know why. . . but I tell you this, I don't envy the one who gets the Horntail. Vicious thing. Its back end's as dangerous as its front, look."

Charlie pointed toward the Horntail's tail, and Harry saw long, bronze-colored spikes protruding along it every few inches.

Five of Charlie's fellow keepers staggered up to the Horntail at that moment, carrying a clutch of huge granite-gray eggs between them in a blanket. They placed them carefully at the Horntail's side. Hagrid let out a moan of longing.

"I've got them counted, Hagrid," said Charlie sternly. Then he said, "How's Harry?"

"Fine," said Hagrid. He was still gazing at the eggs.

"Just hope he's still fine after he's faced this lot," said Charlie grimly, looking out over the dragons' enclosure. "I didn't dare tell Mum what he's got to do for the first task; she's already having kittens about him. . . ." Charlie imitated his mother's anxious voice. "How could they let him enter that tournament, he's much too young! I thought they were all safe, I thought there was going to be an age limit!' She was in floods after that Daily Prophet article about him. 'He still cries about his parents! Oh bless him, I never knew!"

Harry had had enough. Trusting to the fact that Hagrid wouldn't miss him, with the attractions of four dragons and Madame Maxime to occupy him, he turned silently and began to walk away, back to the castle.

He didn't know whether he was glad he'd seen what was coming or not. Perhaps this way was better. The first shock was over now. Maybe if he'd seen the dragons for the first time on Tuesday, he would have passed out cold in front of the whole school. . . but maybe he would anyway. .. . He was going to be armed with his wand - which, just now, felt like nothing more than a narrow strip of wood -- against a fifty-foot-high, scaly, spike-ridden, fire-breathing dragon. And he had to get past it. With everyone watching. How?

Harry sped up, skirting the edge of the forest; he had just under fifteen minutes to get back to the fireside and talk to Sirius, and he couldn't remember, ever, wanting to talk to someone more than he did right now -- when, without warning, he ran into something very solid.

Harry fell backward, his glasses askew, clutching the cloak around him. A voice nearby said, "Ouch! Who's there?"

Harry hastily checked that the cloak was covering him and hay very still, staring up at the dark outline of the wizard he had hit. He recognized the goatee. . . it was Karkaroff.

"Who's there?" said Karkaroff again, very suspiciously, looking around in the darkness. Harry remained still and silent. After a minute or so, Karkaroff seemed to decide that he had hit some sort of animal; he was looking around at waist height, as though expecting to see a dog. Then he crept back under the cover of the trees and started to edge forward toward the place where the dragons were.

Very slowly and very carefully, Harry got to his feet and set off again as fast as he could without making too much noise, hurrying through the darkness back toward Hogwarts.

He had no doubt whatsoever what Karkaroff was up to. He had sneaked off his ship to try and find out what the first task was going to be. He might even have spotted Hagrid and Madame Maxime heading off around the forest together - they were hardly difficult to spot at a distance. . . and now all Karkaroff had to do was follow the sound of voices, and he, like Madame Maxime, would know what was in store for the champions.

By the looks of it, the only champion who would be facing the unknown on Tuesday was Cedric.

Harry reached the castle, slipped in through the front doors, and began to climb the marble stairs; he was very out of breath, but he didn't dare slow down. . . . He had less than five minutes to get up to the fire.

"Balderdash!" he gasped at the Fat Lady, who was snoozing in her frame in front of the portrait hole.

"If you say so," she muttered sleepily, without opening her eyes, and the picture swung forward to admit him. Harry climbed inside. The common room was

deserted, and, judging by the fact that it smelled quite normal, Hermione had not needed to set off any Dungbombs to ensure that he and Sirius got privacy.

Harry pulled off the Invisibility Cloak and threw himself into an armchair in front of the fire. The room was in semidarkness; the flames were the only source of light. Nearby, on a table, the Support Cedric Diggory! badges the Creeveys had been trying to improve were glinting in the firelight. They now read POTTER REALLY STINKS. Harry looked back into the flames, and jumped.

Sirius's head was sitting in the fire. If Harry hadn't seen Mr. Diggory do exactly this back in the Weasleys' kitchen, it would have scared him out of his wits. Instead, his face breaking into the first smile he had worn for days, he scrambled out of his chair, crouched down by the hearth, and said, "Sirius - how're you doing?"

Sirius looked different from Harry's memory of him. When they had said good-bye, Sirius's face had been gaunt and sunken, surrounded by a quantity of long, black, matted hair - but the hair was short and clean now, Sirius's face was fuller, and he looked younger, much more like the only photograph Harry had of him, which had been taken at the Potters' wedding.

"Never mind me, how are you?" said Sirius seriously.

"I'm -" For a second, Harry tried to say "fine" - but he couldn't do it. Before he could stop himself, he was talking more than he'd talked in days - about how no one believed he hadn't entered the tournament of his own free will, how Rita Skeeter had lied about him in the Daily Prophet, how he couldn't walk down a corridor without being sneered at - and about Ron, Ron not believing him, Ron's jealousy...

". . . and now Hagrid's just shown me what's coming in the first task, and it's dragons, Sirius, and I'm a goner," he finished desperately.

Sirius looked at him, eyes full of concern, eyes that had not yet lost the look that Azkaban had given them - that deadened, haunted look He had let Harry talk himself into silence without interruption, but now he said, "Dragons we can deal with, Harry, but we'll get to that in a minute - I haven't got long here. . . I've broken into a wizarding house to use the fire, but they could be back at any time. There are things I need to warn you about."

"What?" said Harry, feeling his spirits slip a further few notches.. . . Surely there could be nothing worse than dragons coming?

"Karkaroff," said Sirius. "Harry, he was a Death Eater. You know what Death Eaters are, don't you?"

"Yes - he - what?"

"He was caught, he was in Azkaban with me, but he got released. I'd bet

everything that's why Dumbledore wanted an Auror at Hogwarts this year - to keep an eye on him. Moody caught Karkaroff. Put him into Azkaban in the first place."

"Karkaroff got released?" Harry said slowly - his brain seemed to be struggling to absorb yet another piece of shocking information. "Why did they release him?"

"He did a deal with the Ministry of Magic," said Sirius bitterly. "He said he'd seen the error of his ways, and then he named names. . . he put a load of other people into Azkaban in his place. . . . He's not very popular in there, I can tell you. And since he got out, from what I can tell, he's been teaching the Dark Arts to every student who passes through that school of his. So watch out for the Durmstrang champion as well."

"Okay," said Harry slowly. "But. . . are you saying Karkaroff put my name in the goblet? Because if he did, he's a really good actor. He seemed furious about it. He wanted to stop me from competing."

"We know he's a good actor," said Sirius, "because he convinced the Ministry of Magic to set him free, didn't he? Now, I've been keeping an eye on the Daily Prophet, Harry.."

"- you and the rest of the world," said Harry bitterly.

"- and reading between the lines of that Skeeter woman's article last month, Moody was attacked the night before he started at Hogwarts. Yes, I know she says it was another false alarm," Sirius said hastily, seeing Harry about to speak, "but I don't think so, somehow. I think someone tried to stop him from getting to Hogwarts. I think someone knew their job would be a lot more difficult with him around. And no one's going to look into it too closely; Mad-Eye's heard intruders a bit too often. But that doesn't mean he can't still spot the real thing. Moody was the best Auror the Ministry ever had."

"So. . . what are you saying?" said Harry slowly. "Karkaroff's trying to kill me? But - why?"

Sirius hesitated.

"I've been nearing some very strange things," he said slowly. "The Death Eaters seem to be a bit more active than usual lately. They showed themselves at the Quidditch World Cup, didn't they? Someone set off the Dark Mark.. . and then - did you hear about that Ministry of Magic witch who's gone missing?"

"Bertha Jorkins?" said Harry.

"Exactly. . . she disappeared in Albania, and that's definitely where Voldemort was rumored to be last. . . and she would have known the Triwizard Tournament was coming up, wouldn't she?"

"Yeah, but. . . it's not very likely she'd have walked straight into Voldemort, is it?"

said Harry.

"Listen, I knew Bertha Jorkins," said Sirius grimly. "She was at Hogwarts when I was, a few years above your dad and me. And she was an idiot. Very nosy, but no brains, none at all. It's not a good combination, Harry. I'd say she'd be very easy to lure into a trap."

"So. . . so Voldemort could have found out about the tournament?" said Harry. "Is that what you mean? You think Karkaroff might be here on his orders?"

"I don't know," said Sirius slowly, "I just don't know...Karkaroff doesn't strike me as the type who'd go back to Voldemort unless he knew Voldemort was powerful enough to protect him. But whoever put your name in that goblet did it for a reason, and I can't help thinking the tournament would be a very good way to attack you and make it hook like an accident."

"Looks hike a really good plan from where I'm standing," said Harry grinning bleaky. "They'll just have to stand back and let the dragons do their stuff."

"Right - these dragons," said Sirius, speaking very quickly now. "There's a way, Harry. Don't be tempted to try a Stunning Spell - dragons are strong and too powerfully magical to be knocked out by a single Stunner, you need about half a dozen wizards at a time to overcome a dragon -"

"Yeah, I know, I just saw," said Harry.

"But you can do it alone," said Sirius. "There is away, and a simple spell's all you need. Just -"

But Harry held up a hand to silence him, his heart suddenly pounding as though it would burst. He could hear footsteps coming down the spiral staircase behind him.

"Go!" he hissed at Sirius. " Go! There's someone coming!"

Harry scrambled to his feet, hiding the fire - if someone saw Sirius's face within the walls of Hogwarts, they would raise an almighty uproar - the Ministry would get dragged in - he, Harry, would be questioned about Sirius's whereabouts -

Harry heard a tiny pop! in the fire behind him and knew Sirius had gone. He watched the bottom of the spiral staircase. Who had decided to go for a stroll at one o'clock in the morning, and stopped Sirius from telling him how to get past a dragon?

It was Ron. Dressed in his maroon paisley pajamas, Ron stopped dead facing Harry across the room, and looked around.

"Who were you talking to?" he said.

"What's that got to do with you?" Harry snarled. "What are you doing down here at this time of night?"

"I just wondered where you -" Ron broke off, shrugging. "Nothing. I'm going back to bed."

"Just thought you'd come nosing around, did you?" Harry shouted. He knew that Ron had no idea what he'd walked in on, knew he hadn't done it on purpose, but he didn't care - at this moment he hated everything about Ron, right down to the several inches of bare ankle showing beneath his pajama trousers.

"Sorry about that," said Ron, his face reddening with anger. "Should've realized you didn't want to be disturbed. I'll let you get on with practicing for your next interview in peace."

Harry seized one of the POTTER REALLY STINKS badges off the table and chucked it, as hard as he could, across the room. It hit Ron on the forehead and bounced off.

"There you go," Harry said. "Something for you to wear on Tuesday. You might even have a scar now, if yon're lucky.. . . That's what you want, isn't it?"

He strode across the room toward the stairs; he half expected Ron to stop him, he would even have liked Ron to throw a punch at him, but Ron just stood there in his too-small pajamas, and Harry, having stormed upstairs, lay awake in bed fuming for a long time afterward and didn't hear him come up to bed.

CHAPTER TWENTY - THE FIRST TASK

Harry got up on Sunday morning and dressed so inattentively that it was a while before he realized he was trying to pull his hat onto his foot instead of his sock. When he'd finally got all his clothes on the right parts of his body, he hurried off to find Hermione, locating her at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall, where she was eating breakfast with Ginny. Feeling too queasy to eat, Harry waited until Hermione had swallowed her last spoonful of porridge, then dragged her out onto the grounds. There, he told her all about the dragons, and about everything Sirius had said, while they took another long walk around the lake.

Alarmed as she was by Sirius's warnings about Karkaroff, Hermione still thought that the dragons were the more pressing problem.

"Let's just try and keep you alive until Tuesday evening," she said desperately, "and then we can worry about Karkaroff."

They walked three times around the lake, trying all the way to think of a simple spell that would subdue a dragon. Nothing whatsoever occurred to them, so they retired to the library instead. Here, Harry pulled down every book he could find on dragons, and both of them set to work searching through the large pile.

"Talon-clipping by charms. .. treating scale-rot. . .' This is no good, this is for nutters like Hagrid who want to keep them healthy. ..

"Dragons are extremely difficult to slay, owing to the ancient magic that imbues their thick hides, which none but the most powerful spells can penetrate. . .' But Sirius said a simple one would do it.. .

"Let's try some simple spellbooks, then," said Harry, throwing aside Men Who Love Dragons Too Much.

He returned to the table with a pile of spellbooks, set them down, and began to flick through each in turn, Hermione whispering nonstop at his elbow.

"Well, there are Switching Spells. . . but what's the point of Switching it? Unless you swapped its fangs for wine-gums or something that would make it less dangerous.. . . The trouble is, like that book said, not much is going to get through a dragon's hide. . . . I'd say Transfigure it, but something that big, you really haven't got a hope, I doubt even Professor McGonagall. . . unless you're supposed to put the spell on yourself? Maybe to give yourself extra powers? But they're not simple spells, I mean, we haven't done any of those in class, I only know about them because I've been doing O.W.L. practice papers. . . ."

"Hermione," Harry said, through gritted teeth, "will you shut up for a bit, please? I m trying to concentrate."

But all that happened, when Hermione fell silent, was that Harry's brain filled with a sort of blank buzzing, which didn't seem to allow room for concentration. He stared hopelessly down the index of Basic Hexes for the Busy and Vexed. Instant scalping. . . but dragons had no hair. . . pepper breath.. . that would probably increase a dragon's firepower. . . horn tongue. . . just what he needed, to give it an extra weapon...

"Oh no, he's back again, why can't he read on his stupid ship?" said Hermione irritably as Viktor Krum slouched in, cast a surly look over at the pair of them, and settled himself in a distant corner with a pile of books. "Come on, Harry, we'll go back to the common room. . . his fan club'll be here in a moment, twittering away... ."

And sure enough, as they left the library, a gang of girls tiptoed past them, one of them wearing a Bulgaria scarf tied around her waist.

Harry barely slept that night. When he awoke on Monday morning, he seriously considered for the first time ever just running away from Hogwarts. But as he looked around the Great Hall at breakfast time, and thought about what leaving the castle would mean, he knew he couldn't do it. It was the only place he had ever been happy. . . well, he supposed he must have been happy with his parents too, but he couldn't remember that.

Somehow, the knowledge that he would rather be here and facing a dragon than back on Privet Drive with Dudley was good to know; it made him feel slightly calmer. He finished his bacon with difficulty (his throat wasn't working too well), and as he and Hermione got up, he saw Cedric Diggory leaving the Hufflepuff table.

Cedric still didn't know about the dragons. . . the only champion who didn't, if Harry was right in thinking that Maxime and Karkaroff would have told Fleur and Krum....

"Hermione, I'll see you in the greenhouses," Harry said, coming to his decision as he watched Cedric leaving the Hall. "Go on, I'll catch you up."

"Harry, you'll be late, the bell's about to ring -"

"I'll catch you up, okay?"

By the time Harry reached the bottom of the marble staircase, Cedric was at the top. He was with a load of sixth-year friends. Harry didn't want to talk to Cedric in front of them; they were among those who had been quoting Rita Skeeter's article at him every time he went near them. He followed Cedric at a distance and saw that he was heading toward the Charms corridor. This gave Harry an idea. Pausing at a distance from them, he pulled out his wand, and took careful aim.

"Diffindo!"

Cedric's bag split. Parchment, quills, and books spilled out of it onto the floor. Several bottles of ink smashed.

"Don't bother," said Cedric in an exasperated voice as his friends bent down to help him. "Tell Flitwick I'm coming, go on. . .

This was exactly what Harry had been hoping for. He slipped his wand back into his robes, waited until Cedric's friends had disappeared into their classroom, and hurried up the corridor, which was now empty of everyone but himself and Cedric.

"Hi," said Cedric, picking up a copy of A Guide to Advanced Transfiguration that was now splattered with ink. "My bag just split. . . brand-new and all. . ."

"Cedric," said Harry, "the first task is dragons."

"What?" said Cedric, looking up.

"Dragons," said Harry, speaking quickly, in case Professor Flitwick came out to see where Cedric had got to. "They've got four, one for each of us, and we've got to get past them."

Cedric stared at him. Harry saw some of the panic he'd been feeling since Saturday night flickering in Cedric's gray eyes.

"Are you sure?" Cedric said in a hushed voice.

"Dead sure," said Harry. "I've seen them."

"But how did you find out? We're not supposed to know. . . ."

"Never mind," said Harry quickly - he knew Hagrid would be in trouble if he told the truth. "But I'm not the only one who knows. Fleur and Krum will know by now - Maxime and Karkaroff both saw the dragons too."

Cedric straightened up, his arms full of inky quills, parchment, and books, his ripped bag dangling off one shoulder. He stared at Harry, and there was a puzzled, almost suspicious look in his eyes.

"Why are you telling me?" he asked.

Harry looked at him in disbelief. He was sure Cedric wouldn't have asked that if he had seen the dragons himself. Harry wouldn't have let his worst enemy face those monsters unprepared - well, perhaps Malfoy or Snape...

"It's just . . . fair, isn't it?" he said to Cedric. "We all know now. . . we're on an even footing, aren't we?"

Cedric was still hooking at him in a slightly suspicious way when Harry heard a familiar clunking noise behind him. He turned around and saw Mad-Eye Moody emerging from a nearby classroom.

"Come with me, Potter," he growled. "Diggory, off you go."

Harry stared apprehensively at Moody. Had he overheard them?

"Er - Professor, I'm supposed to be in Herbology -"

"Never mind that, Potter. In my office, please...

Harry followed him, wondering what was going to happen to him now. What if Moody wanted to know how he'd found out about the dragons? Would Moody go to Dumbledore and tell on Hagrid, or just turn Harry into a ferret? Well, it might be easier to get past a dragon if he were a ferret, Harry thought dully, he'd be smaller, much less easy to see from a height of fifty feet..

He followed Moody into his office. Moody closed the door behind them and turned to look at Harry, his magical eye fixed upon him as well as the normal one.

"That was a very decent thing you just did, Potter," Moody said quietly.

Harry didn't know what to say; this wasn't the reaction he had expected at all.

"Sit down," said Moody, and Harry sat, looking around.

He had visited this office under two of its previous occupants. In Professor Lockhart's day, the walls had been plastered with beaming, winking pictures of Professor Lockhart himself. When Lupin had lived here, you were more likely to come across a specimen of some fascinating new Dark creature he had procured for them to study in class. Now, however, the office was full of a number of exceptionally odd objects that Harry supposed Moody had used in the days when he had been an Auror.

On his desk stood what looked hike a large, cracked, glass spinning top; Harry recognized it at once as a Sneakoscope, because he owned one himself, though it was much smaller than Moody's. In the corner on a small table stood an object that looked something like an extra-squiggly, golden television aerial. It was humming slightly. What appeared to be a mirror hung opposite Harry on the wall, but it was not reflecting the room. Shadowy figures were moving around inside it, none of them clearly in focus.

"Like my Dark Detectors, do you?" s aid Moody, who was watching Harry closely.

"What's that?" Harry asked, pointing at the squiggly golden aerial.

"Secrecy Sensor. Vibrates when it detects concealment and lies.. . no use here, of course, too much interference - students in every direction lying about why they haven't done their homework Been humming ever since I got here. I had to disable my Sneakoscope because it wouldn't stop whistling. It's extra-sensitive, picks up stuff about a mile around. Of course, it could be picking up more than kid stuff," he added in a growl.

"And what's the mirror for?"

"Oh that's my Foe-Glass. See them out there, skulking around? I'm not really in trouble until I see the whites of their eyes. That's when I open my trunk."

He let out a short, harsh laugh, and pointed to the large trunk under the window. It had seven keyholes in a row. Harry wondered what was in there, until Moody's next question brought him sharply back to earth.

"So. . . found out about the dragons, have you?"

Harry hesitated. He'd been afraid of this - but he hadn't told Cedric, and he certainly wasn't going to tell Moody, that Hagrid had broken the rules.

"It's all right," said Moody, sitting down and stretching out his wooden leg with a groan. "Cheating's a traditional part of the Triwizard Tournament and always has been."

"I didn't cheat," said Harry sharply. "It was - a sort of accident that I found out."

Moody grinned. "I wasn't accusing you, laddie. I've been telling Dumbledore from the start, he can be as high-minded as he likes, but you can bet old Karkaroff and Maxime won't be. They'll have told their champions everything they can. They want to win. They want to beat Dumbledore. They'd like to prove he's only human."

Moody gave another harsh laugh, and his magical eye swiveled around so fast it made Harry feel queasy to watch it.

"So. . . got any ideas how you're going to get past your dragon yet?" said Moody.

"No," said Harry.

"Well, I'm not going to tell you," said Moody gruffly. "I don't show favoritism, me. I'm just going to give you some good, general advice. And the first bit is - play to your strengths."

"I haven't got any," said Harry, before he could stop himself. "Excuse me," growled Moody, "you've got strengths if I say you've got them. Think now. What are you best at?"

Harry tried to concentrate. What was he best at? Well, that was easy, really --

"Quidditch," he said dully, "and a fat lot of help -"

"That's right," said Moody, staring at him very hard, his magical eye barely moving at all. "You're a damn good flier from what I've heard."

"Yeah, but.. ." Harry stared at him. "I'm not allowed a broom, I've only got my wand..."

"My second piece of general advice," said Moody loudly, interrupting him, "is to use a nice, simple spell that will enable you to get what you need."

Harry looked at him blankly. What did he need?

"Come on, boy. . ." whispered Moody. "Put them together... it's not that difficult..."

And it clicked. He was best at flying. He needed to pass the dragon in the air. For that, he needed his Firebolt. And for his Fire-bolt, he needed -

"Hermione," Harry whispered, when he had sped into greenhouse three minutes later, uttering a hurried apology to Professor Sprout as he passed her. "Hermione - I need you to help me."

"What d'you think I've been trying to do, Harry?" she whispered back, her eyes round with anxiety over the top of the quivering Flutterby Bush she was pruning.

"Hermione, I need to learn how to do a Summoning Charm properly by tomorrow afternoon."

And so they practiced. They didn't have lunch, but headed for a free classroom, where Harry tried with all his might to make various objects fly across the room toward him. He was still having problems. The books and quills kept losing heart halfway across the room and dropping hike stones to the floor.

"Concentrate, Harry, concentrate. . . ."

"What d'you think I'm trying to do?" said Harry angrily. "A great big dragon keeps popping up in my head for some reason...Okay, try again. . . ."

He wanted to skip Divination to keep practicing, but Hermione refused point-blank to skive off Arithmancy, and there was no point in staying without her. He therefore had to endure over an hour of Professor Trelawney, who spent half the lesson telling everyone that the position of Mars with relation to Saturn at that moment meant that people born in July were in great danger of sudden, violent deaths.

"Well, that's good," said Harry loudly, his temper getting the better of him, "just as long as it's not drawn-out. I don't want to suffer."

Ron looked for a moment as though he was going to laugh; he certainly caught Harry's eye for the first time in days, but Harry was still feeling too resentful toward Ron to care. He spent the rest of the lesson trying to attract small objects toward him under the table with his wand. He managed to make a fly zoom straight into his hand, though he wasn't entirely sure that was his prowess at Summoning Charms - perhaps the fly was just stupid.

He forced down some dinner after Divination, then returned to the empty classroom with Hermione, using the Invisibility Cloak to avoid the teachers. They

kept practicing until past midnight. They would have stayed longer, but Peeves turned up and, pretending to think that Harry wanted things thrown at him, started chucking chairs across the room. Harry and Hermione left in a hurry before the noise attracted Filch, and went back to the Gryffindor common room, which was now mercifully empty.

At two o'clock in the morning, Harry stood near the fireplace, surrounded by heaps of objects: books, quills, several upturned chairs, an old set of Gobstones, and Neville's toad, Trevor. Only in the last hour had Harry really got the hang of the Summoning Charm.

"That's better, Harry, that's loads better," Hermione said, looking exhausted but very pleased.

"Well, now we know what to do next time I can't manage a spell," Harry said, throwing a rune dictionary back to Hermione, so he could try again, "threaten me with a dragon. Right..." He raised his wand once more. "Accio Dictionary!"

The heavy book soared out of Hermione's hand, flew across the room, and Harry caught it.

"Harry, I really think you've got it!" said Hermione delightedly.

"Just as long as it works tomorrow," Harry said. "The Firebolt's going to be much farther away than the stuff in here, it's going to be in the castle, and I'm going to be out there on the grounds. . . ."

"That doesn't matter," said Hermione firmly." Just as long as you're concentrating really, really hard on it, it'll come. Harry, we'd better get some sleep.. . you're going to need it."

Harry had been focusing so hard on learning the Summoning Charm that evening that some of his blind panic had heft him. It returned in full measure, however, on the following morning. The atmosphere in the school was one of great tension and excitement. Lessons were to stop at midday, giving all the students time to get down to the dragons' enclosure - though of course, they didn't yet know what they would find there.

Harry felt oddly separate from everyone around him, whether they were wishing him good luck or hissing "We'll have a box of tissues ready, Potter" as he passed. It was a state of nervousness so advanced that he wondered whether he mightn't just lose his head when they tried to lead him out to his dragon, and start trying to curse everyone in sight. Time was behaving in a more peculiar fashion than ever, rushing past in great dollops, so that one moment he seemed to be sitting down in his first lesson, History of Magic, and the next, walking into lunch.. . and then (where had the morning gone? the last of the dragon-free hours?), Professor McGonagall was hurrying over to him in the Great Hall. Lots of people were watching.

"Potter, the champions have to come down onto the grounds now... . You have to get ready for your first task."

"Okay," said Harry, standing up, his fork falling onto his plate with a clatter.

"Good luck, Harry," Hermione whispered. "You'll be fine!"

"Yeah," said Harry in a voice that was most unlike his own.

He heft the Great Hall with Professor McGonagall. She didn't seem herself either; in fact, she looked nearly as anxious as Hermione. As she walked him down the stone steps and out into the cold November afternoon, she put her hand on his shoulder.

"Now, don't panic," she said, "just keep a cool head. . . . We've got wizards standing by to control the situation if it gets out of hand. . . . The main thing is just to do your best, and nobody will think any the worse of you. . . . Are you all right?"

"Yes," Harry heard himself say. "Yes, I'm fine."

She was leading him toward the place where the dragons were, around the edge of the forest, but when they approached the clump of trees behind which the enclosure would be clearly visible, Harry saw that a tent had been erected, its entrance facing them, screening the dragons from view.

"You're to go in here with the other champions," said Professor McGonagall, in a rather shaky sort of voice, "and wait for your turn, Potter. Mr. Bagman is in there. . . he'll be telling you the - the procedure. . . . Good luck."

"Thanks," said Harry, in a flat, distant voice. She left him at the entrance of the tent. Harry went inside.

Fleur Delacour was sitting in a corner on a how wooden stool. She didn't look nearly as composed as usual, but rather pale and clammy. Viktor Krum looked even surlier than usual, which Harry supposed was his way of showing nerves. Cedric was pacing up and down. When Harry entered, Cedric gave him a small smile, which Harry returned, feeling the muscles in his face working rather hard, as though they had forgotten how to do it.

"Harry! Good-o!" said Bagman happily, looking around at him. "Come in, come in, make yourself at home!"

Bagman looked somehow like a slightly overblown cartoon figure, standing amid all the pale-faced champions. He was wearing his old Wasp robes again.

"Well, now we're all here - time to fill you in!" said Bagman brightly. "When the audience has assembled, I'm going to be offering each of you this bag" - he held up a small sack of purple silk and shook it at them - "from which you will each select a small model of the thing you are about to face! There are different - er -

varieties, you see. And I have to tell you something else too.. . ah, yes... your task is to collect the golden egg!"

Harry glanced around. Cedric had nodded once, to show that he understood Bagman's words, and then started pacing around the tent again; he looked slightly green. Fleur Delacour and Krum hadn't reacted at all. Perhaps they thought they might be sick if they opened their mouths; that was certainly how Harry felt. But they, at least, had volunteered for this. .

And in no time at all, hundreds upon hundreds of pairs of feet could be heard passing the tent, their owners talking excitedly, laughing, joking. . . . Harry felt as separate from the crowd as though they were a different species. And then - it seemed like about a second later to Harry - Bagman was opening the neck of the purple silk sack.

"Ladies first," he said, offering it to Fleur Delacour.

She put a shaking hand inside the bag and drew out a tiny, perfect model of a dragon - a Welsh Green. It had the number two around its neck And Harry knew, by the fact that Fleur showed no sign of surprise, but rather a determined resignation, that he had been right: Madame Maxime had told her what was coming.

The same held true for Krum. He pulled out the scarlet Chinese Fireball. It had a number three around its neck. He didn't even blink, just sat back down and stared at the ground.

Cedric put his hand into the bag, and out came the blueish-gray Swedish Short-Snout, the number one tied around its neck. Knowing what was left, Harry put his hand into the silk bag and pulled out the Hungarian Horntail, and the number four. It stretched its wings as he looked down at it, and bared its minuscule fangs.

"Well, there you are!" said Bagman. "You have each pulled out the dragon you will face, and the numbers refer to the order in which you are to take on the dragons, do you see? Now, I'm going to have to leave you in a moment, because I'm commentating. Mr. Diggory, you're first, just go out into the enclosure when you hear a whistle, all right? Now. . . Harry. . . could I have a quick word? Outside?"

"Er. . . yes," said Harry blankly, and he got up and went out of the tent with Bagman, who walked him a short distance away, into the trees, and then turned to him with a fatherly expression on his face.

"Feeling all right, Harry? Anything I can get you?"

"What?" said Harry. "I - no, nothing."

"Got a plan?" said Bagman, lowering his voice conspiratorially. "Because I don't mind sharing a few pointers, if you'd like them, you know. I mean," Bagman

continued, lowering his voice still further, "you're the underdog here, Harry. . . . Anything I can do to help. . ."

"No," said Harry so quickly he knew he had sounded rude, "no - I - I know what I'm going to do, thanks."

"Nobody would know, Harry," said Bagman, winking at him.

"No, I'm fine," said Harry, wondering why he kept telling people this, and wondering whether he had ever been less fine. "I've got a plan worked out, I -"

A whistle had blown somewhere.

"Good lord, I've got to run!" said Bagman in alarm, and he hurried off.

Harry walked back to the tent and saw Cedric emerging from it, greener than ever. Harry tried to wish him luck as he walked past, but all that came out of his mouth was a sort of hoarse grunt.

Harry went back inside to Fleur and Krum. Seconds hater, they heard the roar of the crowd, which meant Cedric had entered the enclosure and was now face-to-face with the living counterpart of his model.

It was worse than Harry could ever have imagined, sitting there and listening. The crowd screamed. . . yelled.. . gasped like a single many-headed entity, as Cedric did whatever he was doing to get past the Swedish Short-Snout. Krum was still staring at the ground. Fleur had now taken to retracing Cedric's steps, around and around the tent. And Bagman's commentary made everything much, much worse.. . . Horrible pictures formed in Harry's mind as he heard: "Oooh, narrow miss there, very narrow". . . "He's taking risks, this one!". . . "Clever move - pity it didn't work!"

And then, after about fifteen minutes, Harry heard the deafening roar that could mean only one thing: Cedric had gotten past his dragon and captured the golden egg.

"Very good indeed!" Bagman was shouting. "And now the marks from the judges!"

But he didn't shout out the marks; Harry supposed the judges were holding them up and showing them to the crowd.

"One down, three to go!" Bagman yelled as the whistle blew again. "Miss Delacour, if you please!"

Fleur was trembling from head to foot; Harry felt more warmly toward her than he had done so far as she heft the tent with her head held high and her hand clutching her wand. He and Krum were left alone, at opposite sides of the tent, avoiding each other's gaze.

The same process started again. . . ."Oh I'm not sure that was wise!" they could hear Bagman shouting gleefully. "Oh. . . nearly! Careful now. . . good lord, I thought she'd had it then!"

Ten minutes later, Harry heard the crowd erupt into applause once more. . . . Fleur must have been successful too. A pause, while Fleur's marks were being shown. . . more clapping.. . then, for the third time, the whistle.

"And here comes Mr. Krum!" cried Bagman, and Krum slouched out, leaving Harry quite alone.

He felt much more aware of his body than usual; very aware of the way his heart was pumping fast, and his fingers tingling with fear. . . yet at the same time, he seemed to be outside himself, seeing the walls of the tent, and hearing the crowd, as though from far away.

"Very daring!" Bagman was yelling, and Harry heard the Chinese Fireball emit a horrible, roaring shriek, while the crowd drew its collective breath. "That's some nerve he's showing - and - yes, he's got the egg!"

Applause shattered the wintery air like breaking glass; Krum had finished - it would be Harry's turn any moment.

He stood up, noticing dimly that his legs seemed to be made of marshmallow. He waited. And then he heard the whistle blow. He walked out through the entrance of the tent, the panic rising into a crescendo inside him. And now he was walking past the trees, through a gap in the enclosure fence.

He saw everything in front of him as though it was a very highly colored dream. There were hundreds and hundreds of faces staring down at him from stands that had been magicked there since he'd last stood on this spot. And there was the Horntail, at the other end of the enclosure, crouched low over her clutch of eggs, her wings half-furled, her evil, yellow eyes upon him, a monstrous, scaly, black lizard, thrashing her spiked tail, heaving yard-long gouge marks in the hard ground. The crowd was making a great deal of noise, but whether friendly or not, Harry didn't know or care. It was time to do what he had to do. . . to focus his mind, entirely and absolutely, upon the thing that was his only chance.

He raised his wand.

"Accio Firebolt!" he shouted.

Harry waited, every fiber of him hoping, praying. . . . If it hadn't worked. . . if it wasn't coming. . . He seemed to be looking at everything around him through some sort of shimmering, transparent barrier, like a heat haze, which made the enclosure and the hundreds of faces around him swim strangely....

And then he heard it, speeding through the air behind him; he turned and saw his Firebolt hurtling toward him around the edge of the woods, soaring into the

enclosure, and stopping dead in midair beside him, waiting for him to mount. The crowd was making even more noise. . . . Bagman was shouting something. . . but Harry's ears were not working properly anymore. . . listening wasn't important....

He swung his leg over the broom and kicked off from the ground. And a second later, something miraculous happened....

As he soared upward, as the wind rushed through his hair, as the crowd's faces became mere flesh-colored pinpnicks below, and the Horntail shrank to the size of a dog, he realized that he had heft not only the ground behind, but also his fear. . . . He was back where he belonged....

This was just another Quidditch match, that was all. . . just another Quidditch match, and that Horntail was just another ugly opposing team.

He looked down at the clutch of eggs and spotted the gold one, gleaming against its cement-colored fellows, residing safely between the dragon's front legs. "Okay," Harry told himself, "diversionary tactics. . . let's go. . ."

He dived. The Horntail's head followed him; he knew what it was going to do and pulled out of the dive just in time; a jet of fire had been released exactly where he would have been had he not swerved away. . . but Harry didn't care.. . that was no more than dodging a Bludger.

"Great Scott, he can fly!" yelled Bagman as the crowd shrieked and gasped. "Are you watching this, Mr. Krum?"

Harry soared higher in a circle; the Horntail was still following his progress; its head revolving on its long neck - if he kept this up, it would be nicely dizzy - but better not push it too long, or it would be breathing fire again -

Harry plummeted just as the Horntail opened its mouth, but this time he was less lucky - he missed the flames, but the tail came whipping up to meet him instead, and as he swerved to the left, one of the long spikes grazed his shoulder, ripping his robes --

He could feel it stinging, he could hear screaming and groans from the crowd, but the cut didn't seem to be deep. . . . Now he zoomed around the back of the Horntail, and a possibility occurred to him....

The Horntail didn't seem to want to take off, she was too protective of her eggs. Though she writhed and twisted, furling and unfurling her wings and keeping those fearsome yellow eyes on Harry, she was afraid to move too far from them. . . but he had to persuade her to do it, or he'd never get near them. . . . The trick was to do it carefully, gradually....

He began to fly, first this way, then the other, not near enough to make her breathe fire to stave him off, but still posing a sufficient threat to ensure she kept her eyes on him. Her head swayed this way and that, watching him out of those vertical

pupils, her fangs bared...

He flew higher. The Horntail's head rose with him, her neck now stretched to its fullest extent, still swaying, hike a snake before its charmer. . .

Harry rose a few more feet, and she let out a roar of exasperation. He was like a fly to her, a fly she was longing to swat; her tail thrashed again, but he was too high to reach now. . . . She shot fire into the air, which he dodged.. . . Her jaws opened wide....

"Come on," Harry hissed, swerving tantalizingly above her, "come on, come and get me. . . up you get now. ."

And then she reared, spreading her great, black, leathery wings at last, as wide as those of a small airplane - and Harry dived. Before the dragon knew what he had done, or where he had disappeared to, he was speeding toward the ground as fast as he could go, toward the eggs now unprotected by her clawed front legs - he had taken his hands off his Firebolt - he had seized the golden egg -

And with a huge spurt of speed, he was off, he was soaring out over the stands, the heavy egg safely under his uninjured arm, and it was as though somebody had just turned the volume back up - for the first time, he became properly aware of the noise of the crowd, which was screaming and applauding as loudly as the Irish supporters at the World Cup -

"Look at that!" Bagman was yelling. "Will you look at that! Our youngest champion is quickest to get his egg! Well, this is going to shorten the odds on Mr. Potter!"

Harry saw the dragon keepers rushing forward to subdue the Horntail, and, over at the entrance to the enclosure, Professor McGonagalh, Professor Moody, and Hagrid hurrying to meet him, all of them waving him toward them, their smiles evident even from this distance. He flew back over the stands, the noise of the crowd pounding his eardrums, and came in smoothly to land, his heart lighter than it had been in weeks. . . . He had got through the first task, he had survived.

"That was excellent, Potter!" cried Professor McGonagall as he got off the Firebolt - which from her was extravagant praise. He noticed that her hand shook as she pointed at his shoulder. "You'll need to see Madam Pomfrey before the judges give out your score. . . . Over there, she's had to mop up Diggory already. . . ."

"Yeh did it, Harry!" said Hagrid hoarsely. "Yeh did it! An' agains' the Horntail an' all, an' yeh know Charlie said that was the wors' - "

"Thanks, Hagrid," said Harry loudly, so that Hagrid wouldn't blunder on and reveal that he had shown Harry the dragons beforehand.

Professor Moody looked very pleased too; his magical eye was dancing in its socket.

"Nice and easy does the trick, Potter," he growled.

"Right then, Potter, the first aid tent, please. . ." said Professor McGonagall.

Harry walked out of the enclosure, still panting, and saw Madam Pomfrey standing at the mouth of a second tent, looking worried.

"Dragons!" she said, in a disgusted tone, pulling Harry inside. The tent was divided into cubicles; he could make out Cedric's shadow through the canvas, but Cedric didn't seem to be badly injured; he was sitting up, at least. Madam Pomfrey examined Harry's shoulder, talking furiously all the while. "Last year dementors, this year dragons, what are they going to bring into this school next? You're very lucky. . . this is quite shallow. . . it'll need cleaning before I heal it up, though... ."

She cleaned the cut with a dab of some purple liquid that smoked and stung, but then poked his shoulder with her wand, and he felt it heal instantly.

"Now, just sit quietly for a minute - sit! And then you can go and get your score."

She bustled out of the tent and he heard her go next door and say, "How does it feel now, Diggory?"

Harry didn't want to sit still: He was too full of adrenaline. He got to his feet, wanting to see what was going on outside, but before he'd reached the mouth of the tent, two people had come darting inside - Hermione, followed closely by Ron.

"Harry, you were brilliant!" Hermione said squeakily. There were fingernail marks on her face where she had been clutching it in fear. "You were amazing! You really were!"

But Harry was looking at Ron, who was very white and staring at Harry as though he were a ghost.

"Harry," he said, very seriously, "whoever put your name in that goblet - I - I reckon they're trying to do you in!"

It was as though the last few weeks had never happened - as though Harry were meeting Ron for the first time, right after he'd been made champion.

"Caught on, have you?" said Harry coldly. "Took you long enough."

Hermione stood nervously between them, looking from one to the other. Ron opened his mouth uncertainly. Harry knew Ron was about to apologize and suddenly he found he didn't need to hear it.

"It's okay," he said, before Ron could get the words out. "Forget it."

"No," said Ron, "I shouldn't've -"

"Forget it, "Harry said.

Ron grinned nervously at him, and Harry grinned back

Hermione burst into tears.

"There's nothing to cry about!" Harry told her, bewildered.

"You two are so stupid!" she shouted, stamping her foot on the ground, tears splashing down her front. Then, before either of them could stop her, she had given both of them a hug and dashed away, now positively howling.

"Barking mad," said Ron, shaking his head. "Harry, c'mon, they'll be putting up your scores. . . ."

Picking up the golden egg and his Firebolt, feeling more elated than he would have believed possible an hour ago, Harry ducked out of the tent, Ron by his side, talking fast.

"You were the best, you know, no competition. Cedric did this weird thing where he Transfigured a rock on the ground. . . turned it into a dog. . . he was trying to make the dragon go for the dog instead of him. Well, it was a pretty cool bit of Transfiguration, and it sort of worked, because he did get the egg, but he got burned as well - the dragon changed its mind halfway through and decided it would rather have him than the Labrador; he only just got away. And that Fleur girl tried this sort of charm, I think she was trying to put it into a trance - well, that kind of worked too, it went all sleepy, but then it snored, and this great jet of flame shot out, and her skirt caught fire - she put it out with a bit of water out of her wand. And Krum - you won't believe this, but he didn't even think of flying! He was probably the best after you, though. Hit it with some sort of spell right in the eye. Only thing is, it went trampling around in agony and squashed half the real eggs - they took marks off for that, he wasn't supposed to do any damage to them."

Ron drew breath as he and Harry reached the edge of the enclosure. Now that the Horntail had been taken away, Harry could see where the five judges were sitting - right at the other end, in raised seats draped in gold.

"It's marks out of ten from each one," Ron said, and Harry squinting up the field, saw the first judge - Madame Maxime - raise her wand in the air. What hooked like a long silver ribbon shot out of it, which twisted itself into a large figure eight.

"Not bad!" said Ron as the crowd applauded. "I suppose she took marks off for your shoulder. . .

Mr. Crouch came next. He shot a number nine into the air.

"Looking good!" Ron yelled, thumping Harry on the back.

Next, Dumbledore. He too put up a nine. The crowd was cheering harder than ever.

Ludo Bagman - ten.

"Ten?" said Harry in disbelief. "But. . . I got hurt. . . . What's he playing at?"

"Harry, don't complain!" Ron yelled excitedly.

And now Karkaroff raised his wand. He paused for a moment, and then a number shot out of his wand too - four.

"What?" Ron bellowed furiously. "Four? You lousy, biased scum-bag, you gave Krum ten!"

But Harry didn't care, he wouldn't have cared if Karkaroff had given him zero; Ron's indignation on his behalf was worth about a hundred points to him. He didn't tell Ron this, of course, but his heart felt lighter than air as he turned to leave the enclosure. And it wasn't just Ron. . . those weren't only Gryffindors cheering in the crowd. When it had come to it, when they had seen what he was facing, most of the school had been on his side as well as Cedric's. . . . He didn't care about the Slytherins, he could stand whatever they threw at him now.

"You're tied in first place, Harry! You and Krum!" said Charlie Weasley, hurrying to meet them as they set off back toward the school. "Listen, I've got to run, I've got to go and send Mum an owl, I swore I'd tell her what happened - but that was unbelievable! Oh yeah - and they told me to tell you you've got to hang around for a few more minutes.. . . Bagman wants a word, back in the champions' tent."

Ron said he would wait, so Harry reentered the tent, which somehow looked quite different now: friendly and welcoming. He thought back to how he'd felt while dodging the Horntail, and compared it to the long wait before he'd walked out to face it.... There was no comparison; the wait had been immeasurably worse.

Fleur, Cedric, and Krum all came in together. One side of Cedric's face was covered in a thick orange paste, which was presumably mending his burn. He grinned at Harry when he saw him.

"Good one, Harry."

"And you," said Harry, grinning back.

"Well done, all of you!" said Ludo Bagman, bouncing into the tent and looking as pleased as though he personally had just got past a dragon. "Now, just a quick few words. You've got a nice long break before the second task, which will take place at half past nine on the morning of February the twenty-fourth - but we're giving you something to think about in the meantime! If you look down at those golden eggs you're all holding, you will see that they open. . . see the hinges there? You need to solve the clue inside the egg - because it will tell you what the second task is, and enable you to prepare for it! All clear? Sure? Well, off you go, then!"

Harry left the tent, rejoined Ron, and they started to walk back around the edge of the forest, talking hard; Harry wanted to hear what the other champions had done in more detail. Then, as they rounded the clump of trees behind which Harry had

first heard the dragons roar, a witch leapt out from behind them.

It was Rita Skeeter. She was wearing acid-green robes today; the Quick-Quotes Quill in her hand blended perfectly against them.

"Congratulations, Harry!" she said, beaming at him. "I wonder if you could give me a quick word? How you felt facing that dragon? How you feel now, about the fairness of the scoring?"

"Yeah, you can have a word," said Harry savagely. "Good-bye."

And he set off back to the castle with Ron.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE - THE HOUSE-ELF LIBERATION FRONT

Harry, Ron, and Hermione went up to the Owlery that evening to find Pigwidgeon, so that Harry could send Sirius a letter telling him that he had managed to get past his dragon unscathed. On the way, Harry filled Ron in on everything Sirius had told him about Karkaroff. Though shocked at first to hear that Karkaroff had been a Death Eater, by the time they entered the Owlery Ron was saying that they ought to have suspected it all along.

"Fits, doesn't it?" he said. "Remember what Malfoy said on the train, about his dad being friends with Karkaroff? Now we know where they knew each other. They were probably running around in masks together at the World Cup.... I'll tell you one thing, though, Harry, if it was Karkaroff who put your name in the goblet, he's going to be feeling really stupid now, isn't he? Didn't work, did it? You only got a scratch! Come here - I'll do it -"

Pigwidgeon was so overexcited at the idea of a delivery he was flying around and around Harry's head, hooting incessantly. Ron snatched Pigwidgeon out of the air and held him still while Harry attached the letter to his leg.

"There's no way any of the other tasks are going to be that dangerous, how could they be?" Ron went on as he carried Pigwidgeon to the window. "You know what? I reckon you could win this tournament, Harry, I'm serious."

Harry knew that Ron was only saying this to make up for his behavior of the last few weeks, but he appreciated it all the same. Hermione, however, leaned against the Owlery wall, folded her arms, and frowned at Ron.

"Harry's got a long way to go before he finishes this tournament," she said seriously. "If that was the first task, I hate to think what's coming next."

"Right little ray of sunshine, aren't you?" said Ron. "You and Professor Trelawney should get together sometime."

He threw Pigwidgeon out of the window. Pigwidgeon plummeted twelve feet before managing to pull himself back up again; the letter attached to his leg was much longer and heavier than usual - Harry hadn't been able to resist giving Sirius a blow-by-blow account of exactly how he had swerved, circled, and dodged the Horntail. They watched Pigwidgeon disappear into the darkness, and then Ron said, "Well, we'd better get downstairs for your surprise party, Harry - Fred and George should have nicked enough food from the kitchens by now."

Sure enough, when they entered the Gryffindor common room it exploded with cheers and yells again. There were mountains of cakes and flagons of pumpkin juice and butterbeer on every surface; Lee Jordan had let off some Filibuster's Fireworks, so that the air was thick with stars and sparks; and Dean Thomas, who

was very good at drawing, had put up some impressive new banners, most of which depicted Harry zooming around the Horntail's head on his Firebolt, though a couple showed Cedric with his head on fire.

Harry helped himself to food; he had almost forgotten what it was like to feel properly hungry, and sat down with Ron and Hermione. He couldn't believe how happy he felt; he had Ron back on his side, he'd gotten through the first task, and he wouldn't have to face the second one for three months.

"Blimey, this is heavy," said Lee Jordan, picking up the golden egg, which Harry had left on a table, and weighing it in his hands. "Open it, Harry, go on! Let's just see what's inside it!"

"He's supposed to work out the clue on his own," Hermione said swiftly. "It's in the tournament rules. . . ."

"I was supposed to work out how to get past the dragon on my own too," Harry muttered, so only Hermione could hear him, and she grinned rather guiltily.

"Yeah, go on, Harry, open it!" several people echoed.

Lee passed Harry the egg, and Harry dug his fingernails into the groove that ran all the way around it and prised it open.

It was hollow and completely empty - but the moment Harry opened it, the most horrible noise, a loud and screechy wailing, filled the room. The nearest thing to it Harry had ever heard was the ghost orchestra at Nearly Headless Nick's deathday party, who had all been playing the musical saw.

"Shut it!" Fred bellowed, his hands over his ears.

"What was that?" said Seamus Finnigan, staring at the egg as Harry slammed it shut again. "Sounded like a banshee ... Maybe you've got to get past one of those next, Harry!"

"It was someone being tortured!" said Neville, who had gone very white and spilled sausage rolls all over the floor. "You're going to have to fight the Cruciatus Curse!"

"Don't be a prat, Neville, that's illegal," said George. "They wouldn't use the Cruciatus Curse on the champions. I thought it sounded a bit like Percy singing . .. maybe you've got to attack him while he's in the shower. Harry."

"Want a jam tart, Hermione?" said Fred.

Hermione looked doubtfully at the plate he was offering her. Fred grinned.

"It's all right," he said. "I haven't done anything to them. It's the custard creams you've got to watch -"

Neville, who had just bitten into a custard cream, choked and spat it out. Fred

laughed.

"Just my little joke, Neville.. . ."

Hermione took a jam tart. Then she said, "Did you get all this from the kitchens, Fred?"

"Yep," said Fred, grinning at her. He put on a high-pitched squeak and imitated a house-elf. "'Anything we can get you, sir, anything at all!' They're dead helpful... get me a roast ox if I said I was peckish."

"How do you get in there?" Hermione said in an innocently casual sort of voice.

"Easy," said Fred, "concealed door behind a painting of a bowl of fruit. Just tickle the pear, and it giggles and -" He stopped and looked suspiciously at her. "Why?"

"Nothing," said Hermione quickly.

"Going to try and lead the house-elves out on strike now, are you?" said George. "Going to give up all the leaflet stuff and try and stir them up into rebellion?"

Several people chortled. Hermione didn't answer.

"Don't you go upsetting them and telling them they've got to take clothes and salaries!" said Fred warningly. "You'll put them off their cooking!"

Just then, Neville caused a slight diversion by turning into a large canary.

"Oh - sorry, Neville!" Fred shouted over all the laughter. "I forgot - it was the custard

creams we hexed -"

Within a minute, however, Neville had molted, and once his feathers had fallen off, he reappeared looking entirely normal. He even joined in laughing.

"Canary Creams!" Fred shouted to the excitable crowd. "George and I invented them - seven Sickles each, a bargain!"

It was nearly one in the morning when Harry finally went up to the dormitory with Ron, Neville, Seamus, and Dean. Before he pulled the curtains of his four-poster shut. Harry set his tiny model of the Hungarian Horntail on the table next to his bed, where it yawned, curled up, and closed its eyes. Really, Harry thought, as he pulled the hangings on his four-poster closed, Hagrid had a point.. . they were all right, really, dragons. . . .

The start of December brought wind and sleet to Hogwarts. Drafty though the castle always was in winter. Harry was glad of its fires and thick walls every time he passed the Durmstrang ship on the lake, which was pitching in the high winds, its black sails billowing

against the dark skies. He thought the Beauxbatons caravan was likely to be pretty chilly too. Hagrid, he noticed, was keeping Madame Maxime's horses well provided with their preferred drink of single-malt whiskey; the fumes wafting from the trough in the comer of their paddock was enough to make the entire Care of Magical Creatures class light-headed. This was unhelpful, as they were still tending the horrible skrewts and needed their wits about them.

"I'm not sure whether they hibernate or not," Hagrid told the shivering class in the windy pumpkin patch next lesson. "Thought we'd jus' try an see if they fancied a kip . . . we'll jus' settle 'em down in these boxes. . . ."

There were now only ten skrewts left; apparently their desire to kill one another had not been exercised out of them. Each of them was now approaching six feet in length. Their thick gray armor; their powerful, scuttling legs; their fire-blasting ends; their stings and their suckers, combined to make the skrewts the most repulsive things Harry had ever seen. The class looked dispiritedly at the enormous boxes Hagrid had brought out, all lined with pillows and fluffy blankets.

"We'll jus' lead 'em in here," Hagrid said, "an' put the lids on, and we'll see what happens."

But the skrewts, it transpired, did not hibernate, and did not appreciate being forced into pillow-lined boxes and nailed in. Hagrid was soon yelling, "Don panic, now, don' panic!" while the skrewts rampaged around the pumpkin patch, now strewn with the smoldering wreckage of the boxes. Most of the class - Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle in the lead - had fled into Hagrid's cabin through the back door and barricaded themselves in; Harry, Ron, and Hermione, however, were among those who remained outside trying to help Hagrid. Together they managed to restrain and tie up nine of the skrewts, though at the cost of numerous burns and cuts; finally, only one skrewt was left.

"Don' frighten him, now!" Hagrid shouted as Ron and Harry used their wands to shoot jets of fiery sparks at the skrewt, which was advancing menacingly on them, its sting arched, quivering, over its back. "Jus' try an slip the rope 'round his sting, so he won hurt any o' the others!"

"Yeah, we wouldn't want that!" Ron shouted angrily as he and Harry backed into the wall of Hagrid's cabin, still holding the skrewt off with their sparks.

"Well, well, well. . . this does look like fun."

Rita Skeeter was leaning on Hagrid's garden fence, looking in at the mayhem. She was wearing a thick magenta cloak with a furry purple collar today, and her crocodile-skin handbag was over her arm.

Hagrid launched himself forward on top of the skrewt that was cornering Harry and Ron and flattened it; a blast of fire shot out of its end, withering the pumpkin plants nearby.

"Who're you?" Hagrid asked Rita Skeeter as he slipped a loop of rope around the skrewt's sting and tightened it.

"Rita Skeeter, Daily Prophet reporter," Rita replied, beaming at him. Her gold teeth glinted.

"Thought Dumbledore said you weren' allowed inside the school anymore," said Hagrid, frowning slightly as he got off the slightly squashed skrewt and started tugging it over to its fellows.

Rita acted as though she hadn't heard what Hagrid had said.

"What are these fascinating creatures called?" she asked, beaming still more widely.

"Blast-Ended Skrewts," grunted Hagrid.

"Really?" said Rita, apparently full of lively interest. "I've never heard of them before...where do they come from?"

Harry noticed a dull red flush rising up out of Hagrid's wild black beard, and his heart sank. Where had Hagrid got the skrewts from? Hermione, who seemed to be thinking along these lines, said quickly, "They're very interesting, aren't they? Aren't they. Harry?"

"What? Oh yeah . . . ouch . . . interesting," said Harry as she stepped on his foot.

"Ah, you're here. Harry!" said Rita Skeeter as she looked around. "So you like Care of Magical Creatures, do you? One of your favorite lessons?"

"Yes," said Harry stoutly. Hagrid beamed at him.

"Lovely," said Rita. "Really lovely. Been teaching long?" she added to Hagrid.

Harry noticed her eyes travel over Dean (who had a nasty cut across one cheek). Lavender (whose robes were badly singed), Seamus (who was nursing several burnt fingers), and then to the cabin windows, where most of the class stood, their noses pressed against the glass waiting to see if the coast was clear.

"This is o'ny me second year," said Hagrid.

"Lovely... I don't suppose you'd like to give an interview, would you? Share some of your experience of magical creatures? The Prophet does a zoological column every Wednesday, as I'm sure you know. We could feature these - er - Bang-Ended Scoots."

"Blast-Ended Skrewts," Hagrid said eagerly. "Er - yeah, why not?"

Harry had a very bad feeling about this, but there was no way of communicating it to Hagrid without Rita Skeeter seeing, so he had to stand and watch in silence as Hagrid and Rita Skeeter made arrangements to meet in the Three Broomsticks for

a good long interview later that week. Then the bell rang up at the castle, signaling the end of the lesson.

"Well, good-bye, Harry!" Rita Skeeter called merrily to him as he set off with Ron and Hermione. "Until Friday night, then, Hagrid!"

"She'll twist everything he says," Harry said under his breath.

"Just as long as he didn't import those skrewts illegally or anything," said Hermione desperately. They looked at one another - it was exactly the sort of thing Hagrid might do.

"Hagrids been in loads of trouble before, and Dumbledores never sacked him," said Ron consolingly. "Worst that can happen is Hagrid'll have to get rid of the skrewts. Sorry . . . did I say worst? I meant best."

Harry and Hermione laughed, and, feeling slightly more cheerful, went off to lunch.

Harry thoroughly enjoyed double Divination that afternoon; they were still doing star charts and predictions, but now that he and Ron were friends once more, the whole thing seemed very funny again. Professor Trelawney, who had been so pleased with the pair of them when they had been predicting their own horrific deaths, quickly became irritated as they sniggered through her explanation of the various ways in which Pluto could disrupt everyday life.

"I would think," she said, in a mystical whisper that did not conceal her obvious annoyance, "that some of us" - she stared very meaningfully at Harry- "might be a little less frivolous had they seen what I have seen during my crystal gazing last night. As I sat here, absorbed in my needlework, the urge to consult the orb overpowered me. I arose, I settled myself before it, and I gazed into its crystalline depths . . . and what do you think I saw gazing back at me?"

"An ugly old bat in outsize specs?" Ron muttered under his breath.

Harry fought hard to keep his face straight.

"Death, my dears."

Parvati and Lavender both put their hands over their mouths, looking horrified.

"Yes," said Professor Trelawney, nodding impressively, "it comes, ever closer, it circles overhead like a vulture, ever lower. . . ever lower over the castle. . . ."

She stared pointedly at Harry, who yawned very widely and obviously.

"It'd be a bit more impressive if she hadn't done it about eighty times before," Harry said as they finally regained the fresh air of the staircase beneath Professor Trelawney's room. "But if I'd dropped dead every time she's told me I'm going to, I'd be a medical miracle."

"You'd be a sort of extra-concentrated ghost," said Ron, chortling, as they passed the Bloody Baron going in the opposite direction, his wide eyes staring sinisterly. "At least we didn't get homework. I hope Hermione got loads off Professor Vector, I love not working when she is. . . ."

But Hermione wasn't at dinner, nor was she in the library when they went to look for her afterward. The only person in there was Viktor Krum. Ron hovered behind the bookshelves for a while, watching Krum, debating in whispers with Harry whether he should ask for an autograph - but then Ron realized that six or seven girls were lurking in the next row of books, debating exactly the same thing, and he lost his enthusiasm for the idea.

"Wonder where she's got to?" Ron said as he and Harry went back to Gryffindor Tower.

"Dunno . . . balderdash."

But the Fat Lady had barely begun to swing forward when the sound of racing feet behind them announced Hermione's arrival.

"Harry!" she panted, skidding to a halt beside him (the Fat Lady stared down at her, eyebrows raised). "Harry, you've got to come - you've got to come, the most amazing thing's happened- please -"

She seized Harry's arm and started to try to drag him back along the corridor.

"What's the matter?" Harry said.

"I'll show you when we get there - oh come on, quick -"

Harry looked around at Ron; he looked back at Harry, intrigued.

"Okay," Harry said, starting off back down the corridor with Hermione, Ron hurrying to keep up.

"Oh don't mind me!" the Fat Lady called irritably after them. "Don't apologize for bothering me! I'll just hang here, wide open, until you get back, shall I?"

"Yeah, thanks!" Ron shouted over his shoulder.

"Hermione, where are we going?" Harry asked, after she had led

them down through six floors, and started down the marble staircase into the entrance hall.

"You'll see, you'll see in a minute!" said Hermione excitedly.

She turned left at the bottom of the staircase and hurried toward the door through which Cedric Diggory had gone the night after the Goblet of Fire had regurgitated his and Harry's names. Harry had never been through here before. He and Ron followed Hermione down a flight of stone steps, but instead of ending up in a

gloomy underground passage like the one that led to Snape's dungeon, they found themselves in a broad stone corridor, brightly lit with torches, and decorated with cheerful paintings that were mainly of food.

"Oh hang on . . ." said Harry slowly, halfway down the corridor. "Wait a minute, Hermione. . . ."

"What?" She turned around to look at him, anticipation all over her face.

"I know what this is about," said Harry.

He nudged Ron and pointed to the painting just behind Hermione. It showed a gigantic silver fruit bowl.

"Hermione!" said Ron, cottoning on. "You're trying to rope us into that spew stuff again!"

"No, no, I'm not!" she said hastily. "And it's not spew, Ron -"

"Changed the name, have you?" said Ron, frowning at her. "What are we now, then, the House-Elf Liberation Front? I'm not barging into that kitchen and trying to make them stop work, I'm not doing it -"

"I'm not asking you to!" Hermione said impatiently. "I came down here just now, to talk to them all, and I found - oh come on, Harry, I want to show you!"

She seized his arm again, pulled him in front of the picture of the giant fruit bowl, stretched out her forefinger, and tickled the huge green pear. It began to squirm, chuckling, and suddenly turned into a large green door handle. Hermione seized it, pulled the door open, and pushed Harry hard in the back, forcing him inside.

He had one brief glimpse of an enormous, high-ceilinged room, large as the Great Hall above it, with mounds of glittering brass pots and pans heaped around the stone walls, and a great brick fireplace at the other end, when something small hurtled toward him from the middle of the room, squealing, "Harry Potter, sir! Harry Potter!"

Next second all the wind had been knocked out of him as the squealing elf hit him hard in the midriff, hugging him so tightly he thought his ribs would break.

"D-Dobby?" Harry gasped.

"It is Dobby, sir, it is!" squealed the voice from somewhere around his navel. "Dobby has been hoping and hoping to see Harry Potter, sir, and Harry Potter has come to see him, sir!"

Dobby let go and stepped back a few paces, beaming up at Harry, his enormous, green, tennis-ball-shaped eyes brimming with tears of happiness. He looked almost exactly as Harry remembered him; the pencil-shaped nose, the batlike ears, the long fingers and feet - all except the clothes, which were very different.

When Dobby had worked for the Malfoys, he had always worn the same filthy old pillowcase. Now, however, he was wearing the strangest assortment of garments Harry had ever seen; he had done an even worse job of dressing himself than the wizards at the World Cup. He was wearing a tea cozy for a hat, on which he had pinned a number of bright badges; a tie patterned with horseshoes over a bare chest, a pair of what looked like children's soccer shorts, and odd socks. One of these, Harry saw, was the black one Harry had removed from his own foot and tricked Mr. Malfoy into giving Dobby, thereby setting Dobby free. The other was covered in pink and orange stripes.

"Dobby, what're you doing here?" Harry said in amazement. "Dobby has come to work at Hogwarts, sir!" Dobby squealed excitedly. "Professor Dumbledore gave Dobby and Winky jobs, sir!

"Winky?" said Harry. "She's here too?"

"Yes, sir, yes!" said Dobby, and he seized Harry's hand and pulled him off into the kitchen between the four long wooden tables that stood there. Each of these tables, Harry noticed as he passed them, was positioned exactly beneath the four House tables above, in the Great Hall. At the moment, they were clear of food, dinner having finished, but he supposed that an hour ago they had been laden with dishes that were then sent up through the ceiling to their counterparts above.

At least a hundred little elves were standing around the kitchen, beaming, bowing, and curtsying as Dobby led Harry past them. They were all wearing the same uniform: a tea towel stamped with the Hogwarts crest, and tied, as Winky's had been, like a toga.

Dobby stopped in front of the brick fireplace and pointed.

"Winky, sir!" he said.

Winky was sitting on a stool by the fire. Unlike Dobby, she had obviously not foraged for clothes. She was wearing a neat little skirt and blouse with a matching blue hat, which had holes in it for her large ears. However, while every one of Dobby's strange collection of garments was so clean and well cared for that it looked brand-new, Winky was plainly not taking care other clothes at all. There were soup stains all down her blouse and a burn in her skirt.

"Hello, Winky," said Harry.

Winky's lip quivered. Then she burst into tears, which spilled out of her great brown eyes and splashed down her front, just as they had done at the Quidditch World Cup.

"Oh dear," said Hermione. She and Ron had followed Harry and Dobby to the end of the kitchen. "Winky, don't cry, please don't..."

But Winky cried harder than ever. Dobby, on the other hand, beamed up at Harry.

"Would Harry Potter like a cup of tea?" he squeaked loudly, over Winky's sobs.

"Er - yeah, okay," said Harry.

Instantly, about six house-elves came trotting up behind him, bearing a large silver tray laden with a teapot, cups for Harry, Ron, and Hermione, a milk jug, and a large plate of biscuits.

"Good service!" Ron said, in an impressed voice. Hermione frowned at him, but the elves all looked delighted; they bowed very low and retreated.

"How long have you been here, Dobby?" Harry asked as Dobby handed around the tea.

"Only a week. Harry Potter, sir!" said Dobby happily. "Dobby came to see Professor Dumbledore, sir. You see, sir, it is very difficult for a house-elf who has been dismissed to get a new position, sir, very difficult indeed -"

At this, Winky howled even harder, her squashed-tomato of a nose dribbling all down her front, though she made no effort to stem the flow.

"Dobby has traveled the country for two whole years, sir, trying to find work!" Dobby squeaked. "But Dobby hasn't found work, sir, because Dobby wants paying now!"

The house-elves all around the kitchen, who had been listening and watching with interest, all looked away at these words, as though Dobby had said something rude and embarrassing. Hermione, however, said, "Good for you, Dobby!"

"Thank you, miss!" said Dobby, grinning toothily at her. "But most wizards doesn't want a house-elf who wants paying, miss. 'That's not the point of a house-elf,' they says, and they slammed the door in Dobby's face! Dobby likes work, but he wants to wear clothes and he wants to be paid. Harry Potter.... Dobby likes being free!"

The Hogwarts house-elves had now started edging away from Dobby, as though he were carrying something contagious. Winky, however, remained where she was, though there was a definite increase in the volume other crying.

"And then, Harry Potter, Dobby goes to visit Winky, and finds out Winky has been freed too, sir!" said Dobby delightedly.

At this, Winky flung herself forward off her stool and lay face-down on the flagged stone floor, beating her tiny fists upon it and positively screaming with misery. Hermione hastily dropped down to her knees beside her and tried to comfort her, but nothing she said made the slightest difference. Dobby continued with his story, shouting shrilly over Winky's screeches.

"And then Dobby had the idea. Harry Potter, sir! 'Why doesn't Dobby and Winky find work together?' Dobby says. 'Where is there enough work for two house-

elves?' says Winky. And Dobby thinks, and it comes to him, sir! Hogwarts! So Dobby and Winky came to see Professor Dumbledore, sir, and Professor Dumbledore took us on!"

Dobby beamed very brightly, and happy tears welled in his eyes again.

"And Professor Dumbledore says he will pay Dobby, sir, if Dobby wants paying! And so Dobby is a free elf, sir, and Dobby gets a Galleon a week and one day off a month!"

"That's not very much!" Hermione shouted indignantly from the floor, over Winky's continued screaming and fist-beating.

"Professor Dumbledore offered Dobby ten Galleons a week, and weekends off," said Dobby, suddenly giving a little shiver, as though the prospect of so much leisure and riches were frightening, "but Dobby beat him down, miss. . . . Dobby likes freedom, miss, but he isn't wanting too much, miss, he likes work better."

"And how much is Professor Dumbledore paying you, Winky?" Hermione asked kindly.

If she had thought this would cheer up Winky, she was wildly mistaken. Winky did stop crying, but when she sat up she was glaring at Hermione through her massive brown eyes, her whole face sopping wet and suddenly furious.

"Winky is a disgraced elf, but Winky is not yet getting paid!" she squeaked. "Winky is not sunk so low as that! Winky is properly ashamed of being freed!"

"Ashamed?" said Hermione blankly. "But - Winky, come on! It's Mr. Crouch who should be ashamed, not you! You didn't do anything wrong, he was really horrible to you -"

But at these words, Winky clapped her hands over the holes in her hat, flattening her ears so that she couldn't hear a word, and screeched, "You is not insulting my master, miss! You is not insulting Mr. Crouch! Mr. Crouch is a good wizard, miss! Mr. Crouch is right to sack bad Winky!"

"Winky is having trouble adjusting, Harry Potter," squeaked Dobby confidentially. "Winky forgets she is not bound to Mr. Crouch anymore; she is allowed to speak her mind now, but she won't do it."

"Can't house-elves speak their minds about their masters, then?" Harry asked.

"Oh no, sir, no," said Dobby, looking suddenly serious. "'Tis part of the house-elf's enslavement, sir. We keeps their secrets and our silence, sir. We upholds the family's honor, and we never speaks ill of them - though Professor Dumbledore told Dobby he does not insist upon this. Professor Dumbledore said we is free to - to-"

Dobby looked suddenly nervous and beckoned Harry closer. Harry bent forward.

Dobby whispered, "He said we is free to call him a - a barmy old codger if we likes, sir!"

Dobby gave a frightened sort of giggle.

"But Dobby is not wanting to, Harry Potter," he said, talking normally again, and shaking his head so that his ears flapped. "Dobby likes Professor Dumbledore very much, sir, and is proud to keep his secrets and our silence for him."

"But you can say what you like about the Malfoys now?" Harry asked him, grinning.

A slightly fearful look came into Dobby's immense eyes.

"Dobby - Dobby could," he said doubtfully. He squared his small shoulders. "Dobby could tell Harry Potter that his old masters were - were - bad Dark wizards'."

Dobby stood for a moment, quivering all over, horror-struck by his own daring - then he rushed over to the nearest table and began banging his head on it very hard, squealing, "Bad Dobby! Bad Dobby!"

Harry seized Dobby by the back of his tie and pulled him away from the table.

"Thank you. Harry Potter, thank you," said Dobby breathlessly, rubbing his head.

"You just need a bit of practice," Harry said.

"Practice!" squealed Winky furiously. "You is ought to be ashamed of yourself, Dobby, talking that way about your masters!"

"They isn't my masters anymore, Winky!" said Dobby defiantly. "Dobby doesn't care what they think anymore!"

"Oh you is a bad elf, Dobby!" moaned Winky, tears leaking down her face once more. "My poor Mr. Crouch, what is he doing without Winky? He is needing me, he is needing my help! I is looking after the Crouches all my life, and my mother is doing it before me, and my grandmother is doing it before her ... oh what is they saying if they knew Winky was freed? Oh the shame, the shame!" She buried her face in her skirt again and bawled.

"Winky," said Hermione firmly, "I'm quite sure Mr. Crouch is getting along perfectly well without you. We've seen him, you know -"

"You is seeing my master?" said Winky breathlessly, raising her tearstained face out of her skirt once more and goggling at Hermione. "You is seeing him here at Hogwarts?"

"Yes," said Hermione, "he and Mr. Bagman are judges in the Triwizard Tournament."

"Mr. Bagman comes too?" squeaked Winky, and to Harry 's great surprise (and Ron's and Hermione's too, by the looks on their faces), she looked angry again. "Mr. Bagman is a bad wizard! A very bad wizard! My master isn't liking him, oh no, not at all!"

"Bagman - bad?" said Harry.

"Oh yes," Winky said, nodding her head furiously, "My master is telling Winky some things! But Winky is not saying.. . Winky - Winky keeps her master's secrets. ..."

She dissolved yet again in tears; they could hear her sobbing into her skirt, "Poor master, poor master, no Winky to help him no more!"

They couldn't get another sensible word out of Winky. They left her to her crying and finished their tea, while Dobby chatted happily about his life as a free elf and his plans for his wages.

"Dobby is going to buy a sweater next, Harry Potter!" he said happily, pointing at his bare chest,

"Tell you what, Dobby," said Ron, who seemed to have taken a great liking to the elf, "I'll give you the one my mum knits me this Christmas, I always get one from her. You don't mind maroon, do you?"

Dobby was delighted.

"We might have to shrink it a bit to fit you," Ron told him, "but it'll go well with your tea cozy."

As they prepared to take their leave, many of the surrounding elves pressed in upon them, offering snacks to take back upstairs. Hermione refused, with a pained look at the way the elves kept bowing and curtsying, but Harry and Ron loaded their pockets with cream cakes and pies.

"Thanks a lot!" Harry said to the elves, who had all clustered around the door to say good night. "See you, Dobby!"

"Harry Potter . . . can Dobby come and see you sometimes, sir?" Dobby asked tentatively.

" 'Course you can," said Harry, and Dobby beamed.

"You know what?" said Ron, once he, Hermione, and Harry had left the kitchens behind and were climbing the steps into the entrance hall again. "All these years I've been really impressed with Fred and George, nicking food from the kitchens - well, it's not exactly difficult, is it? They can't wait to give it away!"

"I think this is the best thing that could have happened to those elves, you know," said Hermione, leading the way back up the marble staircase. "Dobby coming to

work here, I mean. The other elves will see how happy he is, being free, and slowly it'll dawn on them that they want that too!"

"Let's hope they don't look too closely at Winky," said Harry.

"Oh she'll cheer up," said Hermione, though she sounded a bit doubtful. "Once the shock's worn off, and she's got used to Hogwarts, she'll see how much better off she is without that Crouch man."

"She seems to love him," said Ron thickly (he had just started on a cream cake).

"Doesn't think much of Bagman, though, does she?" said Harry. "Wonder what Crouch says at home about him?"

"Probably says he's not a very good Head of Department," said Hermione, "and let's face it... he's got a point, hasn't he?"

"I'd still rather work for him than old Crouch," said Ron. "At least Bagman's got a sense of humor."

"Don't let Percy hear you saying that," Hermione said, smiling slightly.

"Yeah, well, Percy wouldn't want to work for anyone with a sense of humor, would he?" said Ron, now starting on a chocolate eclair. "Percy wouldn't recognize a joke if it danced naked in front of him wearing Dobby's tea cozy."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO - THE UNEXPECTED TASK

Potter! Weasley! Will you pay attention?"

Professor McGonagall's irritated voice cracked like a whip through the Transfiguration class on Thursday, and Harry and Ron both jumped and looked up.

It was the end of the lesson; they had finished their work; the guinea fowl they had been changing into guinea pigs had been shut away in a large cage on Professor McGonagall's desk (Neville's still had feathers); they had copied down their homework from the blackboard ("Describe, with examples, the ways in which Transforming Spells must be adapted when performing Cross-Species Switches"}. The bell was due to ring at any moment, and Harry and Ron, who had been having a sword fight with a couple of Fred and George's fake wands at the back of the class, looked up, Ron holding a tin parrot and Harry, a rubber haddock.

"Now that Potter and Weasley have been kind enough to act their age," said Professor McGonagall, with an angry look at the pair of them as the head of Harry's haddock drooped and fell silently to the floor - Ron's parrot's beak had severed it moments before - "I have something to say to you all.

"The Yule Ball is approaching - a traditional part of the Triwizard Tournament and an opportunity for us to socialize with our foreign guests. Now, the ball will be open only to fourth years and above - although you may invite a younger student if you wish -"

Lavender Brown let out a shrill giggle. Parvati Patil nudged her hard in the ribs, her face working furiously as she too fought not to giggle. They both looked around at Harry, Professor McGonagall ignored them, which Harry thought was distinctly unfair, as she had just told off him and Ron.

"Dress robes will be worn," Professor McGonagall continued, "and the ball will start at eight o'clock on Christmas Day, finishing at midnight in the Great Hall. Now then -"

Professor McGonagall stared deliberately around the class.

"The Yule Ball is of course a chance for us all to - er - let our hair down," she said, in a disapproving voice.

Lavender giggled harder than ever, with her hand pressed hard against her mouth to stifle the sound. Harry could see what was funny this time: Professor McGonagall, with her hair in a tight bun, looked as though she had never let her hair down in any sense.

"But that does NOT mean," Professor McGonagall went on, "that we will be

relaxing the standards of behavior we expect from Hogwarts students. I will be most seriously displeased if a Gryffindor student embarrasses the school in any way."

The bell rang, and there was the usual scuffle of activity as everyone packed their bags and swung them onto their shoulders.

Professor McGonagall called above the noise, "Potter - a word, if you please."

Assuming this had something to do with his headless rubber haddock, Harry proceeded gloomily to the teacher's desk. Professor McGonagall waited until the rest of the class had gone, and then said, "Potter, the champions and their partners -"

"What partners?" said Harry.

Profesor McGonagall looked suspiciously at him, as though she thought he was trying to be funny.

"Your partners for the Yule Ball, Potter," she said coldly. "Your dance partners."

Harry's insides seemed to curl up and shrivel.

"Dance partners?" He felt himself going red. "I don't dance," he said quickly.

"Oh yes, you do," said Professor McGonagall irritably. "That's what I'm telling you. Traditionally, the champions and their partners open the ball."

Harry had a sudden mental image of himself in a top hat and tails, accompanied by a girl in the sort of frilly dress Aunt Petunia always wore to Uncle Vernon's work parties.

"I'm not dancing," he said.

"It is traditional," said Professor McGonagall firmly. "You are a Hogwarts champion, and you will do what is expected of you as a representative of the school. So make sure you get yourself a partner, Potter."

"But-I don't-"

"You heard me, Potter," said Professor McGonagall in a very final sort of way.

A week ago. Harry would have said finding a partner for a dance would be a cinch compared to taking on a Hungarian Horntail. But now that he had done the latter, and was facing the prospect of asking a girl to the ball, he thought he'd rather have another round with the dragon.

Harry had never known so many people to put their names down to stay at Hogwarts for Christmas; he always did, of course, because the alternative was usually going back to Privet Drive, but he had always been very much in the minority before now. This year, however, everyone in the fourth year and above

seemed to be staying, and they all seemed to Harry to be obsessed with the coming ball - or at least all the girls were, and it was amazing how many girls Hogwarts suddenly seemed to hold; he had never quite noticed that before. Girls giggling and whispering in the corridors, girls shrieking with laughter as boys passed them, girls excitedly comparing notes on what they were going to wear on Christmas night... .

"Why do they have to move in packs?" Harry asked Ron as a dozen or so girls walked past them, sniggering and staring at Harry. "How're you supposed to get one on their own to ask them?"

"Lasso one?" Ron suggested. "Got any idea who you're going to try?"

Harry didn't answer. He knew perfectly well whom he'd like to ask, but working up the nerve was something else. . . . Cho was a year older than he was; she was very pretty; she was a very good Quidditch player, and she was also very popular.

Ron seemed to know what was going on inside Harry's head.

"Listen, you're not going to have any trouble. You're a champion. You've just beaten a Hungarian Horntail. I bet they'll be queuing up to go with you."

In tribute to their recently repaired friendship, Ron had kept the bitterness in his voice to a bare minimum. Moreover, to Harry's amazement, he turned out to be quite right.

A curly-haired third-year Hufflepuff girl to whom Harry had never spoken in his life asked him to go to the ball with her the very next day. Harry was so taken aback he said no before he'd even stopped to consider the matter. The girl walked off looking rather hurt, and Harry had to endure Dean's, Seamus's, and Ron's taunts about her all through History of Magic. The following day, two more girls asked him, a second year and (to his horror) a fifth year who looked as though she might knock him out if he refused.

"She was quite good-looking," said Ron fairly, after he'd stopped laughing.

"She was a foot taller than me," said Harry, still unnerved. "Imagine what I'd look like trying to dance with her."

Hermione's words about Krum kept coming back to him. "They only like him because he's famous!" Harry doubted very much if any of the girls who had asked to be his partner so far would have wanted to go to the ball with him if he hadn't been a school champion. Then he wondered if this would bother him if Cho asked him.

On the whole. Harry had to admit that even with the embarrassing prospect of opening the ball before him, life had definitely improved since he had got through the first task. He wasn't attracting nearly as much unpleasantness in the corridors anymore, which he suspected had a lot to do with Cedric - he had an idea Cedric

might have told the Hufflepuffs to leave Harry alone, in gratitude for Harry's tip-off about the dragons. There seemed to be fewer Support Cedric Diggory! badges around too. Draco Malfoy, of course, was still quoting Rita Skeeter's article to him at every possible opportunity, but he was getting fewer and fewer laughs out of it - and just to heighten Harry's feeling of well-being, no story about Hagrid had appeared in the Daily Prophet.

"She didn' seem very int'rested in magical creatures, ter tell yeh the truth," Hagrid said, when Harry, Ron, and Hermione asked him how his interview with Rita Skeeter had gone during the last Care of Magical Creatures lesson of the term. To their very great relief, Hagrid had given up on direct contact with the skrewts now, and they were merely sheltering behind his cabin today, sitting at a trestle table and preparing a fresh selection of food with which to tempt the skrewts.

"She jus' wanted me ter talk about you, Harry," Hagrid continued in a low voice. "Well, I told her we'd been friends since I went ter fetch yeh from the Dursleys. 'Never had to tell him off in four years?' she said. 'Never played you up in lessons, has he?' I told her no, an she didn' seem happy at all. Yeh'd think she wanted me to say yeh were horrible, Harry."

" 'Course she did," said Harry, throwing lumps of dragon liver into a large metal bowl and picking up his knife to cut some more. "She can't keep writing about what a tragic little hero I am, it'll get boring."

"She wants a new angle, Hagrid," said Ron wisely as he shelled salamander eggs. "You were supposed to say Harry's a mad delinquent!"

"But he's not!" said Hagrid, looking genuinely shocked.

"She should've interviewed Snape," said Harry grimly. "He'd give her the goods on me any day. 'Potter has been crossing lines ever since he first arrived at this school. . . .'"

"Said that, did he?" said Hagrid, while Ron and Hermione laughed. "Well, yeh might've bent a few rules. Harry, bu' yeh're all righ' really, aren' you?"

"Cheers, Hagrid," said Harry, grinning.

"You coming to this ball thing on Christmas Day, Hagrid?" said Ron.

"Though' I might look in on it, yeah," said Hagrid gruffly. "Should be a good do, I reckon. You'll be openin the dancin', won yeh, Harry? Who're you takin'?"

"No one, yet," said Harry, feeling himself going red again. Hagrid didn't pursue the subject.

The last week of term became increasingly boisterous as it progressed. Rumors about the Yule Ball were flying everywhere, though Harry didn't believe half of them - for instance, that Dumbledore had bought eight hundred barrels of mulled mead from Madam Rosmerta. It seemed to be fact, however, that he had booked

the Weird Sisters. Exactly who or what the Weird Sisters were Harry didn't know, never having had access to a wizard's wireless, but he deduced from the wild excitement of those who had grown up listening to the WWN (Wizarding Wireless Network) that they were a very famous musical group.

Some of the teachers, like little Professor Flitwick, gave up trying to teach them much when their minds were so clearly elsewhere; he allowed them to play games in his lesson on Wednesday, and spent most of it talking to Harry about the perfect Summoning Charm

Harry had used during the first task of the Triwizard Tournament. Other teachers were not so generous. Nothing would ever deflect Professor Binns, for example, from plowing on through his notes on goblin rebellions - as Binns hadn't let his own death stand in the way of continuing to teach, they supposed a small thing like Christmas wasn't going to put him off. It was amazing how he could make even bloody and vicious goblin riots sound as boring as Percys cauldron-bottom report. Professors McGonagall and Moody kept them working until the very last second of their classes too, and Snape, of course, would no sooner let them play games in class than adopt Harry. Staring nastily around at them all, he informed them that he would be testing them on poison antidotes during the last lesson of the term.

"Evil, he is," Ron said bitterly that night in the Gryffindor common room. "Springing a test on us on the last day. Ruining the last bit of term with a whole load of studying."

"Mmm . . . you're not exactly straining yourself, though, are you?" said Hermione, looking at him over the top of her Potions notes. Ron was busy building a card castle out of his Exploding Snap pack - a much more interesting pastime than with Muggle cards, because of the chance that the whole thing would blow up at any second.

"It's Christmas, Hermione," said Harry lazily; he was rereading Flying with the Cannons for the tenth time in an armchair near the fire.

Hermione looked severely over at him too. "I'd have thought you'd be doing something constructive, Harry, even if you don't want to learn your antidotes!"

"Like what?" Harry said as he watched Joey Jenkins of the Cannons belt a Bludger toward a Ballycastle Bats Chaser.

"That egg!" Hermione hissed.

"Come on, Hermione, I've got till February the twenty-fourth," Harry said.

He had put the golden egg upstairs in his trunk and hadn't opened it since the celebration party after the first task. There were still two and a half months to go until he needed to know what all the screechy wailing meant, after all.

"But it might take weeks to work it out!" said Hermione. "You're going to look a real idiot if everyone else knows what the next task is and you don't!"

"Leave him alone, Hermione, he's earned a bit of a break," said Ron, and he placed the last two cards on top of the castle and the whole lot blew up, singeing his eyebrows.

"Nice look, Ron ... go well with your dress robes, that will."

It was Fred and George. They sat down at the table with Harry, Ron, and Hermione as Ron felt how much damage had been done.

"Ron, can we borrow Pigwidgeon?" George asked.

"No, he's off delivering a letter," said Ron. "Why?"

"Because George wants to invite him to the ball," said Fred sarcastically.

"Because we want to send a letter, you stupid great prat," said George.

"Who d'you two keep writing to, eh?" said Ron.

"Nose out, Ron, or I'll burn that for you too," said Fred, waving his wand threateningly. "So . . . you lot got dates for the ball yet?"

"Nope," said Ron.

"Well, you'd better hurry up, mate, or all the good ones will be gone," said Fred.

"Who're you going with, then?" said Ron.

"Angelina," said Fred promptly, without a trace of embarrassment.

"What?" said Ron, taken aback. "You've already asked her?"

"Good point," said Fred. He turned his head and called across the common room, "Oi! Angelina!"

Angelina, who had been chatting with Alicia Spinnet near the fire, looked over at him.

"What?" she called back.

"Want to come to the ball with me?"

Angelina gave Fred an appraising sort of look.

"All right, then," she said, and she turned back to Alicia and carried on chatting with a bit of a grin on her face.

"There you go," said Fred to Harry and Ron, "piece of cake."

He got to his feet, yawning, and said, "We'd better use a school owl then, George,

come on. .. ."

They left. Ron stopped feeling his eyebrows and looked across the smoldering wreck of his card castle at Harry.

"We should get a move on, you know . . . ask someone. He's right. We don't want to end up with a pair of trolls."

Hermione let out a sputter of indignation.

"A pair of... what, excuse me?"

"Well - you know," said Ron, shrugging. "I'd rather go alone than with - with Eloise Midgen, say."

"Her acne's loads better lately - and she's really nice!"

"Her nose is off-center," said Ron.

"Oh I see," Hermione said, bristling. "So basically, you're going to take the best-looking girl who'll have you, even if she's completely horrible?"

"Er - yeah, that sounds about right," said Ron.

"I'm going to bed," Hermione snapped, and she swept off toward the girls' staircase without another word.

The Hogwarts staff, demonstrating a continued desire to impress the visitors from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, seemed determined to show the castle at its best this Christmas. When the decorations went up. Harry noticed that they were the most stunning he had yet seen inside the school. Everlasting icicles had been attached to the banisters of the marble staircase; the usual twelve Christmas trees in the Great Hall were bedecked with everything from luminous holly berries to real, hooting, golden owls, and the suits of armor had all been bewitched to sing carols whenever anyone passed them. It was quite something to hear "0 Come, All Ye Faithful" sung by an empty helmet that only knew half the words. Several times, Filch the caretaker had to extract Peeves from inside the armor, where he had taken to hiding, filling in the gaps in the songs with lyrics of his own invention, all of which were very rude.

And still. Harry hadn't asked Cho to the ball. He and Ron were getting very nervous now, though as Harry pointed out, Ron would look much less stupid than he would without a partner;

Harry was supposed to be starting the dancing with the other champions.

"I suppose there's always Moaning Myrtle," he said gloomily, referring to the ghost who haunted the girls' toilets on the second floor.

"Harry - we've just got to grit our teeth and do it," said Ron on Friday morning, in a tone that suggested they were planning the storming of an impregnable fortress.

"When we get back to the common room tonight, we'll both have partners - agreed?"

"Er . . . okay," said Harry.

But every time he glimpsed Cho that day - during break, and then lunchtime, and once on the way to History of Magic - she was surrounded by friends. Didn't she ever go anywhere alone? Could he perhaps ambush her as she was going into a bathroom? But no - she even seemed to go there with an escort of four or five girls. Yet if he didn't do it soon, she was bound to have been asked by somebody else.

He found it hard to concentrate on Snape's Potions test, and consequently forgot to add the key ingredient - a bezoar - meaning that he received bottom marks. He didn't care, though; he was too busy screwing up his courage for what he was about to do. When the bell rang, he grabbed his bag, and hurried to the dungeon door.

"I'll meet you at dinner," he said to Ron and Hermione, and he dashed off upstairs.

He'd just have to ask Cho for a private word, that was all. ... He hurried off through the packed corridors looking for her, and (rather sooner than he had expected) he found her, emerging from a Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson.

"Er - Cho? Could I have a word with you?"

Giggling should be made illegal. Harry thought furiously, as all the girls around Cho started doing it. She didn't, though. She said, "Okay," and followed him out of earshot other classmates.

Harry turned to look at her and his stomach gave a weird lurch as though he had missed a step going downstairs.

"Er," he said.

He couldn't ask her. He couldn't. But he had to. Cho stood there looking puzzled, watching him. The words came out before Harry had quite got his tongue around them.

"Wangoballwime?"

"Sorry?" said Cho.

"D'you - d'you want to go to the ball with me?" said Harry. Why did he have to go red now? Why?

"Oh!" s aid Cho, and she went red too. "Oh Harry, I'm really sorry," and she truly looked it. "I've already said I'll go with someone else."

"Oh," said Harry.

It was odd; a moment before his insides had been writhing like snakes, but suddenly he didn't seem to have any insides at all.

"Oh okay," he said, "no problem."

"I'm really sorry," she said again.

"That's okay," said Harry.

They stood there looking at each other, and then Cho said, "Well-"

"Yeah," said Harry.

"Well, 'bye," said Cho, still very red. She walked away.

Harry called after her, before he could stop himself.

"Who're you going with?"

"Oh - Cedric," she said. "Cedric Diggory."

"Oh right," said Harry.

His insides had come back again. It felt as though they had been filled with lead in their absence.

Completely forgetting about dinner, he walked slowly back up to Gryffindor Tower, Cho's voice echoing in his ears with every step he took. "Cedric - Cedric Diggory." He had been starting to quite like Cedric - prepared to overlook the fact that he had once beaten him at Quidditch, and was handsome, and popular, and nearly everyone's favorite champion. Now he suddenly realized that Cedric was in fact a useless pretty boy who didn't have enough brains to fill an eggcup.

"Fairy lights," he said dully to the Fat Lady - the password had been changed the previous day.

"Yes, indeed, dear!" she trilled, straightening her new tinsel hair band as she swung forward to admit him.

Entering the common room, Harry looked around, and to his surprise he saw Ron sitting ashen-faced in a distant corner. Ginny was sitting with him, talking to him in what seemed to be a low, soothing voice.

"What's up, Ron?" said Harry, joining them.

Ron looked up at Harry, a sort of blind horror in his face.

"Why did I do it?" he said wildly. "I don't know what made me do it!

"What?" said Harry.

"He - er - just asked Fleur Delacour to go to the ball with him," said Ginny. She

looked as though she was fighting back a smile, but she kept patting Ron's arm sympathetically.

"You what?' said Harry.

"I don't know what made me do it!" Ron gasped again. "What was I playing at? There were people - all around - I've gone mad - everyone watching! I was just walking past her in the entrance hall - she was standing there talking to Diggory - and it sort of came over me - and I asked her!"

Ron moaned and put his face in his hands. He kept talking, though the words were barely distinguishable.

"She looked at me like I was a sea slug or something. Didn't even answer. And then - I dunno - I just sort of came to my senses and ran for it."

"She's part veela," said Harry. "You were right - her grandmother was one. It wasn't your fault, I bet you just walked past when she was turning on the old charm for Diggory and got a blast of it - but she was wasting her time. He's going with Cho Chang."

Ron looked up.

"I asked her to go with me just now," Harry said dully, "and she told me."

Ginny had suddenly stopped smiling.

"This is mad," said Ron. "We're the only ones left who haven't got anyone - well, except Neville. Hey - guess who he asked? Hermione!"

"What?" said Harry, completely distracted by this startling news.

"Yeah, I know!" said Ron, some of the color coming back into his face as he started to laugh. "He told me after Potions! Said she's always been really nice, helping him out with work and stuff- but she told him she was already going with someone. Ha! As if! She just didn't want to go with Neville ... I mean, who would?"

"Don't!" said Ginny, annoyed. "Don't laugh -"

Just then Hermione climbed in through the portrait hole.

"Why weren't you two at dinner?" she said, coming over to join them.

"Because - oh shut up laughing, you two - because they've both just been turned down by girls they asked to the ball!" said Ginny.

That shut Harry and Ron up.

"Thanks a bunch, Ginny," said Ron sourly.

"All the good-looking ones taken, Ron?" said Hermione loftily. "Eloise Midgen

starting to look quite pretty now, is she? Well, I'm sure you'll find someone somewhere who'll have you."

But Ron was staring at Hermione as though suddenly seeing her in a whole new light.

"Hermione, Neville's right - you are a girl. . . ."

"Oh well spotted," she said acidly.

"Well - you can come with one of us!"

"No, I can't," snapped Hermione.

"Oh come on," he said impatiently, "we need partners, we're going to look really stupid if we haven't got any, everyone else has . . ."

"I can't come with you," said Hermione, now blushing, "because I'm already going with someone."

"No, you're not!" said Ron. "You just said that to get rid of Neville!"

"Oh did I?" said Hermione, and her eyes flashed dangerously. "Just because it's taken you three years to notice, Ron, doesn't mean no one else has spotted I'm a girl!"

Ron stared at her. Then he grinned again.

"Okay, okay, we know you're a girl," he said. "That do? Will you come now?"

"I've already told you!" Hermione said very angrily. "I'm going with someone else!"

And she stormed off toward the girls' dormitories again.

"She's lying," said Ron flatly, watching her go.

"She's not," said Ginny quietly.

"Who is it then?" said Ron sharply.

"I'm not telling you, it's her business," said Ginny.

"Right," said Ron, who looked extremely put out, "this is getting stupid. Ginny, you can go with Harry, and I'll just -"

"I can't," said Ginny, and she went scarlet too. "I'm going with - with Neville. He asked me when Hermione said no, and I thought. . . well. . . I'm not going to be able to go otherwise, I'm not in fourth year." She looked extremely miserable. "I think I'll go and have dinner," she said, and she got up and walked off to the portrait hole, her head bowed.

Ron goggled at Harry.

"What's got into them?" he demanded.

But Harry had just seen Parvati and Lavender come in through the portrait hole. The time had come for drastic action.

"Wait here," he said to Ron, and he stood up, walked straight up to Parvati, and said, "Parvati? Will you go to the ball with me?"

Parvati went into a fit of giggles. Harry waited for them to subside, his fingers crossed in the pocket of his robes.

"Yes, all right then," she said finally, blushing furiously.

"Thanks," said Harry, in relief. "Lavender - will you go with Ron?"

"She's going with Seamus," said Parvati, and the pair of them giggled harder than ever.

Harry sighed.

"Can't you think of anyone who'd go with Ron?" he said, lowering his voice so that Ron wouldn't hear.

"What about Hermione Granger?" said Parvati.

"She's going with someone else."

Parvati looked astonished.

"Ooooh - who?" she said keenly.

Harry shrugged. "No idea," he said. "So what about Ron?"

"Well. . ." said Parvati slowly, "I suppose my sister might. . . Padma, you know ... in Ravenclaw. I'll ask her if you like."

"Yeah, that would be great," said Harry. "Let me know, will you?"

And he went back over to Ron, feeling that this ball was a lot more trouble than it was worth, and hoping very much that Padma Patil's nose was dead center.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE - THE YULE BALL

Despite the very heavy load of homework that the fourth years had been given for the holidays. Harry was in no mood to work when term ended, and spent the week leading up to Christmas enjoying himself as fully as possible along with everyone else. Gryffindor Tower was hardly less crowded now than during term-time; it seemed to have shrunk slightly too, as its inhabitants were being so much rowdier than usual. Fred and George had had a great success with their Canary Creams, and for the first couple of days of the holidays, people kept bursting into feather all over the place. Before long, however, all the Gryffindors had learned to treat food anybody else offered them with extreme caution, in case it had a Canary Cream concealed in the center, and George confided to Harry that he and Fred were now working on developing something else. Harry made a mental note never to accept so much as a crisp from Fred and George in future. He still hadn't forgotten Dudley and the Ton-Tongue Toffee.

Snow was falling thickly upon the castle and its grounds now. The pale blue Beauxbatons carriage looked like a large, chilly, frosted pumpkin next to the iced gingerbread house that was Hagrid's cabin, while the Durmstrang ship's portholes were glazed with ice, the rigging white with frost. The house-elves down in the kitchen were outdoing themselves with a series of rich, warming stews and savory puddings, and only Fleur Delacour seemed to be able to find anything to complain about.

"It is too 'eavy, all zis 'Ogwarts food," they heard her saying grumpily as they left the Great Hall behind her one evening (Ron skulking behind Harry, keen not to be spotted by Fleur). "I will not fit into my dress robes!"

"Oooh there's a tragedy," Hermione snapped as Fleur went out into the entrance hall. "She really thinks a lot of herself, that one, doesn't she?"

"Hermione - who are you going to the ball with?" said Ron.

He kept springing this question on her, hoping to startle her into a response by asking it when she least expected it. However, Hermione merely frowned and said, "I'm not telling you, you'll just make fun of me."

"You're joking, Weasley!" said Malfoy, behind them. "You're not telling me someone's asked that to the ball? Not the long-molared Mudblood?" ;

Harry and Ron both whipped around, but Hermione said loudly, waving to somebody over Malfoys shoulder, "Hello, Professor Moody!"

Malfoy went pale and jumped backward, looking wildly around for Moody, but he was still up at the staff table, finishing his stew.

"Twitchy little ferret, aren't you, Malfoy?" said Hermione scathingly, and she, Harry, and Ron went up the marble staircase laughing heartily.

"Hermione," said Ron, looking sideways at her, suddenly frowning, "your teeth ..."

"What about them?" she said.

"Well, they're different. . . I've just noticed. . . ."

"Of course they are - did you expect me to keep those fangs Malfoy gave me?"

"No, I mean, they're different to how they were before he put that hex on you. . . . They're all... straight and - and normal-sized."

Hermione suddenly smiled very mischievously, and Harry noticed it too: It was a very different smile from the one he remembered.

"Well. . . when I went up to Madam Pomfrey to get them shrunk, she held up a mirror and told me to stop her when they were back to how they normally were," she said. "And I just. . . let her carry on a bit." She smiled even more widely. "Mum and Dad won't be too pleased. I've been trying to persuade them to let me shrink them for ages, but they wanted me to carry on with my braces. You know, they're dentists, they just don't think teeth and magic should - look! Pigwidgeons back!"

Ron's tiny owl was twittering madly on the top of the icicle-laden banisters, a scroll of parchment tied to his leg. People passing him were pointing and laughing, and a group of third-year girls paused and said, "Oh look at the weeny owl! Isn't he cute?"

Stupid little feathery git!" Ron hissed, hurrying up the stairs and snatching up Pigwidgeon. "You bring letters to the addressee! You don't hang around showing off!"

Pigwidgeon hooted happily, his head protruding over Ron's fist. The third-year girls all looked very shocked.

"Clear off!" Ron snapped at them, waving the fist holding Pigwidgeon, who hooted more happily than ever as he soared through the air. "Here - take it, Harry," Ron added in an undertone as the third-year girls scuttled away looking scandalized. He pulled Sirius's reply off Pigwidgeons leg. Harry pocketed it, and they hurried back to Gryffindor Tower to read it.

Everyone in the common room was much too busy in letting off more holiday steam to observe what anyone else was up to. Ron, Harry, and Hermione sat apart from everyone else by a dark window that was gradually filling up with snow, and Harry read out:

Dear Harry,

Congratulations on getting past the Horntail. Whoever put your name in that goblet shouldn't be feeling too happy right now! I was going to suggest a Conjunctivitus Curse, as a dragon's eyes are its weakest point - "That's what Krum did!" Hermione whispered - but your way was better, I'm impressed.

Don't get complacent, though. Harry. You've only done one task; whoever put you in for the tournament's got plenty more opportunity if they're trying to hurt you. Keep your eyes open -particularly when the person we discussed is around and concentrate on keeping yourself out of trouble.

Keep in touch, I still want to hear about anything unusual.

Sirius

"He sounds exactly like Moody," said Harry quietly, tucking the letter away again inside his robes. "'Constant vigilance!' You'd think I walk around with my eyes shut, banging off the walls. ..."

"But he's right, Harry," said Hermione, "you have still got two tasks to do. You really ought to have a look at that egg, you know, and start working out what it means. . . ."

"Hermione, he's got ages!" snapped Ron. "Want a game of chess, Harry?"

"Yeah, okay," said Harry. Then, spotting the look on Hermione's face, he said, "Come on, how'm I supposed to concentrate with all this noise going on? I won't even be able to hear the egg over this lot."

"Oh I suppose not," she sighed, and she sat down to watch their chess match, which culminated in an exciting checkmate of Ron's, involving a couple of recklessly brave pawns and a very violent bishop.

Harry awoke very suddenly on Christmas Day. Wondering what had caused his abrupt return to consciousness, he opened his eyes, and saw something with very large, round, green eyes staring back at him in the darkness, so close they were almost nose to nose.

"Dobby!" Harry yelled, scrambling away from the elf so fast he almost fell out of bed. "Don't do that!"

"Dobby is sorry, sir!" squeaked Dobby anxiously, jumping backward with his long fingers over his mouth. "Dobby is only wanting to wish Harry Potter 'Merry Christmas' and bring him a present, Sir! Harry Potter did say Dobby could come and see him sometimes, sir!"

It's okay," said Harry, still breathing rather faster than usual, while his heart rate returned to normal. "Just - just prod me or something in future, all right, don't bend over me like that. .."

Harry pulled back the curtains around his four-poster, took his glasses from his

bedside table, and put them on. His yell had awoken Ron, Seamus, Dean, and Neville. All of them were peering through the gaps in their own hangings, heavy-eyed and tousle-haired.

"Someone attacking you, Harry?" Seamus asked sleepily.

"No, it's just Dobby," Harry muttered. "Go back to sleep."

"Nah . . . presents!" said Seamus, spotting the large pile at the foot of his bed. Ron, Dean, and Neville decided that now they were awake they might as well get down to some present-opening too. Harry turned back to Dobby, who was now standing nervously next to Harrys bed, still looking worried that he had upset Harry. There was a Christmas bauble tied to the loop on top of his tea cozy.

"Can Dobby give Harry Potter his present?" he squeaked tentatively.

"'Course you can," said Harry. "Er. . . I've got something for you too."

It was a lie; he hadn't bought anything for Dobby at all, but he quickly opened his trunk and pulled out a particularly knobbly rolled-up pair of socks. They were his oldest and foulest, mustard yellow, and had once belonged to Uncle Vernon. The reason they were extra-knobbly was that Harry had been using them to cushion his Sneakoscope for over a year now. He pulled out the Sneako-scope and handed the socks to Dobby, saying, "Sorry, I forgot to wrap them..."

But Dobby was utterly delighted.

"Socks are Dobby's favorite, favorite clothes, sir!" he said, ripping off his odd ones and pulling on Uncle Vernon's. "I has seven now, sir. . . . But sir ..." he said, his eyes widening, having pulled both socks up to their highest extent, so that they reached to the bottom of his shorts, "they has made a mistake in the shop, Harry Potter, they is giving you two the same!"

"Ah, no, Harry, how come you didn't spot that?" said Ron, grinning over from his own bed, which was now strewn with wrapping paper. "Tell you what, Dobby - here you go - take these two, and you can mix them up properly. And here's your sweater."

He threw Dobby a pair of violet socks he had just unwrapped, and the hand-knitted sweater Mrs. Weasley had sent, Dobby looked quite overwhelmed.

"Sir is very kind!" he squeaked, his eyes brimming with tears again, bowing deeply to Ron. "Dobby knew sir must be a great wizard, for he is Harry Potter's greatest friend, but Dobby did not know that he was also as generous of spirit, as noble, as selfless -"

"They're only socks," said Ron, who had gone slightly pink around the ears, though he looked rather pleased all the same. "Wow, Harry -" He had just opened Harry's present, a Chudley Cannon hat. "Cool!" He jammed it onto his head, where it clashed horribly with his hair.

Dobby now handed Harry a small package, which turned out to be - socks.

"Dobby is making them himself, sir!" the elf said happily. "He is buying the wool out of his wages, sir!"

The left sock was bright red and had a pattern of broomsticks upon it; the right sock was green with a pattern of Snitches.

"They're . . . they're really . . . well, thanks, Dobby," said Harry, and he pulled them on, causing Dobby's eyes to leak with happiness again.

"Dobby must go now, sir, we is already making Christmas dinner in the kitchens!" said Dobby, and he hurried out of the dormitory, waving good-bye to Ron and the others as he passed.

Harry's other presents were much more satisfactory than Dobby's odd socks - with the obvious exception of the Dursleys', which consisted of a single tissue, an all-time low - Harry supposed they too were remember ing the Ton-Tongue Toffee. Hermione had given Harry a book called Quidditch Teams of Britain and Ireland; Ron, a bulging bag of Dungbombs; Sirius, a handy penknife with attachments to unlock any lock and undo any knot; and Hagrid, a vast box of sweets including all Harrys favorites: Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans, Chocolate Frogs, Drooble's Best Blowing Gum, and Fizzing Whizbees. There was also, of course, Mrs. Weasley's usual package, including a new sweater (green, with a picture of a dragon on it - Harry supposed Charlie had told her all about the Horntail), and a large quantity of homemade mince pies.

Harry and Ron met up with Hermione in the common room, and they went down to breakfast together. They spent most of the morning in Gryffindor Tower, where everyone was enjoying their presents, then returned to the Great Hall for a magnificent lunch, which included at least a hundred turkeys and Christmas puddings, and large piles of Cribbage's Wizarding Crackers.

They went out onto the grounds in the afternoon; the snow was untouched except for the deep channels made by the Durmstrang and Beauxbatons students on their way up to the castle. Hermione chose to watch Harry and the Weasleys' snowball fight rather than join in, and at five o'clock said she was going back upstairs to get ready for the ball.

"What, you need three hours?" said Ron, looking at her incredulously and paying for his lapse in concentration when a large snowball, thrown by George, hit him hard on the side of the head. "Who're you going with?" he yelled after Hermione, but she just waved and disappeared up the stone steps into the castle.

There was no Christmas tea today, as the ball included a feast, so at seven o'clock, when it had become hard to aim properly, the others abandoned their snowball fight and trooped back to the common room. The Fat Lady was sitting in her frame with her friend Violet from downstairs, both of them extremely tipsy, empty boxes of chocolate liqueurs littering the bottom other picture.

"Lairy fights, that's the one!" she giggled when they gave the password, and she swung forward to let them inside.

Harry, Ron, Seamus, Dean, and Neville changed into their dress robes up in their dormitory, all of them looking very self-conscious, but none as much as Ron, who surveyed himself in the long mirror in the corner with an appalled look on his face. There was just no getting around the fact that his robes looked more like a dress than anything else. In a desperate attempt to make them look more manly, he used a Severing Charm on the ruff and cuffs. It worked fairly well; at least he was now lace-free, although he hadn't done a very neat job, and the edges still looked depressingly frayed as the boys set off downstairs.

"I still can't work out how you two got the best-looking girls in the year," muttered Dean.

"Animal magnetism," said Ron gloomily, pulling stray threads out of his cuffs.

The common room looked strange, full of people wearing different colors instead of the usual mass of black. Parvati was waiting for Harry at the foot of the stairs. She looked very pretty indeed, in robes of shocking pink, with her long dark plait braided with gold, and gold bracelets glimmering at her wrists. Harry was relieved to see that she wasn't giggling.

"You - er - look nice," he said awkwardly.

"Thanks," she said. "Padma's going to meet you in the entrance hall," she added to Ron.

"Right," said Ron, looking around. "Where's Hermione?"

Parvati shrugged. "Shall we go down then, Harry?"

"Okay," said Harry, wishing he could just stay in the common room. Fred winked at Harry as he passed him on the way out of the portrait hole.

The entrance hall was packed with students too, all milling around waiting for eight o'clock, when the doors to the Great Hall would be thrown open. Those people who were meeting partners from different Houses were edging through the crowd trying to find one another. Parvati found her sister, Padma, and led her over to Harry and Ron.

"Hi," said Padma, who was looking just as pretty as Parvati in robes of bright turquoise. She didn't look too enthusiastic about having Ron as a partner, though; her dark eyes lingered on the frayed neck and sleeves of his dress robes as she looked him up and down.

"Hi," said Ron, not looking at her, but staring around at the crowd. "Oh no ..."

He bent his knees slightly to hide behind Harry, because Fleur Delacour was passing, looking stunning in robes of silver-gray satin, and accompanied by the

Ravenclaw Quidditch captain, Roger Davies. When they had disappeared, Ron stood straight again and stared over the heads of the crowd.

"Where is Hermione?" he said again.

A group of Slytherins came up the steps from their dungeon common room. Malfoy was in front; he was wearing dress robes of black velvet with a high collar, which in Harry's opinion made him look like a vicar. Pansy Parkinson in very frilly robes of pale pink was clutching Malfoy's arm. Crabbe and Goyle were both wearing green; they resembled moss-colored boulders, and neither of them, Harry was pleased to see, had managed to find a partner.

The oak front doors opened, and everyone turned to look as the Durmstrang students entered with Professor Karkaroff. Krum was at the front of the party, accompanied by a pretty girl in blue robes Harry didn't know. Over their heads he saw that an area of lawn right in front of the castle had been transformed into a sort of grotto full of fairy lights - meaning hundreds of actual living fairies were sitting in the rosebushes that had been conjured there, and fluttering over the statues of what seemed to be Father Christmas and his reindeer.

Then Professor McGonagall's voice called, "Champions over here, please!"

Parvati readjusted her bangles, beaming; she and Harry said, "See you in a minute" to Ron and Padma and walked forward, the chattering crowd parting to let them through. Professor McGonagall, who was wearing dress robes of red tartan and had arranged a rather ugly wreath of thistles around the brim other hat, told them to wait on one side of the doors while everyone else went inside; they were to enter the Great Hall in procession when the rest of the students had sat down. Fleur Delacour and Roger Davies stationed themselves nearest the doors; Davies looked so stunned by his good fortune in having Fleur for a partner that he could hardly take his eyes off her. Cedric and Cho were close to Harry too; he looked away from them so he wouldn't have to talk to them. His eyes fell instead on the girl next to Krum. His jaw dropped.

It was Hermione.

But she didn't look like Hermione at all. She had done something with her hair; it was no longer bushy but sleek and shiny, and twisted up into an elegant knot at the back of her head. She was wearing robes made of a floaty, periwinkle-blue material, and she was holding herself differently, somehow - or maybe it was merely the absence of the twenty or so books she usually had slung over her back. She was also smiling - rather nervously, it was true - but the reduction in the size of her front teeth was more noticeable than ever; Harry couldn't understand how he hadn't spotted it before.

"Hi, Harry!" she said. "Hi, Parvati!"

Parvati was gazing at Hermione in unflattering disbelief. She wasn't the only one either; when the doors to the Great Hall opened, Krum's fan club from the library

stalked past, throwing Hermione looks of deepest loathing. Pansy Parkinson gaped at her as she walked by with Malfoy, and even he didn't seem to be able to find an insult to throw at her. Ron, however, walked right past Hermione without looking at her.

Once everyone else was settled in the Hall, Professor McGonagall told the champions and their partners to get in line in pairs and to follow her. They did so, and everyone in the Great Hall applauded as they entered and started walking up toward a large round table at the top of the Hall, where the judges were sitting.

The walls of the Hall had all been covered in sparkling silver frost, with hundreds of garlands of mistletoe and ivy crossing the starry black ceiling. The House tables had vanished; instead, there were about a hundred smaller, lantern-lit ones, each seating about a dozen people.

Harry concentrated on not tripping over his feet. Parvati seemed to be enjoying herself; she was beaming around at everybody, steering Harry so forcefully that he felt as though he were a show dog she was putting through its paces. He caught sight of Ron and Padma as he neared the top table. Ron was watching Hermione pass with narrowed eyes. Padma was looking sulky.

Dumbledore smiled happily as the champions approached the top table, but Karkaroff wore an expression remarkably like Ron's as he watched Krum and Hermione draw nearer. Ludo Bagman, tonight in robes of bright purple with large yellow stars, was clapping as enthusiastically as any of the students; and Madame Maxime, who had changed her usual uniform of black satin for a flowing gown of lavender silk, was applauding them politely. But Mr. Crouch, Harry suddenly realized, was not there. The fifth seat at the table was occupied by Percy Weasley.

When the champions and their partners reached the table, Percy drew out the empty chair beside him, staring pointedly at Harry. Harry took the hint and sat down next to Percy, who was wearing brand-new, navy-blue dress robes and an expression of such smugness that Harry thought it ought to be fined.

"I've been promoted," Percy said before Harry could even ask, and from his tone, he might have been announcing his election as supreme ruler of the universe. "I'm now Mr. Crouch's personal assistant, and I'm here representing him."

"Why didn't he come?" Harry asked. He wasn't looking forward to being lectured on cauldron bottoms all through dinner.

"I'm afraid to say Mr. Crouch isn't well, not well at all. Hasn't been right since the World Cup. Hardly surprising - overwork. He's not as young as he was - though still quite brilliant, of course, the mind remains as great as it ever was. But the World Cup was a fiasco for the whole Ministry, and then, Mr. Crouch suffered a huge personal shock with the misbehavior of that house-elf of his, Blinky, or whatever she was called. Naturally, he dismissed her immediately afterward, but - well, as I say, he's getting on, he needs looking after, and I think he's found a

definite drop in his home comforts since she left. And then we had the tournament to arrange, and the aftermath of the Cup to deal with - that revolting Skeeter woman buzzing around - no, poor man, he's having a well earned, quiet Christmas. I'm just glad he knew he had someone he could rely upon to take his place."

Harry wanted very much to ask whether Mr. Crouch had stopped calling Percy "Weatherby" yet, but resisted the temptation.

There was no food as yet on the glittering golden plates, but small menus were lying in front of each of them. Harry picked his up uncertainly and looked around - there were no waiters. Dumbledore, however, looked carefully down at his own menu, then said very clearly to his plate, "Pork chops!"

And pork chops appeared. Getting the idea, the rest of the table placed their orders with their plates too. Harry glanced up at Hermione to see how she felt about this new and more complicated method of dining - surely it meant plenty of extra work for the house-elves? - but for once, Hermione didn't seem to be thinking about S.P.E.W. She was deep in talk with Viktor Krum and hardly seemed to notice what she was eating.

It now occurred to Harry that he had never actually heard Krum speak before, but he was certainly talking now, and very enthusiastically at that.

"Veil, ve have a castle also, not as big as this, nor as comfortable, I am thinking," he was telling Hermione. "Ve have just four floors, and the fires are lit only for magical purposes. But ve have grounds larger even than these - though in vinter, ve have very little daylight, so ve are not enjoying them. But in summer ve are flying every day, over the lakes and the mountains -"

"Now, now, Viktor!" said Karkaroff with a laugh that didn't reach his cold eyes, "don't go giving away anything else, now, or your charming friend will know exactly where to find us!"

Dumbledore smiled, his eyes twinkling. "Igor, all this secrecy ., . one would almost think you didn't want visitors."

"Well, Dumbledore," said Karkaroff, displaying his yellowing teeth to their fullest extent, "we are all protective of our private domains, are we not? Do we not jealously guard the halls of learning that have been entrusted to us? Are we not right to be proud that we alone know our school's secrets, and right to protect them?"

"Oh I would never dream of assuming I know all Hogwarts' secrets, Igor," said Dumbledore amicably. "Only this morning, for instance, I took a wrong turning on the way to the bathroom and found myself in a beautifully proportioned room I have never seen before, containing a really rather magnificent collection of chamber pots. When I went back to investigate more closely, I discovered that the room had vanished. But I must keep an eye out for it. Possibly it is only accessible at five-thirty in the morning. Or it may only appear at the quarter moon - or when

the seeker has an exceptionally full bladder."

Harry snorted into his plate of goulash. Percy frowned, but Harry could have sworn Dumbledore had given him a very small wink.

Meanwhile Fleur Delacour was criticizing the Hogwarts decorations to Roger Davies.

"Zis is nothing," she said dismissively, looking around at the sparkling walls of the Great Hall. "At ze Palace of Beauxbatons, we 'ave ice sculptures all around ze dining chamber at Chreestmas. Zey do not melt, of course . . . zey are like 'uge statues of diamond, glittering around ze place. And ze food is seemply superb. And we 'ave choirs of wood nymphs, 'oo serenade us as we eat. We 'ave none of zis ugly armor in ze 'alls, and eef a poltergeist ever entaired into Beauxbatons, 'e would be expelled like zat." She slapped her hand onto the table impatiently.

Roger Davies was watching her talk with a very dazed look on his face, and he kept missing his mouth with his fork. Harry had the impression that Davies was too busy staring at Fleur to take in a word she was saying.

"Absolutely right," he said quickly, slapping his own hand down on the table in imitation of Fleur. "Like that. Yeah."

Harry looked around the Hall. Hagrid was sitting at one of the other staff tables; he was back in his horrible hairy brown suit and gazing up at the top table. Harry saw him give a small wave, and looking around, saw Madame Maxime return it, her opals glittering in the candlelight.

Hermione was now teaching Krum to say her name properly; he kept calling her "Hermy-own."

"Her-my-oh-nee," she said slowly and clearly.

"Herm-own-ninny."

"Close enough," she said, catching Harry's eye and grinning.

When all the food had been consumed, Dumbledore stood up and asked the students to do the same. Then, with a wave of his wand, all the tables zoomed back along the walls leaving the floor clear, and then he conjured a raised platform into existence along the right wall. A set of drums, several guitars, a lute, a cello, and some bagpipes were set upon it.

The "Weird Sisters now trooped up onto the stage to wildly enthusiastic applause; they were all extremely hairy and dressed in black robes that had been artfully ripped and torn. They picked up their instruments, and Harry, who had been so interested in watching them that he had almost forgotten what was coming, suddenly realized that the lanterns on all the other tables had gone out, and that the other champions and their partners were standing up.

"Come on!" Parvati hissed. "We're supposed to dance!"

Harry tripped over his dress robes as he stood up. The Weird Sisters struck up a slow, mournful tune; Harry walked onto the brightly lit dance floor, carefully avoiding catching anyone's eye (he could see Seamus and Dean waving at him and sniggering), and next moment, Parvati had seized his hands, placed one around her waist, and was holding the other tightly in hers.

It wasn't as bad as it could have been. Harry thought, revolving slowly on the spot (Parvati was steering). He kept his eyes fixed over the heads of the watching people, and very soon many of them too had come onto the dance floor, so that the champions were no longer the center of attention. Neville and Ginny were dancing nearby - he could see Ginny wincing frequently as Neville trod on her feet - and Dumbledore was waltzing with Madame Maxime. He was so dwarfed by her that the top of his pointed hat barely tickled her chin; however, she moved very gracefully for a woman so large. Mad-Eye Moody was doing an extremely ungainly two-step with Professor Sinistra, who was nervously avoiding his wooden leg.

"Nice socks. Potter," Moody growled as he passed, his magical eye staring through Harry's robes.

"Oh - yeah, Dobby the house-elf knitted them for me," said Harry, grinning.

"He is so creepy!" Parvati whispered as Moody clunked away. "I don't think that eye should be allowed."

Harry heard the final, quavering note from the bagpipe with relief. The Weird Sisters stopped playing, applause filled the hall once more, and Harry let go of Parvati at once.

"Let's sit down, shall we?"

"Oh - but - this is a really good one!" Parvati said as the Weird Sisters struck up a new song, which was much faster.

"No, I don't like it," Harry lied, and he led her away from the dance floor, past Fred and Angelina, who were dancing so exhuberantly that people around them were backing away in fear of injury, and over to the table where Ron and Padma were sitting.

"How's it going?" Harry asked Ron, sitting down and opening a bottle of butterbeer.

Ron didn't answer. He was glaring at Hermione and Krum, who were dancing nearby. Padma was sitting with her arms and legs crossed, one foot jiggling in time to the music. Every now and then she threw a disgruntled look at Ron, who was completely ignoring her. Parvati sat down on Harry's other side, crossed her arms and legs too, and within minutes was asked to dance by a boy from

Beauxbatons.

"You don't mind, do you, Harry?" Parvati said.

"What?" said Harry, who was now watching Cho and Cedric.

"Oh never mind," snapped Parvati, and she went off with the boy from Beauxbatons. When the song ended, she did not return.

Hermione came over and sat down in Parvati's empty chair. She was a bit pink in the face from dancing.

"Hi," said Harry. Ron didn't say anything.

"It's hot, isn't it?" said Hermione, fanning herself with her hand. "Viktors just gone to get some drinks."

Ron gave her a withering look. "Viktor?" he said. "Hasn't he asked you to call him Vicky yet?"

Hermione looked at him in surprise. "What's up with you?" she said.

"If you don't know," said Ron scathingly, "I'm not going to tell you."

Hermione stared at him, then at Harry, who shrugged.

"Ron, what - ?"

"He's from Durmstrang!" spat Ron. "He's competing against Harry! Against Hogwarts! You - you're -" Ron was obviously casting around for words strong enough to describe Hermione's crime, "fraternizing with the enemy, that's what you're doing!"

Hermione's mouth fell open.

"Don't be so stupid!" she said after a moment. "The enemy! Honestly - who was the one who was all excited when they saw him arrive? Who was the one who wanted his autograph? Who's got a model of him up in their dormitory?"

Ron chose to ignore this. "I s'pose he asked you to come with him while you were both in the library?"

"Yes, he did," said Hermione, the pink patches on her cheeks glowing more brightly. "So what?"

"What happened - trying to get him to join spew, were you?"

"No, I wasn't! If you really want to know, he - he said he'd been coming up to the library every day to try and talk to me, but he hadn't been able to pluck up the courage!"

Hermione said this very quickly, and blushed so deeply that she was the same

color as Parvati's robes.

"Yeah, well - that's his story," said Ron nastily.

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"Obvious, isn't it? He's Karkaroff's student, isn't he? He knows who you hang around with. . . . He's just trying to get closer to Harry - get inside information on him - or get near enough to jinx him -"

Hermione looked as though Ron had slapped her. When she spoke, her voice quivered.

"For your information, he hasn't asked me one single thing about Harry, not one -"

Ron changed tack at the speed of light.

"Then he's hoping you'll help him find out what his egg means! I suppose you've been putting your heads together during those cozy little library sessions -"

"I'd never help him work out that egg!" said Hermione, looking outraged. "Never. How could you say something like that - I want Harry to win the tournament. Harry knows that, don't you, Harry?"

"You've got a funny way of showing it," sneered Ron.

"This whole tournament's supposed to be about getting to know foreign wizards and making friends with them!" said Hermione hotly.

"No it isn't!" shouted Ron. "It's about winning!"

People were starting to stare at them.

"Ron," said Harry quietly, "I haven't got a problem with Hermione coming with Krum -"

But Ron ignored Harry too.

"Why don't you go and find Vicky, he'll be wondering where you are," said Ron.

"Don't call him Vicky!"

Hermione jumped to her feet and stormed off across the dance floor, disappearing into the crowd. Ron watched her go with a mixture of anger and satisfaction on his face.

"Are you going to ask me to dance at all?" Padma asked him.

"No," said Ron, still glaring after Hermione.

"Fine," snapped Padma, and she got up and went to join Parvati and the Beauxbatons boy, who conjured up one of his friends to join them so fast that

Harry could have sworn he had zoomed him there by a Summoning Charm.

"Vare is Herm-own-ninny?" said a voice.

Krum had just arrived at their table clutching two butterbeers.

"No idea," said Ron mulishly, looking up at him. "Lost her, have you?"

Krum was looking surly again.

"Veil, if you see her, tell her I haff drinks," he said, and he slouched off.

"Made friends with Viktor Krum, have you, Ron?"

Percy had bustled over, rubbing his hands together and looking extremely pompous. "Excellent! That's the whole point, you know - international magical cooperation!"

To Harry's displeasure, Percy now took Padma's vacated seat. The top table was now empty; Professor Dumbledore was dancing with Professor Sprout, Ludo Bagman with Professor McGonagall; Madame Maxime and Hagrid were cutting a wide path around the dance floor as they waltzed through the students, and Karkaroff was nowhere to be seen. When the next song ended, everybody applauded once more, and Harry saw Ludo Bagman kiss Professor McGonagall's hand and make his way back through the crowds, at which point Fred and George accosted him.

"What do they think they're doing, annoying senior Ministry members?" Percy hissed, watching Fred and George suspiciously. "No respect..."

Ludo Bagman shook off Fred and George fairly quickly, however, and, spotting Harry, waved and came over to their table.

"I hope my brothers weren't bothering you, Mr. Bagman?" said Percy at once.

"What? Oh not at all, not at all!" said Bagman. "No, they were just telling me a bit more about those fake wands of theirs. Wondering if I could advise them on the marketing. I've promised to put them in touch with a couple of contacts of mine at Zonko's Joke Shop. ..."

Percy didn't look happy about this at all, and Harry was prepared to bet he would be rushing to tell Mrs. Weasley about this the moment he got home. Apparently Fred and George's plans had grown even more ambitious lately, if they were hoping to sell to the public. Bagman opened his mouth to ask Harry something, but Percy diverted him.

"How do you feel the tournament's going, Mr. Bagman? Our department's quite satisfied - the hitch with the Goblet of Fire" - he glanced at Harry - "was a little unfortunate, of course, but it seems to have gone very smoothly since, don't you think?"

"Oh yes," Bagman said cheerfully, "it's all been enormous fun. How's old Barty doing? Shame he couldn't come."

"Oh I'm sure Mr. Crouch will be up and about in no time," said Percy importantly, "but in the meantime, I'm more than willing to take up the slack. Of course, it's not all attending balls" - he laughed airily - "oh no, I've had to deal with all sorts of things that have cropped up in his absence - you heard Ali Bashir was caught smuggling a consignment of flying carpets into the country? And then we've been trying to persuade the Transylvanians to sign the International Ban on Dueling. I've got a meeting with their Head of Magical Cooperation in the new year -"

"Let's go for a walk," Ron muttered to Harry, "get away from Percy. ..."

Pretending they wanted more drinks. Harry and Ron left the table, edged around the dance floor, and slipped out into the entrance hall. The front doors stood open, and the fluttering fairy lights in the rose garden winked and twinkled as they went down the front steps, where they found themselves surrounded by bushes; winding, ornamental paths; and large stone statues. Harry could hear splashing water, which sounded like a fountain. Here and there, people were sitting on carved benches. He and Ron set off along one of the winding paths through the rosebushes, but they had gone only a short way when they heard an unpleasantly familiar voice.

"... don't see what there is to fuss about, Igor."

"Severus, you cannot pretend this isn't happening!" Karkaroffs voice sounded anxious and hushed, as though keen not to be overheard. "It's been getting clearer and clearer for months. I am becoming seriously concerned, I can't deny it _"

"Then flee," said Snapes voice curtly. "Flee - I will make your excuses. I, however, am remaining at Hogwarts."

Snape and Karkaroff came around the corner. Snape had his wand out and was blasting rosebushes apart, his expression most ill-natured. Squeals issued from many of the bushes, and dark shapes emerged from them.

"Ten points from Ravenclaw, Fawcett!" Snape snarled as a girl ran past him. "And ten points from Hufflepuff too, Stebbins!" as a boy went rushing after her. "And what are you two doing?" he added, catching sight of Harry and Ron on the path ahead. Karkaroff, Harry saw, looked slightly discomposed to see them standing there. His hand went nervously to his goatee, and he began winding it around his finger.

"We re walking," Ron told Snape shortly. "Not against the law, is it?"

"Keep walking, then!" Snape snarled, and he brushed past them, his long black cloak billowing out behind him. Karkaroff hurried away after Snape. Harry and Ron continued down the path.

"What's got Karkaroff all worried?" Ron muttered.

"And since when have he and Snape been on first-name terms?"said Harry slowly.

They had reached a large stone reindeer now, over which they could see the sparkling jets of a tall fountain. The shadowy outlines of two enormous people were visible on a stone bench, watching the water in the moonlight. And then Harry heard Hagrid speak.

"Momen' I saw yeh, I knew," he was saying, in an oddly husky voice.

Harry and Ron froze. This didn't sound like the sort of scene they ought to walk in on, somehow. . . . Harry looked around, back up the path, and saw Fleur Delacour and Roger Davies standing half-concealed in a rosebush nearby. He tapped Ron on the shoulder and jerked his head toward them, meaning that they could easily sneak off that way without being noticed (Fleur and Davies looked very busy to Harry), but Ron, eyes widening in horror at the sight of Fleur, shook his head vigorously, and pulled Harry deeper into the shadows behind the reindeer.

"What did you know, 'Agrid?" said Madame Maxime, a purr in her low voice.

Harry definitely didn't want to listen to this; he knew Hagrid would hate to be overheard in a situation like this (he certainly would have) - if it had been possible he would have put his fingers in his ears and hummed loudly, but that wasn't really an option. Instead he tried to interest himself in a beetle crawling along the stone reindeer's back, but the beetle just wasn't interesting enough to block out Hagrid's next words.

"I jus' knew . . . knew you were like me. . . . Was it yer mother or yer father?"

"I - I don't know what you mean, 'Agrid. ..."

"It was my mother," said Hagrid quietly. "She was one o' the las' ones in Britain. 'Course, I can' remember her too well. . . she left, see. When I was abou' three. She wasn' really the maternal sort. Well. . . it's not in their natures, is it? Dunno what happened to her . . . might be dead fer all I know. ..."

Madame Maxime didn't say anything. And Harry, in spite of himself, took his eyes off the beetle and looked over the top of the reindeer's antlers, listening. ... He had never heard Hagrid talk about his childhood before.

"Me dad was broken-hearted when she wen'. Tiny little bloke, my dad was. By the time I was six I could lift him up an' put him on top o' the dresser if he annoyed me. Used ter make him laugh. . . ." Hagrid's deep voice broke. Madame Maxime was listening, motionless, apparently staring at the silvery fountain. "Dad raised me . . . but he died, o' course, jus' after I started school. Sorta had ter make me own way after that. Dumbledore was a real help, mind. Very kind ter me, he was. . . ."

Hagrid pulled out a large spotted silk handkerchief and blew his nose heavily.

"So ... anyway . . . enough abou' me. What about you? Which side you got it on?"

But Madame Maxime had suddenly got to her feet.

"It is chilly," she said - but whatever the weather was doing, it was nowhere near as cold as her voice. "I think I will go in now."

"Eh?" said Hagrid blankly. "No, don go! I've - I've never met another one before!"

"Anuzzer what, precisely?" said Madame Maxime, her tone icy.

Harry could have told Hagrid it was best not to answer; he stood there in the shadows gritting his teeth, hoping against hope he wouldn't - but it was no good. "Another half-giant, o' course!" said Hagrid.

"'Ow dare you!" shrieked Madame Maxime. Her voice exploded through the peaceful night air like a foghorn; behind him. Harry heard Fleur and Roger fall out of their rosebush. "I 'ave nevair been more insulted in my life! 'Alf-giant? Moi? I 'ave - I 'ave big bones!"

She stormed away; great multicolored swarms of fairies rose into the air as she passed, angrily pushing aside bushes. Hagrid was still sitting on the bench, staring after her. It was much too dark to make out his expression. Then, after about a minute, he stood up and strode away, not back to the castle, but off out into the dark grounds in the direction of his cabin.

"C'mon," Harry said, very quietly to Ron. "Let's go. . . ."

But Ron didn't move.

"What's up?" said Harry, looking at him.

Ron looked around at Harry, his expression very serious indeed.

"Did you know?" he whispered. "About Hagrid being half-giant?"

"No," Harry said, shrugging. "So what?"

He knew immediately, from the look Ron was giving him, that he was once again revealing his ignorance of the wizarding world. Brought up by the Dursleys, there were many things that wizards took for granted that were revelations to Harry, but these surprises had become fewer with each successive year. Now, however, he could tell that most wizards would not have said "So what?" upon finding out that one of their friends had a giantess for a mother.

"I'll explain inside," said Ron quietly, "c'mon. . .."

Fleur and Roger Davies had disappeared, probably into a more private clump of bushes. Harry and Ron returned to the Great Hall. Parvati and Padma were now sitting at a distant table with a whole crowd of Beauxbatons boys, and Hermione was once more dancing with Krum. Harry and Ron sat down at a table far

removed from the dance floor.

"So?" Harry prompted Ron. "What's the problem with giants?"

"Well, they're . . . they're . . ." Ron struggled for words. ". . . not very nice," he finished lamely.

"Who cares?" Harry said. "There's nothing wrong with Hagrid!"

"I know there isn't, but. . . blimey, no wonder he keeps it quiet," Ron said, shaking his head. "I always thought he'd got in the way of a bad Engorgement Charm when he was a kid or something. Didn't like to mention it. ..."

"But what's it matter if his mother was a giantess?" said Harry.

"Well... no one who knows him will care, 'cos they'll know he's not dangerous," said Ron slowly. "But. . . Harry, they're just vicious, giants. It's like Hagrid said, it's in their natures, they're like trolls . . . they just like killing, everyone knows that. There aren't any left in Britain now, though."

"What happened to them?"

"Well, they were dying out anyway, and then loads got themselves killed by Aurors. There're supposed to be giants abroad, though. . . . They hide out in mountains mostly. . . ."

"I don't know who Maxime thinks she's kidding," Harry said, watching Madame Maxime sitting alone at the judges' table, looking very somber. "If Hagrid's half-giant, she definitely is. Big bones . .. the only thing that's got bigger bones than her is a dinosaur."

Harry and Ron spent the rest of the ball discussing giants in their corner, neither of them having any inclination to dance. Harry tried not to watch Cho and Cedric too much; it gave him a strong desire to kick something.

When the Weird Sisters finished playing at midnight, everyone gave them a last, loud round of applause and started to wend their way into the entrance hall. Many people were expressing the wish that the ball could have gone on longer, but Harry was perfectly happy to be going to bed; as far as he was concerned, the evening hadn't been much fun.

Out in the entrance hall, Harry and Ron saw Hermione saying good night to Krum before he went back to the Durmstrang ship. She gave Ron a very cold look and swept past him up the marble staircase without speaking. Harry and Ron followed her, but halfway up the staircase Harry heard someone calling him.

"Hey-Harry!"

It was Cedric Diggory. Harry could see Cho waiting for him in the entrance hall below.

"Yeah?" said Harry coldly as Cedric ran up the stairs toward him.

Cedric looked as though he didn't want to say whatever it was in front of Ron, who shrugged, looking bad-tempered, and continued to climb the stairs.

"Listen ..." Cedric lowered his voice as Ron disappeared. "I owe you one for telling me about the dragons. You know that golden egg? Does yours wail when you open it?"

"Yeah," said Harry.

"Well... take a bath, okay?"

"What?"

"Take a bath, and - er - take the egg with you, and - er - just mull things over in the hot water. It'll help you think. . . . Trust me."

Harry stared at him.

"Tell you what," Cedric said, "use the prefects' bathroom. Fourth door to the left of that statue of Boris the Bewildered on the fifth floor. Password's 'pine fresh.' Gotta go ... want to say good night -"

He grinned at Harry again and hurried back down the stairs to Cho.

Harry walked back to Gryffindor Tower alone. That had been extremely strange advice. Why would a bath help him to work out what the wailing egg meant? Was Cedric pulling his leg? Was he trying to make Harry look like a fool, so Cho would like him even more by comparison?

The Fat Lady and her friend Vi were snoozing in the picture over the portrait hole. Harry had to yell "Fairy lights!" before he woke them up, and when he did, they were extremely irritated. He climbed into the common room and found Ron and Hermione having a blazing row. Standing ten feet apart, they were bellowing at each other, each scarlet in the face.

"Well, if you don't like it, you know what the solution is, don't you?" yelled Hermione; her hair was coming down out of its elegant bun now, and her face was screwed up in anger.

"Oh yeah?" Ron yelled back. "What's that?"

"Next time there's a ball, ask me before someone else does, and not as a last resort!"

Ron mouthed soundlessly like a goldfish out of water as Hermione turned on her heel and stormed up the girls' staircase to bed. Ron turned to look at Harry.

"Well," he sputtered, looking thunderstruck, "well - that just proves - completely missed the point -"

Harry didn't say anything. He liked being back on speaking terms with Ron too much to speak his mind right now - but he somehow thought that Hermione had gotten the point much better than Ron had.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR - RITA SKEETER'S SCOOP

Everybody got up late on Boxing Day. The Gryffindor common room was much quieter than it had been lately, many yawns punctuating the lazy conversations. Hermione's hair was bushy again; she confessed to Harry that she had used liberal amounts of Sleekeazy's Hair Potion on it for the ball, "but it's way too much bother to do every day," she said matter-of-factly, scratching a purring Crookshanks behind the ears.

Ron and Hermione seemed to have reached an unspoken agreement not to discuss their argument. They were being quite friendly to each other, though oddly formal. Ron and Harry wasted no time in telling Hermione about the conversation they had overheard between Madame Maxime and Hagrid, but Hermione didn't seem to find the news that Hagrid was a half-giant nearly as shocking as Ron did.

"Well, I thought he must be," she said, shrugging. "I knew he couldn't be pure giant because they're about twenty feet tall. But honestly, all this hysteria about giants. They can't all be horrible. . . . It's the same sort of prejudice that people have toward werewolves. . . . It's just bigotry, isn't it?"

Ron looked as though he would have liked to reply scathingly, but perhaps he didn't want another row, because he contented himself with shaking his head disbelievingly while Hermione wasn't looking.

It was time now to think of the homework they had neglected during the first week of the holidays. Everybody seemed to be feeling rather flat now that Christmas was over - everybody except Harry, that is, who was starting (once again) to feel slightly nervous.

The trouble was that February the twenty-fourth looked a lot closer from this side of Christmas, and he still hadn't done anything about working out the clue inside the golden egg. He therefore started taking the egg out of his trunk every time he went up to the dormitory, opening it, and listening intently, hoping that this time it would make some sense. He strained to think what the sound reminded him of, apart from thirty musical saws, but he had never heard anything else like it. He closed the egg, shook it vigorously, and opened it again to see if the sound had changed, but it hadn't. He tried asking the egg questions, shouting over all the wailing, but nothing happened. He even threw the egg across the room - though he hadn't really expected that to help.

Harry had not forgotten the hint that Cedric had given him, but his less-than-friendly feelings toward Cedric just now meant that he was keen not to take his help if he could avoid it. In any case, it seemed to him that if Cedric had really wanted to give Harry a hand, he would have been a lot more explicit. He, Harry, had told Cedric exactly what was coming in the first task - and Cedric's idea of a

fair exchange had been to tell Harry to take a bath. Well, he didn't need that sort of rubbishy help - not from someone who kept walking down corridors hand in hand with Cho, anyway. And so the first day of the new term arrived, and Harry set off to lessons, weighed down with books, parchment, and quills as usual, but also with the lurking worry of the egg heavy in his stomach, as though he were carrying that around with him too.

Snow was still thick upon the grounds, and the greenhouse windows were covered in condensation so thick that they couldn't see out of them in Herbology. Nobody was looking forward to Care of Magical Creatures much in this weather, though as Ron said, the skrewts would probably warm them up nicely, either by chasing them, or blasting off so forcefully that Hagrid's cabin would catch fire.

When they arrived at Hagrid 's cabin, however, they found an elderly witch with closely cropped gray hair and a very prominent chin standing before his front door.

"Hurry up, now, the bell rang five minutes ago," she barked at them as they struggled toward her through the snow.

"Who're you?" said Ron, staring at her. "Wheres Hagrid?"

"My name is Professor Grubbly-Plank," she said briskly. "I am your temporary Care of Magical Creatures teacher."

"Where's Hagrid?" Harry repeated loudly.

"He is indisposed," said Professor Grubbly-Plank shortly.

Soft and unpleasant laughter reached Harrys ears. He turned; Draco Malfoy and the rest of the Slytherins were joining the class. All of them looked gleeful, and none of them looked surprised to see Professor Grubbly-Plank.

"This way, please," said Professor Grubbly-Plank, and she strode off around the paddock where the Beauxbatons horses were shivering. Harry, Ron, and Hermione followed her, looking back over their shoulders at Hagrid's cabin. All the curtains were closed. Was Hagrid in there, alone and ill?

"What's wrong with Hagrid?" Harry said, hurrying to catch up with Professor Grubbly-Plank.

"Never you mind," she said as though she thought he was being nosy.

"I do mind, though," said Harry hotly. "What's up with him?"

Professor Grubbly-Plank acted as though she couldn't hear him. She led them past the paddock where the huge Beauxbatons horses were standing, huddled against the cold, and toward a tree on the edge of the forest, where a large and beautiful unicorn was tethered.

Many of the girls "ooooohed!" at the sight of the unicorn.

"Oh it's so beautiful!" whispered Lavender Brown. "How did she get it? They're supposed to be really hard to catch!"

The unicorn was so brightly white it made the snow all around look gray. It was pawing the ground nervously with its golden hooves and throwing back its horned head.

"Boys keep back!" barked Professor Grubbly-Plank, throwing out an arm and catching Harry hard in the chest. "They prefer the woman's touch, unicorns. Girls to the front, and approach with care, come on, easy does it. ..."

She and the girls walked slowly forward toward the unicorn, leaving the boys standing near the paddock fence, watching. The moment Professor Grubbly-Plank was out of earshot. Harry turned to Ron.

"What d'you reckons wrong with him? You don't think a skrewt - ?"

"Oh he hasn't been attacked, Potter, if that's what you're thinking," said Malfoy softly. "No, he's just too ashamed to show his big, ugly face."

"What d'you mean?" said Harry sharply.

Malfoy put his hand inside the pocket of his robes and pulled out a folded page of newsprint.

"There you go," he said. "Hate to break it to you. Potter. ..."

He smirked as Harry snatched the page, unfolded it, and read it, with Ron, Seamus, Dean, and Neville looking over his shoulder. It was an article topped with a picture of Hagrid looking extremely shifty.

DUMBLEDORE'S GIANT MISTAKE

Albus Dumbledore, eccentric Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, has never been afraid to make controversial staff appointments, writes Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent. In September of this year, he hired Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody, the notoriously jinx-happy ex-Auror, to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts, a decision that caused many raised eyebrows at the Ministry of Magic, given Moody's well-known habit of attacking anybody who makes a sudden movement in his presence. Mad-Eye Moody, however, looks responsible and kindly when set beside the part-human Dumbledore employs to teach Care of Magical Creatures.

Rubeus Hagrid, who admits to being expelled from Hogwarts in his third year, has enjoyed the position of gamekeeper at the school ever since, a job secured for him by Dumbledore. Last year, however, Hagrid used his mysterious influence over the headmaster to secure the additional post of Care of Magical Creatures teacher, over the heads of many better-qualified candidates.

An alarmingly large and ferocious-looking man, Hagrid has been using his newfound authority to terrify the students in his care with a succession of horrific creatures. While Dumbledore turns a blind eye, Hagrid has maimed several pupils during a series of lessons that many admit to being "very frightening."

'I was attacked by a hippogriff, and my friend Vincent Crabbe got a bad bite off a flobberworm," says Draco Malfoy, a fourth-year student. "We all hate Hagrid, but we're just too scared to say anything."

Hagrid has no intention of ceasing his campaign of intimidation, however. In conversation with a Daily Prophet reporter last month, he admitted breeding creatures he has dubbed "Blast-Ended Skrewts," highly dangerous crosses between manti-cores and fire-crabs. The creation of new breeds of magical creature is, of course, an activity usually closely observed by the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. Hagrid, however, considers himself to be above such petty restrictions.

"I was just having some fun," he says, before hastily changing the subject.

As if this were not enough, the Daily Prophet has now unearthed evidence that Hagrid is not - as he has always pretended - a pure-blood wizard. He is not, in fact, even pure human. His mother, we can exclusively reveal, is none other than the giantess Fridwulfa, whose whereabouts are currently unknown.

Bloodthirsty and brutal, the giants brought themselves to the point of extinction by warring amongst themselves during the last century. The handful that remained joined the ranks of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and were responsible for some of the worst mass Muggle killings of his reign of terror.

While many of the giants who served He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named were killed by Aurors working against the Dark Side, Fridwulfa was not among them. It is possible she escaped to one of the giant communities still existing in foreign mountain ranges. If his antics during Care of Magical Creatures lessons are any guide, however, Frid-wulfa's son appears to have inherited her brutal nature.

In a bizarre twist, Hagrid is reputed to have developed a close friendship with the boy who brought around You-Know-Who's fall from power - thereby driving Hagrid's own mother, like the rest of You-Know-Who's supporters, into hiding. Perhaps Harry Potter is unaware of the unpleasant truth about his large friend - but Albus Dumbledore surely has a duty to ensure that Harry Potter, along with his fellow students, is warned about the dangers of associating with part-giants.

Harry finished reading and looked up at Ron, whose mouth was hanging open.

"How did she find out?" he whispered.

But that wasn't what was bothering Harry.

"What d'you mean, 'we all hate Hagrid'?" Harry spat at Malfoy. "What's this

rubbish about him" - he pointed at Crabbe - "getting a bad bite off a flobberworm? They haven't even got teeth!"

Crabbe was sniggering, apparently very pleased with himself.

"Well, I think this should put an end to the oaf's teaching career," said Malfoy, his eyes glinting. "Half-giant. . . and there was me thinking he'd just swallowed a bottle of Skele-Gro when he was young. ... None of the mummies and daddies are going to like this at all. ... They'll be worried he'll eat their kids, ha, ha. ..."

"You-"

"Are you paying attention over there?"

Professor Grubbly-Planks voice carried over to the boys; the girls were all clustered around the unicorn now, stroking it. Harry was so angry that the Daily Prophet article shook in his hands as he turned to stare unseeingly at the unicorn, whose many magical properties Professor Grubbly-Plank was now enumerating in a loud voice, so that the boys could hear too.

"I hope she stays, that woman!" said Parvati Patil when the lesson had ended and they were all heading back to the castle for lunch. "That's more what I thought Care of Magical Creatures would be like . . . proper creatures like unicorns, not monsters. . . ."

"What about Hagrid?" Harry said angrily as they went up the steps.

"What about him?" said Parvati in a hard voice. "He can still be gamekeeper, can't he?"

Parvati had been very cool toward Harry since the ball. He supposed that he ought to have paid her a bit more attention, but she seemed to have had a good time all the same. She was certainly telling anybody who would listen that she had made arrangements to meet the boy from Beauxbatons in Hogsmeade on the next weekend trip.

"That was a really good lesson," said Hermione as they entered the Great Hall. "I didn't know half the things Professor Grubbly-Plank told us about uni -"

"Look at this!" Harry snarled, and he shoved the Daily Prophet article under Hermione's nose.

Hermione's mouth fell open as she read. Her reaction was exactly the same as Ron's.

"How did that horrible Skeeter woman find out? You don't think Hagrid told her?"

"No," said Harry, leading the way over to the Gryffindor table and throwing himself into a chair, furious. "He never even told us, did he? I reckon she was so mad he wouldn't give her loads of horrible stuff about me, she went ferreting

around to get him back."

"Maybe she heard him telling Madame Maxime at the ball," said Hermione quietly.

"We'd have seen her in the garden!" said Ron. "Anyway, she's not supposed to come into school anymore, Hagrid said Dumbledore banned her. . . ."

"Maybe she's got an Invisibility Cloak," said Harry, ladling chicken casserole onto his plate and splashing it everywhere in his anger. "Sort of thing she'd do, isn't it, hide in bushes listening to people."

"Like you and Ron did, you mean," said Hermione.

"We weren't trying to hear him!" said Ron indignantly. "We didn't have any choice! The stupid prat, talking about his giantess mother where anyone could have heard him!"

"We've got to go and see him," said Harry. "This evening, after Divination. Tell him we want him back . . . you do want him back?" he shot at Hermione.

"I - well, I'm not going to pretend it didn't make a nice change, having a proper Care of Magical Creatures lesson for once - but I do want Hagrid back, of course I do!" Hermione added hastily, quailing under Harry's furious stare.

So that evening after dinner, the three of them left the castle once more and went down through the frozen grounds to Hagrid's cabin. They knocked, and Fang's booming barks answered.

"Hagrid, it's us!" Harry shouted, pounding on the door. "Open up!"

Hagrid didn't answer. They could hear Fang scratching at the door, whining, but it didn't open. They hammered on it for ten more minutes; Ron even went and banged on one of the windows, but there was no response.

"What's he avoiding us for?" Hermione said when they had finally given up and were walking back to the school. "He surely doesn't think we'd care about him being half-giant?"

But it seemed that Hagrid did care. They didn't see a sign of him all week. He didn't appear at the staff table at mealtimes, they didn't see him going about his gamekeeper duties on the grounds, and Professor Grubbly-Plank continued to take the Care of Magical Creatures classes. Malfoy was gloating at every possible opportunity.

"Missing your half-breed pal?" he kept whispering to Harry whenever there was a teacher around, so that he was safe from Harry's retaliation. "Missing the elephant-man?"

There was a Hogsmeade visit halfway through January. Hermione was very

surprised that Harry was going to go.

"I just thought you'd want to take advantage of the common room being quiet," she said. "Really get to work on that egg."

"Oh I - I reckon I've got a pretty good idea what it's about now," Harry lied.

"Have you really?" said Hermione, looking impressed. "Well done!"

Harrys insides gave a guilty squirm, but he ignored them. He still had five weeks to work out that egg clue, after all, and that was ages. . . whereas if he went into Hogsmeade, he might run into Hagrid, and get a chance to persuade him to come back.

He, Ron, and Hermione left the castle together on Saturday and set off through the cold, wet grounds toward the gates. As they passed the Durmstrang ship moored in the lake, they saw Viktor Krum emerge onto the deck, dressed in nothing but swimming trunks. He was very skinny indeed, but apparently a lot tougher than he looked, because he climbed up onto the side of the ship, stretched out his arms, and dived, right into the lake.

"He's mad!" said Harry, staring at Krums dark head as it bobbed out into the middle of the lake. "It must be freezing, it's January!"

"It's a lot colder where he comes from," said Hermione. "I suppose it feels quite warm to him."

"Yeah, but there's still the giant squid," said Ron. He didn't sound anxious - if anything, he sounded hopeful. Hermione noticed his tone of voice and frowned.

"He's really nice, you know," she said. "He's not at all like you'd think, coming from Durmstrang. He likes it much better here, he told me."

Ron said nothing. He hadn't mentioned Viktor Krum since the ball, but Harry had found a miniature arm under his bed on Boxing Day, which had looked very much as though it had been snapped off a small model figure wearing Bulgarian Quidditch robes.

Harry kept his eyes skinned for a sign of Hagrid all the way down the slushy High Street, and suggested a visit to the Three Broomsticks once he had ascertained that Hagrid was not in any of the shops.

The pub was as crowded as ever, but one quick look around at all the tables told Harry that Hagrid wasn't there. Heart sinking, he went up to the bar with Ron and Hermione, ordered three butterbeers from Madam Rosmerta, and thought gloomily that he might just as well have stayed behind and listened to the egg wailing after all.

"Doesn't he ever go into the office?" Hermione whispered suddenly. "Look!"

She pointed into the mirror behind the bar, and Harry saw Ludo Bagman reflected there, sitting in a shadowy corner with a bunch of goblins. Bagman was talking very fast in a low voice to the goblins, all of whom had their arms crossed and were looking rather menacing.

It was indeed odd. Harry thought, that Bagman was here at the Three Broomsticks on a weekend when there was no Triwizard event, and therefore no judging to be done. He watched Bagman in the mirror. He was looking strained again, quite as strained as he had that night in the forest before the Dark Mark had appeared. But just then Bagman glanced over at the bar, saw Harry, and stood up.

"In a moment, in a moment!" Harry heard him say brusquely to the goblins, and Bagman hurried through the pub toward Harry, his boyish grin back in place.

"Harry!" he said. "How are you? Been hoping to run into you! Everything going all right?"

"Fine, thanks," said Harry.

"Wonder if I could have a quick, private word, Harry?" said Bagman eagerly. "You couldn't give us a moment, you two, could you?"

"Er - okay," said Ron, and he and Hermione went off to find a table.

Bagman led Harry along the bar to the end furthest from Madam Rosmerta.

"Well, I just thought I'd congratulate you again on your splendid performance against that Horntail, Harry," said Bagman. "Really superb."

"Thanks," said Harry, but he knew this couldn't be all that Bagman wanted to say, because he could have congratulated Harry in front of Ron and Hermione. Bagman didn't seem in any particular rush to spill the beans, though. Harry saw him glance into the mirror over the bar at the goblins, who were all watching him and Harry in silence through their dark, slanting eyes.

"Absolute nightmare," said Bagman to Harry in an undertone, noticing Harry watching the goblins too. "Their English isn't too good . . . it's like being back with all the Bulgarians at the Quidditch World Cup . . . but at least they used sign language another human could recognize. This lot keep gabbling in Gobblede-gook . . . and I only know one word of Gobbledegook. Bladvak. It means 'pickax.' I don't like to use it in case they think I'm threatening them."

He gave a short, booming laugh.

"What do they want?" Harry said, noticing how the goblins were still watching Bagman very closely.

"Er - well. . ." said Bagman, looking suddenly nervous. "They ... er ... they're looking for Barty Crouch."

"Why are they looking for him here?" said Harry. "He's at the Ministry in London, isn't he?"

"Er ... as a matter of fact, I've no idea where he is," said Bagman. "He's sort of... stopped coming to work. Been absent for a couple of weeks now. Young Percy, his assistant, says he's ill. Apparently he's just been sending instructions in by owl. But would you mind not mentioning that to anyone. Harry? Because Rita Skeeter's still poking around everywhere she can, and I'm willing to bet she'd work up Bartys illness into something sinister. Probably say he's gone missing like Bertha Jorkins."

"Have you heard anything about Bertha Jorkins?" Harry asked.

"No," said Bagman, looking strained again. "I've got people looking, of course ..." (About time, thought Harry) "and it's all very strange. She definitely arrived in Albania, because she met her second cousin there. And then she left the cousin's house to go south and see an aunt. . . and she seems to have vanished without trace en route. Blowed if I can see where she's got to ... she doesn't seem the type to elope, for instance . . . but still. . . . What are we doing, talking about goblins and Bertha Jorkins? I really wanted to ask you" - he lowered his voice - "how are you getting on with your golden egg?"

"Er . . . not bad," Harry said untruthfully.

Bagman seemed to know he wasn't being honest.

"Listen, Harry," he said (still in a very low voice), "I feel very bad about all this . . . you were thrown into this tournament, you didn't volunteer for it... and if. . ." (his voice was so quiet now, Harry had to lean closer to listen) "if I can help at all... a prod in the right direction . . . I've taken a liking to you . . . the way you got past that dragon! . . . well, just say the word."

Harry stared up into Bagman's round, rosy face and his wide, baby-blue eyes.

"We're supposed to work out the clues alone, aren't we?" he said, careful to keep his voice casual and not sound as though he was accusing the head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports of breaking the rules.

"Well. . . well, yes," said Bagman impatiently, "but - come on. Harry - we all want a Hogwarts victory, don't we?"

"Have you offered Cedric help?" Harry said.

The smallest of frowns creased Bagman's smooth face. "No, I haven't," he said. "I - well, like I say, I've taken a liking to you. Just thought I'd offer ..."

"Well, thanks," said Harry, "but I think I'm nearly there with the egg . . . couple more days should crack it."

He wasn't entirely sure why he was refusing Bagman's help, except that Bagman

was almost a stranger to him, and accepting his assistance would feel somehow much more like cheating than asking advice from Ron, Hermione, or Sirius.

Bagman looked almost affronted, but couldn't say much more as Fred and George turned up at that point.

"Hello, Mr. Bagman," said Fred brightly. "Can we buy you a drink?"

"Er . . . no," said Bagman, with a last disappointed glance at Harry, "no, thank you, boys ..."

Fred and George looked quite as disappointed as Bagman, who was surveying Harry as though he had let him down badly.

"Well, I must dash," he said. "Nice seeing you all. Good luck, Harry."

He hurried out of the pub. The goblins all slid off their chairs and exited after him. Harry went to rejoin Ron and Hermione.

"What did he want?" Ron said, the moment Harry had sat down.

"He offered to help me with the golden egg," said Harry.

"He shouldn't be doing that!" said Hermione, looking very shocked. "He's one of the judges! And anyway, you've already worked it out - haven't you?"

"Er . . . nearly," said Harry.

"Well, I don't think Dumbledore would like it if he knew Bagman was trying to persuade you to cheat!" said Hermione, still looking deeply disapproving. "I hope he's trying to help Cedric as much!"

"He's not, I asked," said Harry.

"Who cares if Diggorys getting help?" said Ron. Harry privately agreed.

"Those goblins didn't look very friendly," said Hermione, sipping her butterbeer. "What were they doing here?"

"Looking for Crouch, according to Bagman," said Harry. "He's still ill. Hasn't been into work."

"Maybe Percys poisoning him," said Ron. "Probably thinks if Crouch snuffs it he'll be made head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation."

Hermione gave Ron a don't-joke-about-things-like-that look, and said, "Funny, goblins looking for Mr. Crouch. . . . They'd normally deal with the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures."

"Crouch can speak loads of different languages, though," said Harry. "Maybe they need an interpreter."

"Worrying about poor 'ickle goblins, now, are you?" Ron asked Hermione. "Thinking of starting up S.P.U.G. or something? Society for the Protection of Ugly Goblins?"

"Ha, ha, ha," said Hermione sarcastically. "Goblins don't need protection. Haven't you been listening to what Professor Binns has been telling us about goblin rebellions?"

"No," said Harry and Ron together.

"Well, the/re quite capable of dealing with wizards," said Hermione, taking another sip of butterbeer. "They're very clever. They're not like house-elves, who never stick up for themselves."

"Uh-oh," said Ron, staring at the door.

Rita Skeeter had just entered. She was wearing banana-yellow robes today; her long nails were painted shocking pink, and she was accompanied by her paunchy photographer. She bought drinks, and she and the photographer made their way through the crowds to a table nearby. Harry, Ron, and Hermione glaring at her as she approached. She was talking fast and looking very satisfied about something.

"... didn't seem very keen to talk to us, did he, Bozo? Now, why would that be, do you think? And what's he doing with a pack of goblins in tow anyway? Showing them the sights . .. what nonsense ... he was always a bad liar. Reckon something's up? Think we should do a bit of digging? 'Disgraced Ex-Head of Magical Games and Sports, Ludo Bagman . . .' Snappy start to a sentence, Bozo - we just need to find a story to fit it -"

"Trying to ruin someone else's life?" said Harry loudly.

A few people looked around. Rita Skeeter's eyes widened behind her jeweled spectacles as she saw who had spoken.

"Harry!" she said, beaming. "How lovely! Why don't you come and join- ?"

"I wouldn't come near you with a ten-foot broomstick," said Harry furiously. "What did you do that to Hagrid for, eh?"

Rita Skeeter raised her heavily penciled eyebrows.

"Our readers have a right to the truth, Harry. I am merely doing my-"

"Who cares if he's half-giant?" Harry shouted. "There's nothing wrong with him!"

The whole pub had gone very quiet. Madam Rosmerta was staring over from behind the bar, apparently oblivious to the fact that the flagon she was filling with mead was overflowing.

Rita Skeeters smile flickered very slightly, but she hitched it back almost at once; she snapped open her crocodile-skin handbag, pulled out her Quick-Quotes Quill,

and said, "How about giving me an interview about the Hagrid you know. Harry? The man behind the muscles? Your unlikely friendship and the reasons behind it. Would you call him a father substitute?"

Hermione stood up very abruptly, her butterbeer clutched in her hand as though it were a grenade.

"You horrible woman," she said, through gritted teeth, "you don't care, do you, anything for a story, and anyone will do, wont they? Even Ludo Bagman -"

"Sit down, you silly little girl, and don't talk about things you don't understand," said Rita Skeeter coldly, her eyes hardening as they fell on Hermione. "I know things about Ludo Bagman that would make your hair curl... not that it needs it -" she added, eyeing Hermione's bushy hair.

"Let's go," said Hermione, "c'mon. Harry - Ron . .."

They left; many people were staring at them as they went. Harry glanced back as they reached the door. Rita Skeeter's Quick-Quotes Quill was out; it was zooming backward and forward over a piece of parchment on the table.

"She'll be after you next, Hermione," said Ron in a low and worried voice as they walked quickly back up the street.

"Let her try!" said Hermione defiantly; she was shaking with rage. "I'll show her! Silly little girl, am I? Oh, I'll get her back for this. First Harry, then Hagrid ..."

"You don't want to go upsetting Rita Skeeter," said Ron nervously. "I'm serious, Hermione, she'll dig up something on you -"

"My parents don't read the Daily Prophet. She can't scare me into hiding!" said Hermione, now striding along so fast that it was all Harry and Ron could do to keep up with her. The last time Harry had seen Hermione in a rage like this, she had hit Draco Malfoy around the face. "And Hagrid isn't hiding anymore! He should never have let that excuse for a human being upset him! Come on!"

Breaking into a run, she led them all the way back up the road, through the gates flanked by winged boars, and up through the grounds to Hagrid's cabin.

The curtains were still drawn, and they could hear Fang barking as they approached.

"Hagrid!" Hermione shouted, pounding on his front door. "Hagrid, that's enough! We know you're in there! Nobody cares if your mum was a giantess, Hagrid! You can't let that foul Skeeter woman do this to you! Hagrid, get out here, you're just being -"

The door opened. Hermione said, "About t-!" and then stopped, very suddenly, because she had found herself face-to-face, not with Hagrid, but with Albus Dumbledore.

"Good afternoon," he said pleasantly, smiling down at them.

"We-er-we wanted to see Hagrid," said Hermione in a rather small voice.

"Yes, I surmised as much," said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling. "Why don't you come in?"

"Oh . . . um ... okay," said Hermione.

She, Ron, and Harry went into the cabin; Fang launched himself upon Harry the moment he entered, barking madly and trying to lick his ears. Harry fended off Fang and looked around.

Hagrid was sitting at his table, where there were two large mugs of tea. He looked a real mess. His face was blotchy, his eyes swollen, and he had gone to the other extreme where his hair was concerned; far from trying to make it behave, it now looked like a wig of tangled wire.

"Hi, Hagrid," said Harry.

Hagrid looked up.

"'Lo," he said in a very hoarse voice.

"More tea, I think," said Dumbledore, closing the door behind Harry, Ron, and Hermione, drawing out his wand, and twiddling it; a revolving tea tray appeared in midair along with a plate of cakes. Dumbledore magicked the tray onto the table, and everybody sat down. There was a slight pause, and then Dumbledore said, "Did you by any chance hear what Miss Granger was shouting, Hagrid?"

Hermione went slightly pink, but Dumbledore smiled at her and continued, "Hermione, Harry, and Ron still seem to want to know you, judging by the way they were attempting to break down the door."

"Of course we still want to know you!" Harry said, staring at Hagrid. "You don't think anything that Skeeter cow - sorry, Professor," he added quickly, looking at Dumbledore.

"I have gone temporarily deaf and haven't any idea what you said. Harry," said Dumbledore, twiddling his thumbs and staring at the ceiling.

"Er-right," said Harry sheepishly. "I just meant-Hagrid, how could you think we'd care what that-woman-wrote about you?"

Two fat tears leaked out of Hagrid's beetle-black eyes and fell slowly into his tangled beard.

"Living proof of what I've been telling you, Hagrid," said Dumbledore, still looking carefully up at the ceiling. "I have shown you the letters from the countless parents who remember you from their own days here, telling me in no uncertain terms that if I sacked you, they would have something to say about it -"

"Not all of 'em," said Hagrid hoarsely. "Not all of 'em wan me ter stay."

"Really, Hagrid, if you are holding out for universal popularity, I'm afraid you will be in this cabin for a very long time," said Dumbledore, now peering sternly over his half-moon spectacles. "Not a week has passed since I became headmaster of this school when I haven't had at least one owl complaining about the way I run it. But what should I do? Barricade myself in my study and refuse to talk to anybody?"

"Yeh - yeh're not half-giant!" said Hagrid croakily.

"Hagrid, look what I've got for relatives!" Harry said furiously. "Look at the Dursleys!"

"An excellent point," said Professor Dumbledore. "My own brother, Aberforth, was prosecuted for practicing inappropriate charms on a goat. It was all over the papers, but did Aberforth hide? No, he did not! He held his head high and went about his business as usual! Of course, I'm not entirely sure he can read, so that may not have been bravery. . .."

"Come back and teach, Hagrid," said Hermione quietly, "please come back, we really miss you."

Hagrid gulped. More tears leaked out down his cheeks and into his tangled beard.

Dumbledore stood up. "I refuse to accept your resignation, Hagrid, and I expect you back at work on Monday," he said. "You will join me for breakfast at eight-thirty in the Great Hall. No excuses. Good afternoon to you all."

Dumbledore left the cabin, pausing only to scratch Fangs ears. When the door had shut behind him, Hagrid began to sob into his dustbin-lid-sized hands. Hermione kept patting his arm, and at last, Hagrid looked up, his eyes very red indeed, and said, "Great man, Dumbledore . . . great man . .."

"Yeah, he is," said Ron. "Can I have one of these cakes, Hagrid?"

"Help yerself," said Hagrid, wiping his eyes on the back of his hand. "Ar, he's righ', o' course - yeh're all righ' . . .I bin stupid . .. my ol' dad woulda bin ashamed o' the way I've bin behavin'...." More tears leaked out, but he wiped them away more forcefully, and said, "Never shown you a picture of my old dad, have I? Here..."

Hagrid got up, went over to his dresser, opened a drawer, and pulled out a picture of a short wizard with Hagrid's crinkled black eyes, beaming as he sat on top of Hagrid's shoulder. Hagrid was a good seven or eight feet tall, judging by the apple tree beside him, but his face was beardless, young, round, and smooth - he looked hardly older than eleven.

"Tha was taken jus' after I got inter Hogwarts," Hagrid croaked. "Dad was dead chuffed ... thought I migh' not be a wizard, see, 'cos me mum ... well, anyway.

'Course, I never was great shakes at magic, really... but at least he never saw me expelled. Died, see, in me second year. . . ."

"Dumbledore was the one who stuck up for me after Dad went. Got me the gamekeeper job . . . trusts people, he does. Gives 'em second chances ... tha's what sets him apar' from other heads, see. He'll accept anyone at Hogwarts, s'long as they've got the talent. Knows people can turn out okay even if their families weren' ... well... all tha' respectable. But some don understand that. There's some who'd always hold it against yeh . . . there's some who'd even pretend they just had big bones rather than stand up an' say - I am what I am, an' I'm not ashamed. 'Never be ashamed,' my ol' dad used ter say, 'there's some who'll hold it against you, but they're not worth botherin' with.' An' he was right. I've bin an idiot. I'm not botherin' with her no more, I promise yeh that. Big bones . . . I'll give her big bones."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked at one another nervously; Harry would rather have taken fifty Blast-Ended Skrewts for a walk than admit to Hagrid that he had overheard him talking to Madame Maxime, but Hagrid was still talking, apparently unaware that he had said anything odd.

"Yeh know wha, Harry?" he said, looking up from the photograph of his father, his eyes very bright, "when I firs' met you, you reminded me o' me a bit. Mum an' Dad gone, an' you was feelin' like yeh wouldn' fit in at Hogwarts, remember? Not sure yeh were really up to it... an' now look at yeh, Harry! School champion!"

He looked at Harry for a moment and then said, very seriously, "Yeh know what I'd love. Harry? I'd love yeh ter win, I really would. It'd show 'em all... yeh don' have ter be pureblood ter do it. Yeh don have ter be ashamed of what yeh are. It'd show 'em Dumbledore's the one who's got it righ', lettin' anyone in as long as they can do magic. How you doin' with that egg, Harry?"

"Great," said Harry. "Really great."

Hagrid's miserable face broke into a wide, watery smile.

"Tha's my boy. . . you show 'em, Harry, you show 'em. Beat 'em all."

Lying to Hagrid wasn't quite like lying to anyone else. Harry went back to the castle later that afternoon with Ron and Hermione, unable to banish the image of the happy expression on Hagrid's whiskery face as he had imagined Harry winning the tournament. The incomprehensible egg weighed more heavily than ever on Harrys conscience that evening, and by the time he had got into bed, he had made up his mind - it was time to shelve his pride and see if Cedric's hint was worth anything.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE - THE EGG AND THE EYE

Harry had no idea how long a bath he would need to work out the secret of the golden egg, he decided to do it at night, when he would be able to take as much time as he wanted. Reluctant though he was to accept more favors from Cedric, he also decided to use the prefects' bathroom; far fewer people were allowed in there, so it was much less likely that he would be disturbed.

Harry planned his excursion carefully, because he had been caught out of bed and out-of-bounds by Filch the caretaker in the middle of the night once before, and had no desire to repeat the experience. The Invisibility Cloak would, of course, be essential, and as an added precaution, Harry thought he would take the Marauders Map, which, next to the cloak, was the most useful aid to rule-breaking Harry owned. The map showed the whole of Hogwarts, including its many shortcuts and secret passageways and, most important of all, it revealed the people inside the castle as minuscule, labeled dots, moving around the corridors, so that Harry would be forewarned if somebody was approaching the bathroom.

On Thursday night, Harry sneaked up to bed, put on the cloak, crept back downstairs, and, just as he had done on the night when Hagrid had shown him the dragons, waited for the portrait hole to open. This time it was Ron who waited outside to give the Fat Lady the password ("banana fritters"), "Good luck," Ron muttered, climbing into the room as Harry crept out past him.

It was awkward moving under the cloak tonight, because Harry had the heavy egg under one arm and the map held in front of his nose with the other. However, the moonlit corridors were empty and silent, and by checking the map at strategic intervals, Harry was able to ensure that he wouldn't run into anyone he wanted to avoid. When he reached the statue of Boris the Bewildered, a lost-looking wizard with his gloves on the wrong hands, he located the right door, leaned close to it, and muttered the password, "Pine fresh," just as Cedric had told him.

The door creaked open. Harry slipped inside, bolted the door behind him, and pulled off the Invisibility Cloak, looking around.

His immediate reaction was that it would be worth becoming a prefect just to be able to use this bathroom. It was softly lit by a splendid candle-filled chandelier, and everything was made of white marble, including what looked like an empty, rectangular swimming pool sunk into the middle of the floor. About a hundred golden taps stood all around the pools edges, each with a differently colored Jewel set into its handle. There was also a diving board. Long white linen curtains hung at the windows; a large pile of fluffy white towels sat in a corner, and there was a single golden-framed painting on the wall. It featured a blonde mermaid who

was fast asleep on a rock, her long hair over her face. It fluttered every time she

snored.

Harry moved forward, looking around, his footsteps echoing off the walls. Magnificent though the bathroom was - and quite keen though he was to try out a few of those taps - now he was here he couldn't quite suppress the feeling that Cedric might have been having him on. How on earth was this supposed to help solve the mystery of the egg? Nevertheless, he put one of the Huffy towels, the cloak, the map, and the egg at the side of the swimming-pool-sized bath, then knelt down and turned on a few of the taps.

He could tell at once that they carried different sorts of bubble bath mixed with the water, though it wasn't bubble bath as Harry had ever experienced it. One tap gushed pink and blue bubbles the size of footballs; another poured ice-white foam so thick that Harry thought it would have supported his weight if he'd cared to test it; a third sent heavily perfumed purple clouds hovering over the surface of the water. Harry amused himself for awhile turning the taps on and off, particularly enjoying the effect of one whose jet bounced off the surface of the water in large arcs. Then, when the deep pool was full of hot water, foam, and bubbles, which took a very short time considering its size, Harry turned off all the taps, pulled off his pajamas, slippers, and dressing gown, and slid into the water.

It was so deep that his feet barely touched the bottom, and he actually did a couple of lengths before swimming back to the side and treading water, staring at the egg. Highly enjoyable though it was to swim in hot and foamy water with clouds of different-colored steam wafting all around him, no stroke of brilliance came to him, no sudden burst of understanding.

Harry stretched out his arms, lifted the egg in his wet hands, and opened it. The wailing, screeching sound filled the bathroom, echoing and reverberating off the marble walls, but it sounded just as incomprehensible as ever, if not more so with all the echoes. He snapped it shut again, worried that the sound would attract Filch, wondering whether that hadn't been Cedric's plan - and then, making him jump so badly that he dropped the egg, which clattered away across the bathroom floor, someone spoke.

"I'd try putting it in the water, if I were you."

Harry had swallowed a considerable amount of bubbles in shock. He stood up, sputtering, and saw the ghost of a very glum-looking girl sitting cross-legged on top of one of the taps. It was Moaning Myrtle, who was usually to be heard sobbing in the S-bend of a toilet three floors below.

"Myrtle!" Harry said in outrage, "I'm - I'm not wearing anything!"

The foam was so dense that this hardly mattered, but he had a nasty feeling that Myrtle had been spying on him from out of one of the taps ever since he had arrived.

"I closed my eyes when you got in," she said, blinking at him through her thick

spectacles. "You haven't been to see me for ages."

"Yeah . . . well. . ." said Harry, bending his knees slightly, just to make absolutely sure Myrtle couldn't see anything but his head, "I'm not supposed to come into your bathroom, am I? It's a girls' one."

"You didn't used to care," said Myrtle miserably. "You used to be in there all the time."

This was true, though only because Harry, Ron, and Hermione had found Myrtle's out-of-order toilets a convenient place to brew Polyjuice Potion in secret - a forbidden potion that had turned him and Ron into living replicas of Crabbe and Goyle for an hour, so that they could sneak into the Slytherin common room.

"I got told off for going in there." said Harry, which was half-true; Percy had once caught him coming out of Myrtles bathroom. "I thought I'd better not come back after that."

"Oh ... I see ..." said Myrtle, picking at a spot on her chin in a morose sort of way. "Well... anyway... I'd try the egg in the water. That's what Cedric Diggory did."

"Have you been spying on him too?" said Harry indignantly. "What d'you do, sneak up here in the evenings to watch the prefects take baths?"

"Sometimes," said Myrtle, rather slyly, "but I've never come out to speak to anyone before."

"I'm honored," said Harry darkly. "You keep your eyes shut!"

He made sure Myrtle had her glasses well covered before hoisting himself out of the bath, wrapping the towel firmly around his waist, and going to retrieve the egg. Once he was back in the water, Myrtle peered through her fingers and said, "Go on, then . .. open it under the water!"

Harry lowered the egg beneath the foamy surface and opened it... and this time, it did not wail. A gurgling song was coming out of it, a song whose words he couldnt distinguish through the water.

"You need to put your head under too," said Myrtle, who seemed to be thoroughly enjoying bossing him around. "Go on!"

Harry took a great breath and slid under the surface - and now, sitting on the marble bottom of the bubble-filled bath, he heard a chorus of eerie voices singing to him from the open egg in his hands:

"Come seek us where our voices sound,

We cannot sing above the ground,

And while you re searching, ponder this:

Wove taken what you'll sorely miss,

An hour long you'll have to look,

And to recover what we took,

But past an hour- the prospect's black,

Too late, it's gone, it wont come back"

Harry let himself float back upward and broke the bubbly surface, shaking his hair out of his eyes.

"Hear it?" said Myrtle.

"Yeah ... 'Come seek us where our voices sound .. .' and if I need persuading ... hang on, I need to listen again...."

He sank back beneath the water. It took three more underwater renditions of the egg's song before Harry had it memorized; then he trod water for a while, thinking hard, while Myrtle sat and watched him.

"I've got to go and look for people who can't use their voices above the ground. . . ." he said slowly. "Er . . . who could that be?"

"Slow, aren't you?"

He had never seen Moaning Myrtle so cheerful, apart from the day when a dose of PolyJuice Potion had given Hermione the hairy face and tail of a cat. Harry stared around the bathroom, thinking ... if the voices could only be heard underwater, then it made sense for them to belong to underwater creatures. He ran this theory past Myrtle, who smirked at him.

"Well, thats what Diggory thought," she said. "He lay there talking to himself for ages about it. Ages and ages . . . nearly all the bubbles had gone. ..."

"Underwater ..." Harry said slowly. "Myrtle . . . what lives in the lake, apart from the giant squid?"

"Oh all sorts," she said. "I sometimes go down there . . . sometimes don't have any choice, if someone flushes my toilet when I'm not expecting it...."

Trying not to think about Moaning Myrtle zooming down a pipe to the lake with the contents of a toilet. Harry said, "Well, does anything in there have a human voice? Hang on -"

Harry's eyes had fallen on the picture of the snoozing mermaid on the wall.

"Myrtle, there aren't merpeople in there, are there?"

"Oooh, very good," she said, her thick glasses twinkling, "it took Diggory much longer than that! And that was with her awake too" - Myrtle jerked her head

toward the mermaid with an expression of great dislike on her glum face - "giggling and showing off and flashing her fins.. .."

"Thats it, isn't it?" said Harry excitedly. "The second tasks to go and find the merpeople in the lake and ... and ..."

But he suddenly realized what he was saying, and he felt the excitement drain out of him as though someone had just pulled a plug in his stomach. He wasn't a very good swimmer; he'd never had much practice. Dudley had had lessons in his youth, but Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon, no doubt hoping that Harry would drown one day, hadn't bothered to give him any. A couple of lengths of this bath were all very well, but that lake was very large, and very deep . . . and merpeople would surely live right at the bottom. . . .

"Myrtle," Harry said slowly, "how am I supposed to breathe?"

At this, Myrtle's eyes filled with sudden tears again.

"Tactless!" she muttered, groping in her robes for a handkerchief.

"What's tactless?" said Harry, bewildered.

"Talking about breathing in front of me!" she said shrilly, and her voice echoed loudly around the bathroom. "When I can't. . . when I haven't. . . not for ages ..."

She buried her face in her handkerchief and sniffed loudly. Harry remembered how touchy Myrtle had always been about being dead, but none of the other ghosts he knew made such a fuss about it.

"Sorry," he said impatiently. "I didn't mean - I just forgot. . ."

"Oh yes, very easy to forget Myrtle's dead," said Myrtle, gulping, looking at him out of swollen eyes. "Nobody missed me even when I was alive. Took them hours and hours to find my body - I know, I was sitting there waiting for them. Olive Hornby came into the bathroom - Are you in here again, sulking, Myrtle?' she said, 'because Professor Dippet asked me to look for you -' And then she saw my body . . . ooooh, she didn't forget it until her dying day, I made sure of that... followed her around and reminded her, I did. I remember at her brother's wedding -"

But Harry wasn't listening; he was thinking about the merpeople's song again. "We've taken what you II sorely miss." That sounded as though they were going to steal something of his, something he had to get back. What were they going to take?

"--and then, of course, she went to the Ministry of Magic to stop me stalking her, so I had to come back here and live in my toilet."

"Good," said Harry vaguely. "Well, I'm a lot further on than I was. . . . Shut your eyes again, will you? I'm getting out."

He retrieved the egg from the bottom of the bath, climbed out, dried himself, and pulled on his pajamas and dressing gown again.

"Will you come and visit me in my bathroom again sometime?" Moaning Myrtle asked mournfully as Harry picked up the Invisibility Cloak.

"Er . . . I'll try," Harry said, though privately thinking the only way he'd be visiting Myrtle's bathroom again was if every other toilet in the castle got blocked. "See you. Myrtle... thanks for your help."

"Bye, 'bye," she said gloomily, and as Harry put on the Invisibllity Cloak he saw her zoom back up the tap.

Out in the dark corridor, Harry examined the Marauders Map to check that the coast was still clear. Yes, the dots belonging to Filch and his cat, Mrs. Norris, were safely in their office . .. nothing else seemed to be moving apart from Peeves, though he was bouncing around the trophy room on the floor above. ... Harry had taken his first step back toward Gryffindor Tower when something else on the map caught his eye . . . something distinctly odd.

Peeves was not the only thing that was moving. A single dot was flitting around a room in the bottom left-hand corner - Snapes office. But the dot wasn't labeled "Severus Snape" ... it was Bartemius Crouch.

Harry stared at the dot. Mr. Crouch was supposed to be too ill to go to work or to come to the Yule Ball - so what was he doing, sneaking into Hogwarts at one o'clock in the morning? Harry watched closely as the dot moved around and around the room, pausing here and there. ...

Harry hesitated, thinking . . . and then his curiosity got the better of him. He turned and set off in the opposite direction toward the nearest staircase. He was going to see what Crouch was up to.

Harry walked down the stairs as quietly as possible, though the faces in some of the portraits still turned curiously at the squeak of a floorboard, the rustle of his pajamas. He crept along the corridor below, pushed aside a tapestry about halfway along, and proceeded down a narrower staircase, a shortcut that would take him down two floors. He kept glancing down at the map, wondering ... It just didn't seem in character, somehow, for correct, law-abiding Mr. Crouch to be sneaking around somebody else's office this late at night....

And then, halfway down the staircase, not thinking about what he was doing, not concentrating on anything but the peculiar behavior of Mr. Crouch, Harrys leg suddenly sank right through the trick step Neville always forgot to jump. He gave an ungainly wobble, and the golden egg, still damp from the bath, slipped from under his arm. He lurched forward to try and catch it, but too late; the egg fell down the long staircase with a bang as loud as a bass drum on every step - the Invisibility Cloak slipped - Harry snatched at it, and the Marauder s Map fluttered out of his hand and slid down six stairs, where, sunk in the step to above his knee,

he couldn't reach it.

The golden egg fell through the tapestry at the bottom of the staircase, burst open, and began wailing loudly in the corridor below. Harry pulled out his wand and struggled to touch the Marauder s Map, to wipe it blank, but it was too far away to reach -

Pulling the cloak back over himself Harry straightened up, listening hard with his eyes screwed up with fear. . . and, almost immediately -

"PEEVES!"

It was the unmistakable hunting cry of Filch the caretaker. Harry could hear his rapid, shuffling footsteps coming nearer and nearer, his wheezy voice raised in fury.

"What's this racket? Wake up the whole castle, will you? I'll have you, Peeves, I'll have you, you'll... and what is this?"

Filch's footsteps halted; there was a clink of metal on metal and the wailing stopped - Filch had picked up the egg and closed it. Harry stood very still, one leg still Jammed tightly in the magical step, listening. Any moment now, Filch was going to pull aside the tapestry, expecting to see Peeves . . . and there would be no Peeves ... but if he came up the stairs, he would spot the Marauder's Map . . . and Invisibility Cloak or not, the map would show "Harry Potter" standing exactly where he was.

"Egg?" Filch said quietly at the foot of the stairs. "My sweet!" - Mrs. Norris was obviously with him - "This is a Triwizard clue! This belongs to a school champion!"

Harry felt sick; his heart was hammering very fast -

"PEEVES!" Filch roared gleefully. "You've been stealing!"

He ripped back the tapestry below, and Harry saw his horrible, pouchy face and bulging, pale eyes staring up the dark and (to Filch) deserted staircase.

"Hiding, are you?" he said softly. "I'm coming to get you, Peeves. . . . You've gone and stolen a Triwizard clue, Peeves... . Dumbledore'll have you out of here for this, you filthy, pilfering poltergeist. ..."

Filch started to climb the stairs, his scrawny, dust-colored cat at his heels. Mrs. Morris's lamp-like eyes, so very like her masters, were fixed directly upon Harry. He had had occasion before now to wonder whether the Invisibility Cloak worked on cats. . . . Sick with apprehension, he watched Filch drawing nearer and nearer in his old flannel dressing gown - he tried desperately to pull his trapped leg free, but it merely sank a few more inches - any second now, Filch was going to spot the map or walk right into him -

"Filch? Whats going on?"

Filch stopped a few steps below Harry and turned. At the foot of the stairs stood the only person who could make Harry's situation worse: Snape. He was wearing a long gray nightshirt and he looked livid.

"Its Peeves, Professor," Filch whispered malevolently. "He threw this egg down the stairs."

Snape climbed up the stairs quickly and stopped beside Filch. Harry gritted his teeth, convinced his loudly thumping heart would give him away at any second. . . .

"Peeves?" said Snape softly, staring at the egg in Filch's hands. "But Peeves couldn't get into my office. . . ."

"This egg was in your office. Professor?"

"Of course not," Snape snapped. "I heard banging and wailing -"

"Yes, Professor, that was the egg -"

"- I was coming to investigate -"

"- Peeves threw it. Professor -"

"- and when I passed my office, I saw that the torches were lit and a cupboard door was ajar! Somebody has been searching it!"

But Peeves couldn't -"

"I know he couldn't, Filch!" Snape snapped again. "I seal my office with a spell none but a wizard could break!" Snape looked up the stairs, straight through Harry, and then down into the corridor below. "I want you to come and help me search for the intruder, Filch."

"I - yes, Professor - but -"

Filch looked yearningly up the stairs, right through Harry, who could see that he was very reluctant to forgo the chance of cornering Peeves. Go, Harry pleaded with him silently, go with Snape . . . go. . . Mrs. Norris was peering around Filch's legs.... Harry had the distinct impression that she could smell him.. . . Why had he filled that bath with so much perfumed foam?

"The thing is, Professor," said Filch plaintively, "the headmaster will have to listen to me this time. Peeves has been stealing from a student, it might be my chance to get him thrown out of the castle once and for all -"

"Filch, I don't give a damn about that wretched poltergeist; it's my office that's -"

Clunk. Clunk. Clunk.

Snape stopped talking very abruptly. He and Filch both looked down at the foot of the stairs. Harry saw Mad-Eye Moody limp into sight through the narrow gap between their heads. Moody was wearing his old traveling cloak over his nightshirt and leaning on his staff as usual.

"Pajama party, is it?" he growled up the stairs.

"Professor Snape and I heard noises, Professor," said Filch at once. "Peeves the Poltergeist, throwing things around as usual - and then Professor Snape discovered that someone had broken into his off -"

"Shut up!" Snape hissed to Filch.

Moody took a step closer to the foot of the stairs. Harry saw Moodys magical eye travel over Snape, and then, unmistakably, onto himself.

Harrys heart gave a horrible jolt. Moody could see through Invisibility Cloaks... he alone could see the full strangeness of the scene:

Snape in his nightshirt, Filch clutching the egg, and he, Harry, trapped in the stairs behind them. Moody's lopsided gash of a mouth opened in surprise. For a few seconds, he and Harry stared straight into each other's eyes. Then Moody closed his mouth and turned his blue eye upon Snape again.

"Did I hear that correctly, Snape?" he asked slowly. "Someone broke into your office?"

"It is unimportant," said Snape coldly. "On the contrary," growled Moody, "it is very important. Who'd want to break into your office?"

"A student, I daresay," said Snape. Harry could see a vein flickering horribly on Snape's greasy temple. "It has happened before. Potion ingredients have gone missing from my private store cupboard ... students attempting illicit mixtures, no doubt...."

"Reckon they were after potion ingredients, eh?" said Moody. "Not hiding anything else in your office, are you?"

Harry saw the edge of Snapes sallow face turn a nasty brick color, the vein in his temple pulsing more rapidly.

"You know I'm hiding nothing, Moody," he said in a soft and dangerous voice, "as you've searched my office pretty thoroughly yourself."

Moodys face twisted into a smile. "Auror's privilege, Snape. Dumbledore told me to keep an eye -"

"Dumbledore happens to trust me," said Snape through clenched teeth. "I refuse to believe that he gave you orders to search my office!"

"Course Dumbledore trusts you," growled Moody. "Hes a trusting man, isn't he?

Believes in second chances. But me - I say there are spots that don't come off, Snape. Spots that never come off, d'you know what I mean?"

Snape suddenly did something very strange. He seized his left forearm convulsively with his right hand, as though something on it had hurt him.

Moody laughed. "Get back to bed, Snape."

"You don't have the authority to send me anywhere!" Snape hissed, letting go of his arm as though angry with himself. "I have as much right to prowl this school after dark as you do!"

"Prowl away," said Moody, but his voice was full of menace. "I look forward to meeting you in a dark corridor some time.... You've dropped something, by the way. ..."

With a stab of horror. Harry saw Moody point at the Marauders Map, still lying on the staircase six steps below him. As Snape and Filch both turned to look at it, Harry threw caution to the winds; he raised his arms under the cloak and waved furiously at Moody to attract his attention, mouthing "It's mine! Mine!"

Snape had reached out for it, a horrible expression of dawning comprehension on his face -

"Accio Parchment!"

The map flew up into the air, slipped through Snapes outstretched fingers, and soared down the stairs into Moodys hand.

"My mistake," Moody said calmly. "It's mine - must've dropped it earlier -"

But Snape's black eyes were darting from the egg in Filch's arms to the map in Moodys hand, and Harry could tell he was putting two and two together, as only Snape could. . . .

"Potter," he said quietly.

"What's that?" said Moody calmly, folding up the map and pocketing it.

"Potter!" Snape snarled, and he actually turned his head and stared right at the place where Harry was, as though he could suddenly see him. "That egg is Potters egg. That piece of parchment belongs to Potter. I have seen it before, I recognize it! Potter is here! Potter, in his Invisibility Cloak!"

Snape stretched out his hands like a blind man and began to move up the stairs; Harry could have sworn his over-large nostrils were dilating, trying to sniff Harry out - trapped. Harry leaned backward, trying to avoid Snapes fingertips, but any moment now-

"There's nothing there, Snape!" barked Moody, "but I'll be happy to tell the headmaster how quickly your mind jumped to Harry Potter!"

"Meaning what?" Snape turned again to look at Moody, his hands still outstretched, inches from Harry's chest.

"Meaning that Dumbledore's very interested to know who's got it in for that boy!" said Moody, limping nearer still to the foot of the stairs. "And so am I, Snape . . . very interested...." The torchlight flickered across his mangled face, so that the scars, and the chunk missing from

his nose, looked deeper and darker than ever.

Snape was looking down at Moody, and Harry couldn't see the expression on his face. For a moment, nobody moved or said anything. Then Snape slowly lowered his hands.

"I merely thought," said Snape, in a voice of forced calm, "that if Potter was wandering around after hours again ... it's an unfortunate habit of his ... he should be stopped. For - for his own safety."

"Ah, I see," said Moody softly. "Got Potter's best interests at heart, have you?"

There was a pause. Snape and Moody were still staring at each other, Mrs. Norris gave a loud meow, still peering around Filch's legs, looking for the source of Harry's bubble-bath smell.

"I think I will go back to bed," Snape said curtly.

"Best idea you've had all night," said Moody. "Now, Filch, if you'll just give me that egg-"

"No!" said Filch, clutching the egg as though it were his firstborn son. "Professor Moody, this is evidence of Peeves' treachery!"

"It's the property of the champion he stole it from," said Moody. Hand it over, now."

Snape swept downstairs and passed Moody without another word. Filch made a chirruping noise to Mrs. Norris, who stared blankly at Harry for a few more seconds before turning and following her master. Still breathing very fast. Harry heard Snape walking away down the corridor; Filch handed Moody the egg and disappeared from view too, muttering to Mrs. Norris. "Never mind. my sweet.. . we'll see Dumbledore in the morning ... tell him what Peeves was up to...."

A door slammed. Harry was left staring down at Moody, who placed his staff on the bottommost stair and started to climb laboriously toward him, a dull clunk on every other step.

"Close shave. Potter," he muttered.

"Yeah ... I - er ... thanks," said Harry weakly.

"What is this thing?" said Moody, drawing the Marauder's Map out of his pocket

and unfolding it.

"Map of Hogwarts," said Harry, hoping Moody was going to pull him out of the staircase soon; his leg was really hurting him.

"Merlins beard," Moody whispered, staring at the map, his magical eye going haywire. "This . .. this is some map. Potter!"

"Yeah, its . . . quite useful," Harry said. His eyes were starting to water from the pain. "Er - Professor Moody, d'you think you could help me - ?"

"What? Oh! Yes . . . yes, of course . .."

Moody took hold of Harrys arms and pulled; Harrys leg came free of the trick step, and he climbed onto the one above it. Moody was still gazing at the map.

"Potter ..." he said slowly, "you didn't happen, by any chance, to see who broke into Snapes office, did you? On this map, I mean?"

"Er . . . yeah, I did . . ." Harry admitted. "It was Mr. Crouch."

Moodys magical eye whizzed over the entire surface of the map. He looked suddenly alarmed.

"Crouch?" he said. "You're - you're sure. Potter?"

"Positive," said Harry.

"Well, he's not here anymore," said Moody, his eye still whizzing over the map. "Crouch . .. that's very - very interesting... ."

He said nothing for almost a minute, still staring at the map. Harry could tell that this news meant something to Moody and very much wanted to know what it was. He wondered whether he dared ask. Moody scared him slightly. . . yet Moody had just helped him avoid an awful lot of trouble. . . .

"Er ... Professor Moody . . . why d'you reckon Mr. Crouch wanted to look around Snapes office?"

Moodys magical eye left the map and fixed, quivering, upon Harry. It was a penetrating glare, and Harry had the impression that Moody was sizing him up, wondering whether to answer or not, or how much to tell him.

"Put it this way. Potter," Moody muttered finally, "they say old Mad-Eye's obsessed with catching Dark wizards . . . but I'm nothing - nothing - compared to Barty Crouch."

He continued to stare at the map. Harry was burning to know more.

"Professor Moody?" he said again. "D'you think... could this have anything to do with . . . maybe Mr. Crouch thinks there's something going on. ..."

"Like what?" said Moody sharply.

Harry wondered how much he dare say. He didn't want Moody to guess that he had a source of information outside Hogwarts; that might lead to tricky questions about Sirius.

"I don't know," Harry muttered, "odd stuffs been happening lately, hasn't it? It's been in the Daily Prophet... the Dark Mark at the World Cup, and the Death Eaters and everything...."

Both of Moody's mismatched eyes widened.

"You're a sharp boy. Potter," he said. His magical eye roved back to the Marauder's Map. "Crouch could be thinking along those lines," he said slowly. "Very possible. . . there have been some funny rumors flying around lately - helped along by Rita Skeeter, of course. It's making a lot of people nervous, I reckon." A grim smile twisted his lopsided mouth. "Oh if there's one thing I hate," he muttered, more to himself than to Harry, and his magical eye was fixed on the left-hand corner of the map, "its a Death Eater who walked free. ..."

Harry stared at him. Could Moody possibly mean what Harry thought he meant?

"And now I want to ask you a question. Potter," said Moody in a more businesslike tone.

Harrys heart sank; he had thought this was coming. Moody was going to ask where he had got this map, which was a very dubious magical object - and the story of how it had fallen into his hands incriminated not only him, but his own father, Fred and George Weasley, and Professor Lupin, their last Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. Moody waved the map in front of Harry, who braced himself-

"Can I borrow this?"

"Oh!" said Harry.

He was very fond of his map, but on the other hand, he was extremely relieved that Moody wasn't asking where he'd got it, and there was no doubt that he owed Moody a favor.

"Yeah, okay."

"Good boy," growled Moody. "I can make good use of this . .. this might be exactly what I've been looking for. . . . Right, bed, Potter, come on, now. ..."

They climbed to the top of the stairs together, Moody still examining the map as though it was a treasure the like of which he had never seen before. They walked in silence to the door of Moody's office, where he stopped and looked up at Harry.

"You ever thought of a career as an Auror, Potter?"

"No," said Harry, taken aback.

"You want to consider it," said Moody, nodding and looking at Harry thoughtfully. "Yes, indeed ... and incidentally ... I'm guessing you werent Just taking that egg for a walk tonight?"

"Er - no," said Harry, grinning. "I've been working out the clue."

Moody winked at him, his magical eye going haywire again. "Nothing like a nighttime stroll to give you ideas, Potter. . .. See you in the morning...."

He went back into his office, staring down at the Marauders Map again, and closed the door behind him.

Harry walked slowly back to Gryffindor Tower, lost in thought about Snape, and Crouch, and what it all meant.... Why was Crouch pretending to be ill, if he could manage to get to Hogwarts when he wanted to? What did he think Snape was concealing in his office?

And Moody thought he. Harry, ought to be an Auror! Interesting idea.. . but somehow. Harry thought, as he got quietly into his four-poster ten minutes later, the egg and the cloak now safely back in his trunk, he thought he'd like to check how scarred the rest of them were before he chose it as a career.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX - THE SECOND TASK

You said you'd already worked out that egg clue!" said Hermione indignantly.

"Keep your voice down!" said Harry crossly. "I just need to - sort of fine-tune it, all right?"

He, Ron, and Hermione were sitting at the very back of the Charms class with a table to themselves. They were supposed to be practicing the opposite of the Summoning Charm today - the Banishing Charm. Owing to the potential for nasty accidents when objects kept flying across the room. Professor Flitwick had given each student a stack of cushions on which to practice, the theory being that these wouldn't hurt anyone if they went off target. It was a good theory, but it wasn't working very well. Neville's aim was so poor that he kept accidentally sending much heavier things flying across the room - Professor Flitwick, for instance.

"Just forget the egg for a minute, all right?" Harry hissed as Professor Flitwick went whizzing resignedly past them, landing on top of a large cabinet. "I'm trying to tell you about Snape and Moody. ..."

This class was an ideal cover for a private conversation, as everyone was having far too much fun to pay them any attention. Harry had been recounting his adventures of the previous night in whispered installments for the last half hour.

"Snape said Moodys searched his office as well?" Ron whispered, his eyes alight with interest as he Banished a cushion with a sweep of his wand (it soared into the air and knocked Parvati's hat off). "What. . . d'you reckon Moody's here to keep an eye on Snape as well as Karkaroff?"

"Well, I dunno if that's what Dumbledore asked him to do, but he's definitely doing it," said Harry, waving his wand without paying much attention, so that his cushion did an odd sort of belly flop off the desk. "Moody said Dumbledore only lets Snape stay here because he's giving him a second chance or something. ..."

"What?" said Ron, his eyes widening, his next cushion spinning high into the air, ricocheting off the chandelier, and dropping heavily onto Flitwick's desk. "Harry... maybe Moody thinks Snape put your name in the Goblet of Fire!"

"Oh Ron," said Hermione, shaking her head sceptically, "we thought Snape was trying to kill Harry before, and it turned out he was saving Harry's life, remember?"

She Banished a cushion and it flew across the room and landed in the box they were all supposed to be aiming at. Harry looked at Hermione, thinking... it was true that Snape had saved his life once, but the odd thing was, Snape definitely loathed him, just as he'd loathed Harry s father when they had been at school together. Snape loved taking points from Harry, and had certainly never missed an opportunity to give him punishments, or even to suggest that he should be

suspended from the school.

"I don't care what Moody says," Hermione went on. "Dumbledore's not stupid. He was right to trust Hagrid and Professor Lupin, even though loads of people wouldn't have given them jobs, so why shouldn't he be right about Snape, even if Snape is a bit -"

"- evil," said Ron promptly. "Come on, Hermione, why are all these Dark wizard catchers searching his office, then?"

"Why has Mr. Crouch been pretending to be ill?" said Hermione, ignoring Ron. "Its a bit funny, isn't it, that he cant manage to come to the Yule Ball, but he can get up here in the middle of the night when he wants to?"

"You just don't like Crouch because of that elf, Winky," said Ron, sending a cushion soaring into the window.

"You just want to think Snapes up to something," said Hermione, sending her cushion zooming neatly into the box.

"I just want to know what Snape did with his first chance, if he's on his second one," said Harry grimly, and his cushion, to his very great surprise, flew straight across the room and landed neatly on top of Hermione's.

Obedient to Sirius's wish of hearing about anything odd at Hogwarts, Harry sent him a letter by brown owl that night, explaining all about Mr. Crouch breaking into Snape s office, and Moody and Snape's conversation. Then Harry turned his attention in earnest to the most urgent problem facing him: how to survive underwater for an hour on the twenty-fourth of February.

Ron quite liked the idea of using the Summoning Charm again - Harry had explained about Aqua-Lungs, and Ron couldn't see why Harry shouldn't Summon one from the nearest Muggle town. Hermione squashed this plan by pointing out that, in the unlikely event that Harry managed to learn how to operate an Aqua-Lung within the set limit of an hour, he was sure to be disqualified for breaking the International Code of Wizarding Secrecy - it was too much to hope that no Muggles would spot an Aqua-Lung zooming across the countryside to Hogwarts.

"Of course, the ideal solution would be for you to Transfigure yourself into a submarine or something," Hermione said. "If only we'd done human Transfiguration already! But I don't think we start that until sixth year, and it can go badly wrong if you don't know what you're doing...."

"Yeah, I don't fancy walking around with a periscope sticking out of my head," said Harry. "I s'pose I could always attack someone in front of Moody; he might do it for me...."

"I don't think he'd let you choose what you wanted to be turned into, though," said Hermione seriously. "No, I think your best chance is some sort of charm."

So Harry, thinking that he would soon have had enough of the library to last him a lifetime, buried himself once more among the dusty volumes, looking for any spell that might enable a human to survive without oxygen. However, though he, Ron, and Hermione searched through their lunchtimes, evenings, and whole weekends - though Harry asked Professor McGonagall for a note of permission to use the Restricted Section, and even asked the irritable, vulture-like librarian. Madam Pince, for help - they found nothing whatsoever that would enable Harry to spend an hour underwater and live to tell the tale.

Familiar flutterings of panic were starting to disturb Harry now, and he was finding it difficult to concentrate in class again. The lake, which Harry had always taken for granted as just another feature of the grounds, drew his eyes whenever he was near a classroom window, a great, iron-gray mass of chilly water, whose dark and icy depths were starting to seem as distant as the moon.

Just as it had before he faced the Horntail, time was slipping away as though somebody had bewitched the clocks to go extra-fast. There was a week to go before February the twenty-fourth (there was still time) . . . there were five days to go (he was bound to find something soon) .. . three days to go (please let me find something... please). . .

With two days left. Harry started to go off food again. The only good thing about breakfast on Monday was the return of the brown owl he had sent to Sirius. He pulled off the parchment, unrolled it, and saw the shortest letter Sirius had ever written to him.

Send date of next Hogsmeade weekend by return owl.

Harry turned the parchment over and looked at the back, hoping to see something else, but it was blank.

"Weekend after next," whispered Hermione, who had read the note over Harrys shoulder. "Here - take my quill and send this owl back straight away."

Harry scribbled the dates down on the back of Sirius's letter, tied it onto the brown owl's leg, and watched it take flight again. What had he expected? Advice on how to survive underwater? He had been so intent on telling Sirius all about Snape and Moody he had completely forgotten to mention the eggs clue.

"What's he want to know about the next Hogsmeade weekend for?" said Ron.

"Dunno," said Harry dully. The momentary happiness that had flared inside him at the sight of the owl had died. "Come on ...Care of Magical Creatures."

Whether Hagrid was trying to make up for the Blast-Ended Skrewts, or because there were now only two skrewts left, or because he was trying to prove he could do anything that Professor Grubbly-Plank could. Harry didnt know, but Hagrid had been continuing her lessons on unicorns ever since he'd returned to work. It turned out that Hagrid knew quite as much about unicorns as he did about

monsters, though it was clear that he found their lack of poisonous fangs disappointing.

Today he had managed to capture two unicorn foals. Unlike full-grown unicorns, they were pure gold. Parvati and Lavender went into transports of delight at the sight of them, and even Pansy Parkinson had to work hard to conceal how much she liked them.

"Easier ter spot than the adults," Hagrid told the class. "They turn silver when they're abou' two years old, an' they grow horns at aroun four. Don' go pure white till they're full grown, 'round about seven. They're a bit more trustin when they're babies .. . don mind boys so much.... C'mon, move in a bit, yeh can pat 'em if yeh want. . . give 'em a few o' these sugar lumps. . . .

"You okay. Harry?" Hagrid muttered, moving aside slightly, while most of the others swarmed around the baby unicorns.

"Yeah," said Harry. "Jus' nervous, eh?" said Hagrid.

"Bit," said Harry.

"Harry," said Hagrid, clapping a massive hand on his shoulder, so that Harry's knees buckled under its weight, "I'd've bin worried before I saw yeh take on tha Horntail, but I know now yeh can do anythin' yeh set yer mind ter. I'm not worried at all. Yeh're goin ter be fine. Got yer clue worked out, haven' yeh?"

Harry nodded, but even as he did so, an insane urge to confess that he didn't have any idea how to survive at the bottom of the lake for an hour came over him. He looked up at Hagrid - perhaps he had to go into the lake sometimes, to deal with the creatures in it? He looked after everything else on the grounds, after all-

"Yeh're goin' ter win," Hagrid growled, patting Harrys shoulder again, so that Harry actually felt himself sink a couple of inches into the soft ground. "I know it. I can feel it. Yeh're goin' ter win, Harry n

Harry just couldn't bring himself to wipe the happy, confident smile off Hagrid's face. Pretending he was interested in the young unicorns, he forced a smile in return, and moved forward to pat them with the others.

By the evening before the second task. Harry felt as though he were trapped in a nightmare. He was fully aware that even if, by some miracle, he managed to find a suitable spell, he'd have a real job mastering it overnight. How could he have let this happen? Why hadn't he got to work on the egg's clue sooner? Why had he ever let his mind wander in class - what if a teacher had once mentioned how to breathe underwater?

He sat with Hermione and Ron in the library as the sun set outside, tearing feverishly through page after page of spells, hidden from one another by the massive piles of books on the desk in front of each of them. Harry s heart gave a

huge leap every time he saw the word "water" on a page, but more often than not it was merely "Take two pints of water, half a pound of shredded mandrake leaves, and a newt..."

"I don't reckon it can be done," said Rons voice flatly from the other side of the table. "There's nothing. Nothing. Closest was that thing to dry up puddles and ponds, that Drought Charm, but that was nowhere near powerful enough to drain the lake."

"There must be something," Hermione muttered, moving a candle closer to her. Her eyes were so tired she was poring over the tiny print of Olde and Forgotten Bewitchments and Charmes with her nose about an inch from the page. "They'd never have set a task that was undoable."

"They have," said Ron. "Harry, just go down to the lake tomorrow, right, stick your head in, yell at the merpeople to give back whatever they've nicked, and see if they chuck it out. Best you can do, mate."

"There's a way of doing it!" Hermione said crossly. "There Just has to be!"

She seemed to be taking the library's lack of useful information on the subject as a personal insult; it had never failed her before.

"I know what I should have done," said Harry, resting, face-down, on Saucy Tricks for Tricky Sorts. "I should've learned to be an Animagus like Sirius."

An Animagus was a wizard who could transform into an animal.

"Yeah, you could've turned into a goldfish any time you wanted!" said Ron.

"Or a frog," yawned Harry. He was exhausted. "It takes years to become an Animagus, and then you have to register yourself and everything," said Hermione vaguely, now squinting down the index of Weird Wizarding Dilemmas and Their Solutions. "Professor McGonagall told us, remember... you've got to register yourself with the Improper Use of Magic Office ...what animal you become, and your markings, so you can't abuse it..."

"Hermione, I was joking," said Harry wearily. "I know I haven't got a chance of turning into a frog by tomorrow morning...."

"Oh this is no use," Hermione said, snapping shut Weird Wizarding Dilemmas. "Who on earth wants to make their nose hair grow into ringlets?"

"I wouldn't mind," said Fred Weasleys voice. "Be a talking point, wouldn't it?"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked up. Fred and George had just emerged from behind some bookshelves.

"What're you two doing here?" Ron asked.

"Looking for you," said George. "McGonagall wants you, Ron. And you,

Hermione."

"Why?" said Hermione, looking surprised.

"Dunno ... she was looking a bit grim, though," said Fred.

"We're supposed to take you down to her office," said George.

Ron and Hermione stared at Harry, who felt his stomach drop. Was Professor McGonagall about to tell Ron and Hermione off? Perhaps she'd noticed how much they were helping him, when he ought to be working out how to do the task alone?

"We'll meet you back in the common room," Hermione told Harry as she got up to go with Ron - both of them looked very anxious. "Bring as many of these books as you can, okay?"

"Right," said Harry uneasily.

By eight o'clock. Madam Pince had extinguished all the lamps and came to chivvy Harry out of the library. Staggering under the weight of as many books as he could carry, Harry returned to the Gryffindor common room, pulled a table into a corner, and continued to search. There was nothing in Madcap Magic for Wacky Warlocks. . . nothing in A Guide to Medieval Sorcery . . . not one mention of underwater exploits in An Anthology of Eighteenth-Century Charms, or in Dreadful Denizens of the Deep, or Powers You Never Knew You Had and What to Do with Them Now Youve Wised Up.

Crookshanks crawled into Harrys lap and curled up, purring deeply. The common room emptied slowly around Harry. People kept wishing him luck for the next morning in cheery, confident voices like Hagrid s, all of them apparently convinced that he was about to pull off another stunning performance like the one he had managed in the first task. Harry couldn't answer them, he just nodded, feeling as though there were a golfball stuck in his throat. By ten to midnight, he was alone in the room with Crookshanks. He had searched all the remaining books, and Ron and Hermione had not come back.

It's over, he told himself. You can't do it. You'll just have to go down to the lake in the morning and tell the judges....

He imagined himself explaining that he couldn't do the task. He pictured Bagman's look of round-eyed surprise, Karkaroffs satisfied, yellow-toothed smile. He could almost hear Fleur Delacour saying "I knew it. . . 'e is too young, 'e is only a little boy." He saw Malfoy flashing his POTTER STINKS badge at the front of the crowd, saw Hagrid s crestfallen, disbelieving face. . . .

Forgetting that Crookshanks was on his lap. Harry stood up very suddenly; Crookshanks hissed angrily as he landed on the floor, gave Harry a disgusted look, and stalked away with his bottlebrush tail in the air, but Harry was already hurrying up the spiral staircase to his dormitory. ... He would grab the Invisibility

Cloak and go back to the library, he'd stay there all night if he had to. ...

"Lumos," Harry whispered fifteen minutes later as he opened the library door.

Wand tip alight, he crept along the bookshelves, pulling down more books - books of hexes and charms, books on merpeople and water monsters, books on famous witches and wizards, on magical inventions, on anything at all that might include one passing reference to underwater survival. He carried them over to a table, then set to work, searching them by the narrow beam of his wand, occasionally checking his watch. . . .

One in the morning. . . two in the morning . . . the only way he could keep going was to tell himself, over and over again, next book. . . in the next one. . . the next one. . .

The mermaid in the painting in the prefects' bathroom was laughing. Harry was bobbing like a cork in bubbly water next to her rock, while she held his Firebolt over his head.

"Come and get it!" she giggled maliciously. "Come on, jump!"

"I can't," Harry panted, snatching at the Firebolt, and struggling not to sink. "Give it to me!"

But she just poked him painfully in the side with the end of the broomstick, laughing at him.

"That hurts - get off- ouch -"

"Harry Potter must wake up, sir!"

"Stop poking me -"

"Dobby must poke Harry Potter, sir, he must wake up!"

Harry opened his eyes. He was still in the library; the Invisibility Cloak had slipped off his head as he'd slept, and the side of his face was stuck to the pages of Where There's a Wand, There's a Way. He sat up, straightening his glasses, blinking in the bright daylight.

"Harry Potter needs to hurry!" squeaked Dobby. "The second task starts in ten minutes, and Harry Potter -"

"Ten minutes?" Harry croaked. "Ten - ten minutes?"

He looked down at his watch. Dobby was right. It was twenty past nine. A large, dead weight seemed to fall through Harry's chest into his stomach.

"Hurry, Harry Potter!" squeaked Dobby, plucking at Harry's sleeve. "You is supposed to be down by the lake with the other champions, sir!"

"It's too late, Dobby," Harry said hopelessly. "I'm not doing the task, I don't know how-"

"Harry Potter will do the task!" squeaked the elf. "Dobby knew Harry had not found the right book, so Dobby did it for him!"

"What?" said Harry. "But you don't know what the second task is -"

"Dobby knows, sir! Harry Potter has to go into the lake and find his Wheezy -"

"Find my what?"

"- and take his Wheezy back from the merpeople!"

"What's a Wheezy?"

"Your Wheezy, sir, your Wheezy-Wheezy who is giving Dobby his sweater!"

Dobby plucked at the shrunken maroon sweater he was now wearing over his shorts.

"What?" Harry gasped. "They've got. . . they've got Ron?"

"The thing Harry Potter will miss most, sir!" squeaked Dobby. "'But past an hour-'"

"- 'the prospect's black,'" Harry recited, staring, horror-struck, at the elf. " 'Too late, it's gone, it won't come back.' Dobby - what've I got to do?"

"You has to eat this, sir!" s queaked the elf, and he put his hand in the pocket of his shorts and drew out a ball of what looked like slimy, grayish-green rat tails. "Right before you go into the lake, sir - gillyweed!"

"What's it do?" said Harry, staring at the gillyweed.

"It will make Harry Potter breathe underwater, sir!"

"Dobby," said Harry frantically, "listen - are you sure about this?"

He couldn't quite forget that the last time Dobby had tried to "help" him, he had ended up with no bones in his right arm.

"Dobby is quite sure, sir!" said the elf earnestly. "Dobby hears things, sir, he is a house-elf, he goes all over the castle as he lights the fires and mops the floors. Dobby heard Professor McGonagall and Professor Moody in the staffroom, talking about the next task. . . . Dobby cannot let Harry Potter lose his Wheezy!"

Harrys doubts vanished. Jumping to his feet he pulled off the Invisibility Cloak, stuffed it into his bag, grabbed the gillyweed, and put it into his pocket, then tore out of the library with Dobby at his heels.

"Dobby is supposed to be in the kitchens, sir!" Dobby squealed as they burst into

the corridor. "Dobby will be missed - good luck, Harry Potter, sir, good luck!"

"See you later, Dobby!" Harry shouted, and he sprinted along the corridor and down the stairs, three at a time.

The entrance hall contained a few last-minute stragglers, all leaving the Great Hall after breakfast and heading through the double oak doors to watch the second task. They stared as Harry flashed past, sending Colin and Dennis Creevey flying as he leapt down the stone steps and out onto the bright, chilly grounds.

As he pounded down the lawn he saw that the seats that had encircled the dragons' enclosure in November were now ranged along the opposite bank, rising in stands that were packed to the bursting point and reflected in the lake below. The excited babble of the crowd echoed strangely across the water as Harry ran flat-out around the other side of the lake toward the judges, who were sitting at another gold-draped table at the water's edge. Cedric, Fleur, and Krum were beside the judges' table, watching Harry sprint toward them.

"I'm . .. here ..." Harry panted, skidding to a halt in the mud and accidentally splattering Fleurs robes.

"Where have you been?" said a bossy, disapproving voice. "The task's about to start!"

Harry looked around. Percy Weasley was sitting at the judges' table - Mr. Crouch had failed to turn up again.

"Now, now, Percy!" said Ludo Bagman, who was looking intensely relieved to see Harry. "Let him catch his breath!"

Dumbledore smiled at Harry, but Karkaroff and Madame Maxime didn't look at all pleased to see him. ... It was obvious from the looks on their faces that they had thought he wasn't going to turn up.

Harry bent over, hands on his knees, gasping for breath; he had a stitch in his side that felt as though he had a knife between his ribs, but there was no time to get rid of it; Ludo Bagman was now moving among the champions, spacing them along the bank at intervals of ten feet. Harry was on the very end of the line, next to Krum, who was wearing swimming trunks and was holding his wand ready.

"All right. Harry?" Bagman whispered as he moved Harry a few feet farther away from Krum. "Know what you're going to do?"

"Yeah," Harry panted, massaging his ribs.

Bagman gave Harry's shoulder a quick squeeze and returned to the judges' table; he pointed his wand at his throat as he had done at the World Cup, said, "Sonorus!" and his voice boomed out across the dark water toward the stands.

"Well, all our champions are ready for the second task, which will start on my

whistle. They have precisely an hour to recover what has been taken from them. On the count of three, then. One . . . two . . . three!"

The whistle echoed shrilly in the cold, still air; the stands erupted with cheers and applause; without looking to see what the other champions were doing, Harry pulled off his shoes and socks, pulled the handful of gillyweed out of his pocket, stuffed it into his mouth, and waded out into the lake.

It was so cold he felt the skin on his legs searing as though this were fire, not icy water. His sodden robes weighed him down as he walked in deeper; now the water was over his knees, and his rapidly numbing feet were slipping over silt and flat, slimy stones. He was chewing the gillyweed as hard and fast as he could; it felt unpleasantly slimy and rubbery, like octopus tentacles. Waist-deep in the freezing water he stopped, swallowed, and waited for something to happen.

He could hear laughter in the crowd and knew he must look stupid, walking into the lake without showing any sign of magical power. The part of him that was still dry was covered in goose pimples; half immersed in the icy water, a cruel breeze lifting his hair, Harry started to shiver violently. He avoided looking at the stands; the laughter was becoming louder, and there were catcalls and jeering from the Slytherins. ...

Then, quite suddenly, Harry felt as though an invisible pillow had been pressed over his mouth and nose. He tried to draw breath, but it made his head spin; his lungs were empty, and he suddenly felt a piercing pain on either side of his neck -

Harry clapped his hands around his throat and felt two large slits just below his ears, flapping in the cold air. . . . He had gills. Without pausing to think, he did the only thing that made sense - he flung himself forward into the water.

The first gulp of icy lake water felt like the breath of life. His head had stopped spinning; he took another great gulp of water and felt it pass smoothly through his gills, sending oxygen back to his brain. He stretched out his hands in front of him and stared at them. They looked green and ghostly under the water, and they had become webbed. He twisted around and looked at his bare feet - they had become elongated and the toes were webbed too:

It looked as though he had sprouted flippers.

The water didn't feel icy anymore either ... on the contrary, he felt pleasantly cool and very light. . . . Harry struck out once more, marveling at how far and fast his flipper-like feet propelled him through the vater, and noticing how clearly he could see, and how he no longer seemed to need to blink. He had soon swum so far into the lake that he could no longer see the bottom. He flipped over and dived into its depths.

Silence pressed upon his ears as he soared over a strange, dark, foggy landscape. He could only see ten feet around him, so that as he sped throuugh the water new scenes seemed to loom suddenly out of the incoming darkness: forests of rippling,

tangled black weed, wide plains of mud littered with dull, glimmering stones. He swam deeper and deeper, out toward the middle of the lake, his eyes wide, staring through the eerily gray-lit water around him to the shadow beyond, where the water became opaque.

Small fish flickered past him like silver darts. Once or twice he thought he saw something larger moving ahead of him, but when he got nearer, he discovered it to be nothing but a large, blackened log, or a dense clump of weed. There was no sign of any of the other champions, merpeople, Ron - nor, thankfully, the giant squid.

Light green weed stretched ahead of him as far as he could see, two feet deep, like a meadow of very overgrown grass. Harry was staring unblinkingly ahead of him, trying to discern shapes through the gloom . . . and then, without warning, something grabbed hold of his ankle.

Harry twisted his body around and saw a grindylow, a small, horned water demon, poking out of the weed, its long fingers clutched tightly around Harry's leg, its pointed fangs bared - Harry stuck his webbed hand quickly inside his robes and fumbled for his wand. By the time he had grasped it, two more grindylows had risen out of the weed, had seized handfuls of Harry's robes, and were attempting to drag him down.

"Relashio!" Harry shouted, except that no sound came out. ... A large bubble issued from his mouth, and his wand, instead of sending sparks at the grindylows, pelted them with what seemed to be a jet of boiling water, for where it struck them, angry red patches appeared on their green skin. Harry pulled his ankle out of the grindylows grip and swam, as fast as he could, occasionally sending more jets of hot water over his shoulder at random; every now and then he felt one of the grindylows snatch at his foot again, and he kicked out, hard; finally, he felt his foot connect with a horned skull, and looking back, saw the dazed grindylow floating away, cross-eyed, while its fellows shook their fists at Harry and sank back into the weed.

Harry slowed down a little, slipped his wand back inside his robes, and looked around, listening again. He turned full circle in the water, the silence pressing harder than ever against his eardrums. He knew he must be even deeper in the lake now, but nothing was moving but the rippling weed.

"How are you getting on?"

Harry thought he was having a heart attack. He whipped around and saw Moaning Myrtle floating hazily in front of him, gazing at him through her thick, pearly glasses.

"Myrtle!" Harry tried to shout - but once again, nothing came out of his mouth but a very large bubble. Moaning Myrtle actually giggled.

"You want to try over there!" she said, pointing. "I won't come with you. ... I don't

like them much, they always chase me when I get too close. ..."

Harry gave her the thumbs-up to show his thanks and set off once more, careful to swim a bit higher over the weed to avoid any more grindylows that might be lurking there.

He swam on for what felt like at least twenty minutes. He was passing over vast expanses of black mud now, which swirled murkily as he disturbed the water. Then, at long last, he heard a snatch of haunting mersong.

"An hour long you'll have to look,

And to recover what we took..."

Harry swam faster and soon saw a large rock emerge out of the muddy water ahead. It had paintings of merpeople on it; they were carrying spears and chasing what looked like the giant squid. Harry swam on past the rock, following the mersong.

". . . your time's half gone, so tarry not

Lest what you seek stays here to rot. ..."

A cluster of crude stone dwellings stained with algae loomed suddenly out of the gloom on all sides. Here and there at the dark windows, Harry saw faces . . . faces that bore no resemblance at all to the painting of the mermaid in the prefects' bathroom. . . .

The merpeople had grayish skin and long, wild, dark green hair. Their eyes were yellow, as were their broken teeth, and they wore thick ropes of pebbles around their necks. They leered at Harry as he swam past; one or two of them emerged from their caves to watch him better, their powerful, silver fish tails beating the water, spears clutched in their hands.

Harry sped on, staring around, and soon the dwellings became more numerous; there were gardens of weed around some of them, and he even saw a pet grindylow tied to a stake outside one door. Merpeople were emerging on all sides now, watching him eagerly, pointing at his webbed hands and gills, talking behind their hands to one another. Harry sped around a corner and a very strange sight met his eyes.

A whole crowd of merpeople was floating in front of the houses that lined what looked like a mer-version of a village square. A choir of merpeople was singing in the middle, calling the champions toward them, and behind them rose a crude sort of statue; a gigantic merperson hewn from a boulder. Four people were bound tightly to the tail of the stone merperson.

Ron was tied between Hermione and Cho Chang. There was also a girl who looked no older than eight, whose clouds of silvery hair made Harry feel sure that she was Fleur Delacour's sister. All four of them appeared to be in a very deep

sleep. Their heads were lolling onto their shoulders, and fine streams of bubbles kept issuing from their mouths.

Harry sped toward the hostages, half expecting the merpeople to lower their spears and charge at him, but they did nothing. The ropes of weed tying the hostages to the statue were thick, slimy, and very strong. For a fleeting second he thought of the knife Sirius had bought him for Christmas - locked in his trunk in the castle a quarter of a mile away, no use to him whatsoever.

He looked around. Many of the merpeople surrounding them were carrying spears. He swam swiftly toward a seven-foot-tall merman with a long green beard and a choker of shark fangs and tried to mime a request to borrow the spear. The merman laughed and shook his head.

"We do not help," he said in a harsh, croaky voice.

"Come ON!" Harry said fiercely (but only bubbles issued from his mouth), and he tried to pull the spear away from the merman, but the merman yanked it back, still shaking his head and laughing.

Harry swirled around, staring about. Something sharp . . . anything . . .

There were rocks littering the lake bottom. He dived and snatched up a particularly jagged one and returned to the statue. He began to hack at the ropes binding Ron, and after several minutes' hard work, they broke apart. Ron floated, unconscious, a few inches above the lake bottom, drifting a little in the ebb of the water.

Harry looked around. There was no sign of any of the other champions. What were they playing at? Why didn't they hurry up? He turned back to Hermione, raised the jagged rock, and began to hack at her bindings too -

At once, several pairs of strong gray hands seized him. Half a dozen mermen were pulling him away from Hermione, shaking their green-haired heads, and laughing.

"You take your own hostage," one of them said to him. "Leave the others ..."

"No way!" said Harry furiously - but only two large bubbles came out.

Your task is to retrieve your own friend . . . leave the others ..." She's my friend too!" Harry yelled, gesturing toward Hermione, an enormous silver bubble emerging soundlessly from his lips. "And I don't want them to die either!"

Cho's head was on Hermiones shoulder; the small silver-haired girl was ghostly green and pale. Harry struggled to fight off the mermen, but they laughed harder than ever, holding him back. Harry looked wildly around. Where were the other champions? Would he have time to take Ron to the surface and come back down for Hermione and the others? Would he be able to find them again? He looked down at his watch to see how much time was left - it had stopped working.

But then the merpeople around him pointed excitedly over his head. Harry looked

up and saw Cedric swimming toward them. There was an enormous bubble around his head, which made his features look oddly wide and stretched.

"Got lost!" he mouthed, looking panic-stricken. "Fleur and Krum're coming now!"

Feeling enormously relieved, Harry watched Cedric pull a knife out of his pocket and cut Cho free. He pulled her upward and out of sight.

Harry looked around, waiting. Where were Fleur and Krum? Time was getting short, and according to the song, the hostages would be lost after an hour. . . .

The merpeople started screeching animatedly. Those holding Harry loosened their grip, staring behind them. Harry turned and saw something monstrous cutting through the water toward them: a human body in swimming trunks with the head of a shark. ... It was Krum. He appeared to have transfigured himself- but badly.

The shark-man swam straight to Hermione and began snapping and biting at her ropes; the trouble was that Krum's new teeth were positioned very awkwardly for biting anything smaller than a dolphin, and Harry was quite sure that if Krum wasn't careful, he was going to rip Hermione in half. Darting forward. Harry hit Krum hard on the shoulder and held up the jagged stone. Krum seized it and began to cut Hermione free. Within seconds, he had done it; he grabbed Hermione around the waist, and without a backward glance, began to rise rapidly with her toward the surface.

Now what? Harry thought desperately. If he could be sure that Fleur was coming. . . . But still no sign. There was nothing to be done except. . .

He snatched up the stone, which Krum had dropped, but the mermen now closed in around Ron and the little girl, shaking their heads at him. Harry pulled out his wand.

"Get out of the way!"

Only bubbles flew out of his mouth, but he had the distinct impression that the mermen had understood him, because they suddenly stopped laughing. Their yellowish eyes were fixed upon Harry's wand, and they looked scared. There might be a lot more of them than there were of him, but Harry could tell, by the looks on their faces, that they knew no more magic than the giant squid did.

"You've got until three!" Harry shouted; a great stream of bubbles burst from him, but he held up three fingers to make sure they got the message. "One . . ." (he put down a finger) "two . . ." (he put down a second one) -

They scattered. Harry darted forward and began to hack at the ropes binding the small girl to the statue, and at last she was free. He seized the little girl around the waist, grabbed the neck of Rons robes, and kicked off from the bottom.

It was very slow work. He could no longer use his webbed hands to propel himself forward; he worked his flippers furiously, but Ron and Fleur's sister were like

potato-filled sacks dragging him back down. ... He fixed his eyes skyward, though he knew he must still be very deep, the water above him was so dark, . . .

Merpeople were rising with him. He could see them swirling around him with ease, watching him struggle through the water. .. . Would they pull him back down to the depths when the time was up? Did they perhaps eat humans? Harry's legs were seizing up with the effort to keep swimming; his shoulders were aching horribly with the effort of dragging Ron and the girl...

He was drawing breath with extreme difficulty. He could feel pain on the sides of his neck again ... he was becoming very aware of how wet the water was in his mouth .. . yet the darkness was definitely thinning now... he could see daylight above him.. ..

He kicked hard with his flippers and discovered that they were nothing more than feet...water was flooding through his mouth into his lungs ... he was starting to feel dizzy, but he knew light and air were only ten feet above him ... he had to get there ... he had to ...

Harry kicked his legs so hard and fast it felt as though his muscles were screaming in protest; his very brain felt waterlogged, he couldn't breathe, he needed oxygen, he had to keep going, he could not stop -

And then he felt his head break the surface of the lake; wonderful, cold, clear air was making his wet face sting; he gulped it down, feeling as though he had never breathed properly before, and, panting, pulled Ron and the little girl up with him. All around him, wild, green-haired heads were emerging out of the water with him, but they were smiling at him.

The crowd in the stands was making a great deal of noise; shouting and screaming, they all seemed to be on their feet; Harry had the impression they thought that Ron and the little girl might be dead, but they were wrong . . . both of them had opened their eyes; the girl looked scared and confused, but Ron merely expelled a great spout of water, blinked in the bright light, turned to Harry, and said, "Wet, this, isn't it?" Then he spotted Fleur's sister. "What did you bring her for?"

"Fleur didn't turn up, I couldn't leave her," Harry panted.

"Harry, you prat," said Ron, "you didn't take that song thing seriously, did you? Dumbledore wouldn't have let any of us drown!"

"The song said -"

"It was only to make sure you got back inside the time limit!" said Ron. "I hope you didn't waste time down there acting the hero!"

Harry felt both stupid and annoyed. It was all very well for Ron; he'd been asleep, he hadn't felt how eerie it was down in the lake, surrounded by spear-carrying merpeople who'd looked more than capable of murder.

"C'mon," Harry said shortly, "help me with her, I don't think she can swim very well."

They pulled Fleur's sister through the water, back toward the bank where the judges stood watching, twenty merpeople accompanying them like a guard of honor, singing their horrible screechy songs.

Harry could see Madam Pomfrey fussing over Hermione, Krum, Cedric, and Cho, all of whom were wrapped in thick blankets.

Dumbledore and Ludo Bagman stood beaming at Harry and Ron from the bank as they swam nearer, but Percy, who looked very white and somehow much younger than usual, came splashing out to meet them. Meanwhile Madame Maxime was trying to restrain Fleur Delacour, who was quite hysterical, fighting tooth and nail to return to the water.

"Gabrielle! Gabrielle! Is she alive? Is she 'urt?"

"She's fine!" Harry tried to tell her, but he was so exhausted he could hardly talk, let alone shout.

Percy seized Ron and was dragging him back to the bank ("Gerroff, Percy, I'm all right!"); Dumbledore and Bagman were pulling Harry upright; Fleur had broken free of Madame Maxime and was hugging her sister.

"It was ze grindylows . . . zey attacked me ... oh Gabrielle, I thought... I thought.. ."

"Come here, you," said Madam Pomfrey. She seized Harry and pulled him over to Hermione and the others, wrapped him so tightly in a blanket that he felt as though he were in a straitjacket, and forced a measure of very hot potion down his throat. Steam gushed out of his ears.

"Harry, well done!" Hermione cried. "You did it, you found out how all by yourself!"

"Well -" said Harry. He would have told her about Dobby, but he had just noticed Karkaroff watching him. He was the only judge who had not left the table; the only judge not showing signs of pleasure and relief that Harry, Ron, and Fleur's sister had got back safely. "Yeah, that's right," said Harry, raising his voice slightly so that Karkaroff could hear him.

"You haff a water beetle in your hair, Herm-own-ninny," said Krum. Harry had the impression that Krum was drawing her attention back onto himself; perhaps to remind her that he had just rescued her from the lake, but Hermione brushed away the beetle impatiently and said, "You're well outside the time limit, though, Harry. . . . Did it take you ages to find us?"

"No ... I found you okay...."

Harry's feeling of stupidity was growing. Now he was out of the water, it seemed perfectly clear that Dumbledores safety precautions wouldn't have permitted the death of a hostage just because their champion hadn't turned up. Why hadn't he just grabbed Ron and gone? He would have been first back.... Cedric and Krum hadn't wasted time worrying about anyone else; they hadn't taken the mersong seriously. ...

Dumbledore was crouching at the water's edge, deep in conversation with what seemed to be the chief merperson, a particularly wild and ferocious-looking female. He was making the same sort of screechy noises that the merpeople made when they were above water; clearly, Dumbledore could speak Mermish. Finally he straightened up, turned to his fellow judges, and said, "A conference before we give the marks, I think."

The judges went into a huddle. Madam Pomfrey had gone to rescue Ron from Percy's clutches; she led him over to Harry and the others, gave him a blanket and some Pepperup Potion, then went to fetch Fleur and her sister. Fleur had many cuts on her face and arms and her robes were torn, but she didn't seem to care, nor would she allow Madam Pomfrey to clean them.

"Look after Gabrielle," she told her, and then she turned to Harry. "You saved 'er," she said breathlessly. "Even though she was not your 'ostage."

"Yeah," said Harry, who was now heartily wishing he'd left all three girls tied to the statue.

Fleur bent down, kissed Harry twice on each cheek (he felt his face burn and wouldn't have been surprised if steam was coming out of his ears again), then said to Ron, "And you too-you 'elped -"

"Yeah," said Ron, looking extremely hopeful, "yeah, a bit -"

Fleur swooped down on him too and kissed him. Hermione looked simply furious, but just then, Ludo Bagman's magically magnified voice boomed out beside them, making them all jump, and causing the crowd in the stands to go very quiet.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have reached our decision. Merchieftainess Murcus has told us exactly what happened at the bottom of the lake, and we have therefore decided to award marks out of fifty for each of the champions, as follows. . . .

"Fleur Delacour, though she demonstrated excellent use of the Bubble-Head Charm, was attacked by grindylows as she approached her goal, and failed to retrieve her hostage. We award her twenty-five points."

Applause from the stands.

"I deserved zero," said Fleur throatily, shaking her magnificent head.

"Cedric Diggory, who also used the Bubble-Head Charm, was first to return with his hostage, though he returned one minute outside the time limit of an hour."

Enormous cheers from the Hufflepuffs in the crowd; Harry saw Cho give Cedric a glowing look. "We therefore award him forty-seven points."

Harrys heart sank. If Cedric had been outside the time limit, he most certainly had been.

"Viktor Krum used an incomplete form of Transfiguration, which was nevertheless effective, and was second to return with his hostage. We award him forty points."

Karkaroff clapped particularly hard, looking very superior.

"Harry Potter used gillyweed to great effect," Bagman continued. "He returned last, and well outside the time limit of an hour. However, the Merchieftainess informs us that Mr. Potter was first to reach the hostages, and that the delay in his return was due to his determination to return all hostages to safety, not merely his own."

Ron and Hermione both gave Harry half-exasperated, half-commiserating looks.

"Most of the judges," and here, Bagman gave Karkaroff a very nasty look, "feel that this shows moral fiber and merits full marks. However . . . Mr. Potter's score is forty-five points."

Harry's stomach leapt - he was now tying for first place with Cedric. Ron and Hermione, caught by surprise, stared at Harry, then laughed and started applauding hard with the rest of the crowd.

"There you go. Harry!" Ron shouted over the noise. "You weren't being thick after all - you were showing moral fiber!"

Fleur was clapping very hard too, but Krum didn't look happy at all. He attempted to engage Hermione in conversation again, but she was too busy cheering Harry to listen.

"The third and final task will take place at dusk on the twenty-fourth of June," continued Bagman. "The champions will be notified of what is coming precisely one month beforehand. Thank you all for your support of the champions."

It was over. Harry thought dazedly, as Madam Pomfrey began herding the champions and hostages back to the castle to get into dry clothes ... it was over, he had got through ... he didn't have to worry about anything now until June the twenty-fourth. . ..

Next time he was in Hogsmeade, Harry decided as he walked back up the stone steps into the castle, he was going to buy Dobby a pair of socks for every day of the year.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN - PADFOOT RETURNS

One of the best things about the aftermath of the second task was that everybody was very keen to hear details of what had happened down in the lake, which meant that Ron was getting to share Harry's limelight for once. Harry noticed that Ron's version of events changed subtly with every retelling. At first, he gave what seemed to be the truth; it tallied with Hermione's story, anyway - Dumbledore had put all the hostages into a bewitched sleep in Professor McGonagall's office, first assuring them that they would be quite safe, and would awake when they were back above the water. One week later, however, Ron was telling a thrilling tale of kidnap in which he struggled single-handedly against fifty heavily armed merpeople who had to beat him into submission before tying him up.

"But I had my wand hidden up my sleeve," he assured Padma Patil, who seemed to be a lot keener on Ron now that he was getting so much attention and was making a point of talking to him every time they passed in the corridors. "I could've taken those mer-idiots any time I wanted."

"What were you going to do, snore at them?" said Hermione waspishly. People had been teasing her so much about being the thing that Viktor Krum would most miss that she was in a rather tetchy mood.

Ron's ears went red, and thereafter, he reverted to the bewitched sleep version of events.

As they entered March the weather became drier, but cruel winds skinned their hands and faces every time they went out onto the grounds. There were delays in the post because the owls kept being blown off course. The brown owl that Harry had sent to Sirius with the dates of the Hogsmeade weekend turned up at breakfast on Friday morning with half its feathers sticking up the wrong way; Harry had no sooner torn off Sirius's reply than it took flight, clearly afraid it was going to be sent outside again.

Sirius's letter was almost as short as the previous one.

Be at stile at end of road out of Hogsmeade (past Dervish and

Banges) at two o'clock on Saturday afternoon. Bring as much

food as you can.

"He hasn't come back to Hogsmeade?" said Ron incredulously.

"It looks like it, doesn't it?" said Hermione.

"I can't believe him," said Harry tensely, "if he's caught. . ."

"Made it so far, though, hasn't he?" said Ron. "And it's not like the place is swarming with dementors anymore."

Harry folded up the letter, thinking. If he was honest with himself, he really wanted to see Sirius again. He therefore approached the final lesson of the afternoon - double Potions - feeling considerably more cheerful than he usually did when descending the steps to the dungeons.

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were standing in a huddle outside the classroom door with Pansy Parkinson's gang of Slytherin girls. All of them were looking at something Harry couldn't see and sniggering heartily. Pansys pug-like face peered excitedly around Goyle's broad back as Harry, Ron, and Hermione approached.

"There they are, there they are!" she giggled, and the knot of Slytherins broke apart. Harry saw that Pansy had a magazine in her hands - Witch Weekly. The moving picture on the front showed a curly-haired witch who was smiling toothily and pointing at a large sponge cake with her wand.

"You might find something to interest you in there, Granger!" Pansy said loudly, and she threw the magazine at Hermione, who caught it, looking startled. At that moment, the dungeon door opened, and Snape beckoned them all inside.

Hermione, Harry, and Ron headed for a table at the back of the dungeon as usual. Once Snape had turned his back on them to write up the ingredients of todays potion on the blackboard, Hermione hastily rifled through the magazine under the desk. At last, in the center pages, Hermione found what they were looking for. Harry and Ron leaned in closer. A color photograph of Harry headed a short piece entitled:

Harry Potter's Secret Heartache

A boy like no other, perhaps - yet a boy suffering all the usual pangs of adolescence, writes Rita Skeeter. Deprived of love since the tragic demise

of his parents, fourteen-year-old Harry Potter thought he had found solace in his steady girlfriend at Hogwarts, Muggle-born Hermione Granger. Little did he know that he would shortly be suffering yet another emotional blow in a life already littered with personal loss.

Miss Granger, a plain but ambitious girl, seems to have a taste for famous wizards that Harry alone cannot satisfy. Since the arrival at Hogwarts of Viktor Krum, Bulgarian Seeker and hero of the last World Quidditch Cup, Miss Granger has been toying with both boys' affections. Krum, who is openly smitten with the devious Miss Granger, has already invited her to visit him in Bulgaria over the summer holidays, and insists that he has "never felt this way about any other girl."

However, it might not be Miss Granger's doubtful natural charms that have captured these unfortunate boys' interest.

"She's really ugly," says Pansy Parkinson, a pretty and vivacious fourth-year student, "but she'd be well up to making a Love Potion, she's quite brainy. I think that's how she's doing it."

Love Potions are, of course, banned at Hogwarts, and no doubt Albus Dumbledore will want to investigate these claims. In the meantime, Harry Potters well-wishers must hope that, next time, he bestows his heart on a worthier candidate.

"I told you!" Ron hissed at Hermione as she stared down at the article. "I told you not to annoy Rita Skeeter! She's made you out to be some sort of- of scarlet woman!"

Hermione stopped looking astonished and snorted with laughter. "Scarlet woman?" she repeated, shaking with suppressed giggles as she looked around at Ron.

"It's what my mum calls them," Ron muttered, his ears going red.

"If that's the best Rita can do, she's losing her touch," said Hermione, still giggling, as she threw Witch Weekly onto the empty chair beside her. "What a pile of old rubbish."

She looked over at the Slytherins, who were all watching her and Harry closely across the room to see if they had been upset by the article. Hermione gave them a sarcastic smile and a wave, and she, Harry, and Ron started unpacking the ingredients they would need for their Wit-Sharpening Potion.

"There's something funny, though," said Hermione ten minutes later, holding her pestle suspended over a bowl of scarab beetles. "How could Rita Skeeter have known . . . ?"

"Known what?" said Ron quickly. "You haven't been mixing up Love Potions, have you?"

"Don't be stupid," Hermione snapped, starting to pound up her beetles again. "No, it's just. . . how did she know Viktor asked me to visit him over the summer?"

Hermione blushed scarlet as she said this and determinedly avoided Ron's eyes.

"What?" said Ron, dropping his pestle with a loud clunk.

"He asked me right after he'd pulled me out of the lake,"

Hermione muttered. "After he'd got rid of his shark's head. Madam Pomfrey gave us both blankets and then he sort of pulled me away from the judges so they wouldn't hear, and he said, if I wasn't doing anything over the summer, would I like to -"

"And what did you say?" said Ron, who had picked up his pestle and was grinding it on the desk, a good six inches from his bowl, because he was looking at

Hermione.

"And he did say he'd never felt the same way about anyone else," Hermione went on, going so red now that Harry could almost feel the heat coming from her, "but how could Rita Skeeter have heard him? She wasn't there ... or was she? Maybe she has got an Invisibility Cloak; maybe she sneaked onto the grounds to watch the second task. ..."

"And what did you say?" Ron repeated, pounding his pestle down so hard that it dented the desk.

"Well, I was too busy seeing whether you and Harry were okay to-"

"Fascinating though your social life undoubtedly is. Miss Granger," said an icy voice right behind them, and all three of them jumped, "I must ask you not to discuss it in my class. Ten points from Gryffindor."

Snape had glided over to their desk while they were talking. The whole class was now looking around at them; Malfoy took the opportunity to flash POTTER STINKS across the dungeon at Harry.

"Ah . . . reading magazines under the table as well?" Snape added, snatching up the copy of Witch Weekly. "A further ten points from Gryffindor ... oh but of course ..." Snapes black eyes glittered as they fell on Rita Skeeter's article. "Potter has to keep up with his press cuttings. . . ."

The dungeon rang with the Slytherins' laughter, and an unpleasant smile curled Snape's thin mouth. To Harry's fury, he began to read the article aloud.

"'Harry Potter's Secret Heartache. . . dear, dear. Potter, what's ailing you now? 'A boy like no other, perhaps. . .'"

Harry could feel his face burning. Snape was pausing at the end of every sentence to allow the Slytherins a hearty laugh. The article sounded ten times worse when read by Snape. Even Hermione was blushing scarlet now.

"'. . . Harry Potter's well-wishers must hope that, next time, he bestows his heart upon a worthier candidate.' How very touching," sneered Snape, rolling up the magazine to continued gales of laughter from the Slytherins. "Well, I think I had better separate the three of you, so you can keep your minds on your potions rather than on your tangled love lives. Weasley, you stay here. Miss Granger, over there, beside Miss Parkinson. Potter - that table in front of my desk. Move. Now."

Furious, Harry threw his ingredients and his bag into his cauldron and dragged it up to the front of the dungeon to the empty table. Snape followed, sat down at his desk and watched Harry unload his cauldron. Determined not to look at Snape, Harry resumed the mashing of his scarab beetles, imagining each one to have Snape's face.

"All this press attention seems to have inflated your already over-large head.

Potter," said Snape quietly, once the rest of the class had settled down again.

Harry didn't answer. He knew Snape was trying to provoke him; he had done this before. No doubt he was hoping for an excuse to take a round fifty points from Gryffindor before the end of the class.

"You might be laboring under the delusion that the entire wizarding world is impressed with you," Snape went on, so quietly that no one else could hear him (Harry continued to pound his scarab beetles, even though he had already reduced them to a very fine powder), "but I don't care how many times your picture appears in the papers. To me. Potter, you are nothing but a nasty little boy who considers rules to be beneath him."

Harry tipped the powdered beetles into his cauldron and started cutting up his ginger roots. His hands were shaking slightly out of anger, but he kept his eyes down, as though he couldn't hear what Snape was saying to him.

"So I give you fair warning, Potter," Snape continued in a sorter and more dangerous voice, "pint-sized celebrity or not - if I catch you breaking into my office one more time -"

"I haven't been anywhere near your office!" said Harry angrily, forgetting his feigned deafness.

"Don't lie to me," Snape hissed, his fathomless black eyes boring into Harrys. "Boomslang skin. Gillyweed. Both come from my private stores, and I know who stole them."

Harry stared back at Snape, determined not to blink or to look guilty. In truth, he hadn't stolen either of these things from Snape. Hermione had taken the boomslang skin back in their second year - they had needed it for the Polyjuice Potion - and while Snape had suspected Harry at the time, he had never been able to prove it. Dobby, of course, had stolen the gillyweed.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Harry lied coldly.

"You were out of bed on the night my office was broken into!" Snape hissed. "I know it. Potter! Now, Mad-Eye Moody might have joined your fan club, but I will not tolerate your behavior! One more nighttime stroll into my office, Potter, and you will pay!"

"Right," said Harry coolly, turning back to his ginger roots. "I'll bear that in mind if I ever get the urge to go in there."

Snape's eyes flashed. He plunged a hand into the inside of his black robes. For one wild moment. Harry thought Snape was about to pull out his wand and curse him - then he saw that Snape had drawn out a small crystal bottle of a completely clear potion. Harry stared at it.

"Do you know what this is. Potter?" Snape said, his eyes glittering dangerously

again.

"No," said Harry, with complete honesty this time.

"It is Veritaserum - a Truth Potion so powerful that three drops would have you spilling your innermost secrets for this entire class to hear," said Snape viciously. "Now, the use of this potion is controlled by very strict Ministry guidelines. But unless you watch your step, you might just find that my hand slips" - he shook the crystal bottle slightly - "right over your evening pumpkin juice. And then. Potter . . . then we'll find out whether you've been in my office or not."

Harry said nothing. He turned back to his ginger roots once more, picked up his knife, and started slicing them again. He didn't like the sound of that Truth Potion at all, nor would he put it past Snape to slip him some. He repressed a shudder at the thought of what might come spilling out of his mouth if Snape did it... quite apart from landing a whole lot of people in trouble - Hermione and Dobby for a start - there were all the other things he was concealing . . . like the fact that he was in contact with Sirius . . . and - his insides squirmed at the thought - how he felt about Cho. ... He tipped his ginger roots into the cauldron too, and wondered whether he ought to take a leaf out of Moody s book and start drinking only from a private hip flask.

There was a knock on the dungeon door.

"Enter," said Snape in his usual voice.

The class looked around as the door opened. Professor Karkaroff came in. Everyone watched him as he walked up toward Snape's desk. He was twisting his finger around his goatee and looking agitated.

"We need to talk," said Karkaroff abruptly when he had reached Snape. He seemed so determined that nobody should hear what he was saying that he was barely opening his lips; it was as though he were a rather poor ventriloquist. Harry kept his eyes on his ginger roots, listening hard.

"I'll talk to you after my lesson, Karkaroff," Snape muttered, but Karkaroff interrupted him.

"I want to talk now, while you can't slip off, Severus. You've been avoiding me."

"After the lesson," Snape snapped.

Under the pretext of holding up a measuring cup to see if he'd poured out enough armadillo bile, Harry sneaked a sidelong glance at the pair of them. Karkaroff looked extremely worried, and Snape looked angry.

Karkaroff hovered behind Snape's desk for the rest of the double period. He seemed intent on preventing Snape from slipping away at the end of class. Keen to hear what Karkaroff wanted to say, Harry deliberately knocked over his bottle of armadillo bile with two minutes to go to the bell, which gave him an excuse to

duck down behind his cauldron and mop up while the rest of the class moved noisily toward the door.

"What's so urgent?" he heard Snape hiss at Karkaroff.

"This," said Karkaroff, and Harry, peering around the edge of his cauldron, saw Karkaroff pull up the left-hand sleeve of his robe and show Snape something on his inner forearm.

"Well?" said Karkaroff, still making every effort not to move his lips. "Do you see? It's never been this clear, never since - "

"Put it away!" snarled Snape, his black eyes sweeping the classroom.

"But you must have noticed -" Karkaroff began in an agitated voice.

"We can talk later, Karkaroff!" spat Snape. "Potter! What are you doing?"

"Clearing up my armadillo bile, Professor," said Harry innocently, straightening up and showing Snape the sodden rag he was holding.

Karkaroff turned on his heel and strode out of the dungeon. He looked both worried and angry. Not wanting to remain alone with an exceptionally angry Snape, Harry threw his books and ingredients back into his bag and left at top speed to tell Ron and Hermione what he had just witnessed.

They left the castle at noon the next day to find a weak silver sun shining down upon the grounds. The weather was milder than it had been all year, and by the time they arrived in Hogsmeade, all three of them had taken off their cloaks and thrown them over their shoulders. The food Sirius had told them to bring was in Harry's bag; they had sneaked a dozen chicken legs, a loaf of bread, and a flask of pumpkin juice from the lunch table.

They went into Gladrags Wizardwear to buy a present for Dobby, where they had fun selecting the most lurid socks they could find, including a pair patterned with flashing gold and silver stars, and another that screamed loudly when they became too smelly. Then, at half past one, they made their way up the High Street, past Dervish and Banges, and out toward the edge of the village.

Harry had never been in this direction before. The winding lane was leading them out into the wild countryside around Hogsmeade. The cottages were fewer here, and their gardens larger; they were walking toward the foot of the mountain in whose shadow Hogsmeade lay. Then they turned a corner and saw a stile at the end of the lane. Waiting for them, its front paws on the topmost bar, was a very large, shaggy black dog, which was carrying some newspapers in its mouth and looking very familiar. . . .

"Hello, Sirius," said Harry when they had reached him.

The black dog sniffed Harry's bag eagerly, wagged its tail once, then turned and

began to trot away from them across the scrubby patch of ground that rose to meet the rocky foot of the mountain. Harry, Ron, and Hermione climbed over the stile and followed.

Sirius led them to the very foot of the mountain, where the ground was covered with boulders and rocks. It was easy for him, with his four paws, but Harry, Ron, and Hermione were soon out of breath. They followed Sirius higher, up onto the mountain itself. For nearly half an hour they climbed a steep, winding, and stony path, following Sirius's wagging tail, sweating in the sun, the shoulder straps of Harry's bag cutting into his shoulders.

Then, at last, Sirius slipped out of sight, and when they reached the place where he had vanished, they saw a narrow fissure in the rock. They squeezed into it and found themselves in a cool, dimly lit cave. Tethered at the end of it, one end of his rope around a large rock, was Buckbeak the hippogriff. Half gray horse, half giant eagle, Buckbeak's fierce orange eye flashed at the sight of them. All three of them bowed low to him, and after regarding them imperiously for a moment, Buckbeak bent his scaly front knees and allowed Hermione to rush forward and stroke his feathery neck. Harry, however, was looking at the black dog, which had just turned into his godfather.

Sirius was wearing ragged gray robes; the same ones he had been wearing when he had left Azkaban. His black hair was longer than it had been when he had appeared in the fire, and it was untidy and matted once more. He looked very thin.

"Chicken!" he said hoarsely after removing the old Daily Prophets from his mouth and throwing them down onto the cave floor.

Harry pulled open his bag and handed over the bundle of chicken legs and bread.

"Thanks," said Sirius, opening it, grabbing a drumstick, sitting down on the cave floor, and tearing off a large chunk with his teeth. "I've been living off rats mostly. Can't steal too much food from Hogsmeade; I'd draw attention to myself."

He grinned up at Harry, but Harry returned the grin only reluctantly.

"What're you doing here, Sirius?" he said.

"Fulfilling my duty as godfather," said Sirius, gnawing on the chicken bone in a very doglike way. "Don't worry about it, I'm pretending to be a lovable stray."

He was still grinning, but seeing the anxiety in Harrys face, said more seriously, "I want to be on the spot. Your last letter . . . well, let's just say things are getting fishier. I've been stealing the paper every time someone throws one out, and by the looks of things, I'm not the only one who's getting worried."

He nodded at the yellowing Daily Prophets on the cave floor, and Ron picked them up and unfolded them. Harry, however, continued to stare at Sirius.

"What if they catch you? What if you're seen?"

"You three and Dumbledore are the only ones around here who know I'm an Animagus," said Sirius, shrugging, and continuing to devour the chicken leg.

Ron nudged Harry and passed him the Daily Prophets. There were two: The first bore the headline Mystery Illness ofBartemius Crouch, the second, Ministry Witch Still Missing-Minister of Magic Now Personally Involved.

Harry scanned the story about Crouch. Phrases jumped out at him: hasn't been seen in public since November. . . house appears deserted. . . St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries decline comment. . . Ministry refuses to confirm rumors of critical illness. . . .

"They're making it sound like he's dying," said Harry slowly. "But he can't be that ill if he managed to get up here. . . ."

"My brothers Crouch's personal assistant," Ron informed Sirius. "He says Crouch is suffering from overwork."

"Mind you, he did look ill, last time I saw him up close," said Harry slowly, still reading the story. "The night my name came out of the goblet. ..."

"Getting his comeuppance for sacking Winky, isn't he?" said Hermione, an edge to her voice. She was stroking Buckbeak, who was crunching up Sirius's chicken bones. "I bet he wishes he hadn't done it now - bet he feels the difference now she's not there to look after him."

"Hermione's obsessed with house-elfs," Ron muttered to Sirius, casting Hermione a dark look. Sirius, however, looked interested.

"Crouch sacked his house-elf?"

"Yeah, at the Quidditch World Cup," said Harry, and he launched into the story of the Dark Mark's appearance, and Winky being found with Harrys wand clutched in her hand, and Mr. Crouch's fury. When Harry had finished, Sirius was on his feet again and had started pacing up and down the cave.

"Let me get this straight," he said after a while, brandishing a fresh chicken leg. "You first saw the elfin the Top Box. She was saving Crouch a seat, right?"

"Right," said Harry, Ron, and Hermione together.

"But Crouch didn't turn up for the match?"

"No," said Harry. "I think he said he'd been too busy."

Sirius paced all around the cave in silence. Then he said, "Harry, did you check your pockets for your wand after you'd left the Top Box?"

"Erm . . ." Harry thought hard. "No," he said finally. "I didn't need to use it before we got in the forest. And then I put my hand in my pocket, and all that was in there were my Omnioculars." He stared at Sirius. "Are you saying whoever

conjured the Mark stole my wand in the Top Box?"

"It's possible," said Sirius.

"Winky didn't steal that wand!" Hermione insisted.

"The elf wasn't the only one in that box," said Sirius, his brow furrowed as he continued to pace. "Who else was sitting behind you?"

"Loads of people," said Harry. "Some Bulgarian ministers .. . Cornelius Fudge ... the Malfoys ..."

"The Malfoys!" said Ron suddenly, so loudly that his voice echoed all around the cave, and Buckbeak tossed his head nervously. "I bet it was Lucius Malfoy!"

"Anyone else?" said Sirius.

"No one," said Harry.

"Yes, there was, there was Ludo Bagman," Hermione reminded him.

"Oh yeah . . ."

"I don't know anything about Bagman except that he used to be Beater for the Wimbourne Wasps," said Sirius, still pacing. "What's he like?"

"He's okay," said Harry. "He keeps offering to help me with the Triwizard Tournament."

"Does he, now?" said Sirius, frowning more deeply. "I wonder why he'd do that?"

"Says he's taken a liking to me," said Harry.

"Hmm," said Sirius, looking thoughtful.

"We saw him in the forest just before the Dark Mark appeared," Hermione told Sirius. "Remember?" she said to Harry and Ron.

"Yeah, but he didn't stay in the forest, did he?" said Ron. "The moment we told him about the riot, he went off to the campsite."

"How d'you know?" Hermione shot back. "How d'you know where he Disapparated to?"

"Come off it," said Ron incredulously. "Are you saying you reckon Ludo Bagman conjured the Dark Mark?"

"It's more likely he did it than Winky," said Hermione stubbornly.

"Told you," said Ron, looking meaningfully at Sirius, "told you she's obsessed with house -"

But Sirius held up a hand to silence Ron.

"When the Dark Mark had been conjured, and the elf had been discovered holding Harry's wand, what did Crouch do?"

"Went to look in the bushes," said Harry, "but there wasn't anyone else there."

"Of course," Sirius muttered, pacing up and down, "of course, he'd want to pin it on anyone but his own elf... and then he sacked her?"

"Yes," said Hermione in a heated voice, "he sacked her, just because she hadn't stayed in her tent and let herself get trampled -"

"Hermione, will you give it a rest with the elf!" said Ron.

Sirius shook his head and said, "She's got the measure of Crouch better than you have, Ron. If you want to know what a mans like, take a good look at how he treats his inferiors, not his equals."

He ran a hand over his unshaven face, evidently thinking hard.

"All these absences of Barty Crouch's ... he goes to the trouble of making sure his house-elf saves him a seat at the Quidditch World Cup, but doesn't bother to turn up and watch. He works very hard to reinstate the Triwizard Tournament, and then stops coming to that too. . . . It's not like Crouch. If he's ever taken a day off work because of illness before this, I'll eat Buckbeak."

"D'you know Crouch, then?" said Harry.

Sirius's face darkened. He suddenly looked as menacing as he had the night when Harry first met him, the night when Harry still believed Sirius to be a murderer.

"Oh I know Crouch all right," he said quietly. "He was the one who gave the order for me to be sent to Azkaban - without a trial."

"What?" said Ron and Hermione together.

"You're kidding!" said Harry.

"No, I'm not," said Sirius, taking another great bite of chicken. "Crouch used to be Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, didn't you know?"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione shook their heads.

"He was tipped for the next Minister of Magic," said Sirius. "He's a great wizard, Barty Crouch, powerfully magical - and power-hungry. Oh never a Voldemort supporter," he said, reading the look on Harrys face. "No, Barty Crouch was always very outspoken against the Dark Side. But then a lot of people who were against the Dark Side . . . well, you wouldn't understand . . . you're too young. ..."

"That's what my dad said at the World Cup," said Ron, with a trace of irritation in his voice. "Try us, why don't you?"

A grin flashed across Sirius's thin face.

"All right, I'll try you. . . ." He walked once up the cave, back again, and then said, "Imagine that Voldemort's powerful now. You don't know who his supporters are, you don't know who's working for him and who isn't; you know he can control people so that they do terrible things without being able to stop themselves. You're scared for yourself, and your family, and your friends. Every week, news comes of more deaths, more disappearances, more torturing . . . the Ministry of Magic's in disarray, they don't know what to do, they're trying to keep everything hidden from the Muggles, but meanwhile, Muggles are dying too. Terror everywhere . . . panic . . . confusion . . . that's how it used to be.

"Well, times like that bring out the best in some people and the worst in others. Crouch's principles might've been good in the beginning - I wouldn't know. He rose quickly through the Ministry, and he started ordering very harsh measures against Voldemorts supporters. The Aurors were given new powers - powers to kill rather than capture, for instance. And I wasn't the only one who was handed straight to the dementors without trial. Crouch fought violence with violence, and authorized the use of the Unforgivable Curses against suspects. I would say he became as ruthless and cruel as many on the Dark Side. He had his supporters, mind you - plenty of people thought he was going about things the right way, and there were a lot of witches and wizards clamoring for him to take over as Minister of Magic. When Voldemort disappeared, it looked like only a matter of time until Crouch got the top job. But then something rather unfortunate happened. ..." Sirius smiled grimly. "Crouch's own son was caught with a group of Death Eaters who'd managed to talk their way out of Azkaban. Apparently they were trying to find Voldemort and return him to power."

"Crouch's son was caught?" gasped Hermione.

"Yep," said Sirius, throwing his chicken bone to Buckbeak, flinging himself back down on the ground beside the loaf of bread, and tearing it in half. "Nasty little shock for old Barty, I'd imagine. Should have spent a bit more time at home with his family, shouldn't he? Ought to have left the office early once in a while . . . gotten to know his own son."

He began to wolf down large pieces of bread.

"Was his son a Death Eater?" said Harry.

"No idea," said Sirius, still stuffing down bread. "I was in Azkaban myself when he was brought in. This is mostly stuff I've found out since I got out. The boy was definitely caught in the company of people I'd bet my life were Death Eaters - but he might have been in the wrong place at the wrong time, just like the house-elf."

"Did Crouch try and get his son off?" Hermione whispered.

Sirius let out a laugh that was much more like a bark.

"Crouch let his son off? I thought you had the measure of him, Hermione! Anything that threatened to tarnish his reputation had to go; he had dedicated his whole life to becoming Minister of Magic. You saw him dismiss a devoted house-elf because she associated him with the Dark Mark again - doesn't that tell you what he's like? Crouch's fatherly affection stretched just far enough to give his son a trial, and by all accounts, it wasn't much more than an excuse for Crouch to show how much he hated the boy . . . then he sent him straight to Azkaban."

"He gave his own son to the dementors?" asked Harry quietly.

"That's right," said Sirius, and he didn't look remotely amused now. "I saw the dementors bringing him in, watched them through the bars in my cell door. He can't have been more than nineteen. They took him into a cell near mine. He was screaming for his mother by nightfall. He went quiet after a few days, though . . .they all went quiet in the end. . . except when they shrieked in their sleep. ..."

For a moment, the deadened look in Sirius's eyes became more pronounced than ever, as though shutters had closed behind them.

"So he's still in Azkaban?" Harry said.

"No," said Sirius dully. "No, he's not in there anymore. He died about a year after they brought him in."

"He died?"

"He wasn't the only one," said Sirius bitterly. "Most go mad in there, and plenty stop eating in the end. They lose the will to live. You could always tell when a death was coming, because the dementors could sense it, they got excited. That boy looked pretty sickly when he arrived. Crouch being an important Ministry member, he and his wife were allowed a deathbed visit. That was the last time I saw Barty Crouch, half carrying his wife past my cell. She died herself, apparently, shortly afterward. Grief. Wasted away just like the boy. Crouch never came for his sons body. The dementors buried him outside the fortress; I watched them do it."

Sirius threw aside the bread he had just lifted to his mouth and instead picked up the flask of pumpkin juice and drained it.

"So old Crouch lost it all, just when he thought he had it made," he continued, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "One moment, a hero, poised to become Minister of Magic...next, his son dead, his wife dead, the family name dishonored, and, so I've heard since I escaped, a big drop in popularity. Once the boy had died, people started feeling a bit more sympathetic toward the son and started asking how a nice young lad from a good family had gone so badly astray. The conclusion was that his father never cared much for him. So Cornelius Fudge got the top job, and Crouch was shunted sideways into the Department of International Magical Cooperation."

There was a long silence. Harry was thinking of the way Crouch's eyes had bulged as he'd looked down at his disobedient house-elf back in the wood at the Quidditch World Cup. This, then, must have been why Crouch had overreacted to Winky being found beneath the Dark Mark. It had brought back memories of his son, and the old scandal, and his fall from grace at the Ministry.

"Moody says Crouch is obsessed with catching Dark wizards," Harry told Sirius.

"Yeah, I've heard it's become a bit of a mania with him," said Sirius, nodding. "If you ask me, he still thinks he can bring back the old popularity by catching one more Death Eater."

"And he sneaked up here to search Snape's office!" s aid Ron triumphantly, looking at Hermione.

"Yes, and that doesn't make sense at all," said Sirius.

"Yeah, it does!" said Ron excitedly, but Sirius shook his head.

"Listen, if Crouch wants to investigate Snape, why hasn't he been coming to judge the tournament? It would be an ideal excuse to make regular visits to Hogwarts and keep an eye on him."

"So you think Snape could be up to something, then?" asked Harry, but Hermione broke in.

"Look, I don't care what you say, Dumbledore trusts Snape -"

"Oh give it a rest, Hermione," said Ron impatiently. "I know Dumbledores brilliant and everything, but that doesn't mean a really clever Dark wizard couldn't fool him -"

"Why did Snape save Harry's life in the first year, then? Why didn't he just let him die?"

"I dunno - maybe he thought Dumbledore would kick him out-"

"What d'you think, Sirius?" Harry said loudly, and Ron and Hermione stopped bickering to listen.

"I think they've both got a point," said Sirius, looking thoughtfully at Ron and Hermione. "Ever since I found out Snape was teaching here, I've wondered why Dumbledore hired him. Snape's always been fascinated by the Dark Arts, he was famous for it at school. Slimy, oily, greasy-haired kid, he was," Sirius added, and Harry and Ron grinned at each other. "Snape knew more curses when he arrived at school than half the kids in seventh year, and he was part of a gang of Slytherins who nearly all turned out to be Death Eaters."

Sirius held up his fingers and began ticking off names.

"Rosier and Wilkes - they were both killed by Aurors the year before Voldemort

fell. The Lestranges - they're a married couple - they're in Azkaban. Avery - from what I've heard he wormed his way out of trouble by saying he'd been acting under the Imperius Curse - he's still at large. But as far as I know, Snape was never even accused of being a Death Eater - not that that means much. Plenty of them were never caught. And Snape s certainly clever and cunning enough to keep himself out of trouble."

"Snape knows Karkaroff pretty well, but he wants to keep that quiet," said Ron.

"Yeah, you should've seen Snape's face when Karkaroff turned up in Potions yesterday!" said Harry quickly. "Karkaroff wanted to talk to Snape, he says Snape's been avoiding him. Karkaroff looked really worried. He showed Snape something on his arm, but I couldn't see what it was."

He showed Snape something on his arm?" said Sirius, looking frankly bewildered. He ran his fingers distractedly through his filthy hair, then shrugged again. "Well, I've no idea what that's about. . . but if Karkaroff s genuinely worried, and he's going to Snape for answers ..."

Sirius stared at the cave wall, then made a grimace of frustration.

"There's still the fact that Dumbledore trusts Snape, and I know Dumbledore trusts where a lot of other people wouldn't, but I just can't see him letting Snape teach at Hogwarts if he'd ever worked for Voldemort."

"Why are Moody and Crouch so keen to get into Snapes office then?" said Ron stubbornly.

"Well," said Sirius slowly, "I wouldn't put it past Mad-Eye to have searched every single teacher's office when he got to Hogwarts. He takes his Defense Against the Dark Arts seriously, Moody. I'm not sure he trusts anyone at all, and after the things he's seen, it's not surprising. I'll say this for Moody, though, he never killed if he could help it. Always brought people in alive where possible. He was tough, but he never descended to the level of the Death Eaters. Crouch, though . . . he's a different matter ... is he really ill? If he is, why did he make the effort to drag himself up to Snape's office? And if he's not. . . what's he up to? What was he doing at the World Cup that was so important he didn't turn up in the Top Box? What's he been doing while he should have been judging the tournament?"

Sirius lapsed into silence, still staring at the cave wall. Buckbeak was ferreting around on the rocky floor, looking for bones he might have overlooked. Finally, Sirius looked up at Ron.

"You say your brother s Crouch's personal assistant? Any chance you could ask him if he's seen Crouch lately?"

"I can try," said Ron doubtfully. "Better not make it sound like I reckon Crouch is up to anything dodgy, though. Percy loves Crouch."

"And you might try and find out whether they've got any leads on Bertha Jorkins while you're at it," said Sirius, gesturing to the second copy of the Daily Prophet.

"Bagman told me they hadn't," said Harry.

"Yes, he's quoted in the article in there," said Sirius, nodding at the paper. "Blustering on about how bad Bertha's memory is. Well, maybe she's changed since I knew her, but the Bertha I knew wasn't forgetful at all - quite the reverse. She was a bit dim, but she had an excellent memory for gossip. It used to get her into a lot of trouble; she never knew when to keep her mouth shut. I can see her being a bit of a liability at the Ministry of Magic . . . maybe that's why Bagman didn't bother to look for her for so long. ..."

Sirius heaved an enormous sigh and rubbed his shadowed eyes.

"What's the time?"

Harry checked his watch, then remembered it hadn't been working since it had spent over an hour in the lake.

"It's half past three," said Hermione.

"You'd better get back to school," Sirius said, getting to his feet. "Now listen . . ." He looked particularly hard at Harry. "I don't want you lot sneaking out of school to see me, all right? Just send notes to me here. I still want to hear about anything odd. But you're not to go leaving Hogwarts without permission; it would be an ideal opportunity for someone to attack you."

"No one's tried to attack me so far, except a dragon and a couple of grindylows," Harry said, but Sirius scowled at him.

"I don't care . . . I'll breathe freely again when this tournament's over, and that's not until June. And don't forget, if you're talking about me among yourselves, call me Snuffles, okay?"

He handed Harry the empty napkin and flask and went to pat Buckbeak good-bye. "I'll walk to the edge of the village with you," said Sirius, "see if I can scrounge another paper."

He transformed into the great black dog before they left the cave, and they walked back down the mountainside with him, across the boulder-strewn ground, and back to the stile. Here he allowed each of them to pat him on the head, before turning and setting off at a run around the outskirts of the village. Harry, Ron, and Hermione made their way back into Hogsmeade and up toward Hogwarts.

"Wonder if Percy knows all that stuff about Crouch?" Ron said as they walked up the drive to the castle. "But maybe he doesn't care . . . It'd probably just make him admire Crouch even more. Yeah, Percy loves rules. He'd just say Crouch was refusing to break them for his own son."

"Percy would never throw any of his family to the dementors," said Hermione severely.

"I don't know," said Ron. "If he thought we were standing in the way of his career .. . Percy's really ambitious, you know. ..."

They walked up the stone steps into the entrance hall, where the delicious smells of dinner wafted toward them from the Great Hall.

"Poor old Snuffles," said Ron, breathing deeply. "He must really like you. Harry. . . . Imagine having to live off rats."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT - THE MADNESS OF MR CROUCH

Harry, Ron, and Hermione went up to the Owlery after breakfast on Sunday to send a letter to Percy, asking, as Sirius had suggested, whether he had seen Mr. Crouch lately. They used Hedwig, because it had been so long since she'd had a job. When they had watched her fly out of sight through the Owlery window, they proceeded down to the kitchen to give Dobby his new socks.

The house-elves gave them a very cheery welcome, bowing and curtsying and bustling around making tea again. Dobby was ecstatic about his present.

"Harry Potter is too good to Dobby!" he squeaked, wiping large tears out of his enormous eyes.

"You saved my life with that gillyweed, Dobby, you really did," said Harry.

"No chance of more of those eclairs, is there?" said Ron, who was looking around at the beaming and bowing house-elves.

"You've just had breakfast!" said Hermione irritably, but a great silver platter of eclairs was already zooming toward them, supported by four elves.

"We should get some stuff to send up to Snuffles," Harry muttered.

"Good idea," said Ron. "Give Pig something to do. You couldn't give us a bit of extra food, could you?" he said to the surrounding elves, and they bowed delightedly and hurried off to get some more.

"Dobby, where's Winky?" said Hermione, who was looking around.

"Winky is over there by the fire, miss," said Dobby quietly, his ears drooping slightly.

"Oh dear," said Hermione as she spotted Winky.

Harry looked over at the fireplace too. Winky was sitting on the same stool as last time, but she had allowed herself to become so filthy that she was not immediately distinguishable from the smoke-blackened brick behind her. Her clothes were ragged and unwashed. She was clutching a bottle of butterbeer and swaying slightly on her stool, staring into the fire. As they watched her, she gave an enormous hiccup.

"Winky is getting through six bottles a day now," Dobby whispered to Harry.

"Well, it's not strong, that stuff," Harry said.

But Dobby shook his head. "'Tis strong for a house-elf, sir," he said.

Winky hiccuped again. The elves who had brought the eclairs gave her disapproving looks as they returned to work.

"Winky is pining, Harry Potter," Dobby whispered sadly. "Winky wants to go home. Winky still thinks Mr. Crouch is her master, sir, and nothing Dobby says will persuade her that Professor Dumbledore is her master now."

"Hey, Winky," said Harry, struck by a sudden inspiration, walking over to her, and bending down, "you don't know what Mr. Crouch might be up to, do you? Because he's stopped turning up to judge the Triwizard Tournament."

Winky's eyes flickered. Her enormous pupils focused on Harry. She swayed slightly again and then said, "M - Master is stopped - hic - coming?"

"Yeah," said Harry, "we haven't seen him since the first task. The Daily Prophet's saying he's ill."

Winky swayed some more, staring blurrily at Harry.

"Master- hic- ill?"

Her bottom lip began to tremble.

"But we're not sure if that's true," said Hermione quickly.

"Master is needing his - hie - Winky!" whimpered the elf. "Master cannot - hic - manage - hic - all by himself. . . ."

"Other people manage to do their own housework, you know, Winky," Hermione said severely.

"Winky - hic - is not only - hic - doing housework for Mr. Crouch!" Winky squeaked indignantly, swaying worse than ever and slopping butterbeer down her already heavily stained blouse. "Master is - hic - trusting Winky with - hic - the most important - hic - the most secret..."

"What?" said Harry.

But Winky shook her head very hard, spilling more butterbeer down herself.

"Winky keeps - hic - her master's secrets," she said mutinously, swaying very heavily now, frowning up at Harry with her eyes crossed. "You is - hic - nosing, you is."

"Winky must not talk like that to Harry Potter!" said Dobby angrily. "Harry Potter is brave and noble and Harry Potter is not nosy!"

"He is nosing - hic - into my master's - hic - private and secret - hic - Winky is a good house-elf- hic - Winky keeps her silence - hic - people trying to - hic - pry and poke - hic -"

Winky's eyelids drooped and suddenly, without warning, she slid off her stool into the hearth, snoring loudly. The empty bottle of butterbeer rolled away across the stone-flagged floor. Half a dozen house-elves came hurrying forward, looking disgusted. One of them picked up the bottle; the others covered Winky with a large checked tablecloth and tucked the ends in neatly, hiding her from view.

"We is sorry you had to see that, sirs and miss!" squeaked a nearby elf, shaking his head and looking very ashamed. "We is hoping you will not judge us all by Winky, sirs and miss!"

"She's unhappy!" said Hermione, exasperated. "Why don't you try and cheer her up instead of covering her up?"

"Begging your pardon, miss," said the house-elf, bowing deeply again, "but house-elves has no right to be unhappy when there is work to be done and masters to be served."

"Oh for heavens sake!" Hermione cried. "Listen to me, all of you! You've got just as much right as wizards to be unhappy! You've got the right to wages and holidays and proper clothes, you don't have to do everything you're told - look at Dobby!"

"Miss will please keep Dobby out of this," Dobby mumbled, looking scared. The cheery smiles had vanished from the faces of the house-elves around the kitchen. They were suddenly looking at Hermione as though she were mad and dangerous.

"We has your extra food!" squeaked an elf at Harry's elbow, and he shoved a large ham, a dozen cakes, and some fruit into Harry's arms. "Good-bye!"

The house-elves crowded around Harry, Ron, and Hermione and began shunting them out of the kitchen, many little hands pushing in the smalls of their backs.

"Thank you for the socks, Harry Potter!" Dobby called miserably from the hearth, where he was standing next to the lumpy tablecloth that was Winky.

"You couldn't keep your mouth shut, could you, Hermione?" said Ron angrily as the kitchen door slammed shut behind them. "They won't want us visiting them now! We could've tried to get more stuff out of Winky about Crouch!"

"Oh as if you care about that!" scoffed Hermione. "You only like coming down here for the food!"

It was an irritable sort of day after that. Harry got so tired of Ron and Hermione sniping at each other over their homework in the common room that he took Sirius's food up to the Owlery that evening on his own.

Pigwidgeon was much too small to carry an entire ham up to the mountain by himself, so Harry enlisted the help of two school screech owls as well. When they had set off into the dusk, looking extremely odd carrying the large package between them. Harry leaned on the windowsill, looking out at the grounds, at the

dark, rustling treetops of the Forbidden Forest, and the rippling sails of the Durmstrang ship. An eagle owl flew through the coil of smoke rising from Hagrids chimney; it soared toward the castle, around the Owlery, and out of sight. Looking down, Harry saw Hagrid digging energetically in front of his cabin. Harry wondered what he was doing; it looked as though he were making a new vegetable patch. As he watched, Madame Maxime emerged from the Beauxbatons carriage and walked over to Hagrid. She appeared to be trying to engage him in conversation. Hagrid leaned upon his spade, but did not seem keen to prolong their talk, because Madame Maxime returned to the carriage shortly afterward.

Unwilling to go back to Gryffindor Tower and listen to Ron and Hermione snarling at each other, Harry watched Hagrid digging until the darkness swallowed him and the owls around Harry began to awake, swooshing past him into the night.

By breakfast the next day Ron's and Hermione's bad moods had burnt out, and to Harrys relief, Ron's dark predictions that the house-elves would send substandard food up to the Gryffindor table because Hermione had insulted them proved false; the bacon, eggs, and kippers were quite as good as usual.

When the post owls arrived, Hermione looked up eagerly; she seemed to be expecting something.

"Percy won't've had time to answer yet," said Ron. "We only sent Hedwig yesterday."

"No, it's not that," said Hermione. "I've taken out a subscription to the Daily Prophet. I'm getting sick of finding everything out from the Slytherins."

"Good thinking!" said Harry, also looking up at the owls. "Hey, Hermione, I think you're in luck -"

A gray owl was soaring down toward Hermione.

"It hasn't got a newspaper, though," she said, looking disappointed. "It's -"

But to her bewilderment, the gray owl landed in front of her plate, closely followed by four barn owls, a brown owl, and a tawny.

"How many subscriptions did you take out?" said Harry, seizing Hermione's goblet before it was knocked over by the cluster of owls, all of whom were jostling close to her, trying to deliver their own letter first.

"What on earth - ?" Hermione said, taking the letter from the gray owl, opening it, and starting to read. "Oh really!" she sputtered, going rather red.

"What's up?" said Ron.

"It,'s - oh how ridiculous -"

She thrust the letter at Harry, who saw that it was not handwritten, but composed

from pasted letters that seemed to have been cut out of the Daily Prophet.

YOU ARE A WICKED GIRL. HARRY POTTER DESERVES

BETTER. GO BACK WHERE YOU CAME FROM MUGGLE.

"They're all like it!" said Hermione desperately, opening one letter after another. "'Harry Potter can do much better than the likes of you. . . .' 'You deserve to be boiled in frog spawn. . . .' Ouch!"

She had opened the last envelope, and yellowish-green liquid smelling strongly of petrol gushed over her hands, which began to erupt in large yellow boils.

"Undiluted bubotuber pus!" said Ron, picking up the envelope gingerly and sniffing it.

"Ow!" said Hermione, tears starting in her eyes as she tried to rub the pus off her hands with a napkin, but her fingers were now so thickly covered in painful sores that it looked as though she were wearing a pair of thick, knobbly gloves.

"You'd better get up to the hospital wing," said Harry as the owls around Hermione took flight. "We'll tell Professor Sprout where you've gone. . . ."

"I warned her!" said Ron as Hermione hurried out of the Great Hall, cradling her hands. "I warned her not to annoy Rita Skeeter! Look at this one ..." He read out one of the letters Hermione had left behind: "I read In Witch Weekly about how you are playing Harry Potter false and that boy has had enough hardship and I will be sending you a curse by next post as soon as I can find a big enough envelope.' Blimey, she'd better watch out for herself."

Hermione didn't turn up for Herbology. As Harry and Ron left the greenhouse for their Care of Magical Creatures class, they saw Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle descending the stone steps of the castle. Pansy Parkinson was whispering and giggling behind them with her gang of Slytherin girls. Catching sight of Harry, Pansy called, "Potter, have you split up with your girlfriend? Why was she so upset at breakfast?"

Harry ignored her; he didn't want to give her the satisfaction of knowing how much trouble the Witch Weekly article had caused.

Hagrid, who had told them last lesson that they had finished with unicorns, was waiting for them outside his cabin with a fresh supply of open crates at his feet. Harrys heart sank at the sight of the crates - surely not another skrewt hatching? - but when he got near enough to see inside, he found himself looking at a number of flurry black creatures with long snouts. Their front paws were curiously flat, like spades, and they were blinking up at the class, looking politely puzzled at all the attention.

"These're nifflers," said Hagrid, when the class had gathered around. "Yeh find 'em down mines mostly. They like sparkly stuff. . . . There yeh go, look."

One of the nifflers had suddenly leapt up and attempted to bite Pansy Parkinson's watch off her wrist. She shrieked and jumped backward.

"Useful little treasure detectors," said Hagrid happily. "Thought we'd have some fun with 'em today. See over there?" He pointed at the large patch of freshly turned earth Harry had watched him digging from the Owlery window. "I've buried some gold coins. I've got a prize fer whoever picks the niffler that digs up most. Jus' take off all yer valuables, an' choose a niffler, an get ready ter set 'em loose."

Harry took off his watch, which he was only wearing out of habit, as it didn't work anymore, and stuffed it into his pocket. Then he picked up a niffler. It put its long snout in Harry's ear and sniffed enthusiastically. It was really quite cuddly.

"Hang on," said Hagrid, looking down into the crate, "there's a spare niffler here . . . who's missin? Where's Hermione?"

"She had to go to the hospital wing," said Ron.

"We'll explain later," Harry muttered; Pansy Parkinson was listening.

It was easily the most fun they had ever had in Care of Magical Creatures. The nifflers dived in and out of the patch of earth as though it were water, each scurrying back to the student who had released it and spitting gold into their hands. Ron's was particularly efficient; it had soon filled his lap with coins.

"Can you buy these as pets, Hagrid?" he asked excitedly as his niffler dived back into the soil, splattering his robes.

"Yer mum wouldn' be happy, Ron," said Hagrid, grinning. "They wreck houses, nifflers. I reckon they've nearly got the lot, now," he added, pacing around the patch of earth while the nifflers continued to dive. "I on'y buried a hundred coins. Oh there y'are, Hermione!"

Hermione was walking toward them across the lawn. Her hands were very heavily bandaged and she looked miserable. Pansy Parkinson was watching her beadily.

"Well, let's check how yeh've done!" said Hagrid. "Count yer coins! An' there's no point tryin' ter steal any, Goyle," he added, his beetle-black eyes narrowed. "It's leprechaun gold. Vanishes after a few hours."

Goyle emptied his pockets, looking extremely sulky. It turned out that Ron's niffler had been most successful, so Hagrid gave him an enormous slab of Honeydukes chocolate for a prize. The bell rang across the grounds for lunch; the rest of the class set off back to the castle, but Harry, Ron, and Hermione stayed behind to help Hagrid put the nifflers back in their boxes. Harry noticed Madame Maxime watching them out other carriage window.

"What yeh done ter your hands, Hermione?" said Hagrid, looking concerned.

Hermione told him about the hate mail she had received that morning, and the envelope full of bubotuber pus.

"Aaah, don worry," said Hagrid gendy, looking down at her. "I got some o' those letters an all, after Rita Skeeter wrote abou me mum. 'Yeh're a monster an yeh should be put down.' 'Yer mother killed innocent people an if you had any decency you d jump in a lake.'"

"No!" said Hermione, looking shocked.

"Yeah," said Hagrid, heaving the niffler crates over by his cabin wall. "They're jus' nutters, Hermione. Don' open 'em if yeh get any more. Chuck 'em straigh' in the fire."

"You missed a really good lesson," Harry told Hermione as they headed back toward the castle. "They're good, nifflers, aren't they, Ron?"

Ron, however, was frowning at the chocolate Hagrid had given him. He looked thoroughly put out about something.

"What's the matter?" said Harry. "Wrong flavor?"

"No," said Ron shortly. "Why didn't you tell me about the gold?"

"What gold?" said Harry.

"The gold I gave you at the Quidditch World Cup," said Ron. "The leprechaun gold I gave you for my Omnioculars. In the Top Box. Why didn't you tell me it disappeared?"

Harry had to think for a moment before he realized what Ron was talking about.

"Oh . . ." he said, the memory coming back to him at last. "I dunno ... I never noticed it had gone. I was more worried about my wand, wasn't I?"

They climbed the steps into the entrance hall and went into the Great Hall for lunch.

"Must be nice," Ron said abruptly, when they had sat down and started serving themselves roast beef and Yorkshire puddings. "To have so much money you don't notice if a pocketful of Galleons goes missing."

"Listen, I had other stuff on my mind that night!" s aid Harry impatiently. "We all did, remember?"

"I didn't know leprechaun gold vanishes," Ron muttered. "I thought I was paying you back. You shouldn't've given me that Chudley Cannon hat for Christmas."

"Forget it, all right?" said Harry.

Ron speared a roast potato on the end of his fork, glaring at it. Then he said, "I

hate being poor."

Harry and Hermione looked at each other. Neither of them really knew what to say.

"It's rubbish," said Ron, still glaring down at his potato. "I don't blame Fred and George for trying to make some extra money. Wish I could. Wish I had a niffler."

"Well, we know what to get you next Christmas," said Hermione brightly. Then, when Ron continued to look gloomy, she said, "Come on, Ron, it could be worse. At least your fingers aren't full of pus." Hermione was having a lot of difficulty managing her knife and fork, her fingers were so stiff and swollen. "I hate that Skeeter woman!" she burst out savagely. "I'll get her back for this if it's the last thing I do!"

Hate mail continued to arrive for Hermione over the following week, and although she followed Hagrid's advice and stopped opening it, several of her ill-wishers sent Howlers, which exploded at the Gryffindor table and shrieked insults at her for the whole Hall to hear. Even those people who didn't read Witch Weekly knew all about the supposed Harry-Krum-Hermione triangle now. Harry was getting sick of telling people that Hermione wasn't his girlfriend.

"It'll die down, though," he told Hermione, "if we just ignore it. ... People got bored with that stuff she wrote about me last time

"I want to know how she's listening into private conversations when she's supposed to be banned from the grounds!" said Hermione angrily.

Hermione hung back in their next Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson to ask Professor Moody something. The rest of the class was very eager to leave; Moody had given them such a rigorous test of hex-deflection that many of them were nursing small injuries. Harry had such a bad case of Twitchy Ears, he had to hold his hands clamped over them as he walked away from the class.

"Well, Rita's definitely not using an Invisibility Cloak!" Hermione panted five minutes later, catching up with Harry and Ron in the entrance hall and pulling Harrys hand away from one of his wiggling ears so that he could hear her. "Moody says he didn't see her anywhere near the judges' table at the second task, or anywhere near the lake!"

"Hermione, is there any point in telling you to drop this?" said Ron.

"No!" said Hermione stubbornly. "I want to know how she heard me talking to Viktor! And how she found out about Hagrids mum!"

"Maybe she had you bugged," said Harry.

"Bugged?" said Ron blankly. "What. . . put fleas on her or something?"

Harry started explaining about hidden microphones and recording equipment. Ron

was fascinated, but Hermione interrupted them.

"Aren't you two ever going to read Hogwarts, A History^"

"What's the point?" said Ron. "You know it by heart, we can just ask you."

"All those substitutes for magic Muggles use - electricity, computers, and radar, and all those things - they all go haywire around Hogwarts, there's too much magic in the air. No, Rita's using magic to eavesdrop, she must be. ... If I could just find out what it is ... ooh, if it's illegal, I'll have her ..."

"Haven't we got enough to worry about?" Ron asked her. "Do we have to start a vendetta against Rita Skeeter as well?"

"I'm not asking you to help!" Hermione snapped. "I'll do it on my own!"

She marched back up the marble staircase without a backward glance. Harry was quite sure she was going to the library.

"What's the betting she comes back with a box of / Hate Rita Skeeter badges?" said Ron.

Hermione, however, did not ask Harry and Ron to help her pursue vengeance against Rita Skeeter, for which they were both grateful, because their workload was mounting ever higher in the days before the Easter holidays. Harry frankly marveled at the fact that Hermione could research magical methods of eavesdropping as well as everything else they had to do. He was working flat-out just to get through all their homework, though he made a point of sending regular food packages up to the cave in the mountain for Sirius; after last summer, Harry had not forgotten what it felt like to be continually hungry. He enclosed notes to Sirius, telling him that nothing out of the ordinary had happened, and that they were still waiting for an answer from Percy.

Hedwig didn't return until the end of the Easter holidays. Percy's letter was enclosed in a package of Easter eggs that Mrs. Weasley had sent. Both Harrys and Ron's were the size of dragon eggs and full of homemade toffee. Hermiones, however, was smaller than a chicken egg. Her face fell when she saw it.

"Your mum doesn't read Witch Weekly, by any chance, does she, Ron?" she asked quietly.

"Yeah," said Ron, whose mouth was full of toffee. "Gets it for the recipes."

Hermione looked sadly at her tiny egg.

"Don't you want to see what Percy's written?" Harry asked her hastily.

Percys letter was short and irritated.

As I am constantly telling the Daily Prophet, Mr. Crouch is taking a well-deserved break. He is sending in regular owls with instructions. No, I haven't actually seen

him, but I think I can be trusted to know my own superior's handwriting. I have quite enough to do at the moment without trying to quash these ridiculous rumors. Please don't bother me again unless it's something important. Happy Easter.

The start of the summer term would normally have meant that Harry was training hard for the last Quidditch match of the season. This year, however, it was the third and final task in the Triwizard Tournament for which he needed to prepare, but he still didn't know what he would have to do. Finally, in the last week of May, Professor McGonagall held him back in Transfiguration.

"You are to go down to the Quidditch field tonight at nine o'clock. Potter," she told him. "Mr. Bagman will be there to tell the champions about the third task."

So at half past eight that night. Harry left Ron and Hermione in Gryffindor Tower and went downstairs. As he crossed the entrance hall, Cedric came up from the Hufflepuff common room.

"What d'you reckon it's going to be?" he asked Harry as they went together down the stone steps, out into the cloudy night. "Fleur keeps going on about underground tunnels; she reckons we've got to find treasure."

"That wouldn't be too bad," said Harry, thinking that he would simply ask Hagrid for a niffler to do the job for him.

They walked down the dark lawn to the Quidditch stadium, turned through a gap in the stands, and walked out onto the field.

"What've they done to it?" Cedric said indignantly, stopping dead.

The Quidditch field was no longer smooth and flat. It looked as though somebody had been building long, low walls all over it that twisted and crisscrossed in every direction.

"They're hedges!" said Harry, bending to examine the nearest one.

"Hello there!" called a cheery voice.

Ludo Bagman was standing in the middle of the field with Krum and Fleur. Harry and Cedric made their way toward them, climbing over the hedges. Fleur beamed at Harry as he came nearer. Her attitude toward him had changed completely since he had saved her sister from the lake.

"Well, what d'you think?" said Bagman happily as Harry and Cedric climbed over the last hedge. "Growing nicely, aren't they? Give them a month and Hagrid'll have them twenty feet high. Don't worry," he added, grinning, spotting the less-than-happy expressions on Harrys and Cedric's faces, "you'll have your Quidditch field back to normal once the task is over! Now, I imagine you can guess what we're making here?"

No one spoke for a moment. Then -

"Maze," grunted Krum.

"That's right!" said Bagman. "A maze. The third task's really very straightforward. The Triwizard Cup will be placed in the center of the maze. The first champion to touch it will receive full marks."

"We seemply 'ave to get through the maze?" said Fleur.

"There will be obstacles," said Bagman happily, bouncing on the balls of his feet. "Hagrid is providing a number of creatures . . . then there will be spells that must be broken ... all that sort of thing, you know. Now, the champions who are leading on points will get a head start into the maze." Bagman grinned at Harry and Cedric. "Then Mr. Krum will enter . . . then Miss Delacour. But you'll all be in with a fighting chance, depending how well you get past the obstacles. Should be fun, eh?"

Harry, who knew only too well the kind of creatures that Hagrid was likely to provide for an event like this, thought it was unlikely to be any fun at all. However, he nodded politely like the other champions.

"Very well. . . if you haven't got any questions, we'll go back up to the castle, shall we, it's a bit chilly. ..."

Bagman hurried alongside Harry as they began to wend their way out of the growing maze. Harry had the feeling that Bagman was going to start offering to help him again, but just then, Krum tapped Harry on the shoulder.

"Could I haff a vord?"

"Yeah, all right," said Harry, slightly surprised.

"Vill you valk vith me?"

"Okay," said Harry curiously.

Bagman looked slightly perturbed.

"I'll wait for you. Harry, shall I?"

"No, it's okay, Mr. Bagman," said Harry, suppressing a smile, "I think I can find the castle on my own, thanks."

Harry and Krum left the stadium together, but Krum did not set a course for the Durmstrang ship. Instead, he walked toward the forest.

"What're we going this way for?" said Harry as they passed Hagrid s cabin and the illuminated Beauxbatons carriage.

"Don't vont to be overheard," said Krum shortly.

When at last they had reached a quiet stretch of ground a short way from the

Beauxbatons horses' paddock, Krum stopped in the shade of the trees and turned to face Harry.

"I vant to know," he said, glowering, "vot there is between you and Hermy-own-ninny."

Harry, who from Krum's secretive manner had expected something much more serious than this, stared up at Krum in amazement.

"Nothing," he said. But Krum glowered at him, and Harry, somehow struck anew by how tall Krum was, elaborated. "We're friends. She's not my girlfriend and she never has been. It's just that Skeeter woman making things up."

"Hermy-own-ninny talks about you very often," said Krum, looking suspiciously at Harry.

"Yeah," said Harry, "because were friends."

He couldn't quite believe he was having this conversation with Viktor Krum, the famous International Quidditch player. It was as though the eighteen-year-old Krum thought he. Harry, was an equal - a real rival -

"You haff never . . . you haff not..."

"No," said Harry very firmly.

Krum looked slightly happier. He stared at Harry for a few seconds, then said, "You fly very veil. I vos votching at the first task."

"Thanks," said Harry, grinning broadly and suddenly feeling much taller himself. "I saw you at the Quidditch World Cup. The Wronski Feint, you really -"

But something moved behind Krum in the trees, and Harry, who had some experience of the sort of thing that lurked in the forest, instinctively grabbed Krum's arm and pulled him around.

"Vot is it?"

Harry shook his head, staring at the place where he'd seen movement. He slipped his hand inside his robes, reaching for his wand.

Suddenly a man staggered out from behind a tall oak. For a moment, Harry didn't recognize him . . . then he realized it was Mr. Crouch.

He looked as though he had been traveling for days. The knees of his robes were ripped and bloody, his face scratched; he was unshaven and gray with exhaustion. His neat hair and mustache were both in need of a wash and a trim. His strange appearance, however, was nothing to the way he was behaving. Muttering and gesticulating, Mr. Crouch appeared to be talking to someone that he alone could see. He reminded Harry vividly of an old tramp he had seen once when out shopping with the Dursleys. That man too had been conversing wildly with thin

air; Aunt Petunia had seized Dudley's hand and pulled him across the road to avoid him; Uncle Vernon had then treated the family to a long rant about what he would like to do with beggars and vagrants.

"Vosn't he a judge?" said Krum, staring at Mr. Crouch. "Isn't he vith your Ministry?"

Harry nodded, hesitated for a moment, then walked slowly toward Mr. Crouch, who did not look at him, but continued to talk to a nearby tree.

"... and when you've done that, Weatherby, send an owl to Dumbledore confirming the number of Durmstrang students who will be attending the tournament, Karkaroff has just sent word there will be twelve. . . ."

"Mr. Crouch?" said Harry cautiously.

"... and then send another owl to Madame Maxime, because she might want to up the number of students she's bringing, now Karkaroff's made it a round dozen ... do that, Weatherby, will you? Will you? Will..."

Mr. Crouch's eyes were bulging. He stood staring at the tree, muttering soundlessly at it. Then he staggered sideways and fell to his knees.

"Mr. Crouch?" Harry said loudly. "Are you all right?"

Crouch's eyes were rolling in his head. Harry looked around at Krum, who had followed him into the trees, and was looking down at Crouch in alarm.

"Vot is wrong with him?"

"No idea," Harry muttered. "Listen, you'd better go and get someone -"

"Dumbledore!" gasped Mr. Crouch. He reached out and seized a handful of Harrys robes, dragging him closer, though his eyes were staring over Harry's head. "I need... see ... Dumbledore. ..."

"Okay," said Harry, "if you get up, Mr. Crouch, we can go up to the-"

"I've done . . . stupid . . . thing . . ." Mr. Crouch breathed. He looked utterly mad. His eyes were rolling and bulging, and a trickle of spittle was sliding down his chin. Every word he spoke seemed to cost him a terrible effort. "Must. . . tell. . . Dumbledore . . ."

"Get up, Mr. Crouch," said Harry loudly and clearly. "Get up, I'll take you to Dumbledore!"

Mr, Crouch's eyes rolled forward onto Harry.

"Who ... you?" he whispered.

"I'm a student at the school," said Harry, looking around at Krum for some help,

but Krum was hanging back, looking extremely nervous.

"You're not... his?" whispered Crouch, his mouth sagging.

"No," said Harry, without the faintest idea what Crouch was talking about.

"Dumbledore's?"

"That's right," said Harry.

Crouch was pulling him closer; Harry tried to loosen Crouch's grip on his robes, but it was too powerful.

"Warn ... Dumbledore ..."

"I'll get Dumbledore if you let go of me," said Harry. "Just let go, Mr. Crouch, and I'll get him.. . ."

"Thank you, Weatherby, and when you have done that, I would like a cup of tea. My wife and son will be arriving shortly, we are attending a concert tonight with Mr. and Mrs. Fudge."

Crouch was now talking fluently to a tree again, and seemed completely unaware that Harry was there, which surprised Harry so much he didn't notice that Crouch had released him.

"Yes, my son has recently gained twelve O.W.L.S, most satisfactory, yes, thank you, yes, very proud indeed. Now, if you could bring me that memo from the Andorran Minister of Magic, I think I will have time to draft a response. ..."

"You stay here with him!" Harry said to Krum. "I'll get Dumbledore, I'll be quicker, I know where his office is -"

"He is mad," said Krum doubtfully, staring down at Crouch, who was still gabbling to the tree, apparently convinced it was Percy.

"Just stay with him," said Harry, starting to get up, but his movement seemed to trigger another abrupt change in Mr. Crouch, who seized him hard around the knees and pulled Harry back to the ground.

"Don't. . . leave .. . me!" he whispered, his eyes bulging again. "I... escaped .. . must warn . . . must tell... see Dumbledore . . . my fault... all my fault. . . Bertha . . . dead ... all my fault. .. my son ... my fault... tell Dumbledore ... Harry Potter ... the Dark Lord . . . stronger . . . Harry Potter ..."

"I'll get Dumbledore if you let me go, Mr. Crouch!" said Harry. He looked furiously around at Krum. "Help me, will you?"

Looking extremely apprehensive, Krum moved forward and squatted down next to Mr. Crouch.

"Just keep him here," said Harry, pulling himself free of Mr. Crouch. "I'll be back with Dumbledore."

"Hurry, von't you?" Krum called after him as Harry sprinted away from the forest and up through the dark grounds. They were deserted; Bagman, Cedric, and Fleur had disappeared. Harry tore up the stone steps, through the oak front doors, and off up the marble staircase, toward the second floor.

Five minutes later he was hurtling toward a stone gargoyle standing halfway along an empty corridor.

"Sher - sherbet lemon!" he panted at it.

This was the password to the hidden staircase to Dumbledore's office - or at least, it had been two years ago. The password had evidently changed, however, for the stone gargoyle did not spring to life and jump aside, but stood frozen, glaring at Harry malevolently.

"Move!" Harry shouted at it. "C'mon!"

But nothing at Hogwarts had ever moved just because he shouted at it; he knew it was no good. He looked up and down the dark corridor. Perhaps Dumbledore was in the staffroom? He started running as fast as he could toward the staircase -

"POTTER!"

Harry skidded to a halt and looked around. Snape had just emerged from the hidden staircase behind the stone gargoyle. The wall was sliding shut behind him even as he beckoned Harry back toward him.

"What are you doing here, Potter?"

"I need to see Professor Dumbledore!" said Harry, running back up the corridor and skidding to a standstill in front of Snape instead. "It's Mr. Crouch . . . he's just turned up ... he's in the forest... he's asking -"

"What is this rubbish?" said Snape, his black eyes glittering. "What are you talking about?"

"Mr. Crouch!" Harry shouted. "From the Ministry! He's ill or something - he's in the forest, he wants to see Dumbledore! Just give me the password up to -"

"The headmaster is busy. Potter," said Snape, his thin mouth curling into an unpleasant smile.

"I've got to tell Dumbledore!" Harry yelled.

"Didn't you hear me. Potter?"

Harry could tell Snape was thoroughly enjoying himself, denying Harry the thing he wanted when he was so panicky.

"Look," said Harry angrily, "Crouch isn't right - he's - he's out of his mind - he says he wants to warn -"

The stone wall behind Snape slid open. Dumbledore was standing there, wearing long green robes and a mildly curious expression. "Is there a problem?" he said, looking between Harry and Snape.

"Professor!" Harry said, sidestepping Snape before Snape could speak, "Mr. Crouch is here - he's down in the forest, he wants to speak to you!"

Harry expected Dumbledore to ask questions, but to his relief, Dumbledore did nothing of the sort.

"Lead the way," he said promptly, and he swept off along the corridor behind Harry, leaving Snape standing next to the gargoyle and looking twice as ugly.

"What did Mr. Crouch say. Harry?" said Dumbledore as they walked swiftly down the marble staircase.

"Said he wants to warn you . . . said he's done something terrible ... he mentioned his son . . . and Bertha Jorkins .. . and - and Voldemort. . . something about Voldemort getting stronger. ..."

"Indeed," said Dumbledore, and he quickened his pace as they hurried out into the pitch-darkness.

"He's not acting normally," Harry said, hurrying along beside Dumbledore. "He doesn't seem to know where he is. He keeps talking like he thinks Percy Weasley's there, and then he changes, and says he needs to see you. ... I left him with Viktor Krum."

"You did?" said Dumbledore sharply, and he began to take longer strides still, so that Harry was running to keep up. "Do you know if anybody else saw Mr. Crouch?"

"No," said Harry. "Krum and I were talking, Mr. Bagman had just finished telling us about the third task, we stayed behind, and then we saw Mr. Crouch coming out of the forest -"

"Where are they?" said Dumbledore as the Beauxbatons carriage emerged from the darkness.

"Over here," said Harry, moving in front of Dumbledore, leading the way through the trees. He couldn't hear Crouch's voice anymore, but he knew where he was going; it hadn't been much past the Beauxbatons carriage . . . somewhere around here. . . .

"Viktor?" Harry shouted.

No one answered.

"They were here," Harry said to Dumbledore. "They were definitely somewhere around here. ..."

"Lumos," Dumbledore said, lighting his wand and holding it up.

Its narrow beam traveled from black trunk to black trunk, illuminating the ground. And then it fell upon a pair of feet.

Harry and Dumbledore hurried forward. Krum was sprawled on the forest floor. He seemed to be unconscious. There was no sign at all of Mr. Crouch. Dumbledore bent over Krum and gently lifted one of his eyelids.

"Stunned," he said softly. His half-moon glasses glittered in the wandlight as he peered around at the surrounding trees.

"Should I go and get someone?" said Harry. "Madam Pomfrey?"

"No," said Dumbledore swiftly. "Stay here."

He raised his wand into the air and pointed it in the direction of Hagrid's cabin. Harry saw something silvery dart out of it and streak away through the trees like a ghostly bird. Then Dumbledore bent over Krum again, pointed his wand at him, and muttered, "Ennervate."

Krum opened his eyes. He looked dazed. When he saw Dumbledore, he tried to sit up, but Dumbledore put a hand on his shoulder and made him lie still.

"He attacked me!" Krum muttered, putting a hand up to his head. "The old madman attacked me! I vos looking around to see vare Potter had gone and he attacked from behind!"

"Lie still for a moment," Dumbledore said.

The sound of thunderous footfalls reached them, and Hagrid came panting into sight with Fang at his heels. He was carrying his crossbow.

"Professor Dumbledore!" he said, his eyes widening. "Harry - what the - ?"

"Hagrid, I need you to fetch Professor Karkaroff," said Dumbledore. "His student has been attacked. When you've done that, kindly alert Professor Moody -"

"No need, Dumbledore," said a wheezy growl. "I'm here."

Moody was limping toward them, leaning on his staff, his wand lit.

"Damn leg," he said furiously. "Would've been here quicker . . . what's happened? Snape said something about Crouch -"

"Crouch?" said Hagrid blankly.

"Karkaroff, please, Hagrid!" said Dumbledore sharply.

"Oh yeah . .'. right y'are, Professor. . ." said Hagrid, and he turned and disappeared into the dark trees, Fang trotting after him.

"I don't know where Barty Crouch is," Dumbledore told Moody, "but it is essential that we find him."

"I'm onto it," growled Moody, and he pulled out his wand and limped off into the forest.

Neither Dumbledore nor Harry spoke again until they heard the unmistakable sounds of Hagrid and Fang returning. Karkaroff was hurrying along behind them. He was wearing his sleek silver furs, and he looked pale and agitated.

"What is this?" he cried when he saw Krum on the ground and Dumbledore and Harry beside him. "What's going on?"

"I vos attacked!" said Krum, sitting up now and rubbing his head. "Mr. Crouch or votever his name -"

"Crouch attacked you? Crouch attacked you? The Triwizard judge?"

"Igor," Dumbledore began, but Karkaroff had drawn himself up, clutching his furs around him, looking livid.

"Treachery!" he bellowed, pointing at Dumbledore. "It is a plot! You and your Ministry of Magic have lured me here under false pretenses, Dumbledore! This is not an equal competition! First you sneak Potter into the tournament, though he is underage! Now one of your Ministry friends attempts to put my champion out of action! I smell double-dealing and corruption in this whole affair, and you, Dumbledore, you, with your talk of closer international

wizarding links, of rebuilding old ties, of forgetting old differences - here's what I think of you!"

Karkaroff spat onto the ground at Dumbledore's feet. In one swift movement, Hagrid seized the front of Karkaroff's furs, lifted him into the air, and slammed him against a nearby tree.

"Apologize!" Hagrid snarled as Karkaroff gasped for breath, Hagrid's massive fist at his throat, his feet dangling in midair.

"Hagrid, no!" Dumbledore shouted, his eyes flashing.

Hagrid removed the hand pinning Karkaroff to the tree, and Karkaroff slid all the way down the trunk and slumped in a huddle at its roots; a few twigs and leaves showered down upon his head.

"Kindly escort Harry back up to the castle, Hagrid," said Dumbledore sharply.

Breathing heavily, Hagrid gave Karkaroff a glowering look.

"Maybe I'd better stay here. Headmaster. . . ."

"You will take Harry back to school, Hagrid," Dumbledore repeated firmly. "Take him right up to Gryffindor Tower. And Harry - I want you to stay there. Anything you might want to do - any owls you might want to send - they can wait until morning, do you understand me?"

"Er - yes," said Harry, staring at him. How had Dumbledore known that, at that very moment, he had been thinking about sending Pigwidgeon straight to Sirius, to tell him what had happened?

"I'll leave Fang with yeh. Headmaster," Hagrid said, staring menacingly at Karkaroff, who was still sprawled at the foot of the tree, tangled in furs and tree roots. "Stay, Fang. C'mon, Harry."

They marched in silence past the Beauxbatons carriage and up toward the castle.

"How dare he," Hagrid growled as they strode past the lake. "How dare he accuse Dumbledore. Like Dumbledore'd do anythin' like that. Like Dumbledore wanted you in the tournament in the firs' place. Worried! I dunno when I seen Dumbledore more worried than he's bin lately. An' you!" Hagrid suddenly said angrily to Harry, who looked up at him, taken aback. "What were yeh doin', wanderin' off with ruddy Krum? He's from Durmstrang, Harry! Coulda jinxed yeh right there, couldn he? Hasn' Moody taught yeh nothin'? 'Magine lettin him lure yeh off on yer own -"

"Krum's all right!" said Harry as they climbed the steps into the entrance hall. "He wasn't trying to jinx me, he just wanted to talk about Hermione -"

"I'll be havin' a few words with her, an' all," said Hagrid grimly, stomping up the stairs. "The less you lot 'ave ter do with these foreigners, the happier yeh'll be. Yeh can trust any of 'em."

"You were getting on all right with Madame Maxime," Harry said, annoyed.

"Don' you talk ter me abou' her!" said Hagrid, and he looked quite frightening for a moment. "I've got her number now! Tryin' ter get back in me good books, tryin' ter get me ter tell her what's comin in the third task. Ha! You can' trust any of'em!"

Hagrid was in such a bad mood, Harry was quite glad to say good-bye to him in front of the Fat Lady. He clambered through the portrait hole into the common room and hurried straight for the corner where Ron and Hermione were sitting, to tell them what had happened.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE - THE DREAM

It comes down to this," said Hermione, rubbing her forehead. "Either Mr. Crouch attacked Viktor, or somebody else attacked both of them when Viktor wasn't looking."

"It must've been Crouch," said Ron at once. "That's why he was gone when Harry and Dumbledore got there. He'd done a runner."

"I don't think so," said Harry, shaking his head. "He seemed really weak - I don't reckon he was up to Disapparating or anything."

"You cant Disapparate on the Hogwarts grounds, haven't I told you enough times?" said Hermione.

"Okay. . . hows this for a theory," said Ron excitedly. "Krum attacked Crouch - no, wait for it - and then Stunned himself!"

"And Mr. Crouch evaporated, did he?" said Hermione coldly.

"Oh yeah . . ."

It was daybreak. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had crept out of their dormitories very early and hurried up to the Owlery together to send a note to Sirius. Now they were standing looking out at the misty grounds. All three of them were puffy-eyed and pale because they had been talking late into the night about Mr. Crouch.

"Just go through it again, Harry," said Hermione. "What did Mr. Crouch actually say?"

"I've told you, he wasn't making much sense," said Harry. "He said he wanted to warn Dumbledore about something. He definitely mentioned Bertha Jorkins, and he seemed to think she was dead. He kept saying stuff was his fault. . . . He mentioned his son."

"Well, that was his fault," said Hermione testily.

"He was out of his mind," said Harry. "Half the time he seemed to think his wife and son were still alive, and he kept talking to Percy about work and giving him instructions."

"And . . . remind me what he said about You-Know-Who?" said Ron tentatively.

"I've told you," Harry repeated dully. "He said he's getting stronger."

There was a pause. Then Ron said in a falsely confident voice, "But he was out of his mind, like you said, so half of it was probably just raving. ..."

"He was sanest when he was trying to talk about Voldemort," said Harry, and Ron winced at the sound of the name. "He was having real trouble stringing two words together, but that was when he seemed to know where he was, and know what he wanted to do. He just kept saying he had to see Dumbledore."

Harry turned away from the window and stared up into the rafters. The many perches were half-empty; every now and then, another owl would swoop in through one of the windows, returning from its night's hunting with a mouse in its beak.

"If Snape hadn't held me up," Harry said bitterly, "we might've got there in time. 'The headmaster is busy. Potter . . . what's this rubbish, Potter?' Why couldn't he have just got out of the way?"

"Maybe he didn't want you to get there!" said Ron quickly. "Maybe - hang on - how fast d'you reckon he could've gotten down to the forest? D'you reckon he could've beaten you and Dumbledore there?"

"Not unless he can turn himself into a bat or something," said Harry.

"Wouldn't put it past him," Ron muttered.

"We need to see Professor Moody," said Hermione. "We need to find out whether he found Mr. Crouch,"

"If he had the Marauder's Map on him, it would've been easy," said Harry.

"Unless Crouch was already outside the grounds," said Ron, "because it only shows up to the boundaries, doesn't -"

"Shh!" said Hermione suddenly.

Somebody was climbing the steps up to the Owlery. Harry could hear two voices arguing, coming closer and closer.

"- that's blackmail, that is, we could get into a lot of trouble for that-"

"- we've tried being polite; it's time to play dirty, like him. He wouldn't like the Ministry of Magic knowing what he did -"

"I'm telling you, if you put that in writing, it's blackmail!"

"Yeah, and you won't be complaining if we get a nice fat payoff, will you?"

The Owlery door banged open. Fred and George came over the threshold, then froze at the sight of Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

"What're you doing here?" Ron and Fred said at the same time.

"Sending a letter," said Harry and George in unison.

"What, at this time?" said Hermione and Fred.

Fred grinned.

"Fine - we won't ask you what you're doing, if you don't ask us," he said.

He was holding a sealed envelope in his hands. Harry glanced at it, but Fred, whether accidentally or on purpose, shifted his hand so that the name on it was covered.

"Well, don't let us hold you up," Fred said, making a mock bow and pointing at the door.

Ron didn't move. "Who're you blackmailing?" he said.

The grin vanished from Fred's face. Harry saw George half glance at Fred, before smiling at Ron.

"Don't be stupid, I was only joking," he said easily.

"Didn't sound like that," said Ron.

Fred and George looked at each other. Then Fred said abruptly, "I've told you before, Ron, keep your nose out if you like it the shape it is. Can't see why you would, but -"

"It's my business if you're blackmailing someone," said Ron. "George's right, you could end up in serious trouble for that."

"Told you, I was joking," said George. He walked over to Fred, pulled the letter out of his hands, and began attaching it to the leg of the nearest barn owl. "You're starting to sound a bit like our dear older brother, you are, Ron. Carry on like this and you'll be made a prefect."

"No, I won't!" said Ron hotly.

George carried the barn owl over to the window and it took off. George turned around and grinned at Ron.

"Well, stop telling people what to do then. See you later."

He and Fred left the Owlery. Harry, Ron, and Hermione stared at one another.

"You don't think they know something about all this, do you?" Hermione whispered. "About Crouch and everything?"

"No," said Harry. "If it was something that serious, they'd tell someone. They'd tell Dumbledore."

Ron, however, was looking uncomfortable.

"What's the matter?" Hermione asked him.

"Well. . ." said Ron slowly, "I dunno if they would. They're . . . they're obsessed

with making money lately, I noticed it when I was hanging around with them - when - you know -"

"We weren't talking." Harry finished the sentence for him. "Yeah, but blackmail..."

"It's this joke shop idea they've got," said Ron. "I thought they were only saying it to annoy Mum, but they really mean it, they want to start one. They've only got a year left at Hogwarts, they keep going on about how it's time to think about their future, and Dad can't help them, and they need gold to get started."

Hermione was looking uncomfortable now.

"Yes, but. . . they wouldn't do anything against the law to get gold."

"Wouldn't they?" said Ron, looking skeptical. "I dunno . . . they don't exactly mind breaking rules, do they?"

"Yes, but this is the law" said Hermione, looking scared. "This isn't some silly school rule. . . . They'll get a lot more than detention for blackmail! Ron. . . maybe you'd better tell Percy. . . ."

"Are you mad?" said Ron. "Tell Percy? He'd probably do a Crouch and turn them in." He stared at the window through which Fred and George's owl had departed, then said, "Come on, let's get some breakfast."

"D'you think it's too early to go and see Professor Moody?" Hermione said as they went down the spiral staircase.

"Yes," said Harry. "He'd probably blast us through the door if we wake him at the crack of dawn; he'll think we're trying to attack him while he's asleep. Let's give it till break."

History of Magic had rarely gone so slowly. Harry kept checking Ron's watch, having finally discarded his own, but Ron's was moving so slowly he could have sworn it had stopped working too. All three of them were so tired they could happily have put their heads down on the desks and slept; even Hermione wasn't taking her usual notes, but was sitting with her head on her hand, gazing at Professor Binns with her eyes out of focus.

When the bell finally rang, they hurried out into the corridors toward the Dark Arts classroom and found Professor Moody leaving it. He looked as tired as they felt. The eyelid of his normal eye was drooping, giving his face an even more lopsided appearance than usual.

"Professor Moody?" Harry called as they made their way toward him through the crowd.

"Hello, Potter," growled Moody. His magical eye followed a couple of passing first years, who sped up, looking nervous; it rolled into the back of Moody's head and watched them around the corner before he spoke again.

"Come in here."

He stood back to let them into his empty classroom, limped in after them, and closed the door.

"Did you find him?" Harry asked without preamble. "Mr. Crouch?"

"No," said Moody. He moved over to his desk, sat down, stretched out his wooden leg with a slight groan, and pulled out his hip flask.

"Did you use the map?" Harry said.

"Of course," said Moody, taking a swig from his flask. "Took a leaf out of your book, Potter. Summoned it from my office into the forest. He wasn't anywhere on there."

"So he did Disapparate?" said Ron.

"You can't Disapparate on the grounds, Ron!" said Hermione. "There are other ways he could have disappeared, aren't there, Professor?"

Moody's magical eye quivered as it rested on Hermione. "You're another one who might think about a career as an Auror," he told her. "Mind works the right way. Granger."

Hermione flushed pink with pleasure.

"Well, he wasn't invisible," said Harry. "The map shows invisible people. He must've left the grounds, then."

"But under his own steam?" said Hermione eagerly, "or because someone made him?"

"Yeah, someone could've - could've pulled him onto a broom and flown off with him, couldn't they?" said Ron quickly, looking hopefully at Moody as if he too wanted to be told he had the makings of an Auror.

"We can't rule out kidnap," growled Moody.

"So," said Ron, "d'you reckon he's somewhere in Hogsmeade?"

"Could be anywhere," said Moody, shaking his head. "Only thing we know for sure is that he's not here."

He yawned widely, so that his scars stretched, and his lopsided mouth revealed a number of missing teeth. Then he said, "Now, Dumbledore's told me you three fancy yourselves as investigators, but there's nothing you can do for Crouch. The Ministry'll be looking for him now, Dumbledore's notified them. Potter, you just keep your mind on the third task."

"What?" said Harry. "Oh yeah . . ."

He hadn't given the maze a single thought since he'd left it with Krum the previous night.

"Should be right up your street, this one," said Moody, looking up at Harry and scratching his scarred and stubbly chin. "From what Dumbledore's said, you've managed to get through stuff like this plenty of times. Broke your way through a series of obstacles guarding the Sorcerers Stone in your first year, didn't you?"

"We helped," Ron said quickly. "Me and Hermione helped."

Moody grinned.

"Well, help him practice for this one, and I'll be very surprised if he doesn't win," said Moody. "In the meantime .. . constant vigilance, Potter. Constant vigilance." He took another long draw from his hip flask, and his magical eye swiveled onto the window. The topmost sail of the Durmstrang ship was visible through it.

"You two," counseled Moody, his normal eye on Ron and Hermione, "you stick close to Potter, all right? I'm keeping an eye on things, but all the same . . . you can never have too many eyes out."

Sirius sent their owl back the very next morning. It fluttered down beside Harry at the same moment that a tawny owl landed in front of Hermione, clutching a copy of the Daily Prophet in its beak. She took the newspaper, scanned the first few pages, said, "Ha! She hasn't got wind of Crouch!" then joined Ron and Harry in reading what Sirius had to say on the mysterious events of the night before last.

Harry - what do you think you are playing at, walking off into the forest with Viktor Krum? I want you to swear, by return owl, that you are not going to go walking with anyone else at night. There is somebody highly dangerous at Hogwarts. It is clear to me that they wanted to stop Crouch from seeing Dumbledore and you were probably feet away from them in the dark. You could have been killed.

Your name didn't get into the Goblet of Fire by accident. If someone's trying to attack you, they're on their last chance. Stay close to Ron and Hermione, do not leave Gryffindor Tower after hours, and arm yourself for the third task. Practice Stunning and Disarming. A few hexes wouldn't go amiss either. There's nothing you can do about Crouch. Keep your head down and look after yourself. I'm waiting for your letter giving me your word you won't stray out-of-bounds again.

Sirius

"Who's he, to lecture me about being out-of-bounds?" said Harry in mild indignation as he folded up Sirius's letter and put it inside his robes. "After all the stuff he did at school!"

"He's worried about you!" said Hermione sharply. "Just like Moody and Hagrid! So listen to them!"

"No one's tried to attack me all year," said Harry. "No one's done anything to me at

all-"

"Except put your name in the Goblet of Fire," said Hermione. "And they must've done that for a reason. Harry. Snuffles is right. Maybe they've been biding their time. Maybe this is the task they're going to get you."

"Look," said Harry impatiently, "let's say Sirius is right, and someone Stunned Krum to kidnap Crouch. Well, they would've been in the trees near us, wouldn't they? But they waited till I was out of the way until they acted, didn't they? So it doesn't look like I'm their target, does it?"

"They couldn't have made it look like an accident if they'd murdered you in the forest!" said Hermione. "But if you die during a task-"

"They didn't care about attacking Krum, did they?" said Harry. "Why didn't they just polish me off at the same time? They could've made it look like Krum and I had a duel or something."

"Harry, I don't understand it either," said Hermione desperately. "I just know there are a lot of odd things going on, and I don't like it. ... Moody's right - Sirius is right - you've got to get in training for the third task, straight away. And you make sure you write back to Sirius and promise him you're not going to go sneaking off alone again."

The Hogwarts grounds never looked more inviting than when Harry had to stay indoors. For the next few days he spent all of his free time either in the library with Hermione and Ron, looking up hexes, or else in empty classrooms, which they sneaked into to practice. Harry was concentrating on the Stunning Spell, which he had never used before. The trouble was that practicing it involved certain sacrifices on Ron's and Hermione's part.

"Can't we kidnap Mrs. Norris?" Ron suggested on Monday lunchtime as he lay flat on his back in the middle of their Charms classroom, having just been Stunned and reawoken by Harry for the fifth time in a row. "Let's Stun her for a bit. Or you could use Dobby, Harry, I bet he'd do anything to help you. I'm not complaining or anything" - he got gingerly to his feet, rubbing his backside - "but I'm aching all over. ..."

"Well, you keep missing the cushions, don't you!" said Hermione impatiently, rearranging the pile of cushions they had used for the Banishing Spell, which Flitwick had left in a cabinet. "Just try and fall backward!"

"Once you're Stunned, you can't aim too well, Hermione! "said Ron angrily. "Why don't you take a turn?"

"Well, I think Harry's got it now, anyway," said Hermione hastily. "And we don't

have to worry about Disarming, because he's been able to do that for ages. ... I think we ought to start on some of these hexes this evening."

She looked down the list they had made in the library.

"I like the look of this one," she said, "this Impediment Curse. Should slow down anything that's trying to attack you. Harry. We'll start with that one."

The bell rang. They hastily shoved the cushions back into Flitwicks cupboard and slipped out of the classroom.

"See you at dinner!" said Hermione, and she set off for Arithmancy, while Harry and Ron headed toward North Tower, and Divination. Broad strips of dazzling gold sunlight tell across the corridor from the high windows. The sky outside was so brightly blue it looked as though it had been enameled.

"It's going to be boiling in Trelawney's room, she never puts out that fire," said Ron as they started up the staircase toward the silver ladder and the trapdoor.

He was quite right. The dimly lit room was swelteringly hot. The fumes from the perfumed fire were heavier than ever. Harrys head swam as he made his way over to one of the curtained windows. While Professor Trelawney was looking the other way, disentangling her shawl from a lamp, he opened it an inch or so and settled back in his chintz armchair, so that a soft breeze played across his face. It was extremely comfortable.

"My dears," said Professor Trelawney, sitting down in her winged armchair in front of the class and peering around at them all with her strangely enlarged eyes, "we have almost finished our work on planetary divination. Today, however, will be an excellent opportunity to examine the effects of Mars, for he is placed most interestingly at the present time. If you will all look this way, I will dim the lights. . . ."

She waved her wand and the lamps went out. The fire was the only source of light now. Professor Trelawney bent down and lifted, from under her chair, a miniature model of the solar system, contained within a glass dome. It was a beautiful thing; each of the moons glimmered in place around the nine planets and the fiery sun, all of them hanging in thin air beneath the glass. Harry watched lazily as Professor Trelawney began to point out the fascinating angle Mars was making to Neptune. The heavily perfumed fumes washed over him, and the breeze from the window played across his face. He could hear an insect humming gently somewhere behind the curtain. His eyelids began to droop. . . .

He was riding on the back of an eagle owl, soaring through the clear blue sky toward an old, ivy-covered house set high on a hillside. Lower and lower they flew, the wind blowing pleasantly in Harry's face, until they reached a dark and broken window in the upper story of the house and entered. Now they were flying along a gloomy passageway, to a room at the very end . . . through the door they went, into a dark room whose windows were boarded up....

Harry had left the owl's back... he was watching, now, as it fluttered across the room, into a chair with its back to him. . . . There were two dark shapes on the floor beside the chair . . . both of them were stirring. . . .

One was a huge snake . . . the other was a man ... a short, balding man, a man with watery eyes and a pointed nose ... he was wheezing and sobbing on the hearth rug. . . .

"You are in luck, Wormtail," said a cold, high-pitched voice from the depths of the chair in which the owl had landed. "You are very fortunate indeed. Your blunder has not ruined everything. He is dead."

"My Lord!" gasped the man on the floor. "My Lord, I am ... I am so pleased . . . and so sorry. ..."

"Nagini," said the cold voice, "you are out of luck. I will not be feeding Wormtail to you, after all... but never mind, never mind . . . there is still Harry Potter. ..."

The snake hissed. Harry could see its tongue fluttering.

"Now, Wormtail," said the cold voice, "perhaps one more little reminder why I will not tolerate another blunder from you. ..."

"My Lord ... no ... I beg you . . ."

The tip of a wand emerged from around the back of the chair. It was pointing at Wormtail.

"Crucio!" said the cold voice.

Wormtail screamed, screamed as though every nerve in his body were on fire, the screaming filled Harry's ears as the scar on his forehead seared with pain; he was yelling too...Voldemort would hear him, would know he was there. . . .

"Harry! Harry!"

Harry opened his eyes. He was lying on the floor of Professor Trelawney's room with his hands over his face. His scar was still burning so badly that his eyes were watering. The pain had been real. The whole class was standing around him, and Ron was kneeling next to him, looking terrified.

"You all right?" he said.

"Of course he isn't!" said Professor Trelawney, looking thoroughly excited. Her great eyes loomed over Harry, gazing at him. "What was it. Potter? A premonition? An apparition? What did you see?"

"Nothing," Harry lied. He sat up. He could feel himself shaking. He couldn't stop himself from looking around, into the shadows behind him; Voldemorts voice had sounded so close. . . .

"You were clutching your scar!" said Professor Trelawney. "You were rolling on the floor, clutching your scar! Come now. Potter, I have experience in these matters!"

Harry looked up at her.

"I need to go to the hospital wing, I think," he said. "Bad headache."

"My dear, you were undoubtedly stimulated by the extraordinary clairvoyant vibrations of my room!" said Professor Trelawney. "If you leave now, you may lose the opportunity to see further than you have ever -"

"I don't want to see anything except a headache cure," said Harry.

He stood up. The class backed away. They all looked unnerved.

"See you later," Harry muttered to Ron, and he picked up his bag and headed for the trapdoor, ignoring Professor Trelawney, who was wearing an expression of great frustration, as though she had just been denied a real treat.

When Harry reached the bottom of her stepladder, however, he did not set off for the hospital wing. He had no intention whatsoever of going there. Sirius had told him what to do if his scar hurt him again, and Harry was going to follow his advice: He was going straight to Dumbledore's office. He marched down the corridors, thinking about what he had seen in the dream . . . it had been as vivid as the one that had awoken him on Privet Drive. . . . He ran over the details in his mind, trying to make sure he could remember them. . . . He had heard Voldemort accusing Wormtail of making a blunder . . . but the owl had brought good news, the blunder had been repaired, somebody was dead ... so Wormtail was not going to be fed to the snake . . . he, Harry, was going to be fed to it instead. . . .

Harry had walked right past the stone gargoyle guarding the entrance to Dumbledores office without noticing. He blinked, looked around, realized what he had done, and retraced his steps, stopping in front of it. Then he remembered that he didn't know the password.

"Sherbet lemon?" he tried tentatively.

The gargoyle did not move.

"Okay," said Harry, staring at it, "Pear Drop. Er - Licorice Wand. Fizzing Whizbee. Drooble's Best Blowing Gum. Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans ... oh no, he doesn't like them, does he?... oh just open, can't you?" he said angrily. "I really need to see him, its urgent!"

The gargoyle remained immovable.

Harry kicked it, achieving nothing but an excruciating pain in his big toe.

"Chocolate Frog!" he yelled angrily, standing on one leg. "Sugar Quill! Cockroach

Cluster!"

The gargoyle sprang to life and jumped aside. Harry blinked.

"Cockroach Cluster?" he said, amazed. "I was only joking. ..."

He hurried through the gap in the walls and stepped onto the foot of a spiral stone staircase, which moved slowly upward as the doors closed behind him, taking him up to a polished oak door with a brass door knocker.

He could hear voices from inside the office. He stepped off the moving staircase and hesitated, listening.

"Dumbledore, I'm afraid I don't see the connection, don't see it at all!" It was the voice of the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge. "Ludo says Berthas perfectly capable of getting herself lost. I agree we would have expected to have found her by now, but all the same, we've no evidence of foul play, Dumbledore, none at all. As for her disappearance being linked with Barty Crouch's!"

"And what do you thinks happened to Barty Crouch, Minister?" said Moody's growling voice.

"I see two possibilities, Alastor," said Fudge. "Either Crouch has finally cracked - more than likely, I'm sure you'll agree, given his personal history - lost his mind, and gone wandering off somewhere -"

"He wandered extremely quickly, if that is the case, Cornelius," said Dumbledore calmly.

"Or else - well..." Fudge sounded embarrassed. "Well, I'll reserve judgment until after I've seen the place where he was found, but you say it was just past the Beauxbatons carriage? Dumbledore, you know what that woman is?"

"I consider her to be a very able headmistress - and an excellent dancer," said Dumbledore quietly.

"Dumbledore, come!" said Fudge angrily. "Don't you think you might be prejudiced in her favor because of Hagrid? They don't all turn out harmless - if, indeed, you can call Hagrid harmless, with that monster fixation he's got -"

"I no more suspect Madame Maxime than Hagrid," said Dumbledore, just as calmly. "I think it possible that it is you who are prejudiced, Cornelius."

"Can we wrap up this discussion?" growled Moody.

"Yes, yes, let's go down to the grounds, then," said Fudge impatiently.

"No, it's not that," said Moody, "it's just that Potter wants a word with you, Dumbledore. He's just outside the door."

CHAPTER THIRTY - THE PENSIEVE

The door of the office opened.

"Hello, Potter," said Moody. "Come in, then."

Harry walked inside. He had been inside Dumbledore's office once before; it was a very beautiful, circular room, lined with pictures of previous headmasters and headmistresses of Hogwarts, all of whom were fast asleep, their chests rising and falling gently.

Cornelius Fudge was standing beside Dumbledore's desk, wearing his usual pinstriped cloak and holding his lime-green bowler hat.

"Harry!" said Fudge jovially, moving forward. "How are you?"

"Fine," Harry lied.

"We were just talking about the night when Mr. Crouch turned up on the grounds," said Fudge. "It was you who found him, was it not?"

"Yes," said Harry. Then, feeling it was pointless to pretend that he hadn't overheard what they had been saying, he added, "I didn't see Madame Maxime anywhere, though, and she'd have a job hiding, wouldn't she?"

Dumbledore smiled at Harry behind Fudge's back, his eyes twinkling.

"Yes, well," said Fudge, looking embarrassed, "we're about to go for a short walk on the grounds, Harry, if you'll excuse us ... perhaps if you just go back to your class -"

"I wanted to talk to you. Professor," Harry said quickly, looking at Dumbledore, who gave him a swift, searching look.

"Wait here for me, Harry," he said. "Our examination of the grounds will not take long."

They trooped out in silence past him and closed the door. After a minute or so, Harry heard the clunks of Moody's wooden leg growing fainter in the corridor below. He looked around.

"Hello, Fawkes," he said.

Fawkes, Professor Dumbledore's phoenix, was standing on his golden perch beside the door. The size of a swan, with magnificent scarlet-and-gold plumage, he swished his long tail and blinked benignly at Harry.

Harry sat down in a chair in front of Dumbledore's desk. For several minutes, he

sat and watched the old headmasters and headmistresses snoozing in their frames, thinking about what he had just heard, and running his fingers over his scar. It had stopped hurting now.

He felt much calmer, somehow, now that he was in Dumbledore's office, knowing he would shortly be telling him about the dream. Harry looked up at the walls behind the desk. The patched and ragged Sorting Hat was standing on a shelf. A glass case next to it held a magnificent silver sword with large rubies set into the hilt, which Harry recognized as the one he himself had pulled out of the Sorting Hat in his second year. The sword had once belonged to Godric Gryffindor, founder of Harry's House. He was gazing at it, remembering how it had come to his aid when he had thought all hope was lost, when he noticed a patch of silvery light, dancing and shimmering on the glass case. He looked around for the source of the light and saw a sliver of silver-white shining brightly from within a black cabinet behind him, whose door had not been closed properly. Harry hesitated, glanced at Fawkes, then got up, walked across the office, and pulled open the cabinet door.

A shallow stone basin lay there, with odd carvings around the edge: runes and symbols that Harry did not recognize. The silvery light was coming from the basin's contents, which were like nothing Harry had ever seen before. He could not tell whether the substance was liquid or gas. It was a bright, whitish silver, and it was moving ceaselessly; the surface of it became ruffled like water beneath wind, and then, like clouds, separated and swirled smoothly. It looked like light made liquid - or like wind made solid - Harry couldn't make up his mind.

He wanted to touch it, to find out what it felt like, but nearly four years' experience of the magical world told him that sticking his hand into a bowl full of some unknown substance was a very stupid thing to do. He therefore pulled his wand out of the inside of his robes, cast a nervous look around the office, looked back at the contents of the basin, and prodded them.

The surface of the silvery stuff inside the basin began to swirl very fast.

Harry bent closer, his head right inside the cabinet. The silvery substance had become transparent; it looked like glass. He looked down into it expecting to see the stone bottom of the basin - and saw instead an enormous room below the surface of the mysterious substance, a room into which he seemed to be looking through a circular window in the ceiling.

The room was dimly lit; he thought it might even be underground, for there were no windows, merely torches in brackets such as the ones that illuminated the walls of Hogwarts. Lowering his face so that his nose was a mere inch away from the glassy substance, Harry saw that rows and rows of witches and wizards were seated around every wall on what seemed to be benches rising in levels. An empty chair stood in the very center of the room. There was something about the chair that gave Harry an ominous feeling. Chains encircled the arms of it, as though its occupants were usually tied to it.

Where was this place? It surely wasn't Hogwarts; he had never seen a room like that here in the castle. Moreover, the crowd in the mysterious room at the bottom of the basin was comprised of adults, and Harry knew there were not nearly that many teachers at Hogwarts. They seemed, he thought, to be waiting for something; even though he could only see the tops of their hats, all of their faces seemed to be pointing in one direction, and none of them were talking to one another.

The basin being circular, and the room he was observing square, Harry could not make out what was going on in the corners of it. He leaned even closer, tilting his head, trying to see...

The tip of his nose touched the strange substance into which he was staring.

Dumbledore's office gave an almighty lurch - Harry was thrown forward and pitched headfirst into the substance inside the basin -

But his head did not hit the stone bottom. He was falling through something icy-cold and black; it was like being sucked into a dark whirlpool -

And suddenly, Harry found himself sitting on a bench at the end of the room inside the basin, a bench raised high above the others. He looked up at the high stone ceiling, expecting to see the circular window through which he had just been staring, but there was nothing there but dark, solid stone.

Breathing hard and fast. Harry looked around him. Not one of the witches and wizards in the room (and there were at least two hundred of them) was looking at him. Not one of them seemed to have noticed that a fourteen-year-old boy had just dropped from the ceiling into their midst. Harry turned to the wizard next to him on the bench and uttered a loud cry of surprise that reverberated around the silent room.

He was sitting right next to Albus Dumbledore.

"Professor!" Harry said in a kind of strangled whisper. "I'm sorry - I didn't mean to - I was just looking at that basin in your cabinet - I - where are we?"

But Dumbledore didn't move or speak. He ignored Harry completely. Like every other wizard on the benches, he was staring into the far corner of the room, where there was a door.

Harry gazed, nonplussed, at Dumbledore, then around at the silently watchful crowd, then back at Dumbledore. And then it dawned on him. . . .

Once before. Harry had found himself somewhere that nobody could see or hear him. That time, he had fallen through a page in an enchanted diary, right into somebody else's memory . . . and unless he was very much mistaken, something of the sort had happened again...

Harry raised his right hand, hesitated, and then waved it energetically in from of

Dumbledore's face. Dumbledore did not blink, look around at Harry, or indeed move at all. And that, in Harry's opinion, settled the matter. Dumbledore wouldn't ignore him like that. He was inside a memory, and this was not the present-day Dumbledore. Yet it couldn't be that long ago . . . the Dumbledore sitting next to him now was silver-haired, just like the present-day Dumbledore. But what was this place? What were all these wizards waiting for?

Harry looked around more carefully. The room, as he had suspected when observing it from above, was almost certainly underground - more of a dungeon than a room, he thought. There was a bleak and forbidding air about the place; there were no pictures on the walls, no decorations at all; just these serried rows of benches, rising in levels all around the room, all positioned so that they had a clear view of that chair with the chains on its arms.

Before Harry could reach any conclusions about the place in which they were, he heard footsteps. The door in the corner of the dungeon opened and three people entered - or at least one man, flanked by two dementors.

Harry's insides went cold. The dementors - tall, hooded creatures whose faces were concealed - were gliding slowly toward the chair in the center of the room, each grasping one of the man's arms with their dead and rotten-looking hands. The man between them looked as though he was about to faint, and Harry couldn't blame him ... he knew the dementors could not touch him inside a memory, but he remembered their power only too well. The watching crowd recoiled slightly as the dementors placed the man in the chained chair and glided back out of the room. The door swung shut behind them.

Harry looked down at the man now sitting in the chair and saw that it was Karkaroff.

Unlike Dumbledore, Karkaroff looked much younger; his hair and goatee were black. He was not dressed in sleek furs, but in thin and ragged robes. He was shaking. Even as Harry watched, the chains on the arms of the chair glowed suddenly gold and snaked their way up Karkaroff's arms, binding him there.

"Igor Karkaroff," said a curt voice to Harry's left. Harry looked around and saw Mr. Crouch standing up in the middle of the bench beside him. Crouch's hair was dark, his face was much less lined, he looked fit and alert. "You have been brought from Azkaban to present evidence to the Ministry of Magic. You have given us to understand that you have important information for us."

Karkaroff straightened himself as best he could, tightly bound to the chair.

"I have, sir," he said, and although his voice was very scared, Harry could still hear the familiar unctuous note in it. "I wish to be of use to the Ministry. I wish to help. I - I know that the Ministry is trying to - to round up the last of the Dark Lords supporters. I am eager to assist in any way I can. ..."

There was a murmur around the benches. Some of the wizards and witches were

surveying Karkaroff with interest, others with pronounced mistrust. Then Harry heard, quite distinctly, from Dumbledores other side, a familiar, growling voice saying, "Filth."

Harry leaned forward so that he could see past Dumbledore. Mad-Eye Moody was sitting there - except that there was a very noticeable difference in his appearance. He did not have his magical eye, but two normal ones. Both were looking down upon Karkaroff, and both were narrowed in intense dislike.

"Crouch is going to let him out," Moody breathed quietly to Dumbledore. "He's done a deal with him. Took me six months to track him down, and Crouch is going to let him go if he's got enough new names. Let's hear his information, I say, and throw him straight back to the dementors."

Dumbledore made a small noise of dissent through his long, crooked nose.

"Ah, I was forgetting . . . you don't like the dementors, do you, Albus?" said Moody with a sardonic smile.

"No," said Dumbledore calmly, "I'm afraid I don't. I have long felt the Ministry is wrong to ally itself with such creatures."

"But for filth like this . . ." Moody said softly.

"You say you have names for us, Karkaroff," said Mr. Crouch. "Let us hear them, please."

"You must understand," said Karkaroff hurriedly, "that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named operated always in the greatest secrecy. . . . He preferred that we - I mean to say, his supporters - and I regret now, very deeply, that I ever counted myself among them -"

"Get on with it," sneered Moody.

"- we never knew the names of every one of our fellows - He alone knew exactly who we all were -"

"Which was a wise move, wasn't it, as it prevented someone like you, Karkaroff, from turning all of them in," muttered Moody.

"Yet you say you have some names for us?" said Mr. Crouch.

"I - I do," said Karkaroff breathlessly. "And these were important supporters, mark you. People I saw with my own eyes doing his bidding. I give this information as a sign that I fully and totally renounce him, and am filled with a remorse so deep I can barely -"

"These names are?" said Mr. Crouch sharply.

Karkaroff drew a deep breath.

"There was Antonin Dolohov," he said. "I - I saw him torture countless Muggles and - and non-supporters of the Dark Lord."

"And helped him do it," murmured Moody.

"We have already apprehended Dolohov," said Crouch. "He was caught shortly after yourself."

"Indeed?" said Karkaroff, his eyes widening. "I - I am delighted to hear it!"

But he didn't look it. Harry could tell that this news had come as a real blow to him. One of his names was worthless.

"Any others?" said Crouch coldly.

"Why, yes ... there was Rosier," said Karkaroff hurriedly. "Evan Rosier."

"Rosier is dead," said Crouch. "He was caught shortly after you were too. He preferred to fight rather than come quietly and was killed in the struggle."

"Took a bit of me with him, though," whispered Moody to Harry's right. Harry looked around at him once more, and saw him indicating the large chunk out of his nose to Dumbledore.

"No - no more than Rosier deserved!" said Karkaroff, a real note of panic in his voice now. Harry could see that he was starting to worry that none of his information would be of any use to the Ministry. Karkaroff's eyes darted toward the door in the corner, behind which the dementors undoubtedly still stood, waiting.

"Any more?" said Crouch.

"Yes!" said Karkaroff. "There was Travers - he helped murder the McKinnons! Mulciber - he specialized in the Imperius Curse, forced countless people to do horrific things! Rookwood, who was a spy, and passed He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named useful information from inside the Ministry itself!"

Harry could tell that, this time, Karkaroff had struck gold. The watching crowd was all murmuring together.

"Rookwood?" said Mr. Crouch, nodding to a witch sitting in front of him, who began scribbling upon her piece of parchment. "Augustus Rookwood of the Department of Mysteries?"

"The very same," said Karkaroff eagerly. "I believe he used a network of well-placed wizards, both inside the Ministry and out, to collect information -"

"But Travers and Mulciber we have," said Mr. Crouch. "Very well, Karkaroff, if that is all, you will be returned to Azkaban while we decide -"

"Not yet!" cried Karkaroff, looking quite desperate. "Wait, I have more!"

Harry could see him sweating in the torchlight, his white skin contrasting strongly with the black of his hair and beard.

"Snape!" he shouted. "Severus Snape!"

"Snape has been cleared by this council," said Crouch disdainfully. "He has been vouched for by Albus Dumbledore."

"No!" shouted Karkaroff, straining at the chains that bound him to the chair. "I assure you! Severus Snape is a Death Eater!"

Dumbledore had gotten to his feet.

"I have given evidence already on this matter," he said calmly. "Severus Snape was indeed a Death Eater. However, he rejoined our side before Lord Voldemort's downfall and turned spy for us, at great personal risk. He is now no more a Death Eater than I am."

Harry turned to look at Mad-Eye Moody. He was wearing a look of deep skepticism behind Dumbledore's back.

"Very well, Karkaroff," Crouch said coldly, "you have been of assistance. I shall review your case. You will return to Azkaban in the meantime. ..."

Mr. Crouch's voice faded. Harry looked around; the dungeon was dissolving as though it were made of smoke; everything was fading; he could see only his own body - all else was swirling darkness. . . .

And then, the dungeon returned. Harry was sitting in a different seat, still on the highest bench, but now to the left side of Mr. Crouch. The atmosphere seemed quite different: relaxed, even cheerful. The witches and wizards all around the walls were talking to one another, almost as though they were at some sort of sporting event. Harry noticed a witch halfway up the rows of benches opposite. She had short blonde hair, was wearing magenta robes, and was sucking the end of an acid-green quill. It was, unmistakably, a younger Rita Skeeter. Harry looked around; Dumbledore was sitting beside him again, wearing different robes. Mr. Crouch looked more tired and somehow fiercer, gaunter. . . . Harry understood. It was a different memory, a different day ... a different trial.

The door in the corner opened, and Ludo Bagman walked into the room.

This was not, however, a Ludo Bagman gone to seed, but a Ludo Bagman who was clearly at the height of his Quidditch-playing fitness. His nose wasn't broken now; he was tall and lean and muscular. Bagman looked nervous as he sat down in the chained chair, but it did not bind him there as it had bound Karkaroff, and Bagman, perhaps taking heart from this, glanced around at the watching crowd, waved at a couple of them, and managed a small smile.

"Ludo Bagman, you have been brought here in front of the Council of Magical Law to answer charges relating to the activities of the Death Eaters," said Mr.

Crouch. "We have heard the evidence against you, and are about to reach our verdict. Do you have anything to add to your testimony before we pronounce judgment?"

Harry couldn't believe his ears. Ludo Bagman, a Death Eater?

"Only," said Bagman, smiling awkwardly, "well - I know I've been a bit of an idiot -"

One or two wizards and witches in the surrounding seats smiled indulgently. Mr. Crouch did not appear to share their feelings. He was staring down at Ludo Bagman with an expression of the utmost severity and dislike.

"You never spoke a truer word, boy," someone muttered dryly to Dumbledore behind Harry. He looked around and saw Moody sitting there again. "If I didn't know he'd always been dim, I'd have said some of those Bludgers had permanently affected his brain. ..."

"Ludovic Bagman, you were caught passing information to Lord Voldemort's supporters," said Mr. Crouch. "For this, I suggest a term of imprisonment in Azkaban lasting no less than -"

But there was an angry outcry from the surrounding benches. Several of the witches and wizards around the walls stood up, shaking their heads, and even their fists, at Mr. Crouch.

"But I've told you, I had no idea!" Bagman called earnestly over the crowd's babble, his round blue eyes widening. "None at all! Old Rookwood was a friend of my dad's . . . never crossed my mind he was in with You-Know-Who! I thought I was collecting information for our side! And Rookwood kept talking about getting me a job in the Ministry later on ... once my Quidditch days are over, you know ... I mean, I can't keep getting hit by Bludgers for the rest of my life, can I?"

There were titters from the crowd.

"It will be put to the vote," said Mr. Crouch coldly. He turned to the right-hand side of the dungeon. "The jury will please raise their hands . . . those in favor of imprisonment..."

Harry looked toward the right-hand side of the dungeon. Not one person raised their hand. Many of the witches and wizards around the walls began to clap. One of the witches on the jury stood up.

"Yes?" barked Crouch.

"We'd just like to congratulate Mr. Bagman on his splendid performance for England in the Quidditch match against Turkey last Saturday," the witch said breathlessly.

Mr. Crouch looked furious. The dungeon was ringing with applause now. Bagman

got to his feet and bowed, beaming.

"Despicable," Mr. Crouch spat at Dumbledore, sitting down as Bagman walked out of the dungeon. "Rookwood get him a job indeed. . . . The day Ludo Bagman joins us will be a sad day indeed for the Ministry. . . ."

And the dungeon dissolved again. When it had returned, Harry looked around. He and Dumbledore were still sitting beside Mr. Crouch, but the atmosphere could not have been more different. There was total silence, broken only by the dry sobs of a frail, wispy-looking witch in the seat next to Mr. Crouch. She was clutching a handkerchief to her mouth with trembling hands.

Harry looked up at Crouch and saw that he looked gaunter and grayer than ever before. A nerve was twitching in his temple.

"Bring them in," he said, and his voice echoed through the silent dungeon.

The door in the corner opened yet again. Six dementors entered this time, flanking a group of four people. Harry saw the people in the crowd turn to look up at Mr. Crouch. A few of them whispered to one another.

The dementors placed each of the four people in the four chairs with chained arms that now stood on the dungeon floor. There was a thickset man who stared blankly up at Crouch; a thinner and more nervous-looking man, whose eyes were darting around the crowd; a woman with thick, shining dark hair and heavily hooded eyes, who was sitting in the chained chair as though it were a throne; and a boy in his late teens, who looked nothing short of petrified. He was shivering, his straw-colored hair all over his face, his freckled skin milk-white. The wispy little witch beside Crouch began to rock backward and forward in her seat, whimpering into her handkerchief.

Crouch stood up. He looked down upon the four in front of him, and there was pure hatred in his face.

"You have been brought here before the Council of Magical Law," he said clearly, "so that we may pass judgment on you, for a crime so heinous -"

"Father," said the boy with the straw-colored hair. "Father. . .please . . .

"- that we have rarely heard the like of it within this court," said Crouch, speaking more loudly, drowning out his son's voice.

"We have heard the evidence against you. The four of you stand accused of capturing an Auror - Frank Longbottom - and subjecting him to the Cruciatus Curse, believing him to have knowledge of the present whereabouts of your exiled master, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named -"

"Father, I didn't!" shrieked the boy in chains below. "I didn't, I swear it. Father, don't send me back to the dementors -"

"You are further accused," bellowed Mr. Crouch, "of using the Cruciatus Curse on Frank Longbottom's wife, when he would not give you information. You planned to restore He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named to power, and to resume the lives of violence you presumably led while he was strong. I now ask the jury -"

"Mother!" screamed the boy below, and the wispy little witch beside Crouch began to sob, rocking backward and forward. "Mother, stop him. Mother, I didn't do it, it wasn't me!"

"I now ask the jury," shouted Mr. Crouch, "to raise their hands if they believe, as I do, that these crimes deserve a life sentence in Azkaban!"

In unison, the witches and wizards along the right-hand side of the dungeon raised their hands. The crowd around the walls began to clap as it had for Bagman, their faces full of savage triumph. The boy began to scream.

"No! Mother, no! I didn't do it, I didn't do it, I didn't know! Don't send me there, don't let him!"

The dementors were gliding back into the room. The boys' three companions rose quietly from their seats; the woman with the heavy-lidded eyes looked up at Crouch and called, "The Dark Lord will rise again, Crouch! Throw us into Azkaban; we will wait! He

will rise again and will come for us, he will reward us beyond any of his other supporters! We alone were faithful! We alone tried to find him!"

But the boy was trying to fight off the dementors, even though Harry could see their cold, draining power starting to affect him. The crowd was jeering, some of them on their feet, as the woman swept out of the dungeon, and the boy continued to struggle.

"I'm your son!" he screamed up at Crouch. "I'm your son!"

"You are no son of mine!" bellowed Mr. Crouch, his eyes bulging suddenly. "I have no son!"

The wispy witch beside him gave a great gasp and slumped in her seat. She had fainted. Crouch appeared not to have noticed.

"Take them away!" Crouch roared at the dementors, spit flying from his mouth. "Take them away, and may they rot there!"

"Father! Father, I wasn't involved! No! No! Father, please!"

"I think. Harry, it is time to return to my office," said a quiet voice in Harrys ear.

Harry started. He looked around. Then he looked on his other side.

There was an Albus Dumbledore sitting on his right, watching Crouch's son being dragged away by the dementors - and there was an Albus Dumbledore on his left,

looking right at him.

"Come," said the Dumbledore on his left, and he put his hand under Harrys elbow. Harry felt himself rising into the air; the dungeon dissolved around him; for a moment, all was blackness, and then he felt as though he had done a slow-motion somersault, suddenly landing flat on his feet, in what seemed like the dazzling light of Dumbledore's sunlit office. The stone basin was shimmering in the cabinet in front of him, and Albus Dumbledore was standing beside him.

"Professor," Harry gasped, "I know I shouldn't've - I didn't mean - the cabinet door was sort of open and -"

"I quite understand," said Dumbledore. He lifted the basin, carried it over to his desk, placed it upon the polished top, and sat down in the chair behind it. He motioned for Harry to sit down opposite him.

Harry did so, staring at the stone basin. The contents had returned to their original, silvery-white state, swirling and rippling beneath his gaze.

"What is it?" Harry asked shakily.

"This? It is called a Pensieve," said Dumbledore. "I sometimes find, and I am sure you know the feeling, that I simply have too many thoughts and memories crammed into my mind."

"Er," said Harry, who couldn't truthfully say that he had ever felt anything of the sort.

"At these times," said Dumbledore, indicating the stone basin, "I use the Pensieve. One simply siphons the excess thoughts from one's mind, pours them into the basin, and examines them at one's leisure. It becomes easier to spot patterns and links, you understand, when they are in this form."

"You mean . . . that stuff's your thoughts?" Harry said, staring at the swirling white substance in the basin.

"Certainly," said Dumbledore. "Let me show you."

Dumbledore drew his wand out of the inside of his robes and placed the tip into his own silvery hair, near his temple. When he took the wand away, hair seemed to be clinging to it - but then Harry saw that it was in fact a glistening strand of the same strange silvery-white substance that filled the Pensieve. Dumbledore added this fresh thought to the basin, and Harry, astonished, saw his own face swimming around the surface of the bowl. Dumbledore placed his long hands on either side of the Pensieve and swirled it, rather as a gold prospector would pan for fragments of gold.... and Harry saw his own face change smoothly into Snape's, who opened his mouth and spoke to the ceiling, his voice echoing slightly.

"It's coming back . . . Karkaroff's too . . . stronger and clearer than ever..."

"A connection I could have made without assistance," Dumbledore sighed, "but never mind." He peered over the top of his half-moon spectacles at Harry, who was gaping at Snape's face, which was continuing to swirl around the bowl. "I was using the Pensieve when Mr. Fudge arrived for our meeting and put it away rather hastily. Undoubtedly I did not fasten the cabinet door properly. Naturally, it would have attracted your attention."

"I'm sorry," Harry mumbled.

Dumbledore shook his head. "Curiosity is not a sin," he said. "But we should exercise caution with our curiosity. . . yes, indeed ..."

Frowning slightly, he prodded the thoughts within the basin with the tip of his wand. Instantly, a figure rose out of it, a plump, scowling girl of about sixteen, who began to revolve slowly, with her feet still in the basin. She took no notice whatsoever of Harry or Professor Dumbledore. When she spoke, her voice echoed as Snape's had done, as though it were coming from the depths of the stone basin. "He put a hex on me, Professor Dumbledore, and I

was only teasing him, sir, I only said I'd seen him kissing Florence behind the greenhouses last Thursday. . . ."

"But why. Bertha," said Dumbledore sadly, looking up at the now silently revolving girl, "why did you have to follow him in the first place?"

"Bertha?" Harry whispered, looking up at her. "Is that - was that Bertha Jorkins?"

"Yes," said Dumbledore, prodding the thoughts in the basin again; Bertha sank back into them, and they became silvery and opaque once more. "That was Bertha as I remember her at school."

The silvery light from the Pensieve illuminated Dumbledore's face, and it struck Harry suddenly how very old he was looking. He knew, of course, that Dumbledore was getting on in years, but somehow he never really thought of Dumbledore as an old man.

"So, Harry," said Dumbledore quietly. "Before you got lost in my thoughts, you wanted to tell me something."

"Yes," said Harry. "Professor - I was in Divination just now, and - er - I fell asleep."

He hesitated here, wondering if a reprimand was coming, but Dumbledore merely said, "Quite understandable. Continue."

"Well, I had a dream," said Harry. "A dream about Lord Voldemort. He was torturing Wormtail . . . you know who Wormtail-"

"I do know," said Dumbledore promptly. "Please continue."

"Voldemort got a letter from an owl. He said something like, Wormtail's blunder had been repaired. He said someone was dead. Then he said, Wormtail wouldn't be fed to the snake - there was a snake beside his chair. He said - he said he'd be feeding me to it,

instead. Then he did the Cruciatus Curse on Wormtail - and my scar hurt," Harry said. "It woke me up, it hurt so badly."

Dumbledore merely looked at him.

"Er - that's all," said Harry.

"I see," said Dumbledore quietly. "I see. Now, has your scar hurt at any other time this year, excepting the time it woke you up over the summer?"

"No, I - how did you know it woke me up over the summer?" said Harry, astonished.

"You are not Sirius's only correspondent," said Dumbledore. "I have also been in contact with him ever since he left Hogwarts last year. It was I who suggested the mountainside cave as the safest place for him to stay."

Dumbledore got up and began walking up and down behind his desk. Every now and then, he placed his wand tip to his temple, removed another shining silver thought, and added it to the Pensieve. The thoughts inside began to swirl so fast that Harry couldn't make out anything clearly: It was merely a blur of color.

"Professor?" he said quietly, after a couple of minutes.

Dumbledore stopped pacing and looked at Harry.

"My apologies," he said quietly. He sat back down at his desk.

"D'you - d'you know why my scar's hurting me?"

Dumbledore looked very intently at Harry for a moment, and then said, "I have a theory, no more than that. ... It is my belief that your scar hurts both when Lord Voldemort is near you, and when he is feeling a particularly strong surge of hatred."

"But. . . why?"

"Because you and he are connected by the curse that failed," said Dumbledore. "That is no ordinary scar."

"So you think . . . that dream . . . did it really happen?"

"It is possible," said Dumbledore. "I would say - probable. Harry - did you see Voldemort?"

"No," said Harry. "Just the back of his chair. But - there wouldn't have been

anything to see, would there? I mean, he hasn't got a body, has he? But. . . but then how could he have held the wand?" Harry said slowly.

"How indeed?" muttered Dumbledore. "How indeed . . ."

Neither Dumbledore nor Harry spoke for a while. Dumbledore was gazing across the room, and, every now and then, placing his wand tip to his temple and adding another shining silver thought to the seething mass within the Pensieve.

"Professor," Harry said at last, "do you think he's getting stronger?"

"Voldemort?" said Dumbledore, looking at Harry over the Pensieve. It was the characteristic, piercing look Dumbledore had given him on other occasions, and always made Harry feel as though Dumbledore were seeing right through him in a way that even Moody's magical eye could not. "Once again. Harry, I can only give you my suspicions."

Dumbledore sighed again, and he looked older, and wearier, than ever.

"The years of Voldemort's ascent to power," he said, "were marked with disappearances. Bertha Jorkins has vanished without a trace in the place where Voldemort was certainly known to be last. Mr. Crouch too has disappeared . . . within these very grounds. And there was a third disappearance, one which the Ministry, I regret to say, do not consider of any importance, for it concerns a Muggle. His name was Frank Bryce, he lived in the village where Voldemort's father grew up, and he has not been seen since last August. You see, I read the Muggle newspapers, unlike most of my Ministry friends."

Dumbledore looked very seriously at Harry.

"These disappearances seem to me to be linked. The Ministry disagrees - as you may have heard, while waiting outside my office."

Harry nodded. Silence fell between them again, Dumbledore extracting thoughts every now and then. Harry felt as though he ought to go, but his curiosity held him in his chair.

"Professor?" he said again.

"Yes, Harry?" said Dumbledore.

"Er . . . could I ask you about. . . that court thing I was in ... in the Pensieve?"

"You could," said Dumbledore heavily. "I attended it many times, but some trials come back to me more clearly than others ... particularly now. ..."

"You know - you know the trial you found me in? The one with Crouch's son? Well....were they talking about Neville's parents?"

Dumbledore gave Harry a very sharp look. " Has Neville never told you why he has been brought up by his grandmother?" he said.

Harry shook his head, wondering, as he did so, how he could have failed to ask Neville this, in almost four years of knowing him.

"Yes, they were talking about Nevilles parents," said Dumbledore. "His father, Frank, was an Auror just like Professor Moody. He and his wife were tortured for information about Voldemort's whereabouts after he lost his powers, as you heard."

"So they're dead?" said Harry quietly.

"No," said Dumbledore, his voice full of a bitterness Harry had never heard there before. "They are insane. They are both in St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. I believe Neville visits them, with his grandmother, during the holidays. They do not recognize him."

Harry sat there, horror-struck. He had never known . . . never, in four years, bothered to find out. . .

"The Longbottoms were very popular," said Dumbledore. "The attacks on them came after Voldemort's fall from power, just when everyone thought they were safe. Those attacks caused a wave of fury such as I have never known. The Ministry was under great pressure to catch those who had done it. Unfortunately, the Longbottoms' evidence was - given their condition - none too reliable."

"Then Mr. Crouch's son might not have been involved?" said Harry slowly.

Dumbledore shook his head.

"As to that, I have no idea."

Harry sat in silence once more, watching the contents of the Pensieve swirl. There were two more questions he was burning to ask . . . but they concerned the guilt of living people. . . .

"Er," he said, "Mr. Bagman . .."

"... has never been accused of any Dark activity since," said Dumbledore calmly.

"Right," said Harry hastily, staring at the contents of the Pensieve again, which were swirling more slowly now that Dumbledore had stopped adding thoughts. "And ... er ..."

But the Pensieve seemed to be asking his question for him.

Snape's face was swimming on the surface again. Dumbledore glanced down into it, and then up at Harry.

"No more has Professor Snape," he said.

Harry looked into Dumbledore's light blue eyes, and the thing he really wanted to know spilled out of his mouth before he could stop it.

"What made you think he'd really stopped supporting Voldemort, Professor?"

Dumbledore held Harrys gaze for a few seconds, and then said, "That, Harry, is a matter between Professor Snape and myself."

Harry knew that the interview was over; Dumbledore did not look angry, yet there was a finality in his tone that told Harry it was time to go. He stood up, and so did Dumbledore.

"Harry," he said as Harry reached the door. "Please do not speak about Neville's parents to anybody else. He has the right to let people know, when he is ready."

"Yes, Professor," said Harry, turning to go.

"And-"

Harry looked back. Dumbledore was standing over the Pensieve, his face lit from beneath by its silvery spots of light, looking older than ever. He stared at Harry for a moment, and then said, "Good luck with the third task."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE - THE THIRD TASK

Dumbledore reckons You-Know-Who's getting stronger again as well?" Ron whispered.

Everything Harry had seen in the Pensieve, nearly everything Dumbledore had told and shown him afterward, he had now shared with Ron and Hermione - and, of course, with Sirius, to whom Harry had sent an owl the moment he had left Dumbledore's office. Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat up late in the common room once again that night, talking it all over until Harry's mind was reeling, until he understood what Dumbledore had meant about a head becoming so full of thoughts that it would have been a relief to siphon them off.

Ron stared into the common room fire. Harry thought he saw Ron shiver slightly, even though the evening was warm.

"And he trusts Snape?" Ron said. "He really trusts Snape, even though he knows he was a Death Eater?"

"Yes," said Harry.

Hermione had not spoken for ten minutes. She was sitting with her forehead in her hands, staring at her knees. Harry thought she too looked as though she could have done with a Pensieve.

"Rita Skeeter," she muttered finally.

"How can you be worrying about her now?" said Ron, in utter disbelief.

"I'm not worrying about her," Hermione said to her knees. "I'm just thinking. . . remember what she said to me in the Three Broomsticks? 'I know things about Ludo Bagman that would make your hair curl. ' This is what she meant, isn't it? She reported his trial, she knew he'd passed information to the Death Eaters. And Winky too, remember . . .'Ludo Bagman's a bad wizard.' Mr. Crouch would have been furious he got off, he would have talked about it at home."

"Yeah, but Bagman didn't pass information on purpose, did he?"

Hermione shrugged.

"And Fudge reckons Madame Maxime attacked Crouch?" Ron said, turning back to Harry.

"Yeah," said Harry, "but he's only saying that because Crouch disappeared near the Beauxbatons carriage."

"We never thought of her, did we?" said Ron slowly. "Mind you, she's definitely got giant blood, and she doesn't want to admit it-"

"Of course she doesn't," said Hermione sharply, looking up. "Look what happened to Hagrid when Rita found out about his mother. Look at Fudge, jumping to conclusions about her, just because she's part giant. Who needs that sort of prejudice? I'd probably say I had big bones if I knew that's what I'd get for telling the truth."

Hermione looked at her watch. "We haven't done any practicing!" she said, looking shocked. "We were going to do the Impediment Curse! We'll have to really get down to it tomorrow! Come on. Harry, you need to get some sleep."

Harry and Ron went slowly upstairs to their dormitory. As Harry pulled on his pajamas, he looked over at Nevilles bed. True to his word to Dumbledore, he had not told Ron and Hermione about Neville s parents. As Harry took off his glasses and climbed into his four-poster, he imagined how it must feel to have parents still living but unable to recognize you. He often got sympathy from strangers for being an orphan, but as he listened to Nevilles snores, he thought that Neville deserved it more than he did. Lying in the darkness, Harry felt a rush of anger and hate toward the people who had tortured Mr. and Mrs. Longbottom. ... He remembered the jeers of the crowd as Crouch's son and his companions had been dragged from the court by the dementors. ... He understood how they had felt. . . . Then he remembered the milk-white face of the screaming boy and realized with a jolt that he had died a year later. . . .

It was Voldemort, Harry thought, staring up at the canopy of his bed in the darkness, it all came back to Voldemort. ... He was the one who had torn these families apart, who had ruined all these lives. . . .

Ron and Hermione were supposed to be studying for their exams, which would finish on the day of the third task, but they were putting most of their efforts into helping Harry prepare.

"Don't worry about it," Hermione said shortly when Harry pointed this out to them and said he didn't mind practicing on his own for a while, "at least we'll get top marks in Defense Against the Dark Arts. We'd never have found out about all these hexes in class."

"Good training for when we're all Aurors," said Ron excitedly, attempting the Impediment Curse on a wasp that had buzzed into the room and making it stop dead in midair.

The mood in the castle as they entered June became excited and tense again. Everyone was looking forward to the third task, which would take place a week before the end of term. Harry was practicing hexes at every available moment. He felt more confident about this task than either of the others. Difficult and dangerous though it would undoubtedly be, Moody was right: Harry had managed to find his way past monstrous creatures and enchanted barriers before now, and this time he had some notice, some chance to prepare himself for what lay ahead.

Tired of walking in on Harry, Hermione, and Ron all over the school. Professor McGonagall had given them permission to use the empty Transfiguration classroom at lunchtimes. Harry had soon mastered the Impediment Curse, a spell to slow down and obstruct attackers; the Reductor Curse, which would enable him to blast solid objects out of his way; and the Four-Point Spell, a useful discovery of Hermiones that would make his wand point due north, therefore enabling him to check whether he was going in the right direction within the maze. He was still having trouble with the Shield Charm, though. This was supposed to cast a temporary, invisible wall around himself that deflected minor curses; Hermione managed to shatter it with a well-placed Jelly-Legs Jinx, and Harry wobbled around the room for ten minutes afterward before she had looked up the counter-jinx.

"You're still doing really well, though," Hermione said encouragingly, looking down her list and crossing off those spells they had already learned. "Some of these are bound to come in handy."

"Come and look at this," said Ron, who was standing by the window. He was staring down onto the grounds. "What's Malfoy doing?"

Harry and Hermione went to see. Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were standing in the shadow of a tree below. Crabbe and Goyle seemed to be keeping a lookout; both were smirking. Malfoy was holding his hand up to his mouth and speaking into it.

"He looks like he's using a walkie-talkie," said Harry curiously.

"He can't be," said Hermione, "I've told you, those sorts of things don't work around Hogwarts. Come on, Harry," she added briskly, turning away from the window and moving back into the middle of the room, "let's try that Shield Charm again."

Sirius was sending daily owls now. Like Hermione, he seemed to want to concentrate on getting Harry through the last task before they concerned themselves with anything else. He reminded Harry in every letter that whatever might be going on outside the walls of Hogwarts was not Harry's responsibility, nor was it within his power to influence it.

If Voldemort is really getting stronger again, he wrote, my priority is to ensure your safety. He cannot hope to lay hands on you while you are under Dumbledore's protection, but all the same, take no risks: Concentrate on getting through that maze safely, and then we can turn our attention to other matters.

Harry's nerves mounted as June the twenty-fourth drew closer, but they were not as bad as those he had felt before the first and second tasks. For one thing, he was confident that, this time, he had done everything in his power to prepare for the task. For another, this was the final hurdle, and however well or badly he did, the tournament would at last be over, which would be an enormous relief.

Breakfast was a very noisy affair at the Gryffindor table on the morning of the

third task. The post owls appeared, bringing Harry a good-luck card from Sirius. It was only a piece of parchment, folded over and bearing a muddy paw print on its front, but Harry appreciated it all the same. A screech owl arrived for Hermione, carrying her morning copy of the Daily Prophet as usual. She unfolded the paper, glanced at the front page, and spat out a mouthful of pumpkin juice all over it.

"What?" said Harry and Ron together, staring at her. "Nothing," said Hermione quickly, trying to shove the paper out of sight, but Ron grabbed it. He stared at the headline and said, "No way. Not today. That old cow."

"What?" said Harry. "Rita Skeeter again?"

"No," said Ron, and just like Hermione, he attempted to push the paper out of sight.

"It's about me, isn't it?" said Harry.

"No," said Ron, in an entirely unconvincing tone. But before Harry could demand to see the paper. Draco Malfoy shouted across the Great Hall from the Slytherin table.

"Hey, Potter! Potter! How's your head? You feeling all right? Sure you're not going to go berserk on us?"

Malfoy was holding a copy of the Daily Prophet too. Slytherins up and down the table were sniggering, twisting in their seats to see Harry's reaction.

"Let me see it," Harry said to Ron. "Give it here."

Very reluctantly, Ron handed over the newspaper. Harry turned it over and found himself staring at his own picture, beneath the banner headline:

"HARRY POTTER "DISTURBED AND DANGEROUS"

The boy who defeated He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is unstable and possibly dangerous, writes Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent. Alarming evidence has recently come to light about Harry Potter's strange behavior, which casts doubts upon his suitability to compete in a demanding competition like the Triwizard Tournament, or even to attend Hogwarts School.

Potter, the Daily Prophet can exclusively reveal, regularly collapses at school, and is often heard to complain of pain in the scar on his forehead (relic of the curse with which You-Know-Who attempted to kill him). On Monday last, midway through a Divination lesson, your Daily Prophet reporter witnessed Potter storming from the class, claiming that his scar was hurting too badly to continue studying.

It is possible, say top experts at St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, that Potters brain was affected by the attack inflicted upon him by You-Know-Who, and that his insistence that the scar is still hurting is an expression of

his deep-seated confusion.

"He might even be pretending," said one specialist. "This could be a plea for attention."

The Daily Prophet, however, has unearthed worrying facts about Harry Potter that Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, has carefully concealed from the wizarding public.

"Potter can speak Parseltongue," reveals Draco Malfoy, a Hogwarts fourth year. "There were a lot of attacks on students a couple of years ago, and most people thought Potter was behind them after they saw him lose his temper at a dueling club and set a snake on another boy. It was all hushed up, though. But he's made friends with werewolves and giants too. We think he'd do anything for a bit of power."

Parseltongue, the ability to converse with snakes, has long been considered a Dark Art. Indeed, the most famous Parselmouth of our times is none other than You-Know-Who himself. A member of the Dark Force Defense League, who wished to remain unnamed, stated that he would regard any wizard who could speak Parseltongue "as worthy of investigation. Personally, I would be highly suspicious of anybody who could converse with snakes, as serpents are often used in the worst kinds of Dark Magic, and are historically associated with evildoers." Similarly, "anyone who seeks out the company of such vicious creatures as werewolves and giants would appear to have a fondness for violence."

Albus Dumbledore should surely consider whether a boy such as this should be allowed to compete in the Triwizard Tournament. Some fear that Potter might resort to the Dark Arts in his desperation to win the tournament, the third task of which takes place this evening.

"Gone off me a bit, hasn't she?" said Harry lightly, folding up the paper.

Over at the Slytherin table, Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were laughing at him, tapping their heads with their fingers, pulling grotesquely mad faces, and waggling their tongues like snakes.

"How did she know your scar hurt in Divination?" Ron said. "There's no way she was there, there's no way she could've heard -"

"The window was open," said Harry. "I opened it to breathe."

"You were at the top of North Tower!" Hermione said. "Your voice couldn't have carried all the way down to the grounds!"

"Well, you're the one who's supposed to be researching magical methods of bugging!" said Harry. "You tell me how she did it!"

"I've been trying!" said Hermione. "But I... but. . ."

An odd, dreamy expression suddenly came over Hermione's face. She slowly raised a hand and ran her fingers through her hair.

"Are you all right?" said Ron, frowning at her.

"Yes," said Hermione breathlessly. She ran her fingers through her hair again, and then held her hand up to her mouth, as though speaking into an invisible walkie-talkie. Harry and Ron stared at each other.

"I've had an idea," Hermione said, gazing into space. "I think I know. . . because then no one would be able to see ... even Moody. . . and she'd have been able to get onto the window ledge . . . but she's not allowed . . . she's definitely not allowed ... I think we've got her! Just give me two seconds in the library - just to make sure!"

With that, Hermione seized her school bag and dashed out of the Great Hall.

"Oi!" Ron called after her. "We've got our History of Magic exam in ten minutes! Blimey," he said, turning back to Harry, "she must really hate that Skeeter woman to risk missing the start of an exam. What're you going to do in Binns's class - read again?"

Exempt from the end-of-term tests as a Triwizard champion, Harry had been sitting in the back of every exam class so far, looking up fresh hexes for the third task.

"S'pose so," Harry said to Ron; but just then. Professor McGonagall came walking alongside the Gryffindor table toward him.

"Potter, the champions are congregating in the chamber off the Hall after breakfast," she said.

"But the task's not till tonight!" said Harry, accidentally spilling scrambled eggs down his front, afraid he had mistaken the time.

"I'm aware of that, Potter," she said. "The champions' families are invited to watch the final task, you know. This is simply a chance for you to greet them."

She moved away. Harry gaped after her.

"She doesn't expect the Dursleys to turn up, does she?" he asked Ron blankly.

"Dunno," said Ron. "Harry, I'd better hurry, I'm going to be late for Binns. See you later."

Harry finished his breakfast in the emptying Great Hall. He saw Fleur Delacour get up from the Ravenclaw table and join Cedric as he crossed to the side chamber and entered. Krum slouched off to join them shortly afterward. Harry stayed where he was. He really didn't want to go into the chamber. He had no family - no family who would turn up to see him risk his life, anyway. But just as he was getting up,

thinking that he might as well go up to the library and do a spot more hex research, the door of the side chamber opened, and Cedric stuck his head out.

"Harry, come on, they're waiting for you!"

Utterly perplexed. Harry got up. The Dursleys couldn't possibly be here, could they? He walked across the Hall and opened the door into the chamber.

Cedric and his parents were just inside the door. Viktor Krum was over in a corner, conversing with his dark-haired mother and father in rapid Bulgarian. He had inherited his fathers hooked nose. On the other side of the room, Fleur was jabbering away in French to her mother. Fleur's little sister, Gabrielle, was holding her mother's hand. She waved at Harry, who waved back, grinning. Then he saw Mrs. Weasley and Bill standing in front of the fireplace, beaming at him.

"Surprise!" Mrs. Weasley said excitedly as he smiled broadly and walked over to them. "Thought we'd come and watch you. Harry!" She bent down and kissed him on the cheek.

"You all right?" said Bill, grinning at Harry and shaking his hand. "Charlie wanted to come, but he couldn't get time off. He said you were incredible against the Horntail."

Fleur Delacour, Harry noticed, was eyeing Bill with great interest over her mother's shoulder. Harry could tell she had no objection whatsoever to long hair or earrings with fangs on them.

"This is really nice of you," Harry muttered to Mrs. Weasley. "I thought for a moment - the Dursleys -"

"Hmm," said Mrs. Weasley, pursing her lips. She had always refrained from criticizing the Dursleys in front of Harry, but her eyes flashed every time they were mentioned.

"It's great being back here," said Bill, looking around the chamber (Violet, the Fat Lady's friend, winked at him from her frame). "Haven't seen this place for five years. Is that picture of the mad knight still around? Sir Cadogan?"

"Oh yeah," said Harry, who had met Sir Cadogan the previous year.

"And the Fat Lady?" said Bill.

"She was here in my time," said Mrs. Weasley. "She gave me such a telling off one night when I got back to the dormitory at four in the morning -"

"What were you doing out of your dormitory at four in the morning?" said Bill, surveying his mother with amazement.

Mrs. Weasley grinned, her eyes twinkling.

"Your father and I had been for a nighttime stroll," she said. "He got caught by

Apollyon Pringle - he was the caretaker in those days - your father's still got the marks."

"Fancy giving us a tour, Harry?" said Bill.

"Yeah, okay," said Harry, and they made their way back toward the door into the Great Hall. As they passed Amos Diggory, he looked around.

"There you are, are you?" he said, looking Harry up and down.

"Bet you're not feeling quite as full of yourself now Cedrics caught you up on points, are you?"

"What?" said Harry.

"Ignore him," said Cedric in a low voice to Harry, frowning after his father. "He's been angry ever since Rita Skeeters article about the Triwizard Tournament - you know, when she made out you were the only Hogwarts champion."

"Didn't bother to correct her, though, did he?" said Amos Diggory, loudly enough for Harry to hear as he started to walk out of the door with Mrs. Weasley and Bill. "Still, . . you'll show him, Ced. Beaten him once before, haven't you?"

"Rita Skeeter goes out of her way to cause trouble, Amos!" Mrs. Weasley said angrily. "I would have thought you'd know that, working at the Ministry!"

Mr. Diggory looked as though he was going to say something angry, but his wife laid a hand on his arm, and he merely shrugged and turned away.

Harry had a very enjoyable morning walking over the sunny grounds with Bill and Mrs. Weasley, showing them the Beauxbatons carriage and the Durmstrang ship. Mrs. Weasley was intrigued by the Whomping Willow, which had been planted after she had left school, and reminisced at length about the gamekeeper before Hagrid, a man called Ogg.

"How's Percy?" Harry asked as they walked around the greenhouses.

"Not good," said Bill.

"He's very upset," said Mrs. Weasley, lowering her voice and glancing around. "The Ministry wants to keep Mr. Crouch's disappearance quiet, but Percy's been hauled in for questioning about the instructions Mr. Crouch has been sending in. They seem to think there's a chance they weren't genuinely written by him. Percy's been under a lot of strain. They're not letting him fill in for Mr. Crouch as the fifth judge tonight. Cornelius Fudge is going to be doing it."

They returned to the castle for lunch.

"Mum - Bill!" said Ron, looking stunned, as he joined the Gryffindor table. "What're you doing here?"

"Come to watch Harry in the last task!" said Mrs. Weasley brightly. "I must say, it makes a lovely change, not having to cook. How was your exam?"

"Oh . . . okay," said Ron. "Couldn't remember all the goblin rebels' names, so I invented a few. It's all right," he said, helping himself to a Cornish pasty, while Mrs. Weasley looked stern, "they're all called stuff like Bodrod the Bearded and Urg the Unclean; it wasn't hard."

Fred, George, and Ginny came to sit next to them too, and Harry was having such a good time he felt almost as though he were back at the Burrow; he had forgotten to worry about that evening's task, and not until Hermione turned up, halfway through lunch, did he remember that she had had a brainwave about Rita Skeeter.

"Are you going to tell us - ?"

Hermione shook her head warningly and glanced at Mrs. Weasley.

"Hello, Hermione," said Mrs. Weasley, much more stiffly than usual.

"Hello," said Hermione, her smile faltering at the cold expression on Mrs. Weasley's face.

Harry looked between them, then said, "Mrs. Weasley, you didn't believe that rubbish Rita Skeeter wrote in Witch Weekly, did you? Because Hermione's not my girlfriend."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Weasley "No - of course I didn't!"

But she became considerably warmer toward Hermione after that.

Harry, Bill, and Mrs. Weasley whiled away the afternoon with a long walk around the castle, and then returned to the Great Hall for the evening feast. Ludo Bagman and Cornelius Fudge had joined the staff table now. Bagman looked quite cheerful, but Cornelius Fudge, who was sitting next to Madame Maxime, looked stern and was not talking. Madame Maxime was concentrating on her plate, and Harry thought her eyes looked red. Hagrid kept glancing along the table at her,

There were more courses than usual, but Harry, who was starting to feel really nervous now, didn't eat much. As the enchanted ceiling overhead began to fade from blue to a dusky purple, Dumbledore rose to his feet at the staff table, and silence fell.

"Ladies and gentlemen, in five minutes' time, I will be asking you to make your way down to the Quidditch field for the third and final task of the Triwizard Tournament. Will the champions please follow Mr. Bagman down to the stadium now."

Harry got up. The Gryffindors all along the table were applauding him; the Weasleys and Hermione all wished him good luck, and he headed off out of the Great Hall with Cedric, Fleur, and Viktor.

"Feeling all right. Harry?" Bagman asked as they went down the stone steps onto the grounds. "Confident?"

"I'm okay," said Harry. It was sort of true; he was nervous, but he kept running over all the hexes and spells he had been practicing in his mind as they walked, and the knowledge that he could remember them all made him feel better.

They walked onto the Quidditch field, which was now completely unrecognizable. A twenty-foot-high hedge ran all the way around the edge of it. There was a gap right in front of them: the entrance to the vast maze. The passage beyond it looked dark and creepy.

Five minutes later, the stands had begun to fill; the air was full of excited voices and the rumbling of feet as the hundreds of students filed into their seats. The sky was a deep, clear blue now, and the first stars were starting to appear. Hagrid, Professor Moody, Professor McGonagall, and Professor Flitwick came walking into the stadium and approached Bagman and the champions. They were wearing large, red, luminous stars on their hats, all except Hagrid, who had his on the back of his moleskin vest.

"We are going to be patrolling the outside of the maze," said Professor McGonagall to the champions. "If you get into difficulty, and wish to be rescued, send red sparks into the air, and one of us will come and get you, do you understand?"

The champions nodded.

"Off you go, then!" said Bagman brightly to the four patrollers.

"Good luck. Harry," Hagrid whispered, and the four of them walked away in different directions, to station themselves around the maze. Bagman now pointed his wand at his throat, muttered, "Sonorus," and his magically magnified voice echoed into the stands.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the third and final task of the Triwizard Tournament is about to begin! Let me remind you how the points currently stand! Tied in first place, with eighty-five points each - Mr. Cedric Diggory and Mr. Harry Potter, both of Hogwarts School!" The cheers and applause sent birds from the Forbidden Forest fluttering into the darkening sky. "In second place, with eighty points - Mr. Viktor Krum, of Durmstrang Institute!" More applause. "And in third place - Miss Fleur Delacour, of Beauxbatons Academy!"

Harry could just make out Mrs. Weasley, Bill, Ron, and Hermione applauding Fleur politely, halfway up the stands. He waved up at them, and they waved back, beaming at him.

"So ... on my whistle, Harry and Cedric!" said Bagman. "Three - two - one -"

He gave a short blast on his whistle, and Harry and Cedric hurried forward into the

maze.

The towering hedges cast black shadows across the path, and, whether because they were so tall and thick or because they had been enchanted, the sound of the surrounding crowd was silenced the moment they entered the maze. Harry felt almost as though he were underwater again. He pulled out his wand, muttered, "Lumos," and heard Cedric do the same just behind him.

After about fifty yards, they reached a fork. They looked at each other.

"See you," Harry said, and he took the left one, while Cedric took the right.

Harry heard Bagman's whistle for the second time. Krum had entered the maze. Harry sped up. His chosen path seemed completely deserted. He turned right, and hurried on, holding his wand high over his head, trying to see as far ahead as possible. Still, there was nothing in sight.

Bagman's whistle blew in the distance for the third time. All of the champions were now inside.

Harry kept looking behind him. The old feeling that he was being watched was upon him. The maze was growing darker with every passing minute as the sky overhead deepened to navy. He reached a second fork.

"Point Me," he whispered to his wand, holding it flat in his palm.

The wand spun around once and pointed toward his right, into solid hedge. That way was north, and he knew that he needed to go northwest for the center of the maze. The best he could do was to take the left fork and go right again as soon as possible.

The path ahead was empty too, and when Harry reached a right turn and took it, he again found his way unblocked. Harry didn't know why, but the lack of obstacles was unnerving him. Surely he should have met something by now? It felt as though the maze were luring him into a false sense of security. Then he heard movement right behind him. He held out his wand, ready to attack, but its beam fell only upon Cedric, who had just hurried out of a path on the right-hand side. Cedric looked severely shaken. The sleeve of his robe was smoking.

"Hagrid's Blast-Ended Skrewts!" he hissed. "They're enormous - I only just got away!"

He shook his head and dived out of sight, along another path. Keen to put plenty of distance between himself and the skrewts, Harry hurried off again. Then, as he turned a corner, he saw ... a dementor gliding toward him. Twelve feet tall, its face hidden by its hood, its rotting, scabbed hands outstretched, it advanced, sensing its way blindly toward him. Harry could hear its rattling breath; he felt clammy coldness stealing over him, but knew what he had to do....

He summoned the happiest thought he could, concentrated with all his might on

the thought of getting out of the maze and celebrating with Ron and Hermione, raised his wand, and cried, "Expecto Patronum!"

A silver stag erupted from the end of Harry's wand and galloped toward the dementor, which fell back and tripped over the hem of its robes. . . . Harry had never seen a dementor stumble.

"Hang on!" he shouted, advancing in the wake of his silver Patronus, "You're a boggart! Riddikulus!"

There was a loud crack, and the shape-shifter exploded in a wisp of smoke. The silver stag faded from sight. Harry wished it could have stayed, he could have used some company...but he moved on, quickly and quietly as possible, listening hard, his wand held high once more.

Left ... right... left again . . . Twice he found himself facing dead ends. He did the Four-Point Spell again and found that he was going too far east. He turned back, took a right turn, and saw an odd golden mist floating ahead of him.

Harry approached it cautiously, pointing the wand's beam at it. This looked like some kind of enchantment. He wondered whether he might be able to blast it out of the way.

"Reducio!" he said.

The spell shot straight through the mist, leaving it intact. He supposed he should have known better; the Reductor Curse was for solid objects. What would happen if he walked through the mist? Was it worth chancing it, or should he double back?

He was still hesitating when a scream shattered the silence.

"Fleur?" Harry yelled.

There was silence. He stared all around him. What had happened to her? Her scream seemed to have come from somewhere ahead. He took a deep breath and ran through the enchanted mist.

The world turned upside down. Harry was hanging from the ground, with his hair on end, his glasses dangling off his nose, threatening to fall into the bottomless sky. He clutched them to the end of his nose and hung there, terrified. It felt as though his feet were glued to the grass, which had now become the ceiling. Below him the dark, star-spangled heavens stretched endlessly. He felt as though if he tried to move one of his feet, he would fall away from the earth completely.

Think, he told himself, as all the blood rushed to his head, think. . .

But not one of the spells he had practiced had been designed to combat a sudden reversal of ground and sky. Did he dare move his foot? He could hear the blood pounding in his ears. He had two choices - try and move, or send up red sparks,

and get rescued and disqualified from the task.

He shut his eyes, so he wouldn't be able to see the view of endless space below him, and pulled his right foot as hard as he could away from the grassy ceiling.

Immediately, the world righted itself. Harry fell forward onto his knees onto the wonderfully solid ground. He felt temporarily limp with shock. He took a deep, steadying breath, then got up again and hurried forward, looking back over his shoulder as he ran away from the golden mist, which twinkled innocently at him in the moonlight.

He paused at a junction of two paths and looked around for some sign of Fleur. He was sure it had been she who had screamed. What had she met? Was she all right? There was no sign of red sparks - did that mean she had got herself out of trouble, or was she in such trouble that she couldn't reach her wand? Harry took the right fork with a feeling of increasing unease . . . but at the same time, he couldn't help thinking. One champion down. . .

The cup was somewhere close by, and it sounded as though Fleur was no longer in the running. He'd got this far, hadn't he? What if he actually managed to win? Fleetingly, and for the first time since he'd found himself champion, he saw again that image of himself, raising the Triwizard Cup in front of the rest of the school. . . .

He met nothing for ten minutes, but kept running into dead ends. Twice he took the same wrong turning. Finally, he found a new route and started to jog along it, his wandlight waving, making his shadow flicker and distort on the hedge walls. Then he rounded another corner and found himself facing a Blast-Ended Skrewt.

Cedric was right - it was enormous. Ten feet long, it looked more like a giant scorpion than anything. Its long sting was curled over its back. Its thick armor glinted in the light from Harry's wand, which he pointed at it.

"Stupefy!"

The spell hit the skrewt's armor and rebounded; Harry ducked just in time, but could smell burning hair; it had singed the top of his head. The skrewt issued a blast of fire from its end and flew forward toward him.

"Impedimenta!" Harry yelled. The spell hit the skrewt's armor again and ricocheted off; Harry staggered back a few paces and fell over. "IMPEDIMENTA!"

The skrewt was inches from him when it froze - he had managed to hit it on its fleshy, shell-less underside. Panting, Harry pushed himself away from it and ran, hard, in the opposite direction - the Impediment Curse was not permanent; the skrewt would be regaining the use of its legs at any moment.

He took a left path and hit a dead end, a right, and hit another; forcing himself to

stop, heart hammering, he performed the Four-Point Spell again, backtracked, and chose a path that would take him northwest.

He had been hurrying along the new path for a few minutes, when he heard something in the path running parallel to his own that made him stop dead.

"What are you doing?" yelled Cedric's voice. "What the hell d'you think you're doing?"

And then Harry heard Krum's voice.

"Crucio!"

The air was suddenly full of Cedric's yells. Horrified, Harry began sprinting up his path, trying to find a way into Cedric's. When none appeared, he tried the Reductor Curse again. It wasn't very effective, but it burned a small hole in the hedge through which Harry forced his leg, kicking at the thick brambles and branches until they broke and made an opening; he struggled through it, tearing his robes, and looking to his right, saw Cedric jerking and twitching on the ground, Krum standing over him.

Harry pulled himself up and pointed his wand at Krum just as Krum looked up. Krum turned and began to run.

"Stupefy!" Harry yelled.

The spell hit Krum in the back; he stopped dead in his tracks, fell forward, and lay motionless, facedown in the grass. Harry-dashed over to Cedric, who had stopped twitching and was lying there panting, his hands over his face.

"Are you all right?" Harry said roughly, grabbing Cedric's arm.

"Yeah," panted Cedric. "Yeah ... I don't believe it... he crept up behind me. ... I heard him, I turned around, and he had his wand on me. . . ."

Cedric got up. He was still shaking. He and Harry looked down at Krum.

"I can't believe this ... I thought he was all right," Harry said, staring at Krum.

"So did I," said Cedric.

"Did you hear Fleur scream earlier?" said Harry.

"Yeah," said Cedric. "You don't think Krum got her too?"

"I don't know," said Harry slowly.

"Should we leave him here?" Cedric muttered.

"No," said Harry. "I reckon we should send up red sparks. Someone'll come and collect him . . . otherwise he'll probably be eaten by a skrewt."

"He'd deserve it," Cedric muttered, but all the same, he raised his wand and shot a shower of red sparks into the air, which hovered high above Krum, marking the spot where he lay.

Harry and Cedric stood there in the darkness for a moment, looking around them. Then Cedric said, "Well... I s'pose we'd better go on. . . ."

"What?" said Harry. "Oh . . . yeah . . . right. . ."

It was an odd moment. He and Cedric had been briefly united against Krum - now the fact that they were opponents came back to Harry. The two of them proceeded up the dark path without speaking, then Harry turned left, and Cedric right. Cedric's footsteps soon died away.

Harry moved on, continuing to use the Four-Point Spell, making sure he was moving in the right direction. It was between him and Cedric now. His desire to reach the cup first was now burning stronger than ever, but he could hardly believe what he'd just seen Krum do. The use of an Unforgivable Curse on a fellow human being meant a life term in Azkaban, that was what Moody had told them. Krum surely couldn't have wanted the Triwizard Cup that badly....Harry sped up.

Every so often he hit more dead ends, but the increasing darkness made him feel sure he was getting near the heart of the maze. Then, as he strode down a long, straight path, he saw movement once again, and his beam of wandlight hit an extraordinary creature, one which he had only seen in picture form, in his Monster Book of Monsters.

It was a sphinx. It had the body of an over-large lion: great clawed paws and a long yellowish tail ending in a brown tuft. Its head, however, was that of a woman. She turned her long, almond-shaped eyes upon Harry as he approached. He raised his wand, hesitating. She was not crouching as if to spring, but pacing from side to side of the path, blocking his progress. Then she spoke, in a deep, hoarse voice.

"You are very near your goal. The quickest way is past me."

"So ... so will you move, please?" said Harry, knowing what the answer was going to be.

"No," she said, continuing to pace. "Not unless you can answer my riddle. Answer on your first guess - I let you pass. Answer wrongly - I attack. Remain silent - I will let you walk away from me unscathed."

Harry's stomach slipped several notches. It was Hermione who was good at this sort of thing, not him. He weighed his chances. If the riddle was too hard, he could keep silent, get away from the sphinx unharmed, and try and find an alternative route to the center.

"Okay," he said. "Can I hear the riddle?"

The sphinx sat down upon her hind legs, in the very middle of the path, and

recited:

"First think of the person who lives in disguise,

Who deals in secrets and tells naught but lies.

Next, tell me what's always the last thing to mend,

The middle of middle and end of the end?

And finally give me the sound often heard

During the search for a hard-to-find word.

Now string them together, and answer me this,

Which creature would you be unwilling to kiss?"

Harry gaped at her.

"Could I have it again . . . more slowly?" he asked tentatively. She blinked at him, smiled, and repeated the poem. "All the clues add up to a creature I wouldn't want to kiss?" Harry asked.

She merely smiled her mysterious smile. Harry took that for a "yes." Harry cast his mind around. There were plenty of animals he wouldn't want to kiss; his immediate thought was a Blast-Ended Skrewt, but something told him that wasn't the answer. He'd have to try and work out the clues. . . .

"A person in disguise," Harry muttered, staring at her, "who lies ... er ... that'd be a - an impostor. No, that's not my guess! A - a spy? I'll come back to that. . . could you give me the next clue again, please?"

She repeated the next lines of the poem.

"'The last thing to mend,'" Harry repeated. "Er ... no idea . . . 'middle of middle' . . . could I have the last bit again?"

She gave him the last four lines.

"'The sound often heard during the search for a hard-to-find word,'" said Harry. "Er . . . that'd be ... er ... hang on - 'er'! Er's a sound!"

The sphinx smiled at him.

"Spy ... er ... spy ... er ..." said Harry, pacing up and down. "A creature I wouldn't want to kiss . . . a spider!"

The sphinx smiled more broadly. She got up, stretched her front legs, and then moved aside for him to pass.

"Thanks!" said Harry, and, amazed at his own brilliance, he dashed forward.

He had to be close now, he had to be. ... His wand was telling him he was bang on course; as long as he didn't meet anything too horrible, he might have a chance. . . .

Harry broke into a run. He had a choice of paths up ahead. "Point Me!" he whispered again to his wand, and it spun around and pointed him to the right-hand one. He dashed up this one and saw light ahead.

The Triwizard Cup was gleaming on a plinth a hundred yards away. Suddenly a dark figure hurtled out onto the path in front of him.

Cedric was going to get there first. Cedric was sprinting as fast as he could toward the cup, and Harry knew he would never catch up, Cedric was much taller, had much longer legs -

Then Harry saw something immense over a hedge to his left, moving quickly along a path that intersected with his own; it was moving so fast Cedric was about to run into it, and Cedric, his eyes on the cup, had not seen it -

"Cedric!" Harry bellowed. "On your left!"

Cedric looked around just in time to hurl himself past the thing and avoid colliding with it, but in his haste, he tripped. Harry saw Cedric's wand fly out of his hand as a gigantic spider stepped into the path and began to bear down upon Cedric.

"Stupefy!" Harry yelled; the spell hit the spider's gigantic, hairy black body, but for all the good it did, he might as well have thrown a stone at it; the spider jerked, scuttled around, and ran at Harry instead.

"Stupefy! Impedimenta! Stupefy!"

But it was no use - the spider was either so large, or so magical, that the spells were doing no more than aggravating it. Harry had one horrifying glimpse of eight shining black eyes and razor-sharp pincers before it was upon him.

He was lifted into the air in its front legs; struggling madly, he tried to kick it; his leg connected with the pincers and next moment he was in excruciating pain. He could hear Cedric yelling "Stupefy!" too, but his spell had no more effect than Harry's - Harry raised his wand as the spider opened its pincers once more and shouted "Expelliarmus!"

It worked - the Disarming Spell made the spider drop him, but that meant that Harry fell twelve feet onto his already injured leg, which crumpled beneath him. Without pausing to think, he aimed high at the spider's underbelly, as he had done with the skrewt, and shouted "Stupefy!"just as Cedric yelled the same thing.

The two spells combined did what one alone had not: The spider keeled over sideways, flattening a nearby hedge, and strewing the path with a tangle of hairy legs.

"Harry!" he heard Cedric shouting. "You all right? Did it fall on you?"

"No," Harry called back, panting. He looked down at his leg. It was bleeding freely. He could see some sort of thick, gluey secretion from the spider's pincers on his torn robes. He tried to get up, but his leg was shaking badly and did not want to support his weight. He leaned against the hedge, gasping for breath, and looked around.

Cedric was standing feet from the Triwizard Cup, which was gleaming behind him.

"Take it, then," Harry panted to Cedric. "Go on, take it. You're there."

But Cedric didn't move. He merely stood there, looking at Harry. Then he turned to stare at the cup. Harry saw the longing expression on his face in its golden light. Cedric looked around at Harry again, who was now holding onto the hedge to support himself. Cedric took a deep breath.

"You take it. You should win. That's twice you've saved my neck in here."

"That's not how it's supposed to work," Harry said. He felt angry; his leg was very painful, he was aching all over from trying to throw off the spider, and after all his efforts, Cedric had beaten him to it, just as he'd beaten Harry to ask Cho to the ball. "The one who reaches the cup first gets the points. That's you. I'm telling you, I'm not going to win any races on this leg."

Cedric took a few paces nearer to the Stunned spider, away from the cup, shaking his head.

"No," he said.

"Stop being noble," said Harry irritably. "Just take it, then we can get out of here."

Cedric watched Harry steadying himself, holding tight to the hedge.

"You told me about the dragons," Cedric said. "I would've gone down in the first task if you hadn't told me what was coming."

"I had help on that too," Harry snapped, trying to mop up his bloody leg with his robes. "You helped me with the egg - we're square."

"I had help on the egg in the first place," said Cedric.

"We're still square," said Harry, testing his leg gingerly; it shook violently as he put weight on it; he had sprained his ankle when the spider had dropped him.

"You should've got more points on the second task," said Cedric mulishly. "You stayed behind to get all the hostages. I should've done that."

"I was the only one who was thick enough to take that song seriously!" said Harry bitterly. "Just take the cup!"

"No," said Cedric.

He stepped over the spider's tangled legs to join Harry, who stared at him. Cedric was serious. He was walking away from the sort of glory Hufflepuff House hadn't had in centuries.

"Go on," Cedric said. He looked as though this was costing him every ounce of resolution he had, but his face was set, his arms were folded, he seemed decided.

Harry looked from Cedric to the cup. For one shining moment, he saw himself emerging from the maze, holding it. He saw himself holding the Triwizard Cup aloft, heard the roar of the crowd, saw Cho's face shining with admiration, more clearly than he had ever seen it before . . . and then the picture faded, and he found himself staring at Cedric's shadowy, stubborn face.

"Both of us," Harry said.

"What?"

"We'll take it at the same time. It's still a Hogwarts victory. We'll tie for it."

Cedric stared at Harry. He unfolded his arms.

"You - you sure?"

"Yeah," said Harry. "Yeah . . . we've helped each other out, haven't we? We both got here. Let's just take it together."

For a moment, Cedric looked as though he couldn't believe his ears; then his face split in a grin.

"You're on," he said. "Come here."

He grabbed Harrys arm below the shoulder and helped Harry limp toward the plinth where the cup stood. When they had reached it, they both held a hand out over one of the cup's gleaming handles.

"On three, right?" said Harry. "One - two - three -"

He and Cedric both grasped a handle.

Instantly, Harry felt a jerk somewhere behind his navel. His feet had left the ground. He could not unclench the hand holding the Triwizard Cup; it was pulling him onward in a howl of wind and swirling color, Cedric at his side.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO - FLESH, BLOOD, AND BONE

Harry felt his feet slam into the ground; his injured leg gave way, and he fell forward; his hand let go of the Triwizard Cup at last. He raised his head.

"Where are we?" he said.

Cedric shook his head. He got up, pulled Harry to his feet, and they looked around.

They had left the Hogwarts grounds completely; they had obviously traveled miles - perhaps hundreds of miles - for even the mountains surrounding the castle were gone. They were standing instead in a dark and overgrown graveyard; the black outline of a small church was visible beyond a large yew tree to their right. A hill rose above them to their left. Harry could just make out the outline of a fine old house on the hillside.

Cedric looked down at the Triwizard Cup and then up at Harry.

"Did anyone tell you the cup was a Portkey?" he asked.

"Nope," said Harry. He was looking around the graveyard. It was completely silent and slightly eerie. "Is this supposed to be part of the task?"

"I dunno," said Cedric. He sounded slightly nervous. "Wands out, d'you reckon?"

"Yeah," said Harry, glad that Cedric had made the suggestion rather than him.

They pulled out their wands. Harry kept looking around him. He had, yet again, the strange feeling that they were being watched.

"Someone's coming," he said suddenly.

Squinting tensely through the darkness, they watched the figure drawing nearer, walking steadily toward them between the graves. Harry couldn't make out a face, but from the way it was walking and holding its arms, he could tell that it was carrying something. Whoever it was, he was short, and wearing a hooded cloak pulled up over his head to obscure his face. And - several paces nearer, the gap between them closing all the time - Harry saw that the thing in the persons arms looked like a baby ... or was it merely a bundle of robes?

Harry lowered his wand slightly and glanced sideways at Cedric. Cedric shot him a quizzical look. They both turned back to watch the approaching figure.

It stopped beside a towering marble headstone, only six feet from them. For a second. Harry and Cedric and the short figure simply looked at one another.

And then, without warning, Harry's scar exploded with pain. It was agony such as

he had never felt in all his life; his wand slipped from his fingers as he put his hands over his face; his knees buckled; he was on the ground and he could see nothing at all; his head was about to split open.

From far away, above his head, he heard a high, cold voice say, "Kill the spare."

A swishing noise and a second voice, which screeched the words to the night: "Avada Kedavra!"

A blast of green light blazed through Harry's eyelids, and he heard something heavy fall to the ground beside him; the pain in his scar reached such a pitch that he retched, and then it diminished; terrified of what he was about to see, he opened his stinging eyes.

Cedric was lying spread-eagled on the ground beside him. He was dead.

For a second that contained an eternity, Harry stared into Cedric's face, at his open gray eyes, blank and expressionless as the windows of a deserted house, at his half-open mouth, which looked slightly surprised. And then, before Harry's mind had accepted what he was seeing, before he could feel anything but numb disbelief, he felt himself being pulled to his feet.

The short man in the cloak had put down his bundle, lit his wand, and was dragging Harry toward the marble headstone. Harry saw the name upon it flickering in the wandlight before he was forced around and slammed against it.

TOM RIDDLE

The cloaked man was now conjuring tight cords around Harry, tying him from neck to ankles to the headstone. Harry could hear shallow, fast breathing from the depths of the hood; he struggled, and the man hit him - hit him with a hand that had a finger missing. And Harry realized who was under the hood. It was Wormtail.

"You!" he gasped.

But Wormtail, who had finished conjuring the ropes, did not reply; he was busy checking the tightness of the cords, his fingers trembling uncontrollably, rumbling over the knots. Once sure that Harry was bound so tightly to the headstone that he couldn't move an inch, Wormtail drew a length of some black material from the inside of his cloak and stuffed it roughly into Harry's mouth; then, without a word, he turned from Harry and hurried away. Harry couldn't make a sound, nor could he see where Wormtail had gone; he couldn't turn his head to see beyond the headstone; he could see only what was right in front of him.

Cedric's body was lying some twenty feet away. Some way beyond him, glinting in the starlight, lay the Triwizard Cup. Harry's wand was on the ground at Cedric's feet. The bundle of robes that Harry had thought was a baby was close by, at the foot of the grave. It seemed to be stirring fretfully. Harry watched it, and his scar

seared with pain again . . . and he suddenly knew that he didn't want to see what was in those robes ... he didn't want that bundle opened....

He could hear noises at his feet. He looked down and saw a gigantic snake slithering through the grass, circling the headstone where he was tied. Wormtail's fast, wheezy breathing was growing louder again. It sounded as though he was forcing something heavy across the ground. Then he came back within Harry's range of vision, and Harry saw him pushing a stone cauldron to the foot of the grave. It was full of what seemed to be water - Harry could hear it slopping around - and it was larger than any cauldron Harry had ever used; a great stone belly large enough for a full-grown man to sit in.

The thing inside the bundle of robes on the ground was stirring more persistently, as though it was trying to free itself. Now Wormtail was busying himself at the bottom of the cauldron with a wand. Suddenly there were crackling names beneath it. The large snake slithered away into the darkness.

The liquid in the cauldron seemed to heat very fast. The surface began not only to bubble, but to send out fiery sparks, as though it were on fire. Steam was thickening, blurring the outline of Wormtail tending the fire. The movements beneath the robes became more agitated. And Harry heard the high, cold voice again.

"Hurry!"

The whole surface of the water was alight with sparks now. It might have been encrusted with diamonds.

"It is ready. Master."

"Now ..." said the cold voice.

Wormtail pulled open the robes on the ground, revealing what was inside them, and Harry let out a yell that was strangled in the wad of material blocking his mouth.

It was as though Wormtail had flipped over a stone and revealed something ugly, slimy, and blind - but worse, a hundred times worse. The thing Wormtail had been carrying had the shape of a crouched human child, except that Harry had never seen anything less like a child. It was hairless and scaly-looking, a dark, raw, reddish black. Its arms and legs were thin and feeble, and its face - no child alive ever had a face like that - flat and snakelike, with gleaming red eyes.

The thing seemed almost helpless; it raised its thin arms, put them around Wormtail's neck, and Wormtail lifted it. As he did so, his hood fell back, and Harry saw the look of revulsion on Wormtail's weak, pale face in the firelight as he carried the creature to the rim of the cauldron. For one moment, Harry saw the evil, flat face illuminated in the sparks dancing on the surface of the potion. And then Wormtail lowered the creature into the cauldron; there was a hiss, and it

vanished below the surface; Harry heard its frail body hit the bottom with a soft thud.

Let it drown, Harry thought, his scar burning almost past endurance, please. . . let it drown. . . .

Wormtail was speaking. His voice shook; he seemed frightened beyond his wits. He raised his wand, closed his eyes, and spoke to the night.

"Bone of the father, unknowingly given, you wil lrenew your son!"

The surface of the grave at Harry's feet cracked. Horrified, Harry watched as a fine trickle of dust rose into the air at Wormtail's command and fell softly into the cauldron. The diamond surface of the water broke and hissed; it sent sparks in all directions and turned a vivid, poisonous-looking blue.

And now Wormtail was whimpering. He pulled a long, thin, shining silver dagger from inside his cloak. His voice broke into petrified sobs.

"Flesh - of the servant - w-willingly given - you will - revive - your master. "

He stretched his right hand out in front of him - the hand with the missing finger. He gripped the dagger very tightly in his left hand and swung it upward.

Harry realized what Wormtail was about to do a second before it happened - he closed his eyes as tightly as he could, but he could not block the scream that pierced the night, that went through Harry as though he had been stabbed with the dagger too. He heard something fall to the ground, heard Wormtail's anguished panting, then a sickening splash, as something was dropped into the cauldron. Harry couldn't stand to look . . . but the potion had turned a burning red; the light of it shone through Harry's closed eyelids. . . .

Wormtail was gasping and moaning with agony. Not until Harry felt Wormtail's anguished breath on his face did he realize that Wormtail was right in front of him.

"B-blood of the enemy . . . forcibly taken .. . you will. . . resurrect your foe."

Harry could do nothing to prevent it, he was tied too tightly. . .. Squinting down, struggling hopelessly at the ropes binding him, he saw the shining silver dagger shaking in Wormtails remaining hand. He felt its point penetrate the crook of his right arm and blood seeping down the sleeve of his torn robes. Wormtail, still panting with pain, rumbled in his pocket for a glass vial and held it to Harry's cut, so that a dribble of blood fell into it.

He staggered back to the cauldron with Harrys blood. He poured it inside. The liquid within turned, instantly, a blinding white. Wormtail, his job done, dropped to his knees beside the cauldron, then slumped sideways and lay on the ground, cradling the bleeding stump of his arm, gasping and sobbing.

The cauldron was simmering, sending its diamond sparks in all directions, so

blindingly bright that it turned all else to velvety blackness. Nothing happened. . . .

Let it have drowned. Harry thought, let it have gone wrong. . . •

And then, suddenly, the sparks emanating from the cauldron were extinguished. A surge of white steam billowed thickly from the cauldron instead, obliterating everything in front of Harry, so that he couldn't see Wormtail or Cedric or anything but vapor hanging in the air. ... It's gone wrong, he thought. . . it's drowned. .. please . . . please let it be dead. ...

But then, through the mist in front of him, he saw, with an icy surge of terror, the dark outline of a man, tall and skeletally thin, rising slowly from inside the cauldron.

"Robe me," said the high, cold voice from behind the steam, and Wormtail, sobbing and moaning, still cradling his mutilated arm, scrambled to pick up the black robes from the ground, got to his feet, reached up, and pulled them one-handed over his master's head.

The thin man stepped out of the cauldron, staring at Harry . . . and Harry stared back into the face that had haunted his nightmares for three years. Whiter than a skull, with wide, livid scarlet eyes and a nose that was flat as a snakes with slits for nostrils . . .

Lord Voldemort had risen again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE - THE DEATH EATERS

Voldemort looked away from Harry and began examining his own body. His hands were like large, pale spiders; his long white fingers caressed his own chest, his arms, his face; the red eyes, whose pupils were slits, like a cats, gleamed still more brightly through the darkness. He held up his hands and flexed the fingers, his expression rapt and exultant. He took not the slightest notice of Wormtail, who lay twitching and bleeding on the ground, nor of the great snake, which had slithered back into sight and was circling Harry again, hissing. Voldemort slipped one of those unnaturally long-fingered hands into a deep pocket and drew out a wand. He caressed it gently too; and then he raised it, and pointed it at Wormtail, who was lifted off the ground and thrown against the headstone where Harry was tied; he fell to the foot of it and lay there, crumpled up and crying. Voldemort turned his scarlet eyes upon Harry, laughing a high, cold, mirthless laugh.

Wormtail's robes were shining with blood now; he had wrapped the stump of his arm in them.

"My Lord . . ." he choked, "my Lord . . . you promised . . . you did promise ..."

"Hold out your arm," said Voldemort lazily.

"Oh Master . . . thank you, Master ..."

He extended the bleeding stump, but Voldemort laughed again.

"The other arm, Wormtail."

"Master, please . . .please ..."

Voldemort bent down and pulled out Wormtail's left arm; he forced the sleeve of Wormtail's robes up past his elbow, and Harry saw something upon the skin there, something like a vivid red tattoo - a skull with a snake protruding from its mouth - the image that had appeared in the sky at the Quidditch World Cup: the Dark Mark. Voldemort examined it carefully, ignoring Wormtail's uncontrollable weeping.

"It is back," he said softly, "they will all have noticed it... and now, we shall see ... now we shall know ..."

He pressed his long white forefinger to the brand on Wormtail's arm.

The scar on Harry s forehead seared with a sharp pain again, and Wormtail let out a fresh howl; Voldemort removed his fingers from Wormtail's mark, and Harry saw that it had turned jet black.

A look of cruel satisfaction on his face, Voldemort straightened up, threw back his

head, and stared around at the dark graveyard.

"How many will be brave enough to return when they feel it?" he whispered, his gleaming red eyes fixed upon the stars. "And how many will be foolish enough to stay away?"

He began to pace up and down before Harry and Wormtail, eyes sweeping the graveyard all the while. After a minute or so, he looked down at Harry again, a cruel smile twisting his snakelike face.

"You stand, Harry Potter, upon the remains of my late father," he hissed softly. "A Muggle and a fool. . . very like your dear mother. But they both had their uses, did they not? Your mother died to defend you as a child . . . and I killed my father, and see how useful he has proved himself, in death. ..."

Voldemort laughed again. Up and down he paced, looking all around him as he walked, and the snake continued to circle in the grass.

"You see that house upon the hillside, Potter? My father lived there. My mother, a witch who lived here in this village, fell in love with him. But he abandoned her when she told him what she was. ... He didn't like magic, my father . . .

"He left her and returned to his Muggle parents before I was even born. Potter, and she died giving birth to me, leaving me to be raised in a Muggle orphanage . . . but I vowed to find him ... I revenged myself upon him, that fool who gave me his name . . . Tom Riddle. . . ."

Still he paced, his red eyes darting from grave to grave.

"Listen to me, reliving family history . . ." he said quietly, "why, I am growing quite sentimental. . . . But look, Harry! My true family returns. . . ."

The air was suddenly full of the swishing of cloaks. Between graves, behind the yew tree, in every shadowy space, wizards were Apparating. All of them were hooded and masked. And one by one they moved forward . . . slowly, cautiously, as though they could

hardly believe their eyes Voldemort stood in silence, waiting for them. Then one of the Death Eaters fell to his knees, crawled toward Voldemort and kissed the hem of his black robes.

Master . . . Master " he murmured.

The Death Eaters behind him did the same; each of them approaching Voldemort on his knees and kissing his robes, before backing away and standing up, forming a silent circle, which enclosed Tom Riddle s grave, Harry, Voldemort, and the sobbing and twitching heap that was Wormtail. Yet they left gaps in the circle, as though waiting for more people. Voldemort, however, did not seem to expect more. He looked around at the hooded faces, and though there was no wind rustling seemed to run around the circle, as though it had shivered.

"Welcome, Death Eaters," said Voldemort quietly. "Thirteen years. . . thirteen years since last we met. Yet you answer my call as though it were yesterday, we are still united under the Dark Mark, then! Or are we?"

He put back his terrible face and sniffed, his slit-like nostrils widening.

"I smell guilt," he said. "There is a stench or guilt upon the air.

A second shiver ran around the circle, as though each member of it longed, but did not dare to step back from him.

"I see you all, whole and healthy, with your powers intact - such prompt appearances! and I ask myself . . . why did this band of wizards never come to the aid of their master, to whom they swore eternal loyalty?"

No one spoke. No one moved except Wormtail, who was upon the ground, still sobbing over his bleeding arm.

"And I answer myself," whispered Voldemort, "they must have believed me broken, they thought I was gone. They slipped back among my enemies, and they pleaded innocence, and ignorance, and bewitchment. . . .

"And then I ask myself, but how could they have believed I would not rise again? They, who knew the steps I took, long ago, to guard myself against mortal death? They, who had seen proofs of the immensity of my power in the times when I was mightier than any wizard living?

"And I answer myself, perhaps they believed a still greater power could exist, one that could vanquish even Lord Voldemort. . . perhaps they now pay allegiance to another . . . perhaps that champion of commoners, of Mudbloods and Muggles, Albus Dumbledore?"

At the mention of Dumbledore's name, the members of the circle stirred, and some muttered and shook their heads. Voldemort ignored them.

"It is a disappointment to me ... I confess myself disappointed. . . ."

One of the men suddenly flung himself forward, breaking the circle. Trembling from head to foot, he collapsed at Voldemort's feet.

"Master!" he shrieked, "Master, forgive me! Forgive us all!"

Voldemort began to laugh. He raised his wand.

"Crucio!"

The Death Eater on the ground writhed and shrieked; Harry was sure the sound must carry to the houses around. . . . Let the police come, he thought desperately . . . anyone . .. anything. . .

Voldemort raised his wand. The tortured Death Eater lay flat upon the ground,

gasping.

"Get up, Avery," said Voldemort softly. "Stand up. You ask for forgiveness? I do not forgive. I do not forget. Thirteen long years ... I want thirteen years' repayment before I forgive you. Wormtail here has paid some of his debt already, have you not, Wormtail?"

He looked down at Wormtail, who continued to sob.

"You returned to me, not out of loyalty, but out of fear of your old friends. You deserve this pain, Wormtail. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, Master," moaned Wormtail, "please. Master . . . please ..."

"Yet you helped return me to my body," said Voldemort coolly, watching Wormtail sob on the ground. "Worthless and traitorous as you are, you helped me ... and Lord Voldemort rewards his helpers... ."

Voldemort raised his wand again and whirled it through the air. A streak of what looked like molten silver hung shining in the wand's wake. Momentarily shapeless, it writhed and then formed itself into a gleaming replica of a human hand, bright as moonlight, which soared downward and fixed itself upon Wormtails bleeding wrist.

Wormtail's sobbing stopped abruptly. His breathing harsh and ragged, he raised his head and stared in disbelief at the silver hand, now attached seamlessly to his arm, as though he were wearing a dazzling glove. He flexed the shining fingers, then, trembling, picked up a small twig on the ground and crushed it into powder.

"My Lord," he whispered. "Master ... it is beautiful. . . thank you... thank you. ..."

He scrambled forward on his knees and kissed the hem of Voldemort's robes.

"May your loyalty never waver again, Wormtail," said Voldemort.

"No, my Lord . . . never, my Lord . . ."

Wormtail stood up and took his place in the circle, staring at his powerful new hand, his face still shining with tears. Voldemort now approached the man on Wormtail's right.

"Lucius, my slippery friend," he whispered, halting before him. "I am told that you have not renounced the old ways, though to the world you present a respectable face. You are still ready to take the lead in a spot of Muggle-torture, I believe? Yet you never tried to find me, Lucius. . . . Your exploits at the Quidditch World Cup were fun, I daresay. . . but might not your energies have been better directed toward finding and aiding your master?"

"My Lord, I was constantly on the alert," came Lucius Malfoy's voice swiftly from beneath the hood. "Had there been any sign from you, any whisper of your

whereabouts, I would have been at your side immediately, nothing could have prevented me -"

"And yet you ran from my Mark, when a faithful Death Eater sent it into the sky last summer?" said Voldemort lazily, and Mr. Malfoy stopped talking abruptly. "Yes, I know all about that, Lucius. . . . You have disappointed me. ... I expect more faithful service in the future."

"Of course, my Lord, of course. . . . You are merciful, thank you. ..."

Voldemort moved on, and stopped, staring at the space - large enough for two people - that separated Malfoy and the next man.

"The Lestranges should stand here," said Voldemort quietly. "But they are entombed in Azkaban. They were faithful. They went to Azkaban rather than renounce me. . . . When Azkaban is broken open, the Lestranges will be honored beyond their dreams. The dementors will join us ... they are our natural allies ... we will recall the banished giants ... I shall have all my devoted servants returned to me, and an army of creatures whom all fear. ..."

He walked on. Some of the Death Eaters he passed in silence, but he paused before others and spoke to them.

"Macnair . . . destroying dangerous beasts for the Ministry of Magic now, Wormtail tells me? You shall have better victims than that soon, Macnair. Lord Voldemort will provide. ..."

"Thank you, Master . . . thank you," murmured Macnair.

"And here" - Voldemort moved on to the two largest hooded figures - "we have Crabbe . . . you will do better this time, will you not, Crabbe? And you, Goyle?"

They bowed clumsily, muttering dully.

"Yes, Master ..."

"We will, Master...."

"The same goes for you, Nott," said Voldemort quietly as he walked past a stooped figure in Mr. Goyles shadow.

"My Lord, I prostrate myself before you, I am your most faithful -"

"That will do," said Voldemort.

He had reached the largest gap of all, and he stood surveying it with his blank, red eyes, as though he could see people standing there.

"And here we have six missing Death Eaters . . . three dead in my service. One, too cowardly to return ... he will pay. One, who I believe has left me forever ... he will be killed, of course . . . and one, who remains my most faithful servant, and

who has already reentered my service."

The Death Eaters stirred, and Harry saw their eyes dart sideways at one another through their masks.

"He is at Hogwarts, that faithful servant, and it was through his efforts that our young friend arrived here tonight. . . .

"Yes," said Voldemort, a grin curling his lipless mouth as the eyes of the circle flashed in Harry's direction. "Harry Potter has kindly joined us for my rebirthing party. One might go so far as to call him my guest of honor."

There was a silence. Then the Death Eater to the right of Wormtail stepped forward, and Lucius Malfoy's voice spoke from under the mask.

"Master, we crave to know ... we beg you to tell us ... how you have achieved this . . . this miracle . . . how you managed to return to us. .. ."

"Ah, what a story it is, Lucius," said Voldemort. "And it begins - and ends - with my young friend here."

He walked lazily over to stand next to Harry, so that the eyes of the whole circle were upon the two of them. The snake continued to circle.

"You know, of course, that they have called this boy my downfall?" Voldemort said softly, his red eyes upon Harry, whose scar began to burn so fiercely that he almost screamed in agony. "You all know that on the night I lost my powers and my body, I tried to kill him. His mother died in the attempt to save him - and unwittingly provided him with a protection I admit I had not foreseen. ... I could not touch the boy."

Voldemort raised one of his long white fingers and put it very close to Harry's cheek.

"His mother left upon him the traces other sacrifice. . . . This is old magic, I should have remembered it, I was foolish to overlook it... but no matter. I can touch him now."

Harry felt the cold tip of the long white finger touch him, and thought his head would burst with the pain. Voldemort laughed softly in his ear, then took the finger away and continued addressing the Death Eaters.

"I miscalculated, my friends, I admit it. My curse was deflected by the woman's foolish sacrifice, and it rebounded upon myself. Aaah . . . pain beyond pain, my friends; nothing could have prepared me for it. I was ripped from my body, I was less than spirit, less than the meanest ghost. . . but still, I was alive. What I was, even I do not know... I, who have gone further than anybody along the path that leads to immortality. You know my goal - to conquer death. And now, I was tested, and it appeared that one or more of my experiments had worked ... for I had not been killed, though the curse should have done it. Nevertheless, I was as

powerless as the weakest creature alive, and without the means to help myself... for I had no body, and every spell that might have helped me required the use of a wand. . . .

"I remember only forcing myself, sleeplessly, endlessly, second by second, to exist. ... I settled in a faraway place, in a forest, and I waited. . . . Surely, one of my faithful Death Eaters would try and find me. . . one of them would come and perform the magic I could not, to restore me to a body . . , but I waited in vain. ..."

The shiver ran once more around the circle of listening Death Eaters. Voldemort let the silence spiral horribly before continuing.

"Only one power remained to me. I could possess the bodies of others. But I dared not go where other humans were plentiful, for I knew that the Aurors were still abroad and searching for me.

I sometimes inhabited animals - snakes, of course, being my preference - but I was little better off inside them than as pure spirit, for their bodies were ill adapted to perform magic . . . and my possession of them shortened their lives; none of them lasted long. . . .

"Then . . . four years ago . . . the means for my return seemed assured. A wizard - young, foolish, and gullible - wandered across my path in the forest I had made my home. Oh, he seemed the very chance I had been dreaming of... for he was a teacher at Dumbledore's school... he was easy to bend to my will... he brought me back to this country, and after a while, I took possession of his body, to supervise him closely as he carried out my orders. But my plan failed. I did not manage to steal the Sorcerer's Stone. I was not to be assured immortal life. I was thwarted . . . thwarted, once again, by Harry Potter. ..."

Silence once more; nothing was stirring, not even the leaves on the yew tree. The Death Eaters were quite motionless, the glittering eyes in their masks fixed upon Voldemort, and upon Harry.

"The servant died when I left his body, and I was left as weak as ever I had been," Voldemort continued. "I returned to my hiding place far away, and I will not pretend to you that I didn't then fear that I might never regain my powers. . . . Yes, that was perhaps my darkest hour... I could not hope that I would be sent another wizard to possess . . . and I had given up hope, now, that any of my Death Eaters cared what had become of me. ..."

One or two of the masked wizards in the circle moved uncomfortably, but Voldemort took no notice.

"And then, not even a year ago, when I had almost abandoned hope, it happened at last... a servant returned to me. Wormtail here, who had faked his own death to escape justice, was driven out of hiding by those he had once counted friends, and decided to return to his master. He sought me in the country where it had long been rumored I was hiding . . . helped, of course, by the rats he met along the way.

Wormtail has a curious affinity with rats, do you not, Wormtail? His filthy little friends told him there was a place, deep in an Albanian forest, that they avoided, where small animals like themselves had met their deaths by a dark shadow that possessed them. . . .

"But his journey back to me was not smooth, was it, Wormtail? For, hungry one night, on the edge of the very forest where he had hoped to find me, he foolishly stopped at an inn for some food . . . and who should he meet there, but one Bertha Jorkins, a witch from the Ministry of Magic.

"Now see the way that fate favors Lord Voldemort. This might have been the end of Wormtail, and of my last hope for regeneration. But Wormtail - displaying a presence of mind I would never have expected from him - convinced Bertha Jorkins to accompany him on a nighttime stroll. He overpowered her ... he brought her to me. And Bertha Jorkins, who might have ruined all, proved instead to be a gift beyond my wildest dreams ... for - with a little persuasion - she became a veritable mine of information.

"She told me that the Triwizard Tournament would be played at Hogwarts this year. She told me that she knew of a faithful Death Eater who would be only too willing to help me, if I could only contact him. She told me many things. . . but the means I used to break the Memory Charm upon her were powerful, and when I had extracted all useful information from her, her mind and body were both damaged beyond repair. She had now served her purpose. I could not possess her. I disposed of her."

Voldemort smiled his terrible smile, his red eyes blank and pitiless.

"Wormtail's body, of course, was ill adapted for possession, as all assumed him dead, and would attract far too much attention if noticed. However, he was the able-bodied servant I needed, and, poor wizard though he is, Wormtail was able to follow the instructions I gave him, which would return me to a rudimentary, weak body of my own, a body I would be able to inhabit while awaiting the essential ingredients for true rebirth ... a spell or two of my own invention ... a little help from my dear Nagini," Voldemorts red eyes fell upon the continually circling snake, "a potion concocted from unicorn blood, and the snake venom Nagini provided ... I was soon returned to an almost human form, and strong enough to travel.

"There was no hope of stealing the Sorcerer's Stone anymore, for I knew that Dumbledore would have seen to it that it was destroyed. But I was willing to embrace mortal life again, before chasing immortality. I set my sights lower ... I would settle for my old body back again, and my old strength.

"I knew that to achieve this - it is an old piece of Dark Magic, the potion that revived me tonight - I would need three powerful ingredients. Well, one of them was already at hand, was it not, Wormtail? Flesh given by a servant. . . .

"My father's bone, naturally, meant that we would have to come here, where he was buried. But the blood of a foe ... Wormtail would have had me use any wizard, would you not, Wormtail? Any wizard who had hated me ... as so many of them still do. But I knew the one I must use, if I was to rise again, more powerful than I had been when I had fallen. I wanted Harry Potters blood. I wanted the blood of the one who had stripped me of power thirteen years ago . . . for the lingering protection his mother once gave him would then reside in my veins too. .

"But how to get at Harry Potter? For he has been better protected than I think even he knows, protected in ways devised by Dumbledore long ago, when it fell to him to arrange the boy's future. Dumbledore invoked an ancient magic, to ensure the boy's protection as long as he is in his relations' care. Not even I can touch him there. . . . Then, of course, there was the Quidditch World Cup. ... I thought his protection might be weaker there, away from his relations and Dumbledore, but I was not yet strong enough to attempt kidnap in the midst of a horde of Ministry wizards. And then, the boy would return to Hogwarts, where he is under the crooked nose of that Muggle-loving fool from morning until night. So how could I take him?

"Why ... by using Bertha Jorkins's information, of course. Use my one faithful Death Eater, stationed at Hogwarts, to ensure that the boy's name was entered into the Goblet of Fire. Use my Death Eater to ensure that the boy won the tournament - that he touched the Triwizard Cup first - the cup which my Death Eater had turned into a Portkey, which would bring him here, beyond the reach of Dumbledore's help and protection, and into my waiting arms. And here he is ... the boy you all believed had been my downfall. ..."

Voldemort moved slowly forward and turned to face Harry. He raised his wand.

"Crucio!"

It was pain beyond anything Harry had ever experienced; his very bones were on fire; his head was surely splitting along his scar; his eyes were rolling madly in his head; he wanted it to end ... to black out... to die ...

And then it was gone. He was hanging limply in the ropes binding him to the headstone of Voldemort's father, looking up into those bright red eyes through a kind of mist. The night was ringing with the sound of the Death Eaters' laughter.

"You see, I think, how foolish it was to suppose that this boy could ever have been stronger than me," said Voldemort. "But I want there to be no mistake in anybody's mind. Harry Potter escaped me by a lucky chance. And I am now going to prove my power by killing him, here and now, in front of you all, when there is no Dumbledore to help him, and no mother to die for him. I will give him his chance. He will be allowed to fight, and you will be left in no doubt which of us is the stronger. Just a little longer, Nagini," he whispered, and the snake glided away through the grass to where the Death Eaters stood watching.

"Now untie him, Wormtail, and give him back his wand."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR - PRIORI INCANTATEM

Wormtail approached Harry, who scrambled to find his feet, to support his own weight before the ropes were untied. Wormtail raised his new silver hand, pulled out the wad of material gagging Harry, and then, with one swipe, cut through the bonds tying Harry to the gravestone.

There was a split second, perhaps, when Harry might have considered running for it, but his injured leg shook under him as he stood on the overgrown grave, as the Death Eaters closed ranks, forming a tighter circle around him and Voldemort, so that the gaps where the missing Death Eaters should have stood were filled. Wormtail walked out of the circle to the place where Cedric's body lay and returned with Harry's wand, which he thrust roughly into Harry's hand without looking at him. Then Wormtail resumed his place in the circle of watching Death Eaters.

"You have been taught how to duel. Harry Potter?" said Voldemort softly, his red eyes glinting through the darkness.

At these words Harry remembered, as though from a former life, the dueling club at Hogwarts he had attended briefly two years ago. ... All he had learned there was the Disarming Spell, "Expelliarmus". . . and what use would it be to deprive Voldemort of his wand, even if he could, when he was surrounded by Death Eaters, outnumbered by at least thirty to one? He had never learned anything that could possibly fit him for this. He knew he was facing the thing against which Moody had always warned . . . the unblockable Avada Kedavra curse - and Voldemort was right - his mother was not here to die for him this time. ... He was quite unprotected. . . .

"We bow to each other. Harry," said Voldemort, bending a little, but keeping his snakelike face upturned to Harry. "Come, the niceties must be observed. . . . Dumbledore would like you to show manners. . . . Bow to death, Harry. ..."

The Death Eaters were laughing again. Voldemorts lipless mouth was smiling. Harry did not bow. He was not going to let Voldemort play with him before killing him ... he was not going to give him that satisfaction. . . .

"I said, bow," Voldemort said, raising his wand - and Harry felt his spine curve as though a huge, invisible hand were bending him ruthlessly forward, and the Death Eaters laughed harder than ever.

"Very good," said Voldemort softly, and as he raised his wand the pressure bearing down upon Harry lifted too. "And now you face me, like a man . . . straight-backed and proud, the way your father died. . . .

"And now - we duel."

Voldemort raised his wand, and before Harry could do anything to defend himself, before he could even move, he had been hit again by the Cruciatus Curse. The pain was so intense, so all-consuming, that he no longer knew where he was. . . . White-hot knives were piercing every inch of his skin, his head was surely going to burst with pain, he was screaming more loudly than he'd ever screamed in his life -

And then it stopped. Harry rolled over and scrambled to his feet; he was shaking as uncontrollably as Wormtail had done when his hand had been cut off; he staggered sideways into the wall of watching Death Eaters, and they pushed him away, back toward Voldemort.

"A little break," said Voldemort, the slit-like nostrils dilating with excitement, "a little pause . . . That hurt, didn't it. Harry? You don't want me to do that again, do you?"

Harry didn't answer. He was going to die like Cedric, those pitiless red eyes were telling him so ... he was going to die, and there was nothing he could do about it... but he wasn't going to play along. He wasn't going to obey Voldemort... he wasn't going to beg. . . .

"I asked you whether you want me to do that again," said Voldemort softly. "Answer me! Imperial"

And Harry felt, for the third time in his life, the sensation that his mind had been wiped of all thought. . . . Ah, it was bliss, not to think, it was as though he were floating, dreaming ...just answer no ... say no ... just answer no. .. .

I will not, said a stronger voice, in the back of his head, I won't answer. . . .

Just answer no. . . .

I won't do it, I won't say it. ...

Just answer no. . . .

"I WON'T!"

And these words burst from Harry's mouth; they echoed through the graveyard, and the dream state was lifted as suddenly as though cold water had been thrown over him - back rushed the aches that the Cruciatus Curse had left all over his body - back rushed the realization of where he was, and what he was facing. . . .

"You won't?" said Voldemort quietly, and the Death Eaters were not laughing now. "You won't say no? Harry, obedience is a virtue I need to teach you before you die. . . . Perhaps another little dose of pain?"

Voldemort raised his wand, but this time Harry was ready; with the reflexes born of his Quidditch training, he flung himself sideways onto the ground; he rolled behind the marble headstone of Voldemort s father, and he heard it crack as the

curse missed him.

"We are not playing hide-and-seek, Harry," said Voldemort's soft, cold voice, drawing nearer, as the Death Eaters laughed. "You cannot hide from me. Does this mean you are tired of our duel? Does this mean that you would prefer me to finish it now, Harry? Come out, Harry . . . come out and play, then ... it will be quick ... it might even be painless ... I would not know... I have never died. . . ."

Harry crouched behind the headstone and knew the end had come. There was no hope ... no help to be had. And as he heard Voldemort draw nearer still, he knew one thing only, and it was beyond fear or reason: He was not going to die crouching here like a child playing hide-and-seek; he was not going to die kneeling at Voldemort s feet... he was going to die upright like his father, and he was going to die trying to defend himself, even if no defense was possible. . . .

Before Voldemort could stick his snakelike face around the headstone. Harry stood up ... he gripped his wand tightly in his hand, thrust it out in front of him, and threw himself around the headstone, facing Voldemort.

Voldemort was ready. As Harry shouted, "Expelliarmus!" Voldemort cried, "Avada Kedavra!"

A jet of green light issued from Voldemorts wand just as a jet of red light blasted from Harry's - they met in midair - and suddenly Harry's wand was vibrating as though an electric charge were surging through it; his hand seized up around it; he couldn't have released it if he'd wanted to - and a narrow beam of light connected the two wands, neither red nor green, but bright, deep gold. Harry, following the beam with his astonished gaze, saw that Voldemort's long white fingers too were gripping a wand that was shaking and vibrating.

And then - nothing could have prepared Harry for this - he felt his feet lift from the ground. He and Voldemort were both being raised into the air, their wands still connected by that thread of shimmering golden light. They glided away from the tombstone of Voldemort's father and then came to rest on a patch of ground that was clear and free of graves. . . . The Death Eaters were shouting; they were asking Voldemort for instructions; they were closing in, reforming the circle around Harry and Voldemort, the snake slithering at their heels, some of them drawing their wands -

The golden thread connecting Harry and Voldemort splintered; though the wands remained connected, a thousand more beams arced high over Harry and Voldemort, crisscrossing all around them, until they were enclosed in a golden, dome-shaped web, a

cage of light, beyond which the Death Eaters circled like jackals, their cries strangely muffled now. . . .

"Do nothing!" Voldemort shrieked to the Death Eaters, and Harry saw his red eyes wide with astonishment at what was happening, saw him fighting to break the

thread of light still connecting his wand with Harry's; Harry held onto his wand more tightly, with both hands, and the golden thread remained unbroken. "Do nothing unless I command you!" Voldemort shouted to the Death Eaters.

And then an unearthly and beautiful sound filled the air. ... It was coming from every thread of the light-spun web vibrating around Harry and Voldemort. It was a sound Harry recognized, though he had heard it only once before in his life: phoenix song.

It was the sound of hope to Harry. . . the most beautiful and welcome thing he had ever heard in his life. . . . He felt as though the song were inside him instead of just around him. ... It was the sound he connected with Dumbledore, and it was almost as though a friend were speaking in his ear. . . .

Don't break the connection.

I know. Harry told the music, I know I mustn't. . . but no sooner had he thought it, than the thing became much harder to do. His wand began to vibrate more powerfully than ever . . . and now the beam between him and Voldemort changed too ... it was as though large beads of light were sliding up and down the thread connecting the wands - Harry felt his wand give a shudder under his hand as the light beads began to slide slowly and steadily his way. . . . The direction of the beams movement was now toward him, from Voldemort, and he felt his wand shudder angrily. . . .

As the closest bead of light moved nearer to Harrys wand tip, the wood beneath his fingers grew so hot he feared it would burst into flame. The closer that bead moved, the harder Harry's wand vibrated; he was sure his wand would not survive contact with it; it felt as though it was about to shatter under his fingers -

He concentrated every last particle of his mind upon forcing the bead back toward Voldemort, his ears full of phoenix song, his eyes furious, fixed . . . and slowly, very slowly, the beads quivered to a halt, and then, just as slowly, they began to move the other way . . . and it was Voldemort's wand that was vibrating extra-hard now . . . Voldemort who looked astonished, and almost fearful. . . .

One of the beads of light was quivering, inches from the tip of Voldemorts wand. Harry didn't understand why he was doing it, didn't know what it might achieve . . . but he now concentrated as he had never done in his life on forcing that bead of light right back into Voldemort s wand . . . and slowly . . . very slowly ... it moved along the golden thread ... it trembled for a moment. . . and then it connected. . . .

At once, Voldemorts wand began to emit echoing screams of pain . . . then - Voldemort's red eyes widened with shock - a dense, smoky hand flew out of the tip of it and vanished . . . the ghost of the hand he had made Wormtail. . . more shouts of pain . . . and then something much larger began to blossom from Voldemorts wand tip, a great, grayish something, that looked as though it were made of the solidest, densest smoke. ... It was a head . . . now a chest and arms . . .

the torso of Cedric Diggory.

If ever Harry might have released his wand from shock, it would have been then, but instinct kept him clutching his wand tightly, so that the thread of golden light remained unbroken, even though the thick gray ghost of Cedric Diggory (was it a ghost? it looked so

solid) emerged in its entirety from the end of Voldemort s wand, as though it were squeezing itself out of a very narrow tunnel. . . and this shade of Cedric stood up, and looked up and down the golden thread of light, and spoke.

"Hold on. Harry," it said.

Its voice was distant and echoing. Harry looked at Voldemort ... his wide red eyes were still shocked ... he had no more expected this than Harry had . . . and, very dimly. Harry heard the frightened yells of the Death Eaters, prowling around the edges of the golden dome. .

More screams of pain from the wand . . . and then something else emerged from its tip ... the dense shadow of a second head, quickly followed by arms and torso ... an old man Harry had seen only in a dream was now pushing himself out of the end of the wand just as Cedric had done . . . and his ghost, or his shadow, or whatever it was, fell next to Cedric's, and surveyed Harry and Voldemort, and the golden web, and the connected wands, with mild surprise, leaning on his walking stick. . . .

"He was a real wizard, then?" the old man said, his eyes on Voldemort. "Killed me, that one did. . . . You fight him, boy. . . ."

But already, yet another head was emerging ... and this head, gray as a smoky statue, was a woman's. . . . Harry, both arms shaking now as he fought to keep his wand still, saw her drop to the ground and straighten up like the others, staring. . . .

The shadow of Bertha Jorkins surveyed the battle before her with wide eyes.

"Don't let go, now!" she cried, and her voice echoed like Cedrics as though from very far away. "Don't let him get you, Harry - don't let go!"

She and the other two shadowy figures began to pace around the inner walls of the golden web, while the Death Eaters flitted around the outside of it... and Voldemort's dead victims whispered as they circled the duelers, whispered words of encouragement to Harry, and hissed words Harry couldn't hear to Voldemort.

And now another head was emerging from the tip of Voldemorts wand . . . and Harry knew when he saw it who it would be ... he knew, as though he had expected it from the moment when Cedric had appeared from the wand . . . knew, because the man appearing was the one he'd thought of more than any other tonight. . . .

The smoky shadow of a tall man with untidy hair fell to the ground as Bertha had

done, straightened up, and looked at him . . . and Harry, his arms shaking madly now, looked back into the ghostly face of his father.

"Your mother's coming . . ." he said quietly. "She wants to see you ... it will be all right.. . hold on. . . ."

And she came. . . first her head, then her body... a young woman with long hair, the smoky, shadowy form of Lily Potter blossomed from the end of Voldemort's wand, fell to the ground, and straightened like her husband. She walked close to Harry, looking down at him, and she spoke in the same distant, echoing voice as the others, but quietly, so that Voldemort, his face now livid with fear as his victims prowled around him, could not hear. . ..

"When the connection is broken, we will linger for only moments . . . but we will give you time. . . you must get to the Portkey, it will return you to Hogwarts ... do you understand, Harry?"

"Yes," Harry gasped, fighting now to keep a hold on his wand, which was slipping and sliding beneath his fingers.

"Harry . . ." whispered the figure of Cedric, "take my body back, will you? Take my body back to my parents, ..."

"I will," said Harry, his face screwed up with the effort of holding the wand.

"Do it now," whispered his father's voice, "be ready to run . . . do it now. ..."

"NOW!" Harry yelled; he didn't think he could have held on for another moment anyway - he pulled his wand upward with an almighty wrench, and the golden thread broke; the cage of light vanished, the phoenix song died - but the shadowy figures of Voldemort's victims did not disappear - they were closing in upon Voldemort, shielding Harry from his gaze -

And Harry ran as he had never run in his life, knocking two stunned Death Eaters aside as he passed; he zigzagged behind headstones, feeling their curses following him, hearing them hit the headstones - he was dodging curses and graves, pelting toward Cedric's body, no longer aware of the pain in his leg, his whole being concentrated on what he had to do -

"Stun him!" he heard Voldemort scream.

Ten feet from Cedric, Harry dived behind a marble angel to avoid the jets of red light and saw the tip of its wing shatter as the spells hit it. Gripping his wand more tightly, he dashed out from behind the angel -

"Impedimenta!" he bellowed, pointing his wand wildly over his shoulder at the Death Eaters running at him.

From a muffled yell, he thought he had stopped at least one of them, but there was no time to stop and look; he jumped over the cup and dived as he heard more

wand blasts behind him; more jets of light flew over his head as he fell, stretching out his hand to grab Cedric's arm...

"Stand aside! I will kill him! He is mine!" shrieked Voldemort. Harry's hand had closed on Cedric's wrist; one tombstone stood between him and Voldemort, but Cedric was too heavy to carry, and the cup was out of reach -

Voldemort's red eyes flamed in the darkness. Harry saw his mouth curl into a smile, saw him raise his wand.

"Accio!" Harry yelled, pointing his wand at the Triwizard Cup. It flew into the air and soared toward him. Harry caught it by the handle -

He heard Voldemort s scream of fury at the same moment that he felt the jerk behind his navel that meant the Portkey had worked - it was speeding him away in a whirl of wind and color, and Cedric along with him. . . . They were going back.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE - VERITASERUM

Harry felt himself slam flat into the ground; his face was pressed into grass; the smell of it filled his nostrils. He had closed his eyes while the Portkey transported him, and he kept them closed now. He did not move. All the breath seemed to have been knocked out of him; his head was swimming so badly he felt as though the ground beneath him were swaying like the deck of a ship. To hold himself steady, he tightened his hold on the two things he was still clutching: the smooth, cold handle of the Triwizard Cup and Cedric's body. He felt as though he would slide away into the blackness gathering at the edges of his brain if he let go of either of them. Shock and exhaustion kept him on the ground, breathing in the smell of the grass, waiting . . . waiting for someone to do something . . . something to happen . . . and all the while, his scar burned dully on his forehead. . . .

A torrent of sound deafened and confused him; there were voices everywhere, footsteps, screams. ... He remained where he was, his face screwed up against the noise, as though it were a nightmare that would pass. . . .

Then a pair of hands seized him roughly and turned him over.

"Harry! Harry!"

He opened his eyes.

He was looking up at the starry sky, and Albus Dumbledore was crouched over him. The dark shadows of a crowd of people pressed in around them, pushing nearer; Harry felt the ground beneath his head reverberating with their footsteps.

He had come back to the edge of the maze. He could see the stands rising above him, the shapes of people moving in them, the stars above.

Harry let go of the cup, but he clutched Cedric to him even more tightly. He raised his free hand and seized Dumbledore's wrist, while Dumbledore's face swam in and out of focus.

"He's back," Harry whispered. "He's back. Voldemort."

"What's going on? What's happened?"

The face of Cornelius Fudge appeared upside down over Harry; it looked white, appalled.

"My God - Diggory!" it whispered. "Dumbledore - he's dead!"

The words were repeated, the shadowy figures pressing in on them gasped it to those around them . . . and then others shouted it - screeched it - into the night - "He's dead!" "He's dead!" "Cedric Diggory! Dead!"

"Harry, let go of him," he heard Fudge's voice say, and he felt fingers trying to pry him from Cedric's limp body, but Harry wouldn't let him go. Then Dumbledore's face, which was still blurred and misted, came closer.

"Harry, you can't help him now. It's over. Let go."

"He wanted me to bring him back," Harry muttered - it seemed important to explain this. "He wanted me to bring him back to his parents. ..."

"That's right. Harry . . . just let go now. . . ."

Dumbledore bent down, and with extraordinary strength for a man so old and thin, raised Harry from the ground and set -him on his feet. Harry swayed. His head was pounding. His injured leg would no longer support his weight. The crowd around them jostled, fighting to get closer, pressing darkly in on him - "What's happened?" "What's wrong with him?" "Diggorys dead!"

"He'll need to go to the hospital wing!" Fudge was saying loudly. "He's ill, he's injured - Dumbledore, Diggory's parents, they're here, they're in the stands. ..."

"I'll take Harry, Dumbledore, I'll take him -"

"No, I would prefer-"

"Dumbledore, Amos Diggorys running . . . he's coming over. . . . Don't you think you should tell him - before he sees - ?"

"Harry, stay here -"

Girls were screaming, sobbing hysterically.... The scene flickered oddly before Harry's eyes. . . .

"Its all right, son, I've got you . . . come on ... hospital wing . . ."

"Dumbledore said stay," said Harry thickly, the pounding in his scar making him feel as though he was about to throw up; his vision was blurring worse than ever.

"You need to lie down. . .. Come on now...."

Someone larger and stronger than he was was half pulling, half carrying him through the frightened crowd. Harry heard people gasping, screaming, and shouting as the man supporting him pushed a path through them, taking him back to the castle. Across the lawn, past the lake and the Durmstrang ship, Harry heard nothing but the heavy breathing of the man helping him walk.

"What happened. Harry?" the man asked at last as he lifted Harry up the stone steps. Clunk. Clunk. Clunk. It was Mad-Eye Moody.

"Cup was a Portkey," said Harry as they crossed the entrance hall. "Took me and Cedric to a graveyard . . . and Voldemort was there . . . Lord Voldemort..."

Clunk. Clunk. Clunk. Up the marble stairs . . .

"The Dark Lord was there? What happened then?"

"Killed Cedric . . . they killed Cedric. . . ."

"And then?"

Clunk. Clunk. Clunk. Along the corridor . . .

"Made a potion . . . got his body back. . . ."

"The Dark Lord got his body back? He's returned?"

"And the Death Eaters came . . . and then we dueled. ..."

"You dueled with the Dark Lord?"

"Got away . . . my wand . . . did something funny. ... I saw my mum and dad . . . they came out of his wand. ..."

"In here. Harry ... in here, and sit down. . . . You'll be all right now . . . drink this. ..."

Harry heard a key scrape in a lock and felt a cup being pushed into his hands.

"Drink it... you'll feel better . . . come on, now. Harry, I need to know exactly what happened. ..."

Moody helped tip the stuff down Harrys throat; he coughed, a peppery taste burning his throat. Moody's office came into sharper focus, and so did Moody himself. ... He looked as white as Fudge had looked, and both eyes were fixed unblinkingly upon Harry's face.

"Voldemort's back, Harry? You're sure he's back? How did he do it?"

"He took stuff from his father's grave, and from Wormtail, and me," said Harry. His head felt clearer; his scar wasn't hurting so badly; he could now see Moodys face distinctly, even though the office was dark. He could still hear screaming and shouting from the distant Quidditch field.

"What did the Dark Lord take from you?" said Moody.

"Blood," said Harry, raising his arm. His sleeve was ripped where Wormtail's dagger had torn it.

Moody let out his breath in a long, low hiss.

"And the Death Eaters? They returned?"

"Yes," said Harry. "Loads of them . . ."

"How did he treat them?" Moody asked quietly. "Did he forgive them?"

But Harry had suddenly remembered. He should have told Dumbledore, he should have said it straightaway -

"There's a Death Eater at Hogwarts! There's a Death Eater here - they put my name in the Goblet of Fire, they made sure I got through to the end -"

Harry tried to get up, but Moody pushed him back down.

"I know who the Death Eater is," he said quietly.

"Karkaroff?" said Harry wildly. "Where is he? Have you got him? Is he locked up?"

"Karkaroff?" said Moody with an odd laugh. "Karkaroff fled tonight, when he felt the Dark Mark burn upon his arm. He betrayed too many faithful supporters of the Dark Lord to wish to meet them . . . but I doubt he will get far. The Dark Lord has ways of tracking his enemies."

"Karkaroff's gone? He ran away? But then - he didn't put my name in the goblet?"

"No," said Moody slowly. "No, he didn't. It was I who did that."

Harry heard, but didn't believe.

"No, you didn't," he said. "You didn't do that. . . you can't have done..."

"I assure you I did," said Moody, and his magical eye swung around and fixed upon the door, and Harry knew he was making sure that there was no one outside it. At the same time, Moody drew out his wand and pointed it at Harry.

"He forgave them, then?" he said. "The Death Eaters who went free? The ones who escaped Azkaban?"

"What?" said Harry.

He was looking at the wand Moody was pointing at him. This was a bad joke, it had to be.

"I asked you," said Moody quietly, "whether he forgave the scum who never even went to look for him. Those treacherous cowards who wouldn't even brave Azkaban for him. The faithless, worthless bits of filth who were brave enough to cavort in masks at the Quidditch World Cup, but fled at the sight of the Dark Mark when I fired it into the sky."

"You fired . . . What are you talking about. . . ?"

"I told you. Harry ... I told you. If there's one thing I hate more than any other, it's a Death Eater who walked free. They turned their backs on my master when he needed them most. I expected him to punish them. I expected him to torture them. Tell me he

hurt them, Harry. . . ." Moody's face was suddenly lit with an insane smile. "Tell me he told them that I, I alone remained faithful... prepared to risk everything to deliver to him the one thing he wanted above all... you"

"You didn't... it - it can't be you. ..."

"Who put your name in the Goblet of Fire, under the name of a different school? I did. Who frightened off every person I thought might try to hurt you or prevent you from winning the tournament? I did. Who nudged Hagrid into showing you the dragons? I did. Who helped you see the only way you could beat the dragon? I did"

Moody's magical eye had now left the door. It was fixed upon Harry. His lopsided mouth leered more widely than ever.

"It hasn't been easy, Harry, guiding you through these tasks without arousing suspicion. I have had to use every ounce of cunning I possess, so that my hand would not be detectable in your success. Dumbledore would have been very suspicious if you had managed everything too easily. As long as you got into that maze, preferably with a decent head start - then, I knew, I would have a chance of getting rid of the other champions and leaving your way clear. But I also had to contend with your stupidity. The second task . . . that was when I was most afraid we would fail. I was keeping watch on you, Potter. I knew you hadn't worked out the egg's clue, so I had to give you another hint -"

"You didn't," Harry said hoarsely. "Cedric gave me the clue -"

"Who told Cedric to open it underwater? I did. I trusted that he would pass the information on to you. Decent people are so easy to manipulate, Potter. I was sure Cedric would want to repay you for telling him about the dragons, and so he did. But even then,

Potter, even then you seemed likely to fail. I was watching all the time ... all those hours in the library. Didn't you realize that the book you needed was in your dormitory all along? I planted it there early on, I gave it to the Longbottom boy, don't you remember? Magical Water Plants of the Mediterranean. It would have told you all you needed to know about gillyweed. I expected you to ask everyone and anyone you could for help. Longbottom would have told you in an instant. But you did not. . . you did not. . . . You have a streak of pride and independence that might have ruined all.

"So what could I do? Feed you information from another innocent source. You told me at the Yule Ball a house-elf called Dobby had given you a Christmas present. I called the elf to the staffroom to collect some robes for cleaning. I staged a loud conversation with Professor McGonagall about the hostages who had been taken, and whether Potter would think to use gillyweed. And your little elf friend ran straight to Snape's office and then hurried to find you..."

Moodys wand was still pointing directly at Harry's heart. Over his shoulder, foggy

shapes were moving in the Foe-Glass on the wall.

"You were so long in that lake, Potter, I thought you had drowned. But luckily, Dumbledore took your idiocy for nobility, and marked you high for it. I breathed again.

"You had an easier time of it than you should have in that maze tonight, of course," said Moody. "I was patrolling around it, able to see through the outer hedges, able to curse many obstacles out of your way. I Stunned Fleur Delacour as she passed. I put the Imperius Curse on Krum, so that he would finish Diggory and leave your path to the cup clear."

Harry stared at Moody. He just didn't see how this could be. ... Dumbledore's friend, the famous Auror. . . the one who had caught so many Death Eaters ... It made no sense ... no sense at all. ...

The foggy shapes in the Foe-Glass were sharpening, had become more distinct. Harry could see the outlines of three people over Moody's shoulder, moving closer and closer. But Moody wasn't watching them. His magical eye was upon Harry.

"The Dark Lord didn't manage to kill you. Potter, and he so wanted to," whispered Moody. "Imagine how he will reward me when he finds I have done it for him. I gave you to him - the thing he needed above all to regenerate - and then I killed you for him. I will be honored beyond all other Death Eaters. I will be his dearest, his closest supporter . . . closer than a son. ..."

Moody's normal eye was bulging, the magical eye fixed upon Harry. The door was barred, and Harry knew he would never reach his own wand in time. . . .

"The Dark Lord and I," said Moody, and he looked completely insane now, towering over Harry, leering down at him, "have much in common. Both of us, for instance, had very disappointing fathers . . . very disappointing indeed. Both of us suffered the indignity, Harry, of being named after those fathers. And both of us had the pleasure . . . the very great pleasure ... of killing our fathers to ensure the continued rise of the Dark Order!"

"You're mad," Harry said - he couldn't stop himself- "you're mad!"

"Mad, am I?" said Moody, his voice rising uncontrollably. "We'll see! We'll see who's mad, now that the Dark Lord has returned, with me at his side! He is back, Harry Potter, you did not conquer him - and now - I conquer you!"

Moody raised his wand, he opened his mouth; Harry plunged his own hand into his robes -

"Stupefy!" There was a blinding flash of red light, and with a great splintering and crashing, the door of Moody's office was blasted apart -

Moody was thrown backward onto the office floor. Harry, still staring at the place where Moody's face had been, saw Albus Dumbledore, Professor Snape, and

Professor McGonagall looking back at him out of the Foe-Glass. He looked around and saw the three of them standing in the doorway, Dumbledore in front, his wand outstretched.

At that moment, Harry fully understood for the first time why people said Dumbledore was the only wizard Voldemort had ever feared. The look upon Dumbledore's face as he stared down at the unconscious form of Mad-Eye Moody was more terrible than Harry could have ever imagined. There was no benign smile upon Dumbledore's face, no twinkle in the eyes behind the spectacles. There was cold fury in every line of the ancient face; a sense of power radiated from Dumbledore as though he were giving off burning heat.

He stepped into the office, placed a foot underneath Moodys unconscious body, and kicked him over onto his back, so that his face was visible. Snape followed him, looking into the Foe-Glass, where his own face was still visible, glaring into the room. Professor McGonagall went straight to Harry.

"Come along, Potter," she whispered. The thin line of her mouth was twitching as though she was about to cry. "Come along . . . hospital wing ..."

"No," said Dumbledore sharply.

"Dumbledore, he ought to - look at him - he's been through enough tonight -"

"He will stay, Minerva, because he needs to understand," said Dumbledore curtly. "Understanding is the first step to acceptance, and only with acceptance can there be recovery. He needs to know who has put him through the ordeal he has suffered tonight, and why,"

"Moody," Harry said. He was still in a state of complete disbelief. "How can it have been Moody?"

"This is not Alastor Moody," said Dumbledore quietly. "You have never known Alastor Moody. The real Moody would not have removed you from my sight after what happened tonight. The moment he took you, I knew - and I followed."

Dumbledore bent down over Moody's limp form and put a hand inside his robes. He pulled out Moody's hip flask and a set of keys on a ring. Then he turned to Professors McGonagall and Snape.

"Severus, please fetch me the strongest Truth Potion you possess, and then go down to the kitchens and bring up the house-elf called Winky. Minerva, kindly go down to Hagrid's house, where you will find a large black dog sitting in the pumpkin patch. Take the dog up to my office, tell him I will be with him shortly, then come back here."

If either Snape or McGonagall found these instructions peculiar, they hid their confusion. Both turned at once and left the office. Dumbledore walked over to the trunk with seven locks, fitted the first key in the lock, and opened it. It contained a

mass of spell-books. Dumbledore closed the trunk, placed a second key in the second lock, and opened the trunk again. The spellbooks had vanished; this time it contained an assortment of broken Sneako-scopes, some parchment and quills, and what looked like a silvery Invisibility Cloak. Harry watched, astounded, as Dumbledore placed the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth keys in their respective locks, reopening the trunk each time, and revealing different contents each time. Then he placed the seventh key in the lock, threw open the lid, and Harry let out a cry of amazement.

He was looking down into a kind of pit, an underground room, and lying on the floor some ten feet below, apparently fast asleep, thin and starved in appearance, was the real Mad-Eye Moody. His wooden leg was gone, the socket that should have held the magical eye looked empty beneath its lid, and chunks of his grizzled hair were missing. Harry stared, thunderstruck, between the sleeping Moody in the trunk and the unconscious Moody lying on the floor of the office.

Dumbledore climbed into the trunk, lowered himself, and fell lightly onto the floor beside the sleeping Moody. He bent over him.

"Stunned - controlled by the Imperius Curse - very weak," he said. "Of course, they would have needed to keep him alive. Harry, throw down the imposter's cloak - he's freezing. Madam Pomfrey will need to see him, but he seems in no immediate danger."

Harry did as he was told; Dumbledore covered Moody in the cloak, tucked it around him, and clambered out of the trunk again. Then he picked up the hip flask that stood upon the desk, unscrewed it, and turned it over. A thick glutinous liquid splattered onto the office floor.

"Polyjuice Potion, Harry," said Dumbledore. "You see the simplicity of it, and the brilliance. For Moody never does drink except from his hip flask, he's well known for it. The imposter needed, of course, to keep the real Moody close by, so that he could continue making the potion. You see his hair ..." Dumbledore looked down on the Moody in the trunk. "The imposter has been cutting it off all year, see where it is uneven? But I think, in the excitement of tonight, our fake Moody might have forgotten to take it as frequendy as he should have done ... on the hour . . . every hour. . . . We shall see."

Dumbledore pulled out the chair at the desk and sat down upon it, his eyes fixed upon the unconscious Moody on the floor. Harry stared at him too. Minutes passed in silence... .

Then, before Harry's very eyes, the face of the man on the floor began to change. The scars were disappearing, the skin was becoming smooth; the mangled nose became whole and started to shrink. The long mane of grizzled gray hair was withdrawing into the scalp and turning the color of straw. Suddenly, with a loud clunk, the wooden leg fell away as a normal leg regrew in its place; next moment, the magical eyeball had popped out of the man's face as a real eye replaced it; it

rolled away across the floor and continued to swivel in every direction.

Harry saw a man lying before him, pale-skinned, slightly freckled, with a mop of fair hair. He knew who he was. He had seen him in Dumbledore's Pensieve, had watched him being led away from court by the dementors, trying to convince Mr. Crouch that he was innocent. . . but he was lined around the eyes now and looked much older. . . .

There were hurried footsteps outside in the corridor. Snape had returned with Winky at his heels. Professor McGonagall was right behind them.

"Crouch!" Snape said, stopping dead in the doorway. "Barty Crouch!"

"Good heavens," said Professor McGonagall, stopping dead and staring down at the man on the floor.

Filthy, disheveled, Winky peered around Snape's legs. Her mouth opened wide and she let out a piercing shriek.

"Master Barty, Master Barty, what is you doing here?"

She flung herself forward onto the young man's chest.

"You is killed him! You is killed him! You is killed Master's son!"

"He is simply Stunned, Winky," said Dumbledore. "Step aside, please. Severus, you have the potion?"

Snape handed Dumbledore a small glass bottle of completely clear liquid: the Veritaserum with which he had threatened Harry in class. Dumbledore got up, bent over the man on the floor, and pulled him into a sitting position against the wall beneath the Foe-Glass, in which the reflections of Dumbledore, Snape, and McGonagall were still glaring down upon them all. Winky remained on her knees, trembling, her hands over her face. Dumbledore forced the mans mouth open and poured three drops inside it. Then he pointed his wand at the mans chest and said, "Ennervate."

Crouch's son opened his eyes. His face was slack, his gaze unfocused. Dumbledore knelt before him, so that their faces were level.

"Can you hear me?" Dumbledore asked quietly.

The man's eyelids flickered.

"Yes," he muttered.

"I would like you to tell us," said Dumbledore softly, "how you came to be here. How did you escape from Azkaban?"

Crouch took a deep, shuddering breath, then began to speak in a flat, expressionless voice.

"My mother saved me. She knew she was dying. She persuaded my father to rescue me as a last favor to her. He loved her as he had never loved me. He agreed. They came to visit me. They gave me a draft of Polyjuice Potion containing one of my mother's hairs. She took a draft of Polyjuice Potion containing one of my hairs. We took on each other's appearance."

Winky was shaking her head, trembling.

"Say no more. Master Barty, say no more, you is getting your father into trouble!"

But Crouch took another deep breath and continued in the same flat voice.

"The dementors are blind. They sensed one healthy, one dying person entering Azkaban. They sensed one healthy, one dying person leaving it. My father smuggled me out, disguised as my mother, in case any prisoners were watching through their doors.

"My mother died a short while afterward in Azkaban. She was careful to drink Polyjuice Potion until the end. She was buried under my name and bearing my appearance. Everyone believed her to be me."

The man's eyelids flickered.

"And what did your father do with you, when he had got you home?" said Dumbledore quietly.

"Staged my mother's death. A quiet, private funeral. That grave is empty. The house-elf nursed me back to health. Then I had to be concealed. I had to be controlled. My father had to use a number of spells to subdue me. When I had recovered my strength, I thought only of finding my master . . . of returning to his service."

"How did your father subdue you?" said Dumbledore.

"The Imperius Curse," Moody said. "I was under my fathers control. I was forced to wear an Invisibility Cloak day and night. I was always with the house-elf. She was my keeper and caretaker. She pitied me. She persuaded my father to give me occasional treats. Rewards for my good behavior."

"Master Barty, Master Barty," sobbed Winky through her hands. "You isn't ought to tell them, we is getting in trouble. ..."

"Did anybody ever discover that you were still alive?" said Dumbledore softly. "Did anyone know except your father and the house-elf?"

"Yes," said Crouch, his eyelids flickering again. "A witch in my father's office. Bertha Jorkins. She came to the house with papers for my father s signature. He was not at home. Winky showed her inside and returned to the kitchen, to me. But Bertha Jorkins heard Winky talking to me. She came to investigate. She heard enough to guess who was hiding under the Invisibility Cloak. My father arrived

home. She confronted him. He put a very powerful Memory Charm on her to make her forget what she'd found out. Too powerful. He said it damaged her memory permanently."

"Why is she coming to nose into my masters private business?" sobbed Winky. "Why isn't she leaving us be?"

"Tell me about the Quidditch World Cup," said Dumbledore.

"Winky talked my father into it," said Crouch, still in the same monotonous voice. "She spent months persuading him. I had not left the house for years. I had loved Quidditch. Let him go, she said. He will be in his Invisibility Cloak. He can watch. Let him smell fresh air for once. She said my mother would have wanted it. She told my father that my mother had died to give me freedom. She had not saved me for a life of imprisonment. He agreed in the end.

"It was carefully planned. My father led me and Winky up to the Top Box early in the day. Winky was to say that she was saving a seat for my father. I was to sit there, invisible. When everyone had left the box, we would emerge. Winky would appear to be alone. Nobody would ever know.

"But Winky didn't know that I was growing stronger. I was starting to fight my father's Imperius Curse. There were times when I was almost myself again. There were brief periods when I seemed outside his control. It happened, there, in the Top Box. It was like waking from a deep sleep. I found myself out in public, in the middle of the match, and I saw, in front of me, a wand sticking out of a boys pocket. I had not been allowed a wand since before Azkaban. I stole it. Winky didn't know. Winky is frightened of heights. She had her face hidden."

"Master Barty, you bad boy!" whispered Winky, tears trickling between her fingers.

"So you took the wand," said Dumbledore, "and what did you do with it?"

"We went back to the tent," said Crouch. "Then we heard them. We heard the Death Eaters. The ones who had never been to Azkaban. The ones who had never suffered for my master. They had turned their backs on him. They were not enslaved, as I was. They were free to seek him, but they did not. They were merely making sport of Muggles. The sound of their voices awoke me. My mind was clearer than it had been in years. I was angry. I had the wand.

I wanted to attack them for their disloyalty to my master. My father had left the tent; he had gone to free the Muggles. Winky was afraid to see me so angry. She used her own brand of magic to bind me to her. She pulled me from the tent, pulled me into the forest, away from the Death Eaters. I tried to hold her back. I wanted to return to the campsite. I wanted to show those Death Eaters what loyalty to the Dark Lord meant, and to punish them for their lack of it. I used the stolen wand to cast the Dark Mark into the sky.

"Ministry wizards arrived. They shot Stunning Spells everywhere. One of the spells came through the trees where Winky and I stood. The bond connecting us was broken. We were both Stunned.

"When Winky was discovered, my father knew I must be nearby. He searched the bushes where she had been found and felt me lying there. He waited until the other Ministry members had left the forest. He put me back under the Imperius Curse and took me home. He dismissed Winky. She had failed him. She had let me acquire a wand. She had almost let me escape."

Winky let out a wail of despair.

"Now it was just Father and I, alone in the house. And then . . . and then . . ." Crouch's head rolled on his neck, and an insane grin spread across his face. "My master came for me.

"He arrived at our house late one night in the arms of his servant Wormtail. My master had found out that I was still alive. He had captured Bertha Jorkins in Albania. He had tortured her. She told him a great deal. She told him about the Triwizard Tournament. She told him the old Auror, Moody, was going to teach at Hogwarts. He tortured her until he broke through the Memory Charm my father had placed upon her. She told him I had escaped from Azkaban. She told him my father kept me imprisoned to prevent me from seeking my master. And so my master knew that I was still his faithful servant - perhaps the most faithful of all. My master conceived a plan, based upon the information Bertha had given him. He needed me. He arrived at our house near midnight. My father answered the door."

The smile spread wider over Crouch's face, as though recalling the sweetest memory of his life. Winky's petrified brown eyes were visible through her fingers. She seemed too appalled to speak.

"It was very quick. My father was placed under the Imperius Curse by my master. Now my father was the one imprisoned, controlled. My master forced him to go about his business as usual, to act as though nothing was wrong. And I was released. I awoke. I was myself again, alive as I hadn't been in years.

"And what did Lord Voldemort ask you to do?" said Dumbledore.

"He asked me whether I was ready to risk everything for him. I was ready. It was my dream, my greatest ambition, to serve him, to prove myself to him. He told me he needed to place a faithful servant at Hogwarts. A servant who would guide Harry Potter through the Triwizard Tournament without appearing to do so. A servant who would watch over Harry Potter. Ensure he reached the Triwizard Cup. Turn the cup into a Portkey, which would take the first person to touch it to my master. But first -"

"You needed Alastor Moody," said Dumbledore. His blue eyes were blazing, though his voice remained calm.

"Wormtail and I did it. We had prepared the Polyjuice Potion beforehand. We journeyed to his house. Moody put up a struggle. There was a commotion. We managed to subdue him just in time. Forced him into a compartment of his own magical trunk. Took some of his hair and added it to the potion. I drank it; I became Moody's double. I took his leg and his eye. I was ready to face Arthur Weasley when he arrived to sort out the Muggles who had heard a disturbance. I made the dustbins move around the yard. I told Arthur Weasley I had heard intruders in my yard, who had set off the dustbins. Then I packed up Moody's clothes and Dark detectors, put them in the trunk with Moody, and set off for Hogwarts. I kept him alive, under the Imperius Curse. I wanted to be able to question him. To find out about his past, learn his habits, so that I could fool even Dumbledore. I also needed his hair to make the Polyjuice Potion. The other ingredients were easy. I stole boom-slang skin from the dungeons. When the Potions master found me in his office, I said I was under orders to search it."

"And what became of Wormtail after you attacked Moody?" said Dumbledore.

"Wormtail returned to care for my master, in my father's house, and to keep watch over my father."

"But your father escaped," said Dumbledore.

"Yes. After a while he began to fight the Imperius Curse just as I had done. There were periods when he knew what was happening. My master decided it was no longer safe for my father to leave the house. He forced him to send letters to the Ministry instead. He made him write and say he was ill. But Wormtail neglected his duty. He was not watchful enough. My father escaped. My master guessed that he was heading for Hogwarts. My father was going to tell Dumbledore everything, to confess. He was going to admit that he had smuggled me from Azkaban.

"My master sent me word of my father's escape. He told me to stop him at all costs. So I waited and watched. I used the map I had taken from Harry Potter. The map that had almost ruined everything."

"Map?" said Dumbledore quickly. "What map is this?"

"Potter's map of Hogwarts. Potter saw me on it. Potter saw me stealing more ingredients for the Polyjuice Potion from Snape's office one night. He thought I was my father. We have the same first name. I took the map from Potter that night. I told him my father hated Dark wizards. Potter believed my father was after Snape.

"For a week I waited for my father to arrive at Hogwarts. At last, one evening, the map showed my father entering the grounds. I pulled on my Invisibility Cloak and went down to meet him. He was walking around the edge of the forest. Then Potter came, and Krum. I waited. I could not hurt Potter; my master needed him. Potter ran to get Dumbledore. I Stunned Krum. I killed my father."

"Noooo!" wailed Winky. "Master Barty, Master Barty, what is you saying?"

"You killed your father," Dumbledore said, in the same soft voice. "What did you do with the body?"

"Carried it into the forest. Covered it with the Invisibility Cloak. I had the map with me. I watched Potter run into the castle. He met Snape. Dumbledore joined them. I watched Potter bringing Dumbledore out of the castle. I walked back out of the forest, doubled around behind them, went to meet them. I told Dumbledore Snape had told me where to come.

"Dumbledore told me to go and look for my father. I went back to my father's body. Watched the map. When everyone was gone, I Transfigured my father's body. He became a bone ... I buried it, while wearing the Invisibility Cloak, in the freshly dug earth in front of Hagrid's cabin."

There was complete silence now, except for Winky's continued sobs. Then Dumbledore said, "And tonight. . ."

"I offered to carry the Triwizard Cup into the maze before dinner," whispered Barty Crouch. "Turned it into a Portkey. My master's plan worked. He is returned to power and I will be honored by him beyond the dreams of wizards."

The insane smile lit his features once more, and his head drooped onto his shoulder as Winky wailed and sobbed at his side.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX - THE PARTING OF THE WAYS

Dumbledore stood up. He stared down at Barty Crouch for a moment with disgust on his face. Then he raised his wand once more and ropes flew out of it, ropes that twisted themselves around Barty Crouch, binding him tightly. He turned to Professor McGonagall.

"Minerva, could I ask you to stand guard here while I take Harry upstairs?"

"Of course," said Professor McGonagall. She looked slightly nauseous, as though she had just watched someone being sick. However, when she drew out her wand and pointed it at Barty Crouch, her hand was quite steady.

"Severus" - Dumbledore turned to Snape - "please tell Madam Pomfrey to come down here; we need to get Alastor Moody into the hospital wing. Then go down into the grounds, find Cornelius Fudge, and bring him up to this office. He will undoubtedly want to question Crouch himself. Tell him I will be in the hospital wing in half an hour's time if he needs me."

Snape nodded silently and swept out of the room.

"Harry?" Dumbledore said gently.

Harry got up and swayed again; the pain in his leg, which he had not noticed all the time he had been listening to Crouch, now returned in full measure. He also realized that he was shaking. Dumbledore gripped his arm and helped him out into the dark corridor.

"I want you to come up to my office first. Harry," he said quiedy as they headed up the passageway. "Sirius is waiting for us there."

Harry nodded. A kind of numbness and a sense of complete unreality were upon him, but he did not care; he was even glad of it. He didn't want to have to think about anything that had happened since he had first touched the Triwizard Cup. He didn't want to have to examine the memories, fresh and sharp as photographs, which kept flashing across his mind. Mad-Eye Moody, inside the trunk. Wormtail, slumped on the ground, cradling his stump of an arm. Voldemort, rising from the steaming cauldron. Cedric. . . dead . . . Cedric, asking to be returned to his parents. . . .

"Professor," Harry mumbled, "where are Mr. and Mrs. Diggory?"

"They are with Professor Sprout," said Dumbledore. His voice, which had been so calm throughout the interrogation of Barty Crouch, shook very slightly for the first time. "She was Head of Cedric's house, and knew him best."

They had reached the stone gargoyle. Dumbledore gave the password, it sprang

aside, and he and Harry went up the moving spiral staircase to the oak door. Dumbledore pushed it open. Sirius was standing there. His face was white and gaunt as it had been when he had escaped Azkaban. In one swift moment, he had crossed the room.

"Harry, are you all right? I knew it - I knew something like this - what happened?"

His hands shook as he helped Harry into a chair in front of the desk.

"What happened?" he asked more urgently.

Dumbledore began to tell Sirius everything Barty Crouch had said. Harry was only half listening. So tired every bone in his body was aching, he wanted nothing more than to sit here, undisturbed, for hours and hours, until he fell asleep and didn't have to think or feel anymore.

There was a soft rush of wings. Fawkes the phoenix had left his perch, flown across the office, and landed on Harry's knee.

"'Lo, Fawkes," said Harry quietly. He stroked the phoenix's beautiful scarlet-and-gold plumage. Fawkes blinked peacefully up at him. There was something comforting about his warm weight.

Dumbledore stopped talking. He sat down opposite Harry, behind his desk. He was looking at Harry, who avoided his eyes. Dumbledore was going to question him. He was going to make Harry relive everything.

"I need to know what happened after you touched the Portkey in the maze. Harry," said Dumbledore.

"We can leave that till morning, can't we, Dumbledore?" said Sirius harshly. He had put a hand on Harrys shoulder. "Let him have a sleep. Let him rest."

Harry felt a rush of gratitude toward Sirius, but Dumbledore took no notice of Sirius's words. He leaned forward toward Harry.

Very unwillingly, Harry raised his head and looked into those blue eyes.

"If I thought I could help you," Dumbledore said gently, "by putting you into an enchanted sleep and allowing you to postpone the moment when you would have to think about what has happened tonight, I would do it. But I know better. Numbing the pain for a while will make it worse when you finally feel it. You have shown bravery beyond anything I could have expected of you. I ask you to demonstrate your courage one more time. I ask you to tell us what happened."

The phoenix let out one soft, quavering note. It shivered in the air, and Harry felt as though a drop of hot liquid had slipped down his throat into his stomach, warming him, and strengthening him.

He took a deep breath and began to tell them. As he spoke, visions of everything

that had passed that night seemed to rise before his eyes; he saw the sparkling surface of the potion that had revived Voldemort; he saw the Death Eaters Apparating between the graves around them; he saw Cedric's body, lying on the ground beside the cup.

Once or twice, Sirius made a noise as though about to say something, his hand still tight on Harry's shoulder, but Dumbledore raised his hand to stop him, and Harry was glad of this, because it was easier to keep going now he had started. It was even a relief; he felt almost as though something poisonous were being extracted from him. It was costing him every bit of determination he had to keep talking, yet he sensed that once he had finished, he would feel better.

When Harry told of Wormtail piercing his arm with the dagger, however, Sirius let out a vehement exclamation and Dumbledore stood up so quickly that Harry started. Dumbledore walked around the desk and told Harry to stretch out his arm. Harry showed them both the place where his robes were torn and the cut beneath them.

"He said my blood would make him stronger than if he'd used someone else's," Harry told Dumbledore. "He said the protection my - my mother left in me - he'd have it too. And he was right - he could touch me without hurting himself, he touched my face."

For a fleeting instant, Harry thought he saw a gleam of something like triumph in Dumbledore's eyes. But next second. Harry was sure he had imagined it, for when Dumbledore had returned to his seat behind the desk, he looked as old and weary as Harry had ever seen him.

"Very well," he said, sitting down again. "Voldemort has overcome that particular barrier. Harry, continue, please."

Harry went on; he explained how Voldemort had emerged from the cauldron, and told them all he could remember of Voldemort's speech to the Death Eaters. Then he told how Voldemort had untied him, returned his wand to him, and prepared to duel.

But when he reached the part where the golden beam of light had connected his and Voldemort's wands, he found his throat obstructed. He tried to keep talking, but the memories of what had come out of Voldemort's wand were flooding into his mind. He could see Cedric emerging, see the old man, Bertha Jorkins ... his father . . . his mother . . .

He was glad when Sirius broke the silence.

"The wands connected?" he said, looking from Harry to Dumbledore. "Why?"

Harry looked up at Dumbledore again, on whose face there was an arrested look.

"Priori Incantatem," he muttered.

His eyes gazed into Harry's and it was almost as though an invisible beam of understanding shot between them.

"The Reverse Spell effect?" said Sirius sharply.

"Exactly," said Dumbledore. "Harry's wand and Voldemorts wand share cores. Each of them contains a feather from the tail of the same phoenix. This phoenix, in fact," he added, and he pointed at the scarlet-and-gold bird, perching peacefully on Harry's knee.

"My wand's feather came from Fawkes?" Harry said, amazed.

"Yes," said Dumbledore. "Mr. Ollivander wrote to tell me you had bought the second wand, the moment you left his shop four years ago."

"So what happens when a wand meets its brother?" said Sirius.

"They will not work properly against each other," said Dumbledore. "If, however, the owners of the wands force the wands to do battle ... a very rare effect will take place. One of the wands will force the other to regurgitate spells it has performed - in reverse. The most recent first. . . and then those which preceded it. . . ."

He looked interrogatively at Harry, and Harry nodded.

"Which means," said Dumbledore slowly, his eyes upon Harry's face, "that some form of Cedric must have reappeared."

Harry nodded again.

"Diggory came back to life?" said Sirius sharply.

"No spell can reawaken the dead," said Dumbledore heavily. "All that would have happened is a kind of reverse echo. A shadow of the living Cedric would have emerged from the wand . . . am I correct, Harry?"

"He spoke to me," Harry said. He was suddenly shaking again. "The . . . the ghost Cedric, or whatever he was, spoke."

"An echo," said Dumbledore, "which retained Cedric's appearance and character. I am guessing other such forms appeared . . . less recent victims of Voldemort's wand...."

"An old man," Harry said, his throat still constricted. "Bertha Jorkins. And . . ."

"Your parents?" said Dumbledore quietly.

"Yes," said Harry.

Sirius's grip on Harry's shoulder was now so tight it was painful.

"The last murders the wand performed," said Dumbledore, nodding. "In reverse order. More would have appeared, of course, had you maintained the connection.

Very well, Harry, these echoes, these shadows . .. what did they do?"

Harry described how the figures that had emerged from the wand had prowled the edges of the golden web, how Voldemort had seemed to fear them, how the shadow of Harry's mother had told him what to do, how Cedric's had made its final request.

At this point. Harry found he could not continue. He looked around at Sirius and saw that he had his face in his hands.

Harry suddenly became aware that Fawkes had left his knee. The phoenix had fluttered to the floor. It was resting its beautiful head against Harry's injured leg, and thick, pearly tears were falling from its eyes onto the wound left by the spider. The pain vanished. The skin mended. His leg was repaired.

"I will say it again," said Dumbledore as the phoenix rose into the air and resettled itself upon the perch beside the door. "You have shown bravery beyond anything I could have expected of you tonight. Harry. You have shown bravery equal to those who died fighting Voldemort at the height of his powers. You have shouldered a grown wizard's burden and found yourself equal to it - and you have now given us all we have a right to expect. You will come with me to the hospital wing. I do not want you returning to the dormitory tonight. A Sleeping Potion, and some peace . . . Sirius, would you like to stay with him?"

Sirius nodded and stood up. He transformed back into the great black dog and walked with Harry and Dumbledore out of the office, accompanying them down a flight of stairs to the hospital wing.

When Dumbledore pushed open the door. Harry saw Mrs. Weasley, Bill, Ron, and Hermione grouped around a harassed-looking Madam Pomfrey. They appeared to be demanding to know where Harry was and what had happened to him. All of them whipped around as Harry, Dumbledore, and the black dog entered, and Mrs. Weasley let out a kind of muffled scream.

"Harry! Oh Harry!"

She started to hurry toward him, but Dumbledore moved between them.

"Molly," he said, holding up a hand, "please listen to me for a moment. Harry has been through a terrible ordeal tonight. He has just had to relive it for me. What he needs now is sleep, and peace, and quiet. If he would like you all to stay with him," he added, looking around at Ron, Hermione, and Bill too, "you may do so. But I do not want you questioning him until he is ready to answer, and certainly not this evening."

Mrs. Weasley nodded. She was very white. She rounded on Ron, Hermione, and Bill as though they were being noisy, and hissed, "Did you hear? He needs quiet!"

"Headmaster," said Madam Pomfrey, staring at the great black dog that was Sirius,

"may I ask what - ?"

"This dog will be remaining with Harry for a while," said Dumbledore simply. "I assure you, he is extremely well trained. Harry - I will wait while you get into bed."

Harry felt an inexpressible sense of gratitude to Dumbledore for asking the others not to question him. It wasn't as though he didn't want them there; but the thought of explaining it all over again, the idea of reliving it one more time, was more than he could stand.

"I will be back to see you as soon as I have met with Fudge, Harry," said Dumbledore. "I would like you to remain here tomorrow until I have spoken to the school." He left.

As Madam Pomfrey led Harry to a nearby bed, he caught sight of the real Moody lying motionless in a bed at the far end of the room. His wooden leg and magical eye were lying on the bedside table.

"Is he okay?" Harry asked.

"He'll be fine," said Madam Pomfrey, giving Harry some pajamas and pulling screens around him. He took off his robes, pulled on the pajamas, and got into bed. Ron, Hermione, Bill, Mrs. Weasley, and the black dog came around the screen and settled themselves in chairs on either side of him. Ron and Hermione were looking at him almost cautiously, as though scared of him.

"I'm all right," he told them. "Just tired."

Mrs. Weasleys eyes filled with tears as she smoothed his bed-covers unnecessarily.

Madam Pomfrey, who had bustled off to her office, returned holding a small bottle of some purple potion and a goblet.

"You'll need to drink all of this. Harry," she said. "It's a potion for dreamless sleep."

Harry took the goblet and drank a few mouthfuls. He felt himself becoming drowsy at once. Everything around him became hazy; the lamps around the hospital wing seemed to be winking at him in a friendly way through the screen around his bed; his body felt as though it was sinking deeper into the warmth of the feather matress. Before he could finish the potion, before he could say another word, his exhaustion had carried him off to sleep.

Harry woke up, so warm, so very sleepy, that he didn't open his eyes, wanting to drop off again. The room was still dimly lit; he was sure it was still nighttime and had a feeling that he couldn't have been asleep very long.

Then he heard whispering around him.

"They'll wake him if they don't shut up!"

"What are they shouting about? Nothing else can have happened, can it?"

Harry opened his eyes blearily. Someone had removed his glasses. He could see the fuzzy outlines of Mrs. Weasley and Bill close by. Mrs. Weasley was on her feet.

"That's Fudge's voice," she whispered. "And that's Minerva McGonagall's, isn't it? But what are they arguing about?"

Now Harry could hear them too: people shouting and running toward the hospital wing.

"Regrettable, but all the same, Minerva -" Cornelius Fudge was saying loudly.

"You should never have brought it inside the castle!" yelled Professor McGonagall. "When Dumbledore finds out -"

Harry heard the hospital doors burst open. Unnoticed by any of the people around his bed, all of whom were staring at the door as Bill pulled back the screens, Harry sat up and put his glasses back on.

Fudge came striding up the ward. Professors McGonagall and Snape were at his heels.

"Where's Dumbledore?" Fudge demanded of Mrs. Weasley.

"He's not here," said Mrs. Weasley angrily. "This is a hospital wing. Minister, don't you think you'd do better to -"

But the door opened, and Dumbledore came sweeping up the ward.

"What has happened?" said Dumbledore sharply, looking from Fudge to Professor McGonagall. "Why are you disturbing these people? Minerva, I'm surprised at you - I asked you to stand guard over Barty Crouch -"

"There is no need to stand guard over him anymore, Dumble-dore!" she shrieked. "The Minister has seen to that!"

Harry had never seen Professor McGonagall lose control like this. There were angry blotches of color in her cheeks, and a hands were balled into fists; she was trembling with fury.-

"When we told Mr. Fudge that we had caught the Death Eater responsible for tonight's events," said Snape, in a low voice; he seemed to feel his personal safety was in question. He insisted on summoning a dementor to accompany him into the castle. He brought it up to the office where Barty Crouch -"

"I told him you would not agree, Dumbledore!" McGonagall fumed. "I told him you would never allow dementors to set foot inside the castle, but -"

"My dear woman!" roared Fudge, who likewise looked angrier than Harry had ever seen him, "as Minister of Magic, it is my decision whether I wish to bring protection with me when interviewing a possibly dangerous -"

But Professor McGonagall's voice drowned Fudge's.

"The moment that - that thing entered the room," she screamed, pointing at Fudge, trembling all over, "it swooped down on Crouch and - and -"

Harry felt a chill in his stomach as Professor McGonagall struggled to find words to describe what had happened. He did not need her to finish her sentence. He knew what the dementor must have done. It had administered its fatal kiss to Barty Crouch. It had sucked his soul out through his mouth. He was worse than dead.

"By all accounts, he is no loss!" blustered Fudge. "It seems he has been responsible for several deaths'."

"But he cannot now give testimony, Cornelius," said Dumbledore. He was staring hard at Fudge, as though seeing him plainly for the first time. "He cannot give evidence about why he killed those people."

"Why he killed them? Well, that's no mystery, is it?" blustered Fudge. "He was a raving lunatic! From what Minerva and Severus have told me, he seems to have thought he was doing it all on You-Know-Who's instructions!"

"Lord Voldemort was giving him instructions, Cornelius," Dumbledore said. "Those peoples deaths were mere by-products of a plan to restore Voldemort to full strength again. The plan succeeded. Voldemort has been restored to his body."

Fudge looked as though someone had just swung a heavy weight into his face. Dazed and blinking, he stared back at Dumbledore as if he couldn't quite believe what he had just heard. He began to sputter, still goggling at Dumbledore.

"You-Know-Who . . . returned? Preposterous. Come now, Dumbledore ..."

"As Minerva and Severus have doubtless told you," said Dumbledore, "we heard Barty Crouch confess. Under the influence of Veritaserum, he told us how he was smuggled out of Azkaban, and how Voldemort - learning of his continued existence from Bertha Jorkins - went to free him from his father and used him to capture Harry. The plan worked, I tell you. Crouch has helped Voldemort to return."

"See here, Dumbledore," said Fudge, and Harry was astonished to see a slight smile dawning on his face, "you - you can't seriously believe that You-Know-Who - back? Come now, come now . . . certainly, Crouch may have believed himself to be acting upon You-Know-Who's orders - but to take the word of a lunatic like that, Dumbledore ..."

"When Harry touched the Triwizard Cup tonight, he was transported straight to Voldemort," said Dumbledore steadily. "He witnessed Lord Voldemort's rebirth. I

will explain it all to you if you will step up to my office."

Dumbledore glanced around at Harry and saw that he was awake, but shook his head and said, "I am afraid I cannot permit you to question Harry tonight."

Fudge's curious smile lingered. He too glanced at Harry, then looked back at Dumbledore, and said, "You are - er - prepared to take Harry's word on this, are you, Dumbledore?"

There was a moment's silence, which was broken by Sirius growling. His hackles were raised, and he was baring his teeth at Fudge.

"Certainly, I believe Harry," said Dumbledore. His eyes were blazing now. "I heard Crouch's confession, and I heard Harry's account of what happened after he touched the Triwizard Cup; the two stories make sense, they explain everything that has happened since Bertha Jorkins disappeared last summer."

Fudge still had that strange smile on his face. Once again, he glanced at Harry before answering.

"You are prepared to believe that Lord Voldemort has returned, on the word of a lunatic murderer, and a boy who . . . well..."

Fudge shot Harry another look, and Harry suddenly understood.

"You've been reading Rita Skeeter, Mr. Fudge," he said quietly.

Ron, Hermione, Mrs. Weasley, and Bill all jumped. None of them had realized that Harry was awake.

Fudge reddened slightly, but a defiant and obstinate look came over his face.

"And if I have?" he said, looking at Dumbledore. "If I have discovered that you've been keeping certain facts about the boy very quiet? A Parselmouth, eh? And having funny turns all over the place -"

"I assume that you are referring to the pains Harry has been experiencing in his scar?" said Dumbledore coolly.

"You admit that he has been having these pains, then?" said Fudge quickly. "Headaches? Nightmares? Possibly - hallucinations?"

"Listen to me, Cornelius," said Dumbledore, taking a step toward Fudge, and once again, he seemed to radiate that indefinable sense of power that Harry had felt after Dumbledore had Stunned young Crouch. "Harry is as sane as you or I. That scar upon his forehead has not addled his brains. I believe it hurts him when Lord Voldemort is close by, or feeling particularly murderous."

Fudge had taken half a step back from Dumbledore, but he looked no less stubborn.

"You'll forgive me, Dumbledore, but I've never heard of a curse scar acting as an alarm bell before. ..."

"Look, I saw Voldemort come back!" Harry shouted. He tried to get out of bed again, but Mrs. Weasley forced him back. "I saw the Death Eaters! I can give you their names! Lucius Malfoy -"

Snape made a sudden movement, but as Harry looked at him, Snape's eyes flew back to Fudge.

"Malfoy was cleared!" said Fudge, visibly affronted. "A very old family - donations to excellent causes -"

"Macnair!" Harry continued.

"Also cleared! Now working for the Ministry!"

"Avery - Nott - Crabbe - Goyle -"

"You are merely repeating the names of those who were acquitted of being Death Eaters thirteen years ago!" said Fudge angrily. "You could have found those names in old reports of the trials! For heavens sake, Dumbledore - the boy was full of some crackpot story at the end of last year too - his tales are getting taller, and you're still swallowing them - the boy can talk to snakes. Dumbledore, and you still think he's trustworthy?"

"You fool!" Professor McGonagall cried. "Cedric Diggory! Mr. Crouch! These deaths were not the random work of a lunatic!"

"I see no evidence to the contrary!" shouted Fudge, now matching her anger, his face purpling. "It seems to me that you are all determined to start a panic that will destabilize everything we have worked for these last thirteen years!"

Harry couldn't believe what he was hearing. He had always thought of Fudge as a kindly figure, a little blustering, a little pompous, but essentially good-natured. But now a short, angry wizard stood before him, refusing, point-blank, to accept the prospect of disruption in his comfortable and ordered world - to believe that Voldemort could have risen.

"Voldemort has returned," Dumbledore repeated. "If you accept that fact straightaway. Fudge, and take the necessary measures, we may still be able to save the situation. The first and most essential step is to remove Azkaban from the control of the dementors -"

"Preposterous!" shouted Fudge again. "Remove the dementors? I'd be kicked out of office for suggesting it! Half of us only feel safe in our beds at night because we know the dementors are standing guard at Azkaban!"

"The rest of us sleep less soundly in our beds, Cornelius, knowing that you have put Lord Voldemort's most dangerous supporters in the care of creatures who will

join him the instant he asks them!" said Dumbledore. "They will not remain loyal to you, Fudge! Voldemort can offer them much more scope for their powers and their pleasures than you can! With the dementors behind him, and his old supporters returned to him, you will be hard-pressed to stop him regaining the sort of power he had thirteen years ago!"

Fudge was opening and closing his mouth as though no words could express his outrage.

"The second step you must take - and at once," Dumbledore pressed on, "is to send envoys to the giants."

"Envoys to the giants?" Fudge shrieked, finding his tongue again. "What madness is this?"

"Extend them the hand of friendship, now, before it is too late," said Dumbledore, "or Voldemort will persuade them, as he did before, that he alone among wizards will give them their rights and their freedom!"

"You - you cannot be serious!" Fudge gasped, shaking his head and retreating further from Dumbledore. "If the magical community got wind that I had approached the giants - people hate them, Dumbledore - end of my career -"

"You are blinded," said Dumbledore, his voice rising now, the aura of power around him palpable, his eyes blazing once more, "by the love of the office you hold, Cornelius! You place too much importance, and you always have done, on the so-called purity of blood! You fail to recognize that it matters not what someone is born, but what they grow to be! Your dementor has just destroyed the last remaining member of a pure-blood family as old as any - and see what that man chose to make of his life! I tell you now- take the steps I have suggested, and you will be remembered, in office or out, as one of the bravest and greatest Ministers of Magic we have ever known. Fail to act - and history will remember you as the man who stepped aside and allowed Voldemort a second chance to destroy the world we have tried to rebuild!"

"Insane," whispered Fudge, still backing away. "Mad . . ."

And then there was silence. Madam Pomfrey was standing frozen at the foot of Harry's bed, her hands over her mouth. Mrs.Weasley was still standing over Harry, her hand on his shoulder to prevent him from rising. Bill, Ron, and Hermione were staring at Fudge.

"If your determination to shut your eyes will carry you as far as this, Cornelius," said Dumbledore, "we have reached a parting of the ways. You must act as you see fit. And I - I shall act as I see fit."

Dumbledore's voice carried no hint of a threat; it sounded like a mere statement, but Fudge bristled as though Dumbledore were advancing upon him with a wand.

"Now, see here, Dumbledore," he said, waving a threatening finger. "I've given you free rein, always. I've had a lot of respect for you. I might not have agreed with some of your decisions, but I've kept quiet. There aren't many who'd have let you hire werewolves, or keep Hagrid, or decide what to teach your students without reference to the Ministry. But if you're going to work against me -"

"The only one against whom I intend to work," said Dumbledore, "is Lord Voldemort. If you are against him, then we remain, Cornelius, on the same side."

It seemed Fudge could think of no answer to this. He rocked backward and forward on his small feet for a moment and spun his bowler hat in his hands. Finally, he said, with a hint of a plea in his voice, "He can't be back, Dumbledore, he just can't be ..."

Snape strode forward, past Dumbledore, pulling up the left sleeve of his robes as he went. He stuck out his forearm and showed it to Fudge, who recoiled.

"There," said Snape harshly. "There. The Dark Mark. It is not as clear as it was an hour or so ago, when it burned black, but you can still see it. Every Death Eater had the sign burned into him by the Dark Lord. It was a means of distinguishing one another, and his means of summoning us to him. When he touched the Mark of any Death Eater, we were to Disapparate, and Apparate, instantly, at his side. This Mark has been growing clearer all year. Karkaroff s too. Why do you think Karkaroff fled tonight? We both felt the Mark burn. We both knew he had returned. Karkaroff fears the Dark Lord's vengeance. He betrayed too many of his fellow Death Eaters to be sure of a welcome back into the fold."

Fudge stepped back from Snape too. He was shaking his head. He did not seem to have taken in a word Snape had said. He stared, apparently repelled by the ugly mark on Snape's arm, then looked up at Dumbledore and whispered, "I don't know what you and your staff are playing at, Dumbledore, but I have heard enough. I have no more to add. I will be in touch with you tomorrow, Dumbledore, to discuss the running of this school. I must return to the Ministry."

He had almost reached the door when he paused. He turned around, strode back down the dormitory, and stopped at Harry's bed.

"Your winnings," he said shortly, taking a large bag of gold out of his pocket and dropping it onto Harrys bedside table. "One thousand Galleons. There should have been a presentation ceremony, but under the circumstances .. ."

He crammed his bowler hat onto his head and walked out of the room, slamming the door behind him. The moment he had disappeared, Dumbledore turned to look at the group around Harry's bed.

"There is work to be done," he said. "Molly... am I right in thinking that I can count on you and Arthur?"

"Of course you can," said Mrs. Weasley. She was white to the lips, but she looked

resolute. "We know what Fudge is. It's Arthur's fondness for Muggles that has held him back at the Ministry all these years. Fudge thinks he lacks proper wizarding pride."

"Then I need to send a message to Arthur," said Dumbledore. "All those that we can persuade of the truth must be notified immediately, and he is well placed to contact those at the Ministry who are not as shortsighted as Cornelius."

"I'll go to Dad," said Bill, standing up. "I'll go now."

"Excellent," said Dumbledore. "Tell him what has happened. Tell him I will be in direct contact with him shortly. He will need to be discreet, however. If Fudge thinks I am interfering at the Ministry -"

"Leave it to me," said Bill.

He clapped a hand on Harry's shoulder, kissed his mother on the cheek, pulled on his cloak, and strode quickly from the room.

"Minerva," said Dumbledore, turning to Professor McGonagall, "I want to see Hagrid in my office as soon as possible. Also - if she will consent to come - Madame Maxime."

Professor McGonagall nodded and left without a word.

"Poppy," Dumbledore said to Madam Pomfrey, "would you be very kind and go down to Professor Moodys office, where I think you will find a house-elf called Winky in considerable distress? Do what you can for her, and take her back to the kitchens. I think Dobby will look after her for us."

"Very - very well," said Madam Pomfrey, looking startled, and she too left.

Dumbledore made sure that the door was closed, and that Madam Pomfrey's footsteps had died away, before he spoke again.

"And now," he said, "it is time for two of our number to recognize each other for what they are. Sirius ... if you could resume your usual form."

The great black dog looked up at Dumbledore, then, in an instant, turned back into a man.

Mrs. Weasley screamed and leapt back from the bed.

"Sirius Black!" she shrieked, pointing at him.

"Mum, shut up!" Ron yelled. "It's okay!"

Snape had not yelled or jumped backward, but the look on his face was one of mingled fury and horror.

"Him!" he snarled, staring at Sirius, whose face showed equal dislike. "What is he

doing here?"

"He is here at my invitation," said Dumbledore, looking between them, "as are you, Severus. I trust you both. It is time for you to lay aside your old differences and trust each other."

Harry thought Dumbledore was asking for a near miracle. Sirius and Snape were eyeing each other with the utmost loathing.

"I will settle, in the short term," said Dumbledore, with a bite of impatience in his voice, "for a lack of open hostility. You will shake hands. You are on the same side now. Time is short, and unless the few of us who know the truth do not stand united, there is no hope

for any us.

Very slowly - but still glaring at each other as though each wished the other nothing but ill - Sirius and Snape moved toward each other and shook hands. They let go extremely quickly.

"That will do to be going on with," said Dumbledore, stepping between them once more. "Now I have work for each of you. Fudge's attitude, though not unexpected, changes everything. Sirius, I need you to set off at once. You are to alert Remus Lupin, Arabella Figg, Mundungus Fletcher - the old crowd. Lie low at Lupin's for a while; I will contact you there."

"But -" said Harry.

He wanted Sirius to stay. He did not want to have to say goodbye again so quickly.

"You'll see me very soon. Harry," said Sirius, turning to him. "I promise you. But I must do what I can, you understand, don't you?"

"Yeah," said Harry. "Yeah . . . of course I do."

Sirius grasped his hand briefly, nodded to Dumbledore, transformed again into the black dog, and ran the length of the room to the door, whose handle he turned with a paw. Then he was gone.

"Severus," said Dumbledore, turning to Snape, "you know what I must ask you to do. If you are ready . . . if you are prepared ..."

"I am," said Snape.

He looked slightly paler than usual, and his cold, black eyes glittered strangely.

"Then good luck," said Dumbledore, and he watched, with a trace of apprehension on his face, as Snape swept wordlessly after Sirius.

It was several minutes before Dumbledore spoke again.

"I must go downstairs," he said finally. "I must see the Diggorys. Harry - take the rest of your potion. I will see all of you later."

Harry slumped back against his pillows as Dumbledore disappeared. Hermione, Ron, and Mrs. Weasley were all looking at him. None of them spoke for a very long time.

"You've got to take the rest of your potion. Harry," Mrs. Weasley said at last. Her hand nudged the sack of gold on his bedside cabinet as she reached for the bottle and the goblet. "You have a good long sleep. Try and think about something else for a while . . . think about what you're going to buy with your winnings!"

"I don't want that gold," said Harry in an expressionless voice. "You have it. Anyone can have it. I shouldn't have won it. It should've been Cedric's."

The thing against which he had been fighting on and off ever since he had come out of the maze was threatening to overpower him. He could feel a burning, prickling feeling in the inner corners of his eyes. He blinked and stared up at the ceiling.

"It wasn't your fault. Harry," Mrs. Weasley whispered.

"I told him to take the cup with me," said Harry.

Now the burning feeling was in his throat too. He wished Ron would look away.

Mrs. Weasley set the potion down on the bedside cabinet, bent down, and put her arms around Harry. He had no memory of ever being hugged like this, as though by a mother. The full weight of everything he had seen that night seemed to fall in upon him as Mrs. Weasley held him to her. His mother s face, his father's voice, the sight of Cedric, dead on the ground all started spinning in his head until he could hardly bear it, until he was screwing up his face against the howl of misery fighting to get out of him.

There was a loud slamming noise, and Mrs. Weasley and Harry broke apart. Hermione was standing by the window. She was holding something tight in her hand.

"Sorry," she whispered.

"Your potion, Harry," said Mrs. Weasley quickly, wiping her eyes on the back of her hand.

Harry drank it in one gulp. The effect was instantaneous. Heavy, irresistible waves of dreamless sleep broke over him; he fell back onto his pillows and thought no more.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN - THE BEGINNING

When he looked back, even a month later, Harry found he had only scattered memories of the next few days. It was as though he had been through too much to take in any more. The recollections he did have were very painful. The worst, perhaps, was the meeting with the Diggorys that took place the following morning.

They did not blame him for what had happened; on the contrary, both thanked him for returning Cedric's body to them. Mr. Diggory sobbed through most of the interview. Mrs. Diggory's grief seemed to be beyond tears.

"He suffered very little then," she said, when Harry had told her how Cedric had died. "And after all, Amos ... he died just when he'd won the tournament. He must have been happy."

When they got to their feet, she looked down at Harry and said, "You look after yourself, now."

Harry seized the sack of gold on the bedside table.

"You take this," he muttered to her. "It should've been Cedric's, he got there first, you take it -"

But she backed away from him.

"Oh no, it's yours, dear, I couldn't. . . you keep it."

Harry returned to Gryffindor Tower the following evening. From what Hermione and Ron told him, Dumbledore had spoken to the school that morning at breakfast. He had merely requested that they leave Harry alone, that nobody ask him questions or badger him to tell the story of what had happened in the maze. Most people, he noticed, were skirting him in the corridors, avoiding his eyes. Some whispered behind their hands as he passed. He guessed that many of them had believed Rita Skeeter's article about how disturbed and possibly dangerous he was. Perhaps they were formulating their own theories about how Cedric had died. He found he didn't care very much. He liked it best when he was with Ron and Hermione and they were talking about other things, or else letting him sit in silence while they played chess. He felt as though all three of them had reached an understanding they didn't need to put into words; that each was waiting for some sign, some word, of what was going on outside Hogwarts - and that it was useless to speculate about what might be coming until they knew anything for certain. The only time they touched upon the subject was when Ron told Harry about a meeting Mrs. Weasley had had with Dumbledore before going home.

"She went to ask him if you could come straight to us this summer," he said. "But he wants you to go back to the Dursleys, at least at first."

"Why?" said Harry.

"She said Dumbledore's got his reasons," said Ron, shaking his head darkly. "I suppose we've got to trust him, haven't we?"

The only person apart from Ron and Hermione that Harry felt able to talk to was Hagrid. As there was no longer a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, they had those lessons free. They used the one on Thursday afternoon to go down and visit Hagrid in his cabin. It was a bright and sunny day; Fang bounded out of the open door as they approached, barking and wagging his tail madly.

"Who's that?" called Hagrid, coming to the door. "Harry!"

He strode out to meet them, pulled Harry into a one-armed hug, ruffled his hair, and said, "Good ter see yeh, mate. Good ter see yeh."

They saw two bucket-size cups and saucers on the wooden table in front of the fireplace when they entered Hagrid's cabin.

"Bin havin' a cuppa with Olympe," Hagrid said. "She's jus' left."

"Who?" said Ron curiously.

"Madame Maxime, o' course!" said Hagrid.

"You two made up, have you?" said Ron.

"Dunno what yeh're talkin' about," said Hagrid airily, fetching more cups from the dresser. When he had made tea and offered around a plate of doughy cookies, he leaned back in his chair and surveyed Harry closely through his beetle-black eyes.

"You all righ'?" he said gruffly

"Yeah," said Harry.

"No, yeh're not," said Hagrid. "Course yeh're not. But yeh will be."

Harry said nothing.

"Knew he was goin' ter come back," said Hagrid, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked up at him, shocked. "Known it fer years. Harry. Knew he was out there, bidin' his time. It had ter happen. Well, now it has, an' we'll jus' have ter get on with it. We'll fight. Migh' be able ter stop him before he gets a good hold. That's Dumbledores plan, anyway. Great man, Dumbledore. 'S long as we've got him, I'm not too worried."

Hagrid raised his bushy eyebrows at the disbelieving expressions on their faces.

"No good sittin' worryin' abou' it," he said. "What's comin' will come, an we'll meet it when it does. Dumbledore told me wha' you did. Harry."

Hagrid's chest swelled as he looked at Harry.

"Yeh did as much as yer father would've done, an' I can' give yeh no higher praise than that."

Harry smiled back at him. It was the first time he'd smiled in days. "What's Dumbledore asked you to do, Hagrid?" he asked. "He sent Professor McGonagall to ask you and Madame Maxime to meet him - that night."

"Got a little job fer me over the summer," said Hagrid. "Secret, though. I'm not s'pposed ter talk abou' it, no, not even ter you lot. Olympe - Madame Maxime ter you - might be comin' with me. I think she will. Think I got her persuaded."

"Is it to do with Voldemort?"

Hagrid flinched at the sound of the name.

"Migh' be," he said evasively. "Now . . . who'd like ter come an' visit the las' skrewt with me? I was jokin' - jokin'!" he added hastily, seeing the looks on their faces.

It was with a heavy heart that Harry packed his trunk up in the dormitory on the night before his return to Privet Drive. He was dreading the Leaving Feast, which was usually a cause for celebration, when the winner of the Inter-House Championship would be announced. He had avoided being in the Great Hall when it was full ever since he had left the hospital wing, preferring to eat when it was nearly empty to avoid the stares of his fellow students.

When he, Ron, and Hermione entered the Hall, they saw at once that the usual decorations were missing. The Great Hall was normally decorated with the winning House's colors for the Leaving Feast. Tonight, however, there were black drapes on the wall behind the teachers' table. Harry knew instantly that they were there as a mark of respect to Cedric.

The real Mad-Eye Moody was at the staff table now, his wooden leg and his magical eye back in place. He was extremely twitchy, jumping every time someone spoke to him. Harry couldn't blame him; Moodys fear of attack was bound to have been increased by his ten-month imprisonment in his own trunk. Professor Karkaroff s chair was empty. Harry wondered, as he sat down with the other Gryffindors, where Karkaroff was now, and whether Voldemort had caught up with him.

Madame Maxime was still there. She was sitting next to Hagrid. They were talking quietly together. Further along the table, sitting next to Professor McGonagall, was Snape. His eyes lingered on Harry for a moment as Harry looked at him. His expression was difficult to read. He looked as sour and unpleasant as ever. Harry continued to watch him, long after Snape had looked away.

What was it that Snape had done on Dumbledores orders, the night that Voldemort had returned? And why. . . why . . . was Dumbledore so convinced that Snape was

truly on their side? He had been their spy, Dumbledore had said so in the Pensieve. Snape had turned spy against Voldemort, "at great personal risk." Was that the job he had taken up again? Had he made contact with the Death Eaters, perhaps? Pretended that he had never really gone over to Dumbledore, that he had been, like Voldemort himself, biding his time?

Harry's musings were ended by Professor Dumbledore, who stood up at the staff table. The Great Hall, which in any case had been less noisy than it usually was at the Leaving Feast, became very quiet.

"The end," said Dumbledore, looking around at them all, "of another year."

He paused, and his eyes fell upon the Hufflepuff table. Theirs had been the most subdued table before he had gotten to his feet, and theirs were still the saddest and palest faces in the Hall.

"There is much that I would like to say to you all tonight," said Dumbledore, "but I must first acknowledge the loss of a very fine person, who should be sitting here," he gestured toward the Hufflepuffs, "enjoying our feast with us. I would like you all, please, to stand, and raise your glasses, to Cedric Diggory."

They did it, all of them; the benches scraped as everyone in the Hall stood, and raised their goblets, and echoed, in one loud, low, rumbling voice, "Cedric Diggory."

Harry caught a glimpse of Cho through the crowd. There were tears pouring silently down her face. He looked down at the table as they all sat down again.

"Cedric was a person who exemplified many of the qualities that distinguish Hufflepuff house," Dumbledore continued. "He was a good and loyal friend, a hard worker, he valued fair play. His death has affected you all, whether you knew him well or not. I think that you have the right, therefore, to know exactly how it came about."

Harry raised his head and stared at Dumbledore.

"Cedric Diggory was murdered by Lord Voldemort."

A panicked whisper swept the Great Hall. People were staring at Dumbledore in disbelief, in horror. He looked perfectly calm as he watched them mutter themselves into silence.

"The Ministry of Magic," Dumbledore continued, "does not wish me to tell you this. It is possible that some of your parents will be horrified that I have done so - either because they will not believe that Lord Voldemort has returned, or because they think I should not tell you so, young as you are. It is my belief, however, that the truth is generally preferable to lies, and that any attempt to pretend that Cedric died as the result of an accident, or some sort of blunder of his own, is an insult to his memory."

Stunned and frightened, every face in the Hall was turned toward Dumbledore now... or almost every face. Over at the Slytherin table. Harry saw Draco Malfoy muttering something to Crabbe and Goyle. Harry felt a hot, sick swoop of anger in his stomach. He forced himself to look back at Dumbledore.

"There is somebody else who must be mentioned in connection with Cedrics death," Dumbledore went on. "I am talking, of course, about Harry Potter."

A kind of ripple crossed the Great Hall as a few heads turned in Harry's direction before flicking back to face Dumbledore.

"Harry Potter managed to escape Lord Voldemort," said Dumbledore. "He risked his own life to return Cedric's body to Hogwarts. He showed, in every respect, the sort of bravery that few wizards have ever shown in facing Lord Voldemort, and for this, I honor him."

Dumbledore turned gravely to Harry and raised his goblet once more. Nearly everyone in the Great Hall followed suit. They murmured his name, as they had murmured Cedric's, and drank to him. But through a gap in the standing figures. Harry saw that Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, and many of the other Slytherins had remained defiantly in their seats, their goblets untouched. Dumbledore, who after all possessed no magical eye, did not see them.

When everyone had once again resumed their seats, Dumbledore continued, "The Triwizard Tournament's aim was to further and promote magical understanding. In the light of what has happened - of Lord Voldemorts return - such ties are more important than ever before."

Dumbledore looked from Madame Maxime and Hagrid, to Fleur Delacour and her fellow Beauxbatons students, to Viktor Krum and the Durmstrangs at the Slytherin table. Krum, Harry saw, looked wary, almost frightened, as though he expected Dumbledore to say something harsh.

"Every guest in this Hall," said Dumbledore, and his eyes lingered upon the Durmstrang students, "will be welcomed back here at any time, should they wish to come. I say to you all, once again - in the light of Lord Voldemort's return, we are only as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided. Lord Voldemorts gift for spreading discord and enmity is very great. We can fight it only by showing an equally strong bond of friendship and trust. Differences of habit and language are nothing at all if our aims are identical and our hearts are open.

"It is my belief- and never have I so hoped that I am mistaken - that we are all facing dark and difficult times. Some of you in this Hall have already suffered directly at the hands of Lord Voldemort. Many of your families have been torn asunder. A week ago, a student was taken from our midst.

"Remember Cedric. Remember, if the time should come when you have to make a choice between what is right and what is easy, remember what happened to a boy who was good, and kind, and brave, because he strayed across the path of Lord

Voldemort. Remember Cedric Diggory."

Harry's trunk was packed; Hedwig was back in her cage on top of it. He, Ron, and Hermione were waiting in the crowded entrance hall with the rest of the fourth years for the carriages that would take them back to Hogsmeade station. It was another beautiful summer's day. He supposed that Privet Drive would be hot and leafy, its flower beds a riot of color, when he arrived there that evening. The thought gave him no pleasure at all.

"'Arry!"

He looked around. Fleur Delacour was hurrying up the stone steps into the castle. Beyond her, far across the grounds. Harry could see Hagrid helping Madame Maxime to back two of the giant horses into their harness. The Beauxbatons carriage was about to take off.

"We will see each uzzer again, I 'ope," said Fleur as she reached him, holding out her hand. "I am 'oping to get a job 'ere, to improve my Eenglish."

"It's very good already," said Ron in a strangled sort of voice. Fleur smiled at him; Hermione scowled.

"Good-bye, 'Arry," said Fleur, turning to go. "It 'az been a pleasure meeting you!"

Harrys spirits couldn't help but lift slightly as he watched Fleur hurry back across the lawns to Madame Maxime, her silvery hair rippling in the sunlight.

Wonder how the Durmstrang students are getting back," said Ron. "D' you reckon they can steer that ship without Karkaroff?"

"Karkaroff did not steer," said a gruff voice. "He stayed in his cabin and let us do the vork."

Krum had come to say good-bye to Hermione. "Could I have a vord?" he asked her.

"Oh . . . yes ... all right," said Hermione, looking slightly flustered, and following Krum through the crowd and out of sight.

"You'd better hurry up!" Ron called loudly after her. "The carriages'll be here in a minute!"

He let Harry keep a watch for the carriages, however, and spent the next few minutes craning his neck over the crowd to try and see what Krum and Hermione might be up to. They returned quite soon. Ron stared at Hermione, but her face was quite impassive.

"I liked Diggory," said Krum abruptly to Harry. "He vos alvays polite to me. Alvays. Even though I vos from Durmstrang - with Karkaroff," he added, scowling.

"Have you got a new headmaster yet?" said Harry

Krum shrugged. He held out his hand as Fleur had done, shook Harry's hand, and then Ron's. Ron looked as though he was suffering some sort of painful internal struggle. Krum had already started walking away when Ron burst out, "Can I have your autograph?"

Hermione turned away, smiling at the horseless carriages that were now trundling toward them up the drive, as Krum, looking surprised but gratified, signed a fragment of parchment for Ron.

The weather could not have been more different on the journey back to King's Cross than it had been on their way to Hogwarts the previous September. There wasn't a single cloud in the sky. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had managed to get a compartment to themselves. Pigwidgeon was once again hidden under Rons dress robes to stop him from hooting continually; Hedwig was dozing, her head under her wing, and Crookshanks was curled up in a spare seat like a large, furry ginger cushion. Harry, Ron, and Hermione talked more fully and freely than they had all week as the train sped them southward. Harry felt as though Dumbledore's speech at the Leaving Feast had unblocked him, somehow. It was less painful to discuss what had happened now. They broke off their conversation about what action Dumbledore might be taking, even now, to stop Voldemort only when the lunch trolley arrived.

When Hermione returned from the trolley and put her money back into her schoolbag, she dislodged a copy of the Daily Prophet that she had been carrying in there. Harry looked at it, unsure whether he really wanted to know what it might say, but Hermione, seeing him looking at it, said calmly, "There's nothing in there. You can look for yourself, but there's nothing at all. I've been checking every day. Just a small piece the day after the third task saying you won the tournament. They didn't even mention Cedric. Nothing about any of it. If you ask me. Fudge is forcing them to keep quiet."

"He'll never keep Rita quiet," said Harry. "Not on a story like this."

"Oh, Rita hasn't written anything at all since the third task," said Hermione in an oddly constrained voice. "As a matter of fact," she added, her voice now trembling slightly, "Rita Skeeter isn't going to be writing anything at all for a while. Not unless she wants me to spill the beans on her."

"What are you talking about?" said Ron.

"I found out how she was listening in on private conversations when she wasn't supposed to be coming onto the grounds," said Hermione in a rush.

Harry had the impression that Hermione had been dying to tell them this for days, but that she had restrained herself in light of everything else that had happened.

"How was she doing it?" said Harry at once.

"How did you find out?" said Ron, staring at her.

"Well, it was you, really, who gave me the idea. Harry," she said.

"Did I?" said Harry, perplexed. "How?"

"Bugging," said Hermione happily.

"But you said they didn't work -"

"Oh not electronic bugs," said Hermione. "No, you see ... Rita Skeeter" - Hermiones voice trembled with quiet triumph - "is an unregistered Animagus. She can turn -"

Hermione pulled a small sealed glass jar out other bag.

"- into a beetle."

"You're kidding," said Ron. "You haven't.. . she's not..."

"Oh yes she is," said Hermione happily, brandishing the jar at them.

Inside were a few twigs and leaves and one large, fat beetle.

"That's never - you're kidding -" Ron whispered, lifting the jar to his eyes.

"No, I'm not," said Hermione, beaming. "I caught her on the windowsill in the hospital wing. Look very closely, and you'll notice the markings around her antennae are exactly like those foul glasses she wears."

Harry looked and saw that she was quite right. He also remembered something.

"There was a beetle on the statue the night we heard Hagrid telling Madame Maxime about his mum!"

"Exactly," said Hermione. "And Viktor pulled a beetle out of my hair after we'd had our conversation by the lake. And unless I'm very much mistaken, Rita was perched on the windowsill of the Divination class the day your scar hurt. She's been buzzing around for stories all year."

"When we saw Malfoy under that tree ..." said Ron slowly.

"He was talking to her, in his hand," said Hermione. "He knew, of course. That's how she's been getting all those nice little interviews with the Slytherins. They wouldn't care that she was doing something illegal, as long as they were giving her horrible stuff about us and Hagrid."

Hermione took the glass jar back from Ron and smiled at the beetle, which buzzed angrily against the glass.

"I've told her I'll let her out when we get back to London," said Hermione. "I've put an Unbreakable Charm on the jar, you see, so she can't transform. And I've

told her she's to keep her quill to herself for a whole year. See if she can't break the habit of writing horrible lies about people."

Smiling serenely, Hermione placed the beetle back inside her schoolbag.

The door of the compartment slid open.

"Very clever. Granger," said Draco Malfoy.

Crabbe and Goyle were standing behind him. All three of them looked more pleased with themselves, more arrogant and more menacing, than Harry had ever seen them.

"So," said Malfoy slowly, advancing slightly into the compartment and looking slowly around at them, a smirk quivering on his lips. "You caught some pathetic reporter, and Potter's Dumbledore's favorite boy again. Big deal."

His smirk widened. Crabbe and Goyle leered.

"Trying not to think about it, are we?" said Malfoy softly, looking around at all three of them. "Trying to pretend it hasn't happened?"

"Get out," said Harry.

He had not been this close to Malfoy since he had watched him muttering to Crabbe and Goyle during Dumbledores speech about Cedric. He could feel a kind of ringing in his ears. His hand gripped his wand under his robes.

"You've picked the losing side, Potter! I warned you! I told you you ought to choose your company more carefully, remember? When we met on the train, first day at Hogwarts? I told you not to hang around with riffraff like this!" He jerked his head at Ron and Hermione. "Too late now. Potter! They'll be the first to go, now the Dark Lord's back! Mudbloods and Muggle-lovers first! Well - second - Diggory was the f-"

It was as though someone had exploded a box of fireworks within the compartment. Blinded by the blaze of the spells that had blasted from every direction, deafened by a series of bangs, Harry blinked and looked down at the floor.

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were all lying unconscious in the doorway. He, Ron, and Hermione were on their feet, all three of them having used a different hex. Nor were they the only ones to have done so.

"Thought we'd see what those three were up to," said Fred matter-of-factly, stepping onto Goyle and into the compartment. He had his wand out, and so did George, who was careful to tread on Malfoy as he followed Fred inside.

"Interesting effect," said George, looking down at Crabbe. "Who used the Furnunculus Curse?"

"Me," said Harry.

"Odd," said George lightly. "I used Jelly-Legs. Looks as though those two shouldn't be mixed. He seems to have sprouted little tentacles all over his face. Well, let's not leave them here, they don't add much to the decor."

Ron, Harry, and George kicked, rolled, and pushed the unconscious Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle - each of whom looked distinctly the worse for the jumble of jinxes with which they had been hit - out into the corridor, then came back into the compartment and rolled the door shut.

"Exploding Snap, anyone?" said Fred, pulling out a pack of cards.

They were halfway through their fifth game when Harry decided to ask them.

"You going to tell us, then?" he said to George. "Who you were blackmailing?"

"Oh," said George darkly. "That."

"It doesn't matter," said Fred, shaking his head impatiently. "It wasn't anything important. Not now, anyway."

"We've given up," said George, shrugging.

But Harry, Ron, and Hermione kept on asking, and finally, Fred said, "All right, all right, if you really want to know ... it was Ludo Bagman."

"Bagman?" said Harry sharply. "Are you saying he was involved in -"

"Nah," said George gloomily. "Nothing like that. Stupid git. He wouldn't have the brains."

"Well, what, then?" said Ron.

Fred hesitated, then said, "You remember that bet we had with him at the Quidditch World Cup? About how Ireland would win, but Krum would get the Snitch?"

"Yeah," said Harry and Ron slowly.

"Well, the git paid us in leprechaun gold he'd caught from the Irish mascots."

"So?"

"So," said Fred impatiently, "it vanished, didn't it? By next morning, it had gone!"

"But - it must've been an accident, mustn't it?" said Hermione.

George laughed very bitterly.

"Yeah, that's what we thought, at first. We thought if we just wrote to him, and told him he'd made a mistake, he'd cough up. But nothing doing. Ignored our

letter. We kept trying to talk to him about it at Hogwarts, but he was always making some excuse to get away from us."

"In the end, he turned pretty nasty," said Fred. "Told us we were too young to gamble, and he wasn't giving us anything."

"So we asked for our money back," said George glowering.

"He didn't refuse!" gasped Hermione.

"Right in one," said Fred.

"But that was all your savings!" said Ron.

"Tell me about it," said George. "'Course, we found out what was going on in the end. Lee Jordan's dad had had a bit of trouble getting money off Bagman as well. Turns out he's in big trouble with the goblins. Borrowed loads of gold off them. A gang of them cornered him in the woods after the World Cup and took all the gold he had, and it still wasn't enough to cover all his debts. They followed him all the way to Hogwarts to keep an eye on him. He's lost everything gambling. Hasn't got two Galleons to rub together. And you know how the idiot tried to pay the goblins back?"

"How?" said Harry.

"He put a bet on you, mate," said Fred. "Put a big bet on you to win the tournament. Bet against the goblins."

"So that's why he kept trying to help me win!" said Harry. "Well - I did win, didn't I? So he can pay you your gold!"

"Nope," said George, shaking his head. "The goblins play as dirty as him. They say you drew with Diggory, and Bagman was betting you'd win outright. So Bagman had to run for it. He did run for it right after the third task."

George sighed deeply and started dealing out the cards again.

The rest of the journey passed pleasantly enough; Harry wished it could have gone on all summer, in fact, and that he would never arrive at King's Cross . . . but as he had learned the hard way that year, time will not slow down when something unpleasant lies ahead, and all too soon, the Hogwarts Express was pulling in at platform nine and three-quarters. The usual confusion and noise filled the corridors as the students began to disembark. Ron and Hermione struggled out past Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, carrying their trunks. Harry, however, stayed put.

"Fred - George - wait a moment."

The twins turned. Harry pulled open his trunk and drew out his Triwizard winnings.

"Take it," he said, and he thrust the sack into George's hands.

"What?" said Fred, looking flabbergasted.

"Take it," Harry repeated firmly. "I don't want it."

"You're mental," said George, trying to push it back at Harry.

"No, I'm not," said Harry. "You take it, and get inventing. It's for the joke shop."

"He is mental," Fred said in an almost awed voice.

"Listen," said Harry firmly. "If you don't take it, I'm throwing it down the drain. I don't want it and I don't need it. But I could do with a few laughs. We could all do with a few laughs. I've got a feeling we're going to need them more than usual before long."

"Harry," said George weakly, weighing the money bag in his hands, "there's got to be a thousand Galleons in here."

"Yeah," said Harry, grinning. "Think how many Canary Creams that is."

The twins stared at him.

"Just don't tell your mum where you got it... although she might not be so keen for you to join the Ministry anymore, come to think of it. . . ."

"Harry," Fred began, but Harry pulled out his wand.

"Look," he said flatly, "take it, or I'll hex you. I know some good ones now. Just do me one favor, okay? Buy Ron some different dress robes and say they're from you."

He left the compartment before they could say another word, stepping over Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, who were still lying on the floor, covered in hex marks.

Uncle Vernon was waiting beyond the barrier. Mrs. Weasley was close by him. She hugged Harry very tightly when she saw him and whispered in his ear, "I think Dumbledore will let you come to us later in the summer. Keep in touch, Harry."

"See you. Harry," said Ron, clapping him on the back.

"'Bye, Harry!" said Hermione, and she did something she had never done before, and kissed him on the cheek.

"Harry - thanks," George muttered, while Fred nodded fervently at his side.

Harry winked at them, turned to Uncle Vernon, and followed him silently from the station. There was no point worrying yet, he told himself, as he got into the back of the Dursleys' car.

As Hagrid had said, what would come, would come ... and he would have to meet it when it did.

Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix

By J.K. Rowling

CHAPTER ONE

Dudley Demented

The hottest day of the summer so far was drawing to a close and a drowsy silence lay over the large, square houses of Privet Drive. Cars that were usually gleaming stood dusty in their drives and lawns that were once emerald green lay parched and yellowing; the use of hosepipes had been banned due to drought. Deprived of their usual car-washing and lawn-mowing pursuits, the inhabitants of Privet Drive had retreated into the shade of their cool houses, windows thrown wide in the hope of tempting in a nonexistent breeze. The only person left outdoors was a teenage boy who was lying flat on his back in a flowerbed outside number four.

He was a skinny, black-haired, bespectacled boy who had the pinched, slightly unhealthy look of someone who has grown a lot in a short space of time. His jeans were torn and dirty, his T-shirt baggy and faded, and the soles of his trainers were peeling away from the uppers. Harry Potter's appearance did not endear him to the neighbors, who were the sort of people who thought scruffiness ought to be punishable by law, but as he had hidden himself behind a large hydrangea bush this evening he was quite invisible to passers-by. In fact, the only way he would be spotted was if his Uncle Vernon or Aunt Petunia stuck their heads out of the living-room window and looked straight down into the flowerbed below.

On the whole, Harry thought he was to be congratulated on his idea of hiding here. He was not, perhaps, very comfortable lying on the hot, hard earth but, on the other hand, nobody was glaring at him, grinding their teeth so loudly that he could not hear the news, or shooting nasty questions at him, as had happened every time he had tried sitting down in the living room to watch television with his aunt and uncle.

Almost as though this thought had fluttered through the open window, Vernon Dursley, Harry's uncle, suddenly spoke.

"Glad to see the boy's stopped trying to butt in. Where is he, anyway?"

"I don't know," said Aunt Petunia, unconcerned. "Not in the house."

Uncle Vernon grunted.

"Watching the news…" he said scathingly. "I'd like to know what he's really up to. As if a normal boy cares what's on the news - Dudley hasn't got a clue what's going on; doubt he knows who the Prime Minister is! Anyway, it's not as if there'd be anything about his lot on our news–"

“Vernon, shh!” said Aunt Petunia. “The window’s open!”

“Oh - yes - sorry, dear.”

The Dursleys fell silent. Harry listened to a jingle about Fruit ‘n’ Bran breakfast cereal while he watched Mrs. Figg, a batty cat-loving old lady from nearby Wisteria Walk, amble slowly past. She was frowning and muttering to herself. Harry was very pleased he was concealed behind the bush, as Mrs. Figg had recently taken to asking him around for tea whenever she met him in the street. She had rounded the corner and vanished from view before Uncle Vernon’s voice floated out of the window again.

“Dudders out for tea?”

“At the Polkisses’,” said Aunt Petunia fondly. “He’s got so many little friends, he’s so popular.”

Harry suppressed a snort with difficulty. The Dursleys really were astonishingly stupid about their son, Dudley. They had swallowed all his dim-witted lies about having tea with a different member of his gang every night of the summer holidays. Harry knew perfectly well that Dudley had not been to tea anywhere; he and his gang spent every evening vandalizing the play park, smoking on street corners and throwing stones at passing cars and children. Harry had seen them at it during his evening walks around Little Whinging; he had spent most of the holidays wandering the streets, scavenging newspapers from bins along the way.

The opening notes of the music that heralded the seven o’clock news reached Harry’s ears and his stomach turned over. Perhaps tonight - after a month of waiting - would be the night.

“Record numbers of stranded holiday makers fill air ports as the Spanish baggage-handlers’ strike reaches its second week –”

“Give ‘em a lifelong siesta, I would,” snarled Uncle Vernon over the end of the newsreader’s sentence, but no matter: outside in the flowerbed, Harry’s stomach seemed to unclench. If anything had happened, it would surely have been the first item on the news; death and destruction were more important than stranded holidaymakers.

He let out a long, slow breath and stared up at the brilliant blue sky. Every day this summer had been the same: the tension, the expectation, the temporary relief, and then mounting tension again… and always, growing more insistent all the time, the question of why nothing had happened yet.

He kept listening, just in case there was some small clue, not recognized for what it really was by the Muggles - an unexplained disappearance, perhaps, or some strange accident… but the baggage-handlers’ strike was followed by news about the drought in the Southeast (“I hope he’s listening next door!” bellowed Uncle Vernon. “Him with his sprinklers on at three in the morning!”), then a helicopter that had almost crashed in a field in Surrey, then a famous actress’s divorce from her famous husband (“As if we’re interested in their sordid affairs,” sniffed Aunt Petunia, who had followed the case obsessively in every magazine she could lay her bony hands

on).

Harry closed his eyes against the now blazing evening sky as the newsreader said, "*-and finally, Bungy the budgie has found a novel way of keeping cool this summer. Bungy, who lives at the Five Feathers in Barnsley, has learned to water ski! Mary Dorkins went to find out more.*"

Harry opened his eyes. If they had reached water-skiing budgerigars, there would be nothing else worth hearing. He rolled cautiously on to his front and raised himself on to his knees and elbows, preparing to crawl out from under the window.

He had moved about two inches when several things happened in very quick succession.
A loud, echoing crack broke the sleepy silence like a gunshot; a cat streaked out from under a parked car and flew out of sight; a shriek, a bellowed oath and the sound of breaking china came from the Dursleys' living room, and as though this was the signal Harry had been waiting for he jumped to his feet, at the same time pulling from the waistband of his jeans a thin wooden wand as if he were unsheathing a sword - but before he could draw himself up to full height, the top of his head collided with the Dursleys' open window. The resultant crash made Aunt Petunia scream even louder.

Harry felt as though his head had been split in two. Eyes streaming, he swayed, trying to focus on the street to spot the source of the noise, but he had barely staggered upright when two large purple hands reached through the open window and closed tightly around his throat.

"Put - it-away!" Uncle Vernon snarled into Harry's ear. "Now! Before- anyone - sees!"

"Get - off - me!" Harry gasped. For a few seconds they struggled, Harry pulling at his uncles sausage-like fingers with his left hand, his right maintaining a firm grip on his raised wand; then, as the pain in the top of Harry's head gave a particularly nasty throb, Uncle Vernon yelped and released Harry as though he had received an electric shock. Some invisible force seemed to have surged through his nephew, making him impossible to hold.

Panting, Harry fell forwards over the hydrangea bush, straightened up and stared around. There was no sign of what had caused the loud cracking noise, but there were several faces peering through various nearby windows. Harry stuffed his wand hastily back into his jeans and tried to look innocent.

"Lovely evening!" shouted Uncle Vernon, waving at Mrs. Number Seven, who was glaring from behind her net curtains. "Did you hear that car backfire just now? Gave Petunia and me quite a turn!"

He continued to grin in a horrible, manic way until all the curious neighbors had disappeared from their various windows, then the grin became a grimace of rage as he beckoned Harry back towards him.

Harry moved a few steps closer, taking care to stop just short of the point at which Uncle Vernon's outstretched hands could resume their strangling.

“What the devil do you mean by it, boy?” asked Uncle Vernon in a croaky voice that trembled with fury.

“What do I mean by what?” said Harry coldly. He kept looking left and right up the street, still hoping to see the person who had made the cracking noise.

“Making a racket like a starting pistol right outside our –”

“I didn’t make that noise,” said Harry firmly.

Aunt Petunia’s thin, horsy face now appeared beside Uncle Vernon’s wide, purple one. She looked livid.

“Why were you lurking under our window?”

“Yes - yes, good point, Petunia! What were you doing under our window, boy?”

“Listening to the news,” said Harry in a resigned voice.

His aunt and uncle exchanged looks of outrage.

“Listening to the news! Again?”

“Well, it changes every day, you see,” said Harry.

“Don’t you be clever with me, boy! I want to know what you’re really up to - and don’t give me any more of this listening to the news tosh! You know perfectly well that your lot -”

“Careful, Vernon!” breathed Aunt Petunia, and Uncle Vernon lowered his voice so that Harry could barely hear him, “-that your lot don’t get on our news!”

“That’s all you know,” said Harry.

The Dursleys goggled at him for a few seconds, then Aunt Petunia said, “You’re a nasty little liar. What are all those -” she, too, lowered her voice so that Harry had to lip-read the next word, “- owls doing if they’re not bringing you news?”

“Aha!” said Uncle Vernon in a triumphant whisper. “Get out of that one, boy! As if we didn’t know you get all your news from those pestilential birds!”

Harry hesitated for a moment. It cost him something to tell the truth this time, even though his aunt and uncle could not possibly know how bad he felt at admitting it.

“The owls… aren’t bringing me news,” he said tonelessly.

“I don’t believe it,” said Aunt Petunia at once.

“No more do I,” said Uncle Vernon forcefully.

“We know you’re up to something funny,” said Aunt Petunia.

“We’re not stupid, you know,” said Uncle Vernon.

“Well, that’s news to me,” said Harry, his temper rising, and before the Dursleys could call him back, he had wheeled about, crossed the front lawn, stepped over the low garden wall and was striding off up the street.

He was in trouble now and he knew it. He would have to face his aunt and uncle later and pay the price for his rudeness, but he did not care very much just at the moment; he had much more pressing matters on his mind.

Harry was sure the cracking noise had been made by someone Apparating or Disapparating. It was exactly the sound Dobby the house-elf made when he vanished into thin air. Was it possible that Dobby was here in Privet Drive? Could Dobby be following him right at this very moment? As this thought occurred he wheeled around and stared back down Privet Drive, but it appeared to be completely deserted and Harry was sure that Dobby did not know how to become invisible. He walked on, hardly aware of the route he was taking, for he had pounded these streets so often lately that his feet carried him to his favorite haunts automatically. Every few steps he glanced back over his shoulder. Someone magical had been near him as he lay among Aunt Petunia’s dying begonias, he was sure of it. Why hadn’t they spoken to him, why hadn’t they made contact, why were they hiding now?

And then, as his feeling of frustration peaked, his certainty leaked away.

Perhaps it hadn’t been a magical sound after all. Perhaps he was so desperate for the tiniest sign of contact from the world to which he belonged that he was simply overreacting to perfectly ordinary noises. Could he be sure it hadn’t been the sound of something breaking inside a neighbor’s house?

Harry felt a dull, sinking sensation in his stomach and before he knew it the feeling of hopelessness that had plagued him all summer rolled over him once again.

Tomorrow morning he would be woken by the alarm at five o’clock so he could pay the owl that delivered the Daily Prophet - but was there any point continuing to take it? Harry merely glanced at the front page before throwing it aside these days; when the idiots who ran the paper finally realized that Voldemort was back it would be headline news, and that was the only kind Harry cared about.

If he was lucky, there would also be owls carrying letters from his best friends Ron and Hermione, though any expectation he’d had that their letters would bring him news had long since been dashed.

We can’t say much about you-know-what, obviously… We’ve been told not to say anything

important in case our letters go astray… We're quite busy but I can't give you details here… There's a fair amount going on, we'll tell you everything when we see you…

But when were they going to see him? Nobody seemed too bothered with a precise date. Hermione had scribbled I expect we'll be seeing you quite soon inside his birthday card, but how soon was soon? As far as Harry could tell from the vague hints in their letters, Hermione and Ron were in the same place, presumably at Ron's parents' house. He could hardly bear to think of the pair of them having fun at The Burrow when he was stuck in Privet Drive. In fact, he was so angry with them he had thrown away, unopened, the two boxes of Honeydukes chocolates they'd sent him for his birthday. He'd regretted it later, after the wilted salad Aunt Petunia had provided for dinner that night.

And what were Ron and Hermione busy with? Why wasn't he, Harry, busy? Hadn't he proved himself capable of handling much more than them? Had they all forgotten what he had done? Hadn't it been he who had entered that graveyard and watched Cedric being murdered, and been tied to that tombstone and nearly killed?

Don't think about that, Harry told himself sternly for the hundredth time that summer. It was bad enough that he kept revisiting the graveyard in his nightmares, without dwelling on it in his waking moments too.

He turned a corner into Magnolia Crescent; halfway along he passed the narrow alleyway down the side of a garage where he had first clapped eyes on his godfather. Sirius, at least, seemed to understand how Harry was feeling. Admittedly, his letters were just as empty of proper news as Ron and Hermione's, but at least they contained words of caution and consolation instead of tantalizing hints:

I *know this must be frustrating for you… Keep your nose clean and everything will be okay… Be careful and don't do anything rash…*

Well, thought Harry, as he crossed Magnolia Crescent, turned into Magnolia Road and headed towards the darkening play park, he had (by and large) done as Sirius advised. He had at least resisted the temptation to tie his trunk to his broomstick and set off for The Burrow by himself. In fact, Harry thought his behavior had been very good considering how frustrated and angry he felt at being stuck in Privet Drive so long, reduced to hiding in flowerbeds in the hope of hearing something that might point to what Lord Voldemort was doing. Nevertheless, it was quite galling to be told not to be rash by a man who had served twelve years in the wizard prison, Azkaban, escaped, attempted to commit the murder he had been convicted for in the first place, then gone on the run with a stolen Hippogriff.

Harry vaulted over the locked park gate and set off across the parched grass. The park was as empty as the surrounding streets. When he reached the swings he sank on to the only one that Dudley and his friends had not yet managed to break, coiled one arm around the chain and stared moodily at the ground. He would not be able to hide in the Dursleys' flowerbed again. Tomorrow, he would have to think of some fresh way of listening to the news. In the meantime, he had nothing to look forward to but another restless, disturbed night, because even when he

escaped the nightmares about Cedric he had unsettling dreams about long dark corridors, all finishing in dead ends and locked doors, which he supposed had something to do with the trapped feeling he had when he was awake. Often the old scar on his forehead prickled uncomfortably, but he did not fool himself that Ron or Hermione or Sirius would find that very interesting any more. In the past, his scar hurting had warned that Voldemort was getting stronger again, but now that Voldemort was back they would probably remind him that its regular irritation was only to be expected… nothing to worry about… old news…

The injustice of it all welled up inside him so that he wanted to yell with fury. If it hadn't been for him, nobody would even have known Voldemort was back! And his reward was to be stuck in Little Whinging for four solid weeks, completely cut off from the magical world, reduced to squatting among dying begonias so that he could hear about water-skiing budgerigars! How could Dumbledore have forgotten him so easily? Why had Ron and Hermione got together without inviting him along, too? How much longer was he supposed to endure Sirius telling him to sit tight and be a good boy; or resist the temptation to write to the stupid Daily Prophet and point out that Voldemort had returned? These furious thoughts whirled around in Harry's head, and his insides writhed with anger as a sultry, velvety night fell around him, the air full of the smell of warm, dry grass, and the only sound that of the low grumble of traffic on the road beyond the park railings.

He did not know how long he had sat on the swing before the sound of voices interrupted his musings and he looked up. The streetlamps from the surrounding roads were casting a misty glow strong enough to silhouette a group of people making their way across the park. One of them was singing a loud, crude song. The others were laughing. A soft ticking noise came from several expensive racing bikes that they were wheeling along.

Harry knew who those people were. The figure in front was unmistakeably his cousin, Dudley Dursley, wending his way home, accompanied by his faithful gang.

Dudley was as vast as ever, but a year's hard dieting and the discovery of a new talent had wrought quite a change in his physique. As Uncle Vernon delightedly told anyone who would listen, Dudley had recently become the Junior Heavyweight Inter-School Boxing Champion of the Southeast. 'The noble sport', as Uncle Vernon called it, had made Dudley even more formidable than he had seemed to Harry in their primary school days when he had served as Dudley's first punching bag. Harry was not remotely afraid of his cousin any more but he still didn't think that Dudley learning to punch harder and more accurately was cause for celebration. Neighborhood children all around were terrified of him - even more terrified than they were of 'that Potter boy' who, they had been warned, was a hardened hooligan and attended St. Brutus's Secure Center for Incurably Criminal Boys.

Harry watched the dark figures crossing the grass and wondered who they had been beating up tonight. *Look round*, Harry found himself thinking as he watched them. *Come on… look round… I'm sitting here all alone… come and have a go…*

If Dudley's friends saw him sitting here, they would be sure to make a beeline for him and what would Dudley do then? He wouldn't want to lose face in front of the gang, but he'd be terrified

of provoking Harry… it would be really fun to watch Dudley's dilemma, to taunt him, watch him, with him powerless to respond… and if any of the others tried hitting Harry, he was ready - he had his wand. Let them try… he'd love to vent some of his frustration on the boys who had once made his life hell.

But they didn't turn around, they didn't see him, they were almost at the railings. Harry mastered the impulse to call after them… seeking a fight was not a smart move… he must not use magic… he would be risking expulsion again.

The voices of Dudley's gang died away; they were out of sight, heading along Magnolia Road. *There you go, Sirius,* Harry thought dully. *Nothing rash. Kept my nose clean. Exactly the opposite of what you'd have done.*

He got to his feet and stretched. Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon seemed to feel that whenever Dudley turned up was the right time to be home, and any time after that was much too late. Uncle Vernon had threatened to lock Harry in the shed if he came home after Dudley ever again, so, stifling a yawn, and still scowling, Harry set off towards the park gate.

Magnolia Road, like Privet Drive, was full of large, square houses with perfectly manicured lawns, all owned by large, square owners who drove very clean cars similar to Uncle Vernon's. Harry preferred Little Whinging by night, when the curtained windows made patches of jewel bright color in the darkness and he ran no danger of hearing disapproving mutters about his 'delinquent' appearance when he passed the householders. He walked quickly, so that halfway along Magnolia Road Dudley's gang came into view again; they were saying their farewells at the entrance to Magnolia Crescent. Harry stepped into the shadow of a large lilac tree and waited.

"… squealed like a pig, didn't he?" Malcolm was saying, to guffaws from the others.

"Nice right hook, Big D," said Piers.

"Same time tomorrow?" said Dudley.

"Round at my place, my parents will be out," said Gordon.

"See you then," said Dudley.

"Bye, Dud!"

"See ya, Big D!"

Harry waited for the rest of the gang to move on before setting off again. When their voices had faded once more he headed around the corner into Magnolia Crescent and by walking very quickly he soon came within hailing distance of Dudley, who was strolling along at his ease, humming tunelessly.

"Hey, Big D!"

Dudley turned.

"Oh," he grunted. "It's you."

"How long have you been 'Big D' then?" said Harry.

"Shut it," snarled Dudley, turning away.

"Cool name," said Harry, grinning and falling into step beside his cousin. "But you'll always be 'Ickle Diddykins' to me."

"I said, SHUT IT!" said Dudley, whose ham-like hands had curled into fists.

"Don't the boys know that's what your mum calls you?"

"Shut your face."

"You don't tell her to shut her face. What about 'Popkin' and 'Dinky Diddydums', can I use them then?"

Dudley said nothing. The effort of keeping himself from hitting Harry seemed to demand all his self-control.

"So who've you been beating up tonight?" Harry asked, his grin fading. "Another ten-year-old? I know you did Mark Evans two nights ago -"

"He was asking for it," snarled Dudley.

"Oh yeah?"

"He cheeked me."

"Yeah? Did he say you look like a pig that's been taught to walk on its hind legs? Cause that's not cheek, Dud, that's true."

A muscle was twitching in Dudley's jaw. It gave Harry enormous satisfaction to know how furious he was making Dudley; he felt as though he was siphoning off his own frustration into his cousin, the only outlet he had.

They turned right down the narrow alleyway where Harry had first seen Sirius and which formed a short cut between Magnolia Crescent and Wisteria Walk. It was empty and much darker than the streets it linked because there were no streetlamps. Their footsteps were muffled between garage walls on one side and a high fence on the other.

“Think you’re a big man carrying that thing, don’t you?” Dudley said after a few seconds.

“What thing?”

“That - that thing you are hiding.”

Harry grinned again.

“Not as stupid as you look, are you, Dud? But I s’pose, if you were, you wouldn’t be able to walk and talk at the same time.”

Harry pulled out his wand. He saw Dudley look sideways at it.

“You’re not allowed,” Dudley said at once. “I know you’re not. You’d get expelled from that freak school you go to.”

“How d’you know they haven’t changed the rules, Big D?”

“They haven’t,” said Dudley, though he didn’t sound completely convinced.

Harry laughed softly.

“You haven’t got the guts to take me on without that thing, have you?” Dudley snarled.

“Whereas you just need four mates behind you before you can beat up a ten year old. You know that boxing title you keep banging on about? How old was your opponent? Seven? Eight?”

“He was sixteen, for your information,” snarled Dudley, “and he was out cold for twenty minutes after I’d finished with him and he was twice as heavy as you. You just wait till I tell Dad you had that thing out –”

“Running to Daddy now, are you? Is his ickle boxing champ frightened of nasty Harry’s wand?”

“Not this brave at night, are you?” sneered Dudley.

“This is night, Diddykins. That’s what we call it when it goes all dark like this.”

“I mean when you’re in bed!” Dudley snarled.

He had stopped walking. Harry stopped too, staring at his cousin.

From the little he could see of Dudley’s large face, he was wearing a strangely triumphant look.

“What d’you mean, I’m not brave when I’m in bed?” s aid Harry, completely nonplussed. “What am I supposed to be frightened of, pillows or something?”

“I heard you last night,” said Dudley breathlessly. “Talking in your sleep. Moaning.”

“What d’you mean?” Harry said again, but there was a cold, plunging sensation in his stomach. He had revisited the graveyard last night in his dreams.

Dudley gave a harsh bark of laughter, then adopted a high-pitched whimpering voice.

“‘Don’t kill Cedric! Don’t kill Cedric!’ Who’s Cedric - your boyfriend?”

“I - you’re lying,” said Harry automatically. But his mouth had gone dry. He knew Dudley wasn’t lying - how else would he know about Cedric?

“Dad! Help me, Dad! He’s going to kill me, Dad! Boo hoo!”

“Shut up,” said Harry quietly. “Shut up, Dudley, I’m warning you!”

“Come and help me, Dad! Mum, come and help me! He’s killed Cedric! Dad, help me! He’s going to - don’t you point that thing at me!”

Dudley backed into the alley wall. Harry was pointing the wand directly at Dudley’s heart. Harry could feel fourteen years’ hatred of Dudley pounding in his veins - what wouldn’t he give to strike now, to jinx Dudley so thoroughly he’d have to crawl home like an insect, struck dumb, sprouting feelers…

“Don’t ever talk about that again,” Harry snarled. “D’you understand me?”

“Point that thing somewhere else!”

“I said, do you understand me?”

“Point it somewhere else!”

“DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?”

“GET THAT THING AWAY FROM -”

Dudley gave an odd, shuddering gasp, as though he had been doused in icy water.

Something had happened to the night. The star-strewn indigo sky was suddenly pitch black and lightless - the stars, the moon, the misty streetlamps at either end of the alley had vanished. The distant rumble of cars and the whisper of trees had gone. The balmy evening was suddenly piercingly, bitingly cold. They were surrounded by total, impenetrable, silent darkness, as though some giant hand had dropped a thick, icy mantle over the entire alleyway, blinding them.

For a split second Harry thought he had done magic without meaning to, despite the fact that he’d been resisting as hard as he could - then his reason caught up with his senses - he didn’t

have the power to turn off the stars. He turned his head this way and that, trying to see something, but the darkness pressed on his eyes like a weightless veil.

Dudley’s terrified voice broke in Harry’s ear.

“W-what are you d-doing? St-stop it!”

“I’m not doing anything! Shut up and don’t move!”

“I c-can’t see! I’ve g-gone blind! I -”

“I said shut up!”

Harry stood stock still, turning his sightless eyes left and right. The cold was so intense he was shivering all over; goose bumps had erupted up his arms and the hairs on the back of his neck were standing up - he opened his eyes to their fullest extent, staring blankly around, unseeing. It was impossible… they couldn’t be here… not in Little Whinging… he strained his ears… he would hear them before he saw them…

“I’ll t-tell Dad!” Dudley whimpered. “W-where are you? What are you d-do—?”

“Will you shut up?” Harry hissed, “I’m trying to lis —”

But he fell silent. He had heard just the thing he had been dreading.

There was something in the alleyway apart from themselves, something that was drawing long, hoarse, rattling breaths. Harry felt a horrible jolt of dread as he stood trembling in the freezing air.

“C-cut it out! Stop doing it! I’ll h-hit you, I swear I will!”

“Dudley, shut—”

WHAM.

A fist made contact with the side of Harry’s head, lifting him off his feet. Small white lights popped in front of his eyes. For the second time in an hour Harry felt as though his head had been cleaved in two; next moment, he had landed hard on the ground and his wand had flown out of his hand.

“You moron, Dudley!” Harry yelled, his eyes watering with pain as he scrambled to his hands and knees, feeling around frantically in the blackness. He heard Dudley blundering away, hitting the alley fence, stumbling.

“DUDLEY, COME BACK! YOU’RE RUNNING RIGHT AT IT!”

There was a horrible squealing yell and Dudley's footsteps stopped. At the same moment, Harry felt a creeping chill behind him that could mean only one thing. There was more than one.

"DUDLEY, KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT! WHATEVER YOU DO, KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT! Wand!" Harry muttered frantically, his hands flying over the ground like spiders. "Where's - wand -come on -lumos!"

He said the spell automatically, desperate for light to help him in his search - and to his disbelieving relief, light flared inches from his right hand - the wand tip had ignited. Harry snatched it up, scrambled to his feet and turned around.

His stomach turned over.

A towering, hooded figure was gliding smoothly towards him, hovering over the ground, no feet or face visible beneath its robes, sucking on the night as it came.

Stumbling backwards, Harry raised his wand.

"Expecto patronum!"

A silvery wisp of vapour shot from the tip of the wand and the Dementor slowed, but the spell hadn't worked properly; tripping over his own feet, Harry retreated further as the Dementor bore down upon him, panic fogging his brain -concentrate –

A pair of grey, slimy, scabbed hands slid from inside the Dementor's robes, reaching for him. A rushing noise filled Harry's ears.

"Expecto patronum!"

His voice sounded dim and distant. Another wisp of silver smoke, feebler than the last, drifted from the wand - he couldn't do it any more, he couldn't work the spell.

There was laughter inside his own head, shrill, high-pitched laughter… he could smell the Dementor's putrid, death-cold breath filling his own lungs, drowning him - think… something happy…

But there was no happiness in him… the Dementor's icy fingers were closing on his throat - the high-pitched laughter was growing louder and louder, and a voice spoke inside his head: "Bow to death, Harry… it might even be painless… I would no t know… I have never died…"

He was never going to see Ron and Hermione again –

And their faces burst clearly into his mind as he fought for breath.

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

An enormous silver stag erupted from the tip of Harry's wand; its antlers caught the Dementor in the place where the heart should have been; it was thrown backwards, weightless as darkness, and as the stag charged, the Dementor swooped away, bat-like and defeated.

"THIS WAY!" Harry shouted at the stag. Wheeling around, he sprinted down the alleyway, holding the lit wand aloft. "DUDLEY? DUDLEY!"

He had run barely a dozen steps when he reached them: Dudley was curled up on the ground, his arms clamped over his face. A second Dementor was crouching low over him, gripping his wrists in its slimy hands, prizing them slowly almost lovingly apart, lowering its hooded head towards Dudley's face as though about to kiss him.

"GET IT!" Harry bellowed, and with a rushing, roaring sound, the silver stag he had conjured came galloping past him. The Dementor's eyeless face was barely an inch from Dudley's when the silver antlers caught it; the thing was thrown up into the air and, like its fellow, it soared away and was absorbed into the darkness; the stag cantered to the end of the alleyway and dissolved into silver mist.

Moon, stars and streetlamps burst back into life. A warm breeze swept the alleyway. Trees rustled in neighboring gardens and the mundane rumble of cars in Magnolia Crescent filled the air again.

Harry stood quite still, all his senses vibrating, taking in the abrupt return to normality. After a moment, he became aware that his T-shirt was sticking to him; he was drenched in sweat.
He could not believe what had just happened. Dementors here, in Little Whinging.

Dudley lay curled up on the ground, whimpering and shaking. Harry bent down to see whether he was in a fit state to stand up, but then he heard loud, running footsteps behind him. Instinctively raising his wand again, he span on his heel to face the newcomer.

Mrs. Figg, their batty old neighbor, came panting into sight. Her grizzled grey hair was escaping from its hairnet, a clanking string shopping bag was swinging from her wrist and her feet were halfway out of her tartan carpet slippers. Harry made to stow his wand hurriedly out of sight, but-

"Don't put it away idiot boy!" she shrieked. "What if there are more of them around? Oh, I'm going to kill Mundungus Fletcher!"

CHAPTER TWO

A Peck of Owls

“He left!” said Mrs. Figg, wringing her hands. “Left to see someone about a batch of cauldrons that fell off the back of a broom! I told him I’d flay him alive if he went, and now look! Dementors! It’s just lucky I put Mr. Tibbies on the case! But we haven’t got time to stand around! Hurry, now, we’ve got to get you back! Oh, the trouble this is going to cause! I will kill him!”

“But -” The revelation that his batty old cat-obsessed neighbor knew what Dementors were was almost as big a shock to Harry as meeting two of them down the alleyway. “You’re - you’re a witch?”

“I’m a Squib, as Mundungus knows full well, so how on earth was I supposed to help you fight off Dementors? He left you completely without cover when I’d warned him -”

“This Mundungus has been following me? Hang on - it was him! He Disapparated from the front of my house!”

“Yes, yes, yes, but luckily I’d stationed Mr. Tibbies under a car just in case, and Mr. Tibbies came and warned me, but by the time I got to your house you’d gone - and now - oh, what’s Dumbledore going to say? You!” she shrieked at Dudley, still supine on the alley floor. “Get your fat bottom off the ground, quick!”

“You know Dumbledore?” said Harry, staring at her.

“Of course I know Dumbledore, who doesn’t know Dumbledore? But come on - I’ll be no help if they come back, I’ve never so much as transfigured a teabag.”

She stooped down, seized one of Dudley’s massive arms in her wizened hands and tugged.

“Get up, you useless lump, get up!”

But Dudley either could not or would not move. He remained on the ground, trembling and ashen-faced, his mouth shut very tight.

“I’ll do it.” Harry took hold of Dudley’s arm and h heaved. With an enormous effort he managed to hoist him to his feet. Dudley seemed to be on the point of fainting. His small eyes were rolling in their sockets and sweat was beading his face; the moment Harry let go of him he swayed dangerously.

“Hurry up!” said Mrs. Figg hysterically.

Harry pulled one of Dudley’s massive arms around his own shoulders and dragged him towards

the road, sagging slightly under the weight. Mrs. Figg tottered along in front of them, peering anxiously around the corner.

“Keep your wand out,” she told Harry, as they entered Wisteria Walk. “Never mind the Statute of Secrecy now, there’s going to be hell to pay anyway, we might as well be hanged for a dragon as an egg. Talk about the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery… this was exactly what Dumbledore was afraid of - What’s that at the end of the street? Oh, it’s just Mr. Prentice… don’t put your wand away, boy, don’t I keep telling you I’m no use?”

It was not easy to hold a wand steady and haul Dudley along at the same time. Harry gave his cousin an impatient dig in the ribs, but Dudley seemed to have lost all desire for independent movement. He was slumped on Harry’s shoulder, his large feet dragging along the ground.

“Why didn’t you tell me you’re a Squib, Mrs. Figg?” asked Harry, panting with the effort to keep walking. “All those times I came round your house - why didn’t you say anything?”

“Dumbledore’s orders. I was to keep an eye on you but not say anything, you were too young. I’m sorry I gave you such a miserable time, Harry, but the Dursleys would never have let you come if they’d thought you enjoyed it. It wasn’t easy, you know… but oh my word,” she said tragically, wringing her hands once more, “when Dumbledore hears about this - how could Mundungus have left, he was supposed to be on duty until midnight - where is he? How am I going to tell Dumbledore what’s happened? I can’t Apparate.”

“I’ve got an owl, you can borrow her.” Harry groaned, wondering whether his spine was going to snap under Dudleys weight.

“Harry, you don’t understand! Dumbledore will need to act as quickly as possible, the Ministry have their own ways of detecting underage magic, they’ll know already, you mark my words.”

“But I was getting rid of Dementors, I had to use magic - they’re going to be more worried about what Dementors were doing floating around Wisteria Walk, surely?”

“Oh, my dear, I wish it were so, but I’m afraid - MUNDUNGUS FLETCHER, I AM GOING TO KILL YOU!”

There was a loud crack and a strong smell of drink mingled with stale tobacco filled the air as a squat, unshaven man in a tattered overcoat materialized right in front of them. He had short, bandy legs, long straggly ginger hair and bloodshot, baggy eyes that gave him the doleful look of a basset hound. He was also clutching a silvery bundle that Harry recognized at once as an Invisibility Cloak.

“S’up, Figgy?” he said, staring from Mrs. Figg to Harry and Dudley. “What ‘appened to staying undercover?”

“I’ll give you undercover!” cried Mrs. Figg. “Dementors, you useless, skiving sneak thief!”

“Dementors?” repeated Mundungus, aghast. “Dementors, ‘ere?”

“Yes, here, you worthless pile of bat droppings, here!” shrieked Mrs. Figg. “Dementors attacking the boy on your watch!”

“Blimey,” said Mundungus weakly, looking from Mrs. Figg to Harry, and back again. “Blimey, I -”

“And you off buying stolen cauldrons! Didn’t I tell you not to go? Didn’t I!”

“I - well, I -” Mundungus looked deeply uncomfortable. “It — it was a very good business opportunity, see -”

Mrs. Figg raised the arm from which her string bag dangled and whacked Mundungus around the face and neck with it; judging by the clanking noise it made it was full of cat food.

“Ouch - gerroff - gerroff, you mad old bat! Someone’s gotta tell Dumbledore!”

“Yes - they - have!” yelled Mrs. Figg, swinging the bag of cat food at every bit of Mundungus she could reach. “And - it - had - better - be - you - and - you - can - tell - him - why - you - weren’t - there - to - help!”

“Keep your ‘airnet on!” said Mundungus, his arms over his head, cowering. “I’m going, I’m going!”

And with another loud crack, he vanished.

“I hope Dumbledore murders him!” said Mrs. Figg furiously. “Now come on, Harry, what are you waiting for?”

Harry decided not to waste his remaining breath on pointing out that he could barely walk under Dudley’s bulk. He gave the semi-conscious Dudley a heave and staggered onwards.

“I’ll take you to the door,” said Mrs. Figg, as they turned into Privet Drive. “Just in case there are more of them around… oh my word, what a catastrophe… and you had to fight them off yourself… and Dumbledore said we were to keep you from doing magic at all costs… well, it’s no good crying over spilt potion, I suppose… but the cat’s among the pixies now.”

“So,” Harry panted, “Dumbledore’s… been having… me followed?”

“Of course he has,” said Mrs. Figg impatiently. “Did you expect him to let you wander around on your own after what happened in June? Good Lord, boy, they told me you were intelligent… right… get inside and stay there,” she said, as they reached number four. “I expect someone will be in touch with you soon enough.”

“What are you going to do?” asked Harry quickly.

"I'm going straight home," said Mrs. Figg, staring around the dark street and shuddering. "I'll need to wait for more instructions. Just stay in the house. Goodnight."

"Hang on, don't go yet! I want to know -"

But Mrs. Figg had already set off at a trot, carpet slippers flopping, string bag clanking.

"Wait!" Harry shouted after her. He had a million questions to ask anyone who was in contact with Dumbledore; but within seconds Mrs. Figg was swallowed by the darkness. Scowling, Harry readjusted Dudley on his shoulder and made his slow, painful way up number four's garden path.

The hall light was on. Harry stuck his wand back inside the waistband of his jeans, rang the bell and watched Aunt Petunia's outline grow larger and larger, oddly distorted by the rippling glass in the front door.

"Diddy! About time too, I was getting quite - quite -Diddy, what's the matter!"

Harry looked sideways at Dudley and ducked out from under his arm just in time. Dudley swayed on the spot for a moment, his face pale green… then he opened his mouth and vomited all over the doormat.

"DIDDY! Diddy, what's the matter with you? Vernon? VERNON!"

Harry's uncle came galumphing out of the living room, walrus moustache blowing hither and thither as it always did when he was agitated. He hurried forwards to help Aunt Petunia negotiate a weak-kneed Dudley over the threshold while avoiding stepping in the pool of sick.

"He's ill, Vernon!"

"What is it, son? What's happened? Did Mrs. Polkiss give you something foreign for tea?"

"Why are you all covered in dirt, darling? Have you been lying on the ground?"

"Hang on - you haven't been mugged, have you, son?"

Aunt Petunia screamed.

"Phone the police, Vernon! Phone the police! Diddy, darling, speak to Mummy! What did they do to you?"

In all the kerfuffle nobody seemed to have noticed Harry, which suited him perfectly. He managed to slip inside just before Uncle Vernon slammed the door and, while the Dursleys made their noisy progress down the hall towards the kitchen, Harry moved carefully and quietly towards the stairs.

“Who did it, son? Give us names. We’ll get them, don’t worry.”

“Shh! He’s trying to say something, Vernon! What is it, Diddy? Tell Mummy!”

Harry’s foot was on the bottom-most stair when Dudley found his voice.

“Him.”

Harry froze, foot on the stair, face screwed up, braced for the explosion.

“BOY! COME HERE!”

With a feeling of mingled dread and anger, Harry removed his foot slowly from the stair and turned to follow the Dursleys.

The scrupulously clean kitchen had an oddly unreal glitter after the darkness outside. Aunt Petunia was ushering Dudley into a chair; he was still very green and clammy-looking. Uncle Vernon standing in front of the draining board, glaring at Harry through tiny, narrowed eyes.

“What have you done to my son?” he said in a menacing growl.

“Nothing,” said Harry, knowing perfectly well that Uncle Vernon wouldn’t believe him.

“What did he do to you, Diddy?” Aunt Petunia said in a quavering voice, now sponging sick from the front of Dudley’s leather jacket. “Was it - was it you-know-what, darling? Did he use – his thing?”

Slowly, tremulously, Dudley nodded.

“I didn’t!” Harry said sharply, as Aunt Petunia let out a wail and Uncle Vernon raised his fists. “I didn’t do anything to him, it wasn’t me, it was –”

But at that precise moment a screech owl swooped in through the kitchen window. Narrowly missing the top of Uncle Vernon’s head, it soared across the kitchen, dropped the large parchment envelope it was carrying in its beak at Harry’s feet, turned gracefully, the tips of its wings just brushing the top of the fridge, then zoomed outside again and off across the garden.

“OWLS!” bellowed Uncle Vernon, the well-worn vein in his temple pulsing angrily as he slammed the kitchen window shut. “OWLS AGAIN! I WILL NOT HAVE ANY MORE OWLS IN MY HOUSE!”

But Harry was already ripping open the envelope and pulling out the letter inside, his heart pounding somewhere in the region of his Adam’s apple.

Dear Mr. Potter,

We have received intelligence that you performed the Patronus Charm at twenty-three minutes past nine this evening in a Muggle-inhabited area and in the presence of a Muggle.

The severity of this breach of the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery has resulted in your expulsion from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Ministry representatives will be calling at your place of residence shortly to destroy your wand.

As you have already received an official warning for a previous offence under Section 13 of the International Confederation of Warlocks' Statute of Secrecy, we regret to inform you that your presence is required at a disciplinary hearing at the Ministry of Magic at 9 a.m. on the twelfth of August.

Hoping you are well,

Yours sincerely,

Mafalda Hopkirk

Improper Use of Magic Office

Ministry of Magic

Harry read the letter through twice. He was only vaguely aware of Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia talking. Inside his head, all was icy and numb. One fact had penetrated his consciousness like a paralyzing dart. He was expelled from Hogwarts. It was all over. He was never going back. He looked up at the Dursleys. Uncle Vernon was purple-faced, shouting, his fists still raised; Aunt Petunia had her arms around Dudley, who was retching again.

Harry's temporarily stupefied brain seemed to reawaken. Ministry representatives will be calling at your place of residence shortly to destroy your wand. There was only one thing for it. He would have to run - now. Where he was going to go, Harry didn't know, but he was certain of one thing: at Hogwarts or outside it, he needed his wand. In an almost dream like state, he pulled his wand out and turned to leave the kitchen.

"Where d'you think you're going?" yelled Uncle Vernon. When Harry didn't reply, he pounded across the kitchen to block the doorway into the hall. "I haven't finished with you, boy!"

"Get out of the way," said Harry quietly.

"You're going to stay here and explain how my son-"

"If you don't get out of the way I'm going to jinx you," said Harry, raising the wand.

"You can't pull that one on me!" snarled Uncle Vernon. "I know you're not allowed to use it outside that madhouse you call a school!"

“The madhouse has chucked me out,” said Harry. “So I can do whatever I like. You’ve got three seconds. One - two -”

A resounding CRACK filled the kitchen. Aunt Petunia screamed, ‘Hide!’ Uncle Vernon yelled and ducked, but for the third time that night Harry was searching for the source of a disturbance he had not made. He spotted it at once: a dazed and ruffled-looking barn owl was sitting outside on the kitchen sill, having just collided with the closed window.

Ignoring Uncle Vernon’s anguished yell of ‘OWLS!’ Harry crossed the room at a run and wrenched the window open. The owl stuck out its leg, to which a small roll of parchment was tied, shook its leathers, and took off the moment Harry had taken the letter. Hands shaking, Harry unfurled the second message, which was written very hastily and blotchily in black ink.

Harry —

Dumbledore’s just arrived at the Ministry and he’s trying to sort it all out. DO NOT LEAVE YOUR AUNT AND UNCLE’S HOUSE. DO NOT DO ANY MORE MAGIC. DO NOT SURRENDER YOUR WAND.

Arthur Weasley

Dumbledore was trying to sort it all out… what did that mean? How much power did Dumbledore have to override the Ministry of Magic? Was there a chance that he might be allowed back to Hogwarts, then? A small shoot of hope burgeoned in Harry’s chest, almost immediately strangled by panic - how was he supposed to refuse to surrender his wand without doing magic? He’d have to duel with the Ministry representatives, and if he did that, he’d be lucky to escape Azkaban, let alone expulsion.

His mind was racing… he could run for it and risk being captured by the Ministry, or stay put and wait for them to find him here. He was much more tempted by the former course, but he knew Mr. Weasley had his best interests at heart… and after all, Dumbledore had sorted out much worse than this before.

“Right,” Harry said, “I’ve changed my mind, I’m staying.” He flung himself down at the kitchen table and faced Dudley and Aunt Petunia. The Dursleys appeared taken aback at his abrupt change of mind. Aunt Petunia glanced despairingly at Uncle Vernon. The vein in his purple temple was throbbing worse than ever.

“Who are all these ruddy owls from?” he growled.

“The first one was from the Ministry of Magic, expelling me,” said Harry calmly. He was straining his ears to catch any noises outside, in case the Ministry representatives were approaching, and it was easier and quieter to answer Uncle Vernon’s questions than to have him start raging and bellowing. “The second one was from my friend Ron’s dad, who works at the Ministry.”

“Ministry of Magic?” bellowed Uncle Vernon. “People like you in government! Oh, this explains everything, everything, no wonder the country’s going to the dogs.”

When Harry did not respond, Uncle Vernon glared at him, then spat out, “And why have you been expelled?”

“Because I did magic.”

“AHA!” roared Uncle Vernon, slamming his fist down on top of the fridge, which sprang open; several of Dudley’s low-fat snacks toppled out and burst on the floor. “So you admit it! What did you do to Dudley?”

“Nothing,” said Harry, slightly less calmly. “That wasn’t me -”

“Was,” muttered Dudley unexpectedly, and Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia instantly made flapping gestures at Harry to quieten him while they both bent low over Dudley.

“Go on, son,” said Uncle Vernon, “what did he do?”

“Tell us, darling,” whispered Aunt Petunia.

“Pointed his wand at me,” Dudley mumbled.

“Yeah, I did, but I didn’t use -” Harry began angrily, but –

“SHUT UP!” roared Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia in unison.

“Go on, son,” repeated Uncle Vernon, moustache blowing about furiously.

“All went dark,” Dudley said hoarsely, shuddering. “Everything dark. And then I h-heard… things. Inside m-my head.”

Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia exchanged looks of utter horror. If their least favorite thing in the world was magic - closely followed by neighbors who cheated more than they did on the hosepipe ban - people who heard voices were definitely in the bottom ten. They obviously thought Dudley was losing his mind.

“What sort of things did you hear, Popkin?” breathed Aunt Petunia, very white-faced and with tears in her eyes.

But Dudley seemed incapable of saying. He shuddered again and shook his large blond head, and despite the sense of numb dread that had settled on Harry since the arrival of the first owl, he felt a certain curiosity. Dementors caused a person to relive the worst moments of their life. What would spoiled, pampered, bullying Dudley have been forced to hear?

“How come you fell over, son?” said Uncle Vernon, in an unnaturally quiet voice, the kind of

voice he might adopt at the bedside of a very ill person.

“T-tripped,” said Dudley shakily. “And then –”

He gestured at his massive chest. Harry understood. Dudley was remembering the clammy cold that filled the lungs as hope and happiness were sucked out of you.

“Horrible,” croaked Dudley. “Cold. Really cold.”

“Okay,” said Uncle Vernon, in a voice of forced calm, while Aunt Petunia laid an anxious hand on Dudley’s forehead to feel his temperature. “What happened then, Dudders?”

“Felt… felt… felt… as if… as if…”

“As if you’d never be happy again,” Harry supplied dully.

“Yes,” Dudley whispered, still trembling.

“So!” said Uncle Vernon, voice restored to full and considerable volume as he straightened up. “You put some crackpot spell on my son so he’d hear voices and believe he was - was doomed to misery, or something, did you?”

“How many times do I have to tell you?” said Harry, temper and voice both rising. “It wasn’t me! It was a couple of Dementors!”

“A couple of - what’s this codswallop?”

“De - men - tors,” said Harry slowly and clearly. “Two of them.”

“And what the ruddy hell are Dementors?”

“They guard the wizard prison, Azkaban,” said Aunt Petunia.

Two seconds of ringing silence followed these words before Aunt Petunia clapped her hand over her mouth as though she had let slip a disgusting swear word. Uncle Vernon was goggling at her. Harry’s brain reeled. Mrs. Figg was one thing - but Aunt Petunia?

“How d’you know that?” he asked her, astonished.

Aunt Petunia looked quite appalled with herself. She glanced at Uncle Vernon in fearful apology, then lowered her hand slightly to reveal her horsy teeth.

“I heard - that awful boy – telling her about them - years ago,” she said jerkily.

“If you mean my mum and dad, why don’t you use their names?” said Harry loudly, but Aunt Petunia ignored him. She seemed horribly flustered.

Harry was stunned. Except for one outburst years ago, in the course of which Aunt Petunia had screamed that Harry's mother had been a freak, he had never heard her mention her sister. He was astounded that she had remembered this scrap of information about the magical world for so long, when she usually put all her energies into pretending it didn't exist.

Uncle Vernon opened his mouth, closed it again, opened it once more, shut it, then, apparently struggling to remember how to talk, opened it for a third time and croaked, "So - so - they - er - they - er - they actually exist, do they - er - Dementy-whatsits?"

Aunt Petunia nodded.

Uncle Vernon looked from Aunt Petunia to Dudley to Harry as if hoping somebody was going to shout 'April Fool!' When nobody did, he opened his mouth yet again, but was spared the struggle to find more words by the arrival of the third owl of the evening. It zoomed through the still-open window like a feathery cannon-ball and landed with a clatter on the kitchen table, causing all three of the Dursleys to jump with fright. Harry tore a second official-looking envelope from the owls beak and ripped it open as the owl swooped back out into the night.

"Enough - effing - owls," muttered Uncle Vernon distractedly, stomping over to the window and slamming it shut again.

Dear Mr. Potter,

Further to our letter of approximately twenty-two minutes ago, the Ministry of Magic has revised its decision to destroy your wand forthwith. You may retain your wand until your disciplinary hearing on the twelfth of August, at which time an official decision will be taken.

Following discussions with the Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the Ministry has agreed that the question of your expulsion will also be decided at that time. You should therefore consider yourself suspended from school pending further enquiries.

With best wishes,

Yours sincerely,

Mafalda Hopkirk

Improper Use of Magic Office

Ministry of Magic

Harry read this letter through three times in quick succession. The miserable knot in his chest loosened slightly with the relief of Knowing he was not yet definitely expelled, though his fears were by no means banished. Everything seemed to hang on this hearing on the twelfth of August.

"Well?" said Uncle Vernon, recalling Harry to his surroundings. "What now? Have they

sentenced you to anything? Do your lot have the death penalty?" he added as a hopeful afterthought.

"I've got to go to a hearing," said Harry.

"And they'll sentence you there?"

"I suppose so."

"I won't give up hope, then," said Uncle Vernon nastily.

"Well, if that's all," said Harry, getting to his feet. He was desperate to be alone, to think, perhaps to send a letter to Ron, Hermione or Sirius.

"NO, IT RUDDY WELL IS NOT ALL!" bellowed Uncle Vernon. "SIT BACK DOWN!"

"What now?" said Harry impatiently.

"DUDLEY!" roared Uncle Vernon. "I want to know exactly what happened to my son!"

"FINE!" yelled Harry, and in his temper, red and gold sparks shot out of the end of his wand, still clutched in his hand. All three Dursleys flinched, looking terrified.

"Dudley and I were in the alleyway between Magnolia Crescent and Wisteria Walk," said Harry, speaking fast, fighting to control his temper. "Dudley thought he'd be smart with me, I pulled out my wand but didn't use it. Then two Dementors turned up —"

"But what ARE Dementoids?" asked Uncle Vernon furiously. "What do they DO?"

"I told you - they suck all the happiness out of you," said Harry, "and if they get the chance, they kiss you -

"Kiss you?" said Uncle Vernon, his eyes popping slightly. "Kiss you?"

"It's what they call it when they suck the soul out of your mouth."

Aunt Petunia uttered a soft scream.

"His soul? They didn't take - he's still got his -"

She seized Dudley by the shoulders and shook him, as though testing to see whether she could hear his soul rattling around inside him.

"Of course they didn't get his soul, you'd know if they had," said Harry, exasperated.

"Fought 'em off, did you, son?" said Uncle Vernon loudly, with the appearance of a man

struggling to bring the conversation back on to a plane he understood. “Gave ‘em the old one-two, did you?”

“You can’t give a Dementor the old one-two,” said Harry through clenched teeth.

“Why’s he all right, then?” blustered Uncle Vernon. “Why isn’t he all empty, then?”

“Because I used the Patronus -”

WHOOSH. With a clattering, a whirring of wings and a soft fall of dust, a fourth owl came shooting out of the kitchen fireplace.

“FOR GOD’S SAKE!” roared Uncle Vernon, pulling great clumps of hair out of his moustache, something he hadn’t been driven to do in a long time. “I WILL NOT HAVE OWLS HERE, I WILL NOT TOLERATE THIS, I TELL YOU!”

But Harry was already pulling a roll of parchment from the owl’s leg. He was so convinced that this letter had to be from Dumbledore, explaining everything - the Dementors, Mrs. Figg, what the Ministry was up to, how he, Dumbledore, intended to sort everything out - that for the first time in his life he was disappointed to see Sirius’s handwriting. Ignoring Uncle Vernon’s on going rant about owls, and narrowing his eyes against a second cloud of dust as the most recent owl look off back up the chimney, Harry read Sirius’s message.

Arthur’s just told us what’s happened. Don’t leave the house again, whatever you do.

Harry found this such an inadequate response to everything that had happened tonight that he turned the piece of parchment over, looking for the rest of the letter, but there was nothing else. And now his temper was rising again. Wasn’t anybody going to say ‘well done’ for fighting off two Dementors single-handed? Both Mr. Weasley and Sirius were acting as though he’d misbehaved, and were saving their tellings-off until they could ascertain how much damage had been done.

“…A peck, I mean, pack of owls shooting in and out of my house. I won’t have it, boy, I won’t-”

“I can’t stop the owls coming,” Harry snapped, crushing Sirius’s letter in his fist.

“I want the truth about what happened tonight!” bar ked Uncle Vernon. “If it was Demenders who hurt Dudley, how come you’ve been expelled? You did you-know-what, you’ve admitted it!”

Harry took a deep, steadying breath. His head was beginning to ache again. He wanted more than anything to get out of the kitchen, and away from the Dursleys.

“I did the Patronus Charm to get rid of the Dementors,” he said, forcing himself to remain calm. “It’s the only thing that works against them.”

“But what were Dementoids doing in Little Whinging?” said Uncle Vernon in an outraged tone.

“Couldn’t tell you,” said Harry wearily. “No idea.”

His head was pounding in the glare of the strip-lighting now. His anger was ebbing away. He felt drained, exhausted. The Dursleys were all staring at him.

“It’s you,” said Uncle Vernon forcefully. “It’s go t something to do with you, boy, I know it. Why else would they turn up here? Why else would they be down that alleyway? You’ve got to be the only - the only -” Evidently, he couldn’t bring himself to say the word ‘wizard’ “the only you know-what for miles.”

“I don’t know why they were here.”

But at Uncle Vernon’s words, Harry’s exhausted brain had ground back into action. Why had the Dementors come to Little Whinging? How could it be coincidence that they had arrived in the alleyway where Harry was? Had they been sent? Had the Ministry of Magic lost control of the Dementors? Had they deserted Azkaban and joined Voldemort, as Dumbledore had predicted they would?

“These Demembers guard some weirdo’s prison?” asked Uncle Vernon, lumbering along in the wake of Harry’s train of thought.

“Yes,” said Harry.

If only his head would stop hurting, if only he could just leave the kitchen and get to his dark bedroom and think…

“Oho! They were coming to arrest you!” said Uncle Vernon, with the triumphant air of a man reaching an unassailable conclusion. “That’s it, isn’t it, boy? You’re on the run from the law!”

“Of course I’m not,” said Harry, shaking his head as though to scare off a fly, his mind racing now.

“Then why -?”

“He must have sent them,” said Harry quietly, more to himself than to Uncle Vernon.

“What’s that? Who must have sent them?”

“Lord Voldemort,” said Harry.

He registered dimly how strange it was that the Dursleys, who flinched, winced and squawked if they heard words like ‘wizard’, ‘magic’ or ‘wand’, could hear the name of the most evil wizard of all time without the slightest tremor.

“Lord - hang on,” said Uncle Vernon, his face screwed up, a look of dawning comprehension coming into his piggy eyes. “I’ve heard that name… that was the one who —”

“Murdered my parents, yes,” Harry said dully.

“But he’s gone,” said Uncle Vernon impatiently, without the slightest sign that the murder of Harry’s parents might be a painful topic. “That giant bloke said so. He’s gone.”

“He’s back,” said Harry heavily.

It felt very strange to be standing here in Aunt Petunia’s surgically clean kitchen, beside the top of-the-range fridge and the wide-screen television, talking calmly of Lord Voldemort to Uncle Vernon. The arrival of the Dementors in Little Whinging seemed to have breached the great, invisible wall that divided the relentlessly non-magical world of Privet Drive and the world beyond, Harry’s two lives had somehow become fused and everything had been turned upside-down; the Dursleys were asking for details about the magical world, and Mrs. Figg knew Albus Dumbledore; Dementors were soaring around Little Whinging, and he might never return to Hogwarts. Harry’s head throbbed more painfully.

“Back?” whispered Aunt Petunia.

She was looking at Harry as she had never looked at him before. And all of a sudden, for the very first time in his life, Harry fully appreciated that Aunt Petunia was his mother’s sister. He could not have said why this hit him so very powerfully at this moment. All he knew was that he was not the only person in the room who had an inkling of what Lord Voldemort being back might mean. Aunt Petunia had never in her life looked at him like that before. Her large, pale eyes (so unlike her sister’s) were not narrowed in dislike or anger, they were wide and fearful. The furious pretence that Aunt Petunia had maintained all Harry’s life - that there was no magic and no world other than the world she inhabited with Uncle Vernon - seemed to have fallen away.

“Yes,” Harry said, talking directly to Aunt Petunia now. “He came back a month ago. I saw him.”

Her hands found Dudley’s massive leather-clad shoulders and clutched them.

“Hang on,” said Uncle Vernon, looking from his wife to Harry and back again, apparently dazed and confused by the unprecedented understanding that seemed to have sprung up between them. “Hang on. This Lord Voldything’s back, you say.”

“Yes.”

“The one who murdered your parents.”

“Yes.”

“And now he’s sending Dismembers after you?”

“Looks like it,” said Harry.

“I see,” said Uncle Vernon, looking from his white - faced wife to Harry and hitching up his trousers. He seemed to be swelling, his great purple face stretching before Harry’s eyes. “Well, that settles it,” he said, his shirt front straining as he inflated himself, “you can get out of this house, boy!”

“What?” said Harry.

“You heard me - OUT!” Uncle Vernon bellowed, and even Aunt Petunia and Dudley jumped. “OUT! OUT! I should’ve done this years ago! Owls treating the place like a rest home, puddings exploding, half the lounge destroyed, Dudley’s tail, Marge bobbing around on the ceiling and that flying Ford Anglia - OUT! OUT! You’ve had it! You’re history! You’re not staying here if some loony’s after you, you’re not endangering my wife and son, you’re not bringing trouble down on us. If you’re going the same way as your useless parents, I’ve had it! OUT!”

Harry stood rooted to the spot. The letters from the Ministry, Mr. Weasley and Sirius were all crushed in his left hand. Don’t leave the house again, whatever you do. DO NOT LEAVE YOUR AUNT AND UNCLE’S HOUSE.

“You heard me!” said Uncle Vernon, bending forward now, his massive purple face coming so close to Harry’s, he actually felt flecks of spit hit his face. “Get going! You were all keen to leave half an hour ago! I’m right behind you! Get out and never darken our doorstep again! Why we ever kept you in the first place, I don’t know, Marge was right, it should have been the orphanage. We were too damn soft for our own good, thought we could squash it out of you, thought we could turn you normal, but you’ve been rotten from the beginning and I’ve had enough - owls!”

The fifth owl zoomed down the chimney so fast it actually hit the floor before zooming into the air again with a loud screech. Harry raised his hand to seize the letter, which was in a scarlet envelope, but it soared straight over his head, flying directly at Aunt Petunia, who let out a scream and ducked, her arms over her face. The owl dropped the red envelope on her head, turned, and flew straight back up the chimney.

Harry darted forwards to pick up the letter, but Aunt Petunia beat him to it.

“You can open it if you like,” said Harry, “but I’ll hear what it says anyway. That’s a Howler.”

“Let go of it, Petunia!” roared Uncle Vernon. “Don’t touch it, it could be dangerous!”

“It’s addressed to me,” said Aunt Petunia in a shaking voice. “It’s addressed to me, Vernon, look! *Mrs. Petunia Dursley, The Kitchen, Number Four, Privet Drive –”*

She caught her breath, horrified. The red envelope had begun to smoke.

“Open it!’ Harry urged her. “Get it over with! It’ll happen anyway.”

“No.”

Aunt Petunia’s hand was trembling. She looked wildly around the kitchen as though looking for an escape route, but too late -the envelope burst into flames. Aunt Petunia screamed and dropped it.

An awful voice filled the kitchen, echoing in the confined space, issuing from the burning letter on the table.

Remember my last, Petunia.

Aunt Petunia looked as though she might faint. She sank into the chair beside Dudley, her face in her hands. The remains of the envelope smouldered into ash in the silence.

“What is this?” Uncle Vernon said hoarsely. “What - I don’t -Petunia?”

Aunt Petunia said nothing. Dudley was staring stupidly at his mother, his mouth hanging open. The silence spiraled horribly. Harry was watching his aunt, utterly bewildered, his head throbbing fit to burst.

“Petunia, dear?” said Uncle Vernon timidly. “P-Petunia?”

She raised her head. She was still trembling. She swallowed.

“The boy - the boy will have to stay, Vernon,” she said weakly.

“W-what?”

“He stays,” she said. She was not looking at Harry. She got to her feet again.

“He… but Petunia…”

“If we throw him out, the neighbors will talk,” she said. She was rapidly regaining her usual brisk, snappish manner, though she was still very pale. “They’ll ask awkward questions, they’ll want to know where he’s gone. We’ll have to keep him.”

Uncle Vernon was deflating like an old tire.

“But Petunia, dear –”

Aunt Petunia ignored him. She turned to Harry. “You’re to stay in your room,” she said. “You’re not to leave the house. Now get to bed.”

Harry didn’t move.

“Who was that Howler from?”

“Don’t ask questions,” Aunt Petunia snapped.

“Are you in touch with wizards?”

“I told you to get to bed!”

“What did it mean? Remember the last what?”

“Go to bed!”

“How come -?”

“YOU HEARD YOUR AUNT, NOW GET TO BED!”

CHAPTER THREE

The Advance Guard

I've just been attacked by Dementors and I might be expelled from Hogwarts. I want to know what's going on and when I'm going to get out of here.

Harry copied these words on to three separate pieces of parchment the moment he reached the desk in his dark bedroom. He addressed the first to Sirius, the second to Ron and the third to Hermione. His owl, Hedwig, was off hunting; her cage stood empty on the desk. Harry paced the bedroom waiting for her to come back, his head pounding, his brain too busy for sleep even though his eyes stung and itched with tiredness. His back ached from hauling Dudley home, and the two lumps on his head where the window and Dudley had hit him were throbbing painfully. Up and down he paced, consumed with anger and frustration, grinding his teeth and clenching his fists, casting angry looks out at the empty, star-strewn sky every time he passed the window. Dementors sent to get him, Mrs. Figg and Mundungus Fletcher tailing him in secret, then suspension from Hogwarts and a hearing at the Ministry of Magic - and still no one was telling him what was going on.

And what, what, had that Howler been about? Whose voice had echoed so horribly, so menacingly, through the kitchen?

Why was he still trapped here without information? Why was everyone treating him like some naughty kid? Don't do any more magic, stay in the house…

He kicked his school trunk as he passed it, but far from relieving his anger he felt worse, as he now had a sharp pain in his toe to deal with in addition to the pain in the rest of his body.

Just as he limped past the window, Hedwig soared through it with a soft rustle of wings like a small ghost.

"About time!" Harry snarled, as she landed lightly on top of her cage. "You can put that down, I've got work for you!"

Hedwig's large, round, amber eyes gazed at him reproachfully over the dead frog clamped in her beak.

"Come here," said Harry, picking up the three small rolls of parchment and a leather thong and tying the scrolls to her scaly leg. "Take these straight to Sirius, Ron and Hermione and don't come back here without good long replies. Keep pecking them till they've written decent-length answers if you've got to. Understand?"

Hedwig gave a muffled hooting noise, her beak still full of frog.

"Get going, then," said Harry.

She took off immediately. The moment she'd gone, Harry threw himself down on his bed without undressing and stared at the dark ceiling. In addition to every other miserable feeling, he now felt guilty that he'd been irritable with Hedwig; she was the only friend he had at number four, Privet Drive. But he'd make it up to her when she came back with the answers from Sirius, Ron and Hermione.

They were bound to write back quickly; they couldn't possibly ignore a Dementor attack. He'd probably wake up tomorrow to three fat letters full of sympathy and plans for his immediate removal to The Burrow. And with that comforting idea, sleep rolled over him, stifling all further thought.

But Hedwig didn't return next morning. Harry spent the day in his bedroom, leaving it only to go to the bathroom. Three times that day Aunt Petunia shoved food into his room through the cat flap Uncle Vernon had installed three summers ago. Every time Harry heard her approaching he tried to question her about the Howler, but he might as well have interrogated the doorknob for all the answers he got. Otherwise, the Dursleys kept well clear of his bedroom. Harry couldn't see the point of forcing his company on them; another row would achieve nothing except perhaps make him so angry he'd perform more illegal magic.

So it went on for three whole days. Harry was alternately filled with restless energy that made him unable to settle to anything, during which time he paced his bedroom, furious at the whole lot of them for leaving him to stew in this mess; and with a lethargy so complete that he could lie on his bed for an hour at a time, staring dazedly into space, aching with dread at the thought of the Ministry hearing.

What if they ruled against him? What if he was expelled and his wand was snapped in half? What would he do, where would he go? He could not return to living full-time with the Dursleys, not now he knew the other world, the one to which he really belonged. Might he be able to move into Sirius's house, as Sirius had suggested a year ago, before he had been forced to flee from the Ministry? Would Harry be allowed to live there alone, given that he was still underage? Or would the matter of where he went next be decided for him? Had his breach of the International Statute of Secrecy been severe enough to land him in a cell in Azkaban? Whenever this thought occurred, Harry invariably slid off his bed and began pacing again.

On the fourth night after Hedwig's departure Harry was lying in one of his apathetic phases, staring at the ceiling, his exhausted mind quite blank, when his uncle entered his bedroom. Harry looked slowly around at him. Uncle Vernon was wearing his best suit and an expression of enormous smugness.

"We're going out," he said.

"Sorry?"

"We - that is to say, your aunt, Dudley and I - are going out."

"Fine," said Harry dully, looking back at the ceiling.

“You are not to leave your bedroom while we are away.”

“Okay.”

“You are not to touch the television, the stereo, or any of our possessions.”

“Right.”

“You are not to steal food from the fridge.”

“Okay.”

“I am going to lock your door.”

“You do that.”

Uncle Vernon glared at Harry, clearly suspicious of this lack of argument, then stomped out of the room and closed the door behind him. Harry heard the key turn in the lock and Uncle Vernon’s footsteps walking heavily down the stairs. A few minutes later he heard the slamming of car doors, the rumble of an engine, and the unmistakable sound of the car sweeping out of the drive.

Harry had no particular feeling about the Dursleys leaving. It made no difference to him whether they were in the house or not. He could not even summon the energy to get up and turn on his bedroom light. The room grew steadily darker around him as he lay listening to the night sounds through the window he kept open all the time, waiting for the blessed moment when Hedwig returned. The empty house creaked around him. The pipes gurgled. Harry lay there in a kind of stupor, thinking of nothing, suspended in misery.

Then, quite distinctly, he heard a crash in the kitchen below. He sat bolt upright, listening intently. The Dursleys couldn’t be back, it was much too soon, and in any case he hadn’t heard their car.

There was silence for a few seconds, then voices. Burglars, he thought, sliding off the bed on to his feet - but a split second later it occurred to him that burglars would keep their voices down, and whoever was moving around in the kitchen was certainly not troubling to do so.

He snatched up his wand from the bedside table and stood facing his bedroom door, listening with all his might. Next moment, he jumped as the lock gave a loud click and his door swung open. Harry stood motionless, staring through the open doorway at the dark upstairs landing, straining his ears for further sounds, but none came. He hesitated for a moment, then moved swiftly and silently out of his room to the head of the stairs.

His heart shot upwards into his throat. There were people standing in the shadowy hall below, silhouetted against the streetlight glowing through the glass door; eight or nine of them, all, as far as he could see, looking up at him.

“Lower your wand, boy, before you take someone’s eye out,” said a low, growling voice.

Harry’s heart was thumping uncontrollably. He knew that voice, but he did not lower his wand.

“Professor Moody?” he said uncertainly.

“I don’t know so much about ‘Professor’,” growled the voice, “never got round to much teaching, did I? Get down here, we want to see you properly.”

Harry lowered his wand slightly but did not relax his grip on it, nor did he move. He had very good reason to be suspicious. He had recently spent nine months in what he had thought was Mad-Eye Moody’s company only to find out that it wasn’t Moody at all, but an impostor; an impostor, moreover, who had tried to kill Harry before being unmasked. But before he could make a decision about what to do next, a second, slightly hoarse voice floated upstairs.

“It’s all right, Harry. We’ve come to take you away.”

Harry’s heart leapt. He knew that voice, too, though he hadn’t heard it for over a year.

“P-Professor Lupin?” he said disbelievingly. “Is that you?”

“Why are we all standing in the dark?” said a third voice, this one completely unfamiliar, a woman’s. “Lumos.”

A wand-tip flared, illuminating the hall with magical light. Harry blinked. The people below were crowded around the foot of the stairs, gazing up at him intently, some craning their heads for a better look.

Remus Lupin stood nearest to him. Though still quite young, Lupin looked tired and rather ill; he had more grey hairs than when Harry had last said goodbye to him and his robes were more patched and shabbier than ever. Nevertheless, he was smiling broadly at Harry, who tried to smile back despite his state of shock.

“Oooh, he looks just like I thought he would,” said the witch who was holding her lit wand aloft. She looked the youngest there; she had a pale heart-shaped face, dark twinkling eyes, and short spiky hair that was a violent shade of violet. “Wotcher, Harry!”

“Yeah, I see what you mean, Remus,” said a bald black wizard standing furthest back - he had a deep, slow voice and wore a single gold hoop in his ear - “he looks exactly like James.”

“Except the eyes,” said a wheezy-voiced, silver-haired wizard at the back. “Lily’s eyes.”

Mad-Eye Moody, who had long grizzled grey hair and a large chunk missing from his nose, was squinting suspiciously at Harry through his mismatched eyes. One eye was small, dark and beady, the other large, round and electric blue - the magical eye that could see through walls,

doors and the back of Moody's own head. "Are you quite sure it's him, Lupin?" he growled. "It'd be a nice lookout if we bring back some Death Eater impersonating him. We ought to ask him something only the real Potter would know. Unless anyone brought any Veritaserum?"

"Harry, what form does your Patronus take?" Lupin asked.

"A stag," said Harry nervously.

"That's him, Mad-Eye," said Lupin.

Very conscious of everybody still staring at him, Harry descended the stairs, stowing his wand in the back pocket of his jeans as he came.

"Don't put your wand there, boy!" roared Moody. "What if it ignited? Better wizards than you have lost buttocks, you know!"

"Who d'you know who's lost a buttock?" the violet-haired woman asked Mad-Eye interestedly.

"Never you mind, you just keep your wand out of your back pocket!" growled Mad-Eye. "Elementary wand-safety, nobody bothers about it any more." He stumped off towards the kitchen. "And I saw that," he added irritably, as t he woman rolled her eyes towards the ceiling.

Lupin held out his hand and shook Harry's.

"How are you?" he asked, looking closely at Harry.

"F-fine…"

Harry could hardly believe this was real. Four weeks with nothing, not the tiniest hint of a plan to remove him from Privet Drive, and suddenly a whole bunch of wizards was standing matter-of factly in the house as though this was a long-standing arrangement. He glanced at the people surrounding Lupin; they were still gazing avidly at him. He felt very conscious of the fact that he had not combed his hair for four days.

"I'm - you're really lucky the Dursleys are out…" he mumbled.

"Lucky, ha!" said the violet-haired woman. "It was me who lured them out of the way. Sent a letter by Muggle post telling them they'd been short-listed for the All-England Best Kept Suburban Lawn Competition. They're heading off to the prize-giving right now… or they think they are."

Harry had a fleeting vision of Uncle Vernon's face when he realized there was no All-England Best Kept Suburban Lawn Competition.

"We are leaving, aren't we?" he asked. "Soon?"

“Almost at once,” said Lupin, “we’re just waiting for the all-clear.”

“Where are we going? The Burrow?” Harry asked hopefully.

“Not The Burrow, no,” said Lupin, motioning Harry towards the kitchen; the little knot of wizards followed, all still eyeing Harry curiously. “Too risky. We’ve set up Headquarters somewhere undetectable. It’s taken a while…”

Mad-Eye Moody was now sitting at the kitchen table swigging from a hip flask, his magical eye spinning in all directions, taking in the Dursleys’ many labor-saving appliances.

“This is Alastor Moody, Harry” Lupin continued, pointing towards Moody.

“Yeah, I know,” said Harry uncomfortably. It felt odd to be introduced to somebody he’d thought he’d known for a year.

“And this is Nymphadora -”

“Don’t call me Nymphadora, Remus,” said the young witch with a shudder, “it’s Tonks.”

“Nymphadora Tonks, who prefers to be known by her surname only,” finished Lupin.

“So would you if your fool of a mother had called you Nymphadora,” muttered Tonks.

“And this is Kingsley Shacklebolt.” He indicated the tall black wizard, who bowed. “Elphias Doge.” The wheezy-voiced wizard nodded. “Dedalus Diggle -”

“We’ve met before,” squeaked the excitable Diggle, dropping his violet-colored top hat.

“Emmeline Vance.” A stately-looking witch in an emerald green shawl inclined her head. “Sturgis Podmore.” A square-jawed wizard with thick straw-colored hair winked. “And Hestia Jones.” A pink-cheeked, black-haired witch waved form next to the toaster.

Harry inclined his head awkwardly at each of them as they were introduced. He wished they would look at something other than him; it was as though he had suddenly been ushered onstage. He also wondered why so many of them were there.

“A surprising number of people volunteered to come and get you,” said Lupin, as though he had read Harry’s mind; the corners of his mouth twitched slightly.

“Yeah, well, the more the better,” said Moody darkly. “We’re your guard, Potter.”

“We’re just waiting for the signal to tell us it’s safe to set off,” said Lupin, glancing out of the kitchen window. “We’ve got about fifteen minutes.”

“Very clean, aren’t they, these Muggles?” said the witch called Tonks, who was looking around

the kitchen with great interest. “My dad’s Muggle-born and he’s a right old slob. I suppose it varies, just as it does with wizards?”

“Er - yeah,” said Harry. “Look -” he turned back to Lupin, “what’s going on, I haven’t heard anything from anyone, what’s Vol—?”

Several of the witches and wizards made odd hissing noises; Dedalus Diggle dropped his hat again and Moody growled, “Shut up!”

“What?” said Harry.

“We’re not discussing anything here, it’s too risky,” said Moody, turning his normal eye on Harry. His magical eye remained focused on the ceiling. “Damn it,” he added angrily, putting a hand up to the magical eye, “it keeps getting stuck - ever since that scum wore it.”

And with a nasty squelching sound much like a plunger being pulled from a sink, he popped out his eye.

“Mad-Eye, you do know that’s disgusting, don’t you?” said Tonks conversationally.

“Get me a glass of water, would you, Harry,” requested Moody.

Harry crossed to the dishwasher, took out a clean glass and filled it with water at the sink, still watched eagerly by the band of wizards. Their relentless staring was starting to annoy him.

“Cheers,” said Moody, when Harry handed him the glass. He dropped the magical eyeball into the water and prodded it up and down; the eye whizzed around, staring at them all in turn. “I want three hundred and sixty degrees visibility on the return journey.”

“How’re we getting - wherever we’re going?” Harry asked.

“Brooms,” said Lupin. “Only way. You’re too young to Apparate, they’ll be watching the Floo Network and it’s more than our life’s worth to set up an unauthorized Portkey.”

“Remus says you’re a good flier,” said Kingsley Shacklebolt in his deep voice.

“He’s excellent,” said Lupin, who was checking his watch. “Anyway, you’d better go and get packed, Harry, we want to be ready to go when the signal comes.”

“I’ll come and help you,” said Tonks brightly.

She followed Harry back into the hall and up the stairs, looking around with much curiosity and interest.

“Funny place,” she said. “It’s a bit too clean, d’you know what I mean? Bit unnatural. Oh, this is better,” she added, as they entered Harry’s bedroom and he turned on the light.

His room was certainly much messier than the rest of the house. Confined to it for four days in a very bad mood, Harry had not bothered tidying up after himself. Most of the books he owned were strewn over the floor where he'd tried to distract himself with each in turn and thrown it aside; Hedwig's cage needed cleaning out and was starting to smell; and his trunk lay open, revealing a jumbled mixture of Muggle clothes and wizards' robes that had spilled on to the floor around it.

Harry started picking up books and throwing them hastily into his trunk. Tonks paused at his open wardrobe to look critically at her reflection in the mirror on the inside of the door.

"You know, I don't think violet's really my color," she said pensively, tugging at a lock of spiky hair. "D'you think it makes me look a bit peaky?"

"Er -" said Harry, looking up at her over the top of Quidditch Teams of Britain and Ireland.

"Yeah, it does," said Tonks decisively. She screwed up her eyes in a strained expression as though she was struggling to remember something. A second later, her hair had turned bubblegum pink.

"How did you do that?" said Harry, gaping at her as she opened her eyes again.

"I'm a Metamorphmagus," she said, looking back at her reflection and turning her head so that she could see her hair from all directions. "It means I can change my appearance at will," she added, spotting Harry's puzzled expression in the mirror behind her. "I was born one. I got top marks in Concealment and Disguise during Auror training without any study at all, it was great."

"You're an Auror?" said Harry, impressed. Being a Dark-wizard-catcher was the only career he'd ever considered after Hogwarts.

"Yeah," said Tonks, looking proud. "Kingsley is as well, he's a bit higher up than me, though. I only qualified a year ago. Nearly failed on Stealth and Tracking. I'm dead clumsy, did you hear me break that plate when we arrived downstairs?"

"Can you learn how to be a Metamorphmagus?" Harry asked her, straightening up, completely forgetting about packing.

Tonks chuckled.

"Bet you wouldn't mind hiding that scar sometimes, eh?"

Her eyes found the lightning-shaped scar on Harry's forehead.

"No, I wouldn't mind," Harry mumbled, turning away. He did not like people staring at his scar.

"Well, you'll have to learn the hard way, I'm afraid," said Tonks. "Metamorphmagi are really rare, they're born, not made. Most wizards need to use a wand, or potions, to change their

appearance. But we've got to get going, Harry, we're supposed to be packing," she added guiltily, looking around at all the mess on the floor.

"Oh — yeah," said Harry, grabbing a few more books.

"Don't be stupid, it'll be much quicker if I - pack!" cried Tonks, waving her wand in a long, sweeping movement over the floor.

Books, clothes, telescope and scales all soared into the air and flew pell-mell into the trunk.

"It's not very neat," said Tonks, walking over to t he trunk and looking down at the jumble inside.

"My mums got this knack of getting stuff to fit itself in neatly - she even gets the socks to fold themselves - but I've never mastered how she does it - it's a kind of flick -" She flicked her wand hopefully.

One of Harry's socks gave a feeble sort of wiggle and flopped back on top of the mess in the trunk.

"Ah, well," said Tonks, slamming the trunk's lid shut, "at least it's all in. That could do with a bit of cleaning, too." She pointed her wand at Hedwig's cage. "Scourgify." A few feathers and droppings vanished. "Well, that's a bit better - I've never quite got the hang of these householdy sort of spells. Right - got everything? Cauldron? Broom? Wow! - A Firebolt!"

Her eyes widened as they fell on the broomstick in Harry's right hand it was his pride and joy, a gift from Sirius, an international-standard broomstick.

"And I'm still riding a Comet Two Sixty" said Tonks enviously. "Ah well… wand still in your jeans? Both buttocks still on? Okay, let's go. Locomotor trunk."

Harry's trunk rose a few inches into the air. Holding her wand like a conductor's baton, Tonks made the trunk hover across the room and out of the door ahead of them, Hedwig's cage in her left hand. Harry followed her down the stairs carrying his broomstick.

Back in the kitchen Moody had replaced his eye, which was spinning so fast after its cleaning it made Harry feel sick to look at it. Kingsley Shacklebolt and Sturgis Podmore were examining the microwave and Hestia Jones was laughing at a potato peeler she had come across while rummaging in the drawers. Lupin was sealing a letter addressed to the Dursleys.

"Excellent," said Lupin, looking up as Tonks and Harry entered. "We've got about a minute, I think. We should probably get out into the garden so we're ready. Harry, I've left a letter telling your aunt and uncle not to worry –"

"They won't," said Harry.

“- that you’re safe -”

“That’ll just depress them.”

“- and you’ll see them next summer.”

“Do I have to?”

Lupin smiled but made no answer.

“Come here, boy,” said Moody gruffly, beckoning Harry towards him with his wand. “I need to Disillusion you.”

“You need to what?” said Harry nervously.

“Disillusionment Charm,” said Moody, raising his wand. “Lupin says you’ve got an Invisibility Cloak, but it won’t stay on while we’re flying; this’ll disguise you better. Here you go -

He rapped him hard on the top of the head and Harry felt a curious sensation as though Moody had just smashed an egg there; cold trickles seemed to be running down his body from the point the wand had struck.

“Nice one, Mad-Eye,” said Tonks appreciatively, staring at Harry’s midriff.

Harry looked down at his body, or rather, what had been his body, for it didn’t look anything like his any more. It was not invisible; it had simply taken on the exact color and texture of the kitchen unit behind him. He seemed to have become a human chameleon.

“Come on,” said Moody, unlocking the back door with his wand.

They all stepped outside on to Uncle Vernon’s beautifully kept lawn.

“Clear night,” grunted Moody, his magical eye scanning the heavens. “Could’ve done with a bit more cloud cover. Right, you,” he barked at Harry,” we’re going to be flying in close formation. Tonks’ll be right in front of you, keep close on her tail. Lupin’ll be covering you from below I’m going to be behind you. The rest’ll be circling us. We don’t break ranks for anything, got me? If one of us is killed -

“Is that likely?” Harry asked apprehensively, but Moody ignored him.

“- the others keep flying, don’t stop, don’t break ranks. If they take out all of us and you survive, Harry, the rear guard are standing by to take over; keep flying east and they’ll join you.”

“Stop being so cheerful, Mad-Eye, he’ll think we’re not taking this seriously” said Tonks, as she strapped Harry’s trunk and Hedwig’s cage into a harness hanging from her broom.

“I’m just telling the boy the plan,” growled Moody. “Our jobs to deliver him safely to Headquarters and if we die in the attempt –”

“No one’s going to die,” said Kingsley Shacklebolt in his deep, calming voice.

“Mount your brooms, that’s the first signal!” said Lupin sharply pointing into the sky.

Far, far above them, a shower of bright red sparks had flared among the stars, Harry recognized them at once as wand sparks. He swung his right leg over his Firebolt, gripped its handle tightly and felt it vibrating very slightly, as though it was as keen as he was to be up in the air once more.

“Second signal, let’s go!” said Lupin loudly as more sparks, green this time, exploded high above them.

Harry kicked off hard from the ground. The cool night air rushed through his hair as the neat square gardens of Privet Drive fell away, shrinking rapidly into a patchwork of dark greens and blacks, and every thought of the Ministry hearing was swept from his mind as though the rush of air had blown it out of his head. He felt as though his heart was going to explode with pleasure; he was flying again, flying away from Privet Drive as he’d been fantasizing about all summer, he was going home… for a few glorious moments, all his problems seemed to recede to nothing, insignificant in the vast, starry sky.

“Hard left, hard left, there’s a Muggle looking up!” shouted Moody from behind him. Tonks swerved and Harry followed her, watching his trunk swinging wildly beneath her broom. “We need more height… give it another quarter of a mile!”

Harry’s eyes watered in the chill as they soared upwards; he could see nothing below now but tiny pinpricks of light that were car headlights and streetlamps. Two of those tiny lights might belong to Uncle Vernon’s car… the Dursleys would be heading back to their empty house right now, full of rage about the non-existent Lawn Competition… and Harry laughed aloud at the thought, though his voice was drowned by the flapping robes of the others, the creaking of the harness holding his trunk and the cage, and the whoosh of the wind in their ears as they sped through the air. He had not felt this alive in a month, or this happy.

“Bearing south!” shouted Mad-Eye. “’Town ahead!”

They soared right to avoid passing directly over the glittering spider’s web of lights below.

“Bear southeast and keep climbing, there’s some low cloud ahead we can lose ourselves in!” called Moody.

“We’re not going through clouds!” shouted Tonks angrily, “we’ll get soaked, Mad-Eye!”

Harry was relieved to hear her say this; his hands were growing numb on the Firebolt’s handle. He wished he had thought to put on a coat; he was starting to shiver.

They altered their course every now and then according to Mad-Eyes instructions. Harry’s eyes were screwed up against the rush of icy wind that was starting to make his ears ache; he could remember being this cold on a broom only once before, during the Quidditch match against Hufflepuff in his third year, which had taken place in a storm. The guard around him was circling continuously like giant birds of prey. Harry lost track of time. He wondered how long they had been flying, it felt like an hour at least.

“Turning southwest!” yelled Moody “We want to avoid the motorway!”

Harry was now so chilled he thought longingly of the snug, dry interiors of the cars streaming along below, then, even more longingly, of traveling by Floo powder; it might be uncomfortable to spin around in fireplaces but it was at least warm in the flames… Kingsley Shacklebolt swooped around him, bald pate and earring gleaming slightly in the moonlight… now Emmeline Vance was on his right, her wand out, her head turning left and right… then she, too, swooped over him, to be replaced by Sturgis Podmore…

“We ought to double back for a bit, just to make sure we’re not being followed!” Moody shouted.

“ARE YOU MAD, MAD-EYE”‘ Tonks screamed from the front. “We’re all frozen to our brooms! If we keep going off-course we’re not going to get there until next week! Besides, we’re nearly there now!”

“Time to start the descent!” came Lupin’s voice. “Follow Tonks, Harry!”

Harry followed Tonks into a dive. They were heading for the largest collection of lights he had yet seen, a huge, sprawling crisscrossing mass, glittering in lines and grids, interspersed with patches of deepest black. Lower and lower they flew, until Harry could see individual headlights and streetlamps, chimneys and television aerials. He wanted to reach the ground very much, though he felt sure someone would have to unfreeze him from his broom.

“Here we go!” called Tonks, and a few seconds later she had landed.

Harry touched down right behind her and dismounted on a patch of unkempt grass in the middle of a small square. Tonks was already unbuckling Harry’s trunk. Shivering, Harry looked around. The grimy fronts of the surrounding houses were not welcoming; some of them had broken windows, glimmering dully in the light fro the streetlamps, paint was peeling from many of the doors and heaps of rubbish lay outside several sets of front steps.

“Where are we?” Harry asked, but Lupin said quietly, “In a minute.”

Moody was rummaging in his cloak, his gnarled hands clumsy with cold.

“Got it,” he muttered, raising what looked like a silver cigarette lighter into the air and clicking it.

The nearest streetlamp went out with a pop. He clicked the unlighter again; the next lamp went out; he kept clicking until every lamp in the square was extinguished and the only remaining light came from curtained windows and the sickle moon overhead.

“Borrowed it from Dumbledore,” growled Moody, pocketing the Put-Outer. “That’ll take care of any Muggles looking out of the window, see? Now come on, quick.”

He took Harry by the arm and led him from the patch of grass, across the road and on to the pavement; Lupin and Tonks followed, carrying Harry’s trunk between them, the rest of the guard, all with their wands out, flanking them.

The muffled pounding of a stereo was coming from an upper window in the nearest house. A pungent smell of rotting rubbish came from the pile of bulging bin-bags just inside the broken gate.

“Here,” Moody muttered, thrusting a piece of parchment towards Harry’s Disillusioned hand and holding his lit wand close to it, so as to illuminate the writing. “Read quickly and memories.”

Harry looked down at the piece of paper. The narrow handwriting was vaguely familiar. It said:

The Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix may be found at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, London.

CHAPTER FOUR

Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place

“What’s the Order of the -?” Harry began.

“Not here, boy!” snarled Moody. “Wait till we’re inside!”

He pulled the piece of parchment out of Harry’s hand and set fire to it with his wand-tip. As the message curled into flames and floated to the ground, Harry looked around at the houses again. They were standing outside number eleven; he looked to the left and saw number ten; to the right, however, was number thirteen.

“But where’s -?”

“Think about what you’ve just memorized,” said Lupin quietly.

Harry thought, and no sooner had he reached the part about number twelve, Grimmauld Place, than a battered door emerged out of nowhere between numbers eleven and thirteen, followed swiftly by dirty walls and grimy windows. It was as though an extra house had inflated, pushing those on either side out of its way. Harry gaped at it. The stereo in number eleven thudded on. Apparently the Muggles inside hadn’t felt anything.

“Come on, hurry,” growled Moody, prodding Harry in the back.

Harry walked up the worn stone steps, staring at the newly materialized door. Its black paint was shabby and scratched. The silver doorknocker was in the form of a twisted serpent. There was no keyhole or letterbox.

Lupin pulled out his wand and tapped the door once. Harry heard many loud, metallic clicks and what sounded like the clatter of a chain. The door creaked open.

“Get in quick, Harry,” Lupin whispered, “but don’t go far inside and don’t touch anything.”

Harry stepped over the threshold into the almost total darkness of the hall. He could smell damp, dust and a sweetish, rotting smell; the place had the feeling of a derelict building. He looked over his shoulder and saw the others filing in behind him, Lupin and Tonks carrying his trunk and Hedwig’s cage. Moody was standing on the top step releasing the balls of light the Put-Outer had stolen from the streetlamps; they flew back to their bulbs and the square glowed momentarily with orange light before Moody limped inside and closed the front door, so that the darkness in the hall became complete.

“Here -”

He rapped Harry hard over the head with his wand; Harry felt as though something hot was

trickling down his back this time and knew that the Disillusionment Charm must have lifted.

“Now stay still, everyone, while I give us a bit of light in here,” Moody whispered.

The others’ hushed voices were giving Harry an odd feeling of foreboding; it was as though they had just entered the house of a dying person. He heard a soft hissing noise and then old-fashioned gas lamps sputtered into life all along the walls, casting a flickering insubstantial light over the peeling wallpaper and threadbare carpet of a long, gloomy hallway, where a cobwebby chandelier glimmered overhead and age-blackened portraits hung crooked on the walls. Harry heard something scuttling behind the baseboard. Both the chandelier and the candelabra on a rickety table nearby were shaped like serpents.

There were hurried footsteps and Ron’s mother, Mrs. Weasley, emerged from a door at the far end of the hall. She was beaming in welcome as she hurried towards them, though Harry noticed that she was rather thinner and paler than she had been last time he had seen her.

“Oh, Harry, it’s lovely to see you!” she whispered, pulling him into a rib-cracking hug before holding him at arm’s length and examining him critically. “You’re looking peaky; you need feeding up, but you’ll have to wait a bit for dinner, I’m afraid.”

She turned to the gang of wizards behind him and whispered urgently, “He’s just arrived, the meetings started.”

The wizards behind Harry all made noises of interest and excitement and began filing past him towards the door through which Mrs. Weasley had just come. Harry made to follow Lupin, but Mrs. Weasley held him back.

“No, Harry, the meetings only for members of the Order. Ron and Hermione are upstairs, you can wait with them until the meetings over, then we’ll have dinner. And keep your voice down in the hall,” she added in an urgent whisper.

“Why?”

“I don’t want anything to wake up.”

“What d’you -?”

“I’ll explain later, I’ve got to hurry, I’m supposed to be at the meeting - I’ll just show you where you’re sleeping.”

Pressing her finger to her lips, she led him on tiptoe past a pair of long, moth-eaten curtains, behind which Harry supposed there must be another door, and after skirting a large umbrella stand that looked as though it had been made from a severed troll’s leg they started up the dark staircase, passing a row of shrunken heads mounted on plaques on the wall. A closer look showed Harry that the heads belonged to house-elves. All of them had the same rather snout-like nose.

Harry's bewilderment deepened with every step he took. What on earth were they doing in a house that looked as though it belonged to the darkest of wizards?

"Mrs. Weasley, why -?"

"Ron and Hermione will explain everything, dear, I've really got to dash," Mrs. Weasley whispered distractedly. "There -" they had reached the second landing, "- you're the door on the right. I'll call you when it's over."

And she hurried off downstairs again.

Harry crossed the dingy landing, turned the bedroom doorknob, which was shaped like a serpents head, and opened the door.

He caught a brief glimpse of a gloomy high-ceilinged, twin-bedded room; then there was a loud twittering noise, followed by an even louder shriek, and his vision was completely obscured by a large quantity of very bushy hair. Hermione had thrown herself on to him in a hug that nearly knocked him flat, while Ron's tiny owl, Pigwidgeon, zoomed excitedly round and round their heads.

"HARRY! Ron, he's here, Harry's here! We didn't hear you arrive! Oh, how are you? Are you all right? Have you been furious with us? I bet you have, I know our letters were useless - but we couldn't tell you anything, Dumbledore made us swear we wouldn't, oh, we've got so much to tell you, and you've got things to tell us - the Dementors! When we heard - and that Ministry hearing - it's just outrageous, I've looked it all up, they can't expel you, they just can't, there's provision in the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery for the use of magic in life-threatening situations -"

"Let him breathe, Hermione," said Ron, grinning as he closed the door behind Harry. He seemed to have grown several more inches during their month apart, making him taller and more gangly looking than ever, though the long nose, bright red hair and freckles were the same.

Still beaming, Hermione let go of Harry, but before she could say another word there was a soft whooshing sound and something white soared from the top of a dark wardrobe and landed gently on Harry's shoulder.

"Hedwig!"

The snowy owl clicked her beak and nibbled his ear affectionately as Harry stroked her feathers.

"She's been in a right state," said Ron. "Pecked us half to death when she brought your last letters, look at this -"

He showed Harry the index finger of his right hand, which sported a half-healed but clearly deep cut.

“Oh, yeah,” Harry said. “Sorry about that, but I wanted answers, you know -”

“We wanted to give them to you, mate,” said Ron. “Hermione was going spare, she kept saying you’d do something stupid if you were stuck all on your own without news, but Dumbledore made us -”

“- swear not to tell me,” said Harry. “Yeah, Hermione’s already said.”

The warm glow that had flared inside him at the sight of his two best friends was extinguished as something icy flooded the pit of his stomach. All of a sudden - after yearning to see them for a solid month — he felt he would rather Ron and Hermione left him alone.

There was a strained silence in which Harry stroked Hedwig automatically, not looking at either of the others.

“He seemed to think it was best,” said Hermione rather breathlessly. “Dumbledore, I mean.”

“Right,” said Harry. He noticed that her hands, too, bore the marks of Hedwigs beak and found that he was not at all sorry.

“I think he thought you were safest with the Muggles -” Ron began.

“Yeah?” said Harry, raising his eyebrows. “Have either of you been attacked by Dementors this summer?”

“Well, no-but that’s why he’s had people from the Order of the Phoenix tailing you all the time-”

Harry felt a great jolt in his guts as though he had just missed a step going downstairs. So everyone had known he was being followed, except him.

“Didn’t work that well, though, did it?” said Harry, doing his utmost to keep his voice even. “Had to look after myself after all, didn’t I?”

“He was so angry,” said Hermione, in an almost awestruck voice. “Dumbledore. We saw him. When he found out Mundungus had left before his shift had ended. He was scary.”

“Well, I’m glad he left,” Harry said coldly. “If he hadn’t, I wouldn’t have done magic and Dumbledore would probably have left me at Privet Drive all summer.”

“Aren’t you… aren’t you worried about the Ministry of Magic hearing?” said Hermione quietly.

“No,” Harry lied defiantly. He walked away from them, looking around, with Hedwig nestled contentedly on his shoulder, but this room was not likely to raise his spirits. It was dank and dark. A blank stretch of canvas in an ornate picture frame was all that relieved the bareness of the peeling walls, and as Harry passed it he thought he heard someone, who was lurking out of sight, snigger.

“So why’s Dumbledore been so keen to keep me in the dark?” Harry asked, still trying hard to keep his voice casual. “Did you - er - bother to ask him at all?”

He glanced up just in time to see them exchanging a look that told him he was behaving just as they had feared he would. It did nothing to improve his temper.

“We told Dumbledore we wanted to tell you what was going on,” said Ron. “We did, mate. But he’s really busy now, we’ve only seen him twice since we came here and he didn’t have much time, he just made us swear not to tell you important stuff when we wrote, he said the owls might be intercepted.”

“He could still’ve kept me informed if he’d wanted to,” Harry said shortly. “You’re not telling me he doesn’t know ways to send messages without owls.”

Hermione glanced at Ron and then said, “I thought that, too. But he didn’t want you to know anything.”

“Maybe he thinks I can’t be trusted,” said Harry, watching their expressions.

“Don’t be thick,” said Ron, looking highly disconcerted.

“Or that I can’t take care of myself.”

“Of course he doesn’t think that!” said Hermione anxiously.

“So how come I have to stay at the Dursleys’ while you two get to join in everything that’s going on here?” said Harry, the words tumbling over one another in a rush, his voice growing louder with every word. “How come you two are allowed to know everything that’s going on?”

“We’re not!” Ron interrupted. “Mum won’t let us near the meetings, she says we’re too young -”

But before he knew it, Harry was shouting.

“SO YOU HAVEN’T BEEN IN THE MEETINGS, BIG DEAL! YOU’VE STILL BEEN HERE, HAVEN’T YOU? YOU’VE STILL BEEN TOGETHER! ME, I’VE BEEN STUCK AT THE DURSLEYS’ FOR A MONTH! AND I’VE HANDLED MORE THAN YOU TWO’VE EVER MANAGED AND DUMBLEDORE KNOWS IT - WHO SAVED THE SORCERER’S STONE? WHO GOT RID OF RIDDLE? WHO SAVED BOTH YOUR SKINS FROM THE DEMENTORS?”

Every bitter and resentful thought Harry had had in the past month was pouring out of him: his frustration at the lack of news, the hurt that they had all been together without him, his fury at being followed and not told about it - all the feelings he was half-ashamed of finally burst their boundaries. Hedwig took fright at the noise and soared off to the top of the wardrobe again; Pigwidgeon twittered in alarm and zoomed even faster around their heads.

“WHO HAD TO GET PAST DRAGONS AND SPHINXES AND EVERY OTHER FOUL THING LAST YEAR? WHO SAW HIM COME BACK? WHO HAD TO ESCAPE FROM HIM? ME!”

Ron was standing there with his mouth half-open, clearly stunned and at a loss for anything to say, while Hermione looked on the verge of tears.

“BUT WHY SHOULD I KNOW WHAT’S GOING ON? WHY SHOULD ANYONE BOTHER TO TELL ME WHAT’S BEEN HAPPENING?”

“Harry, we wanted to tell you, we really did -” Hermione began.

“CAN’T’VE WANTED TO THAT MUCH, CAN YOU, OR YOU’D HAVE SENT ME AN OWL, BUT DUMBLEDORE MADEYOU SWEAR–”

“Well, he did -”

“FOUR WEEKS I’VE BEEN STUCK IN PRIVET DRIVE, NICKING PAPERS OUT OF BINS TO TRY AND FIND OUT WHAT’S BEEN GOING ON -”

“We wanted to -”

“I SUPPOSE YOU’VE BEEN HAVING A REAL LAUGH, HAVEN’T YOU, ALL HOLED UP HERE TOGETHER -”

“No, honest -”

“Harry we’re really sorry!” said Hermione desperately, her eyes now sparkling with tears. “You’re absolutely right, Harry - I’d be furious if it was me!”

Harry glared at her, still breathing deeply, then turned away from them again, pacing up and down. Hedwig hooted glumly from the top of the wardrobe. There was a long pause, broken only by the mournful creak of the floorboards below Harry’s feet.

“What is this place, anyway?” he shot at Ron and Hermione.

“Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix,” said Ron at once.

“Is anyone going to bother telling me what the Order of the Phoenix -?”

“It’s a secret society,” said Hermione quickly. “Dumbledore’s in charge, he founded it. It’s the people who fought against You-Know-Who last time.”

“Who’s in it?” said Harry, coming to a halt with his hands in his pockets.

“Quite a few people -”

“We’ve met about twenty of them,” said Ron, “but we think there are more.”

Harry glared at them.

“Well?” he demanded, looking from one to the other.

“Er,” said Ron. “Well what?”

“Voldemort!” said Harry furiously, and both Ron and Hermione winced. “What’s happening? What’s he up to? Where is he? What are we doing to stop him?”

“We’ve told you, the Order don’t let us in on their meetings,” said Hermione nervously. “So we don’t know the details - but we’ve got a general idea,” she added hastily, seeing the look on Harry’s face.

“Fred and George have invented Extendable Ears, see,” said Ron. “They’re really useful.”

“Extendable -?”

“Ears, yeah. Only we’ve had to stop using them lately because Mum found out and went berserk. Fred and George had to hide them all to stop Mum binning them. But we got a good bit of use out of them before Mum realized what was going on. We know some of the Order are following known Death Eaters, keeping tabs on them, you know -”

“Some of them are working on recruiting more people to the Order -” said Hermione.

“And some of them are standing guard over something,” said Ron. “They’re always talking about guard duty.”

“Couldn’t have been me, could it?” said Harry sarcastically.

“Oh, yeah,” said Ron, with a look of dawning comprehension.

Harry snorted. He walked around the room again, looking anywhere but at Ron and Hermione.

“So, what have you two been doing, if you’re not allowed in meetings?” he demanded. “You said you’d been busy”‘

“We have,” said Hermione quickly. “We’ve been decontaminating this house, it’s been empty for ages and stuff’s been breeding in here. We’ve managed to clean out the kitchen, most of the bedrooms and I think we’re doing the drawing room tomo-”

With two loud cracks, Fred and George, Ron’s elder twin brothers, had materialized out of thin air in the middle of the room. Pigwidgeon twittered more wildly than ever and zoomed off to join Hedwig on top of the wardrobe.

“Stop doing that!” Hermione said weakly to the twins, who were as vividly red-haired as Ron, though stockier and slightly shorter.

“Hello, Harry,” said George, beaming at him. “We thought we heard your dulcet tones.”

“You don’t want to bottle up your anger like that, Harry, let it all out,” said Fred, also beaming. “There might be a couple of people fifty miles away who didn’t hear you.”

“You two passed your Apparation tests, then?” asked Harry grumpily.

“With distinction,” said Fred, who was holding what looked like a piece of very long, flesh colored string.

“It would have taken you about thirty seconds longer to walk down the stairs,” said Ron.

“Time is Galleons, little brother” said Fred. “Anyway, Harry, you’re interfering with reception. Extendable Ears,” he added in response to Harry’s raised eyebrows, and held up the string which Harry now saw was trailing out on to the landing. “We’re trying to hear what’s going on downstairs.”

“You want to be careful,” said Ron, staring at the Ear, “if Mum sees one of them again…”

“It’s worth the risk, that’s a major meeting they’re having,” said Fred.

The door opened and a long mane of red hair appeared.

“Oh, hello, Harry!” said Ron’s younger sister, Ginny, brightly. “I thought I heard your voice.” Turning to Fred and George, she said, “It’s no-go with the Extendable Ears, she’s gone and put an Imperturbable Charm on the kitchen door.”

“How d’you know?” said George, looking crestfallen.

“Tonks told me how to find out,” said Ginny. “You just chuck stuff at the door and if it can’t make contact the door’s been Imperturbed. I’ve been flicking Dungbombs at it from the top of the stairs and they just soar away from it, so there’s no way the Extendable Ears will be able to get under the gap.”

Fred heaved a deep sigh.

“Shame. I really fancied finding out what old Snape’s been up to.”

“Snape!” said Harry quickly. “Is he here?”

“Yeah,” said George, carefully closing the door and sitting down on one of the beds; Fred and Ginny followed. “Giving a report. Top secret.”

“Git,” said Fred idly.

“He’s on our side now,” said Hermione reprovingly.

Ron snorted. “Doesn’t stop him being a git. The way he looks at us when he sees us.”

“Bill doesn’t like him, either,” said Ginny, as though that settled the matter.

Harry was not sure his anger had abated yet; but his thirst for information was now overcoming his urge to keep shouting. He sank on to the bed opposite the others.

“Is Bill here?” he asked. “I thought he was working in Egypt?”

“He applied for a desk job so he could come home and work for the Order,” said Fred. “He says he misses the tombs, but;” he smirked, “there are compensations.”

“What d’you mean?”

“Remember old Fleur Delacour?” said George. “She’s got a job at Gringotts to eempwve ‘er Eeenglish -”

“And Bill’s been giving her a lot of private lessons,” sniggered Fred.

“Charlie’s in the Order, too,” said George, “but he’s still in Romania. Dumbledore wants as many foreign wizards brought in as possible, so Charlie’s trying to make contacts on his days off.”

“Couldn’t Percy do that?” Harry asked. The last he had heard, the third Weasley brother was working in the Department of International Magical Co-operation at the Ministry of Magic.

At Harry’s words, all the Weasleys and Hermione exchanged darkly significant looks.

“Whatever you do, don’t mention Percy in front of Mum and Dad,” Ron told Harry in a tense voice.

“Why not?”

“Because every time Percy’s name’s mentioned, Dad breaks whatever he’s holding and Mum starts crying,” Fred said.

“It’s been awful,” said Ginny sadly.

“I think we’re well shut of him,” said George, with an uncharacteristically ugly look on his face.

“What’s happened?” Harry said.

"Percy and Dad had a row," said Fred. "I've never seen Dad row with anyone like that. It's normally Mum who shouts."

"It was the first week back after term ended," said Ron. "We were about to come and join the Order. Percy came home and told us he'd been promoted."

"You're kidding?" said Harry.

Though he knew perfectly well that Percy was highly ambitious, Harry's impression was that Percy had not made a great success of his first job at the Ministry of Magic. Percy had committed the fairly large oversight of failing to notice that his boss was being controlled by Lord Voldemort (not that the Ministry had believed it - they all thought Mr. Crouch had gone mad).

"Yeah, we were all surprised," said George, "because Percy got into a load of trouble about Crouch, there was an inquiry and everything. They said Percy ought to have realized Crouch was off his rocker and informed a superior. But you know Percy, Crouch left him in charge, he wasn't going to complain."

"So how come they promoted him?"

"That's exactly what we wondered," said Ron, who see med very keen to keep normal conversation going now that Harry had stopped yelling. "He came home really pleased with himself - even more pleased than usual, if you can imagine that - and told Dad he'd been offered a position in Fudge's own office. A really good one for someone only a year out of Hogwarts: Junior Assistant to the Minister. He expected Dad to be all impressed, I think."

"Only Dad wasn't," said Fred grimly.

"Why not?" said Harry.

"Well, apparently Fudge has been storming round the Ministry checking that nobody's having any contact with Dumbledore," said George.

"Dumbledore's name is mud with the Ministry these days, see," said Fred. "They all think he's just making trouble saying You-Know-Who's back."

"Dad says Fudge has made it clear that anyone who's in league with Dumbledore can clear out their desks," said George.

"Trouble is, Fudge suspects Dad, he knows he's friendly with Dumbledore, and he's always thought Dad's a bit of a weirdo because of his Muggle obsession."

"But what's that got to do with Percy?" asked Harry, confused.
"I'm coming to that. Dad reckons Fudge only wants Percy in his office because he wants to use

him to spy on the family - and Dumbledore."

Harry let out a low whistle.

"Bet Percy loved that."

Ron laughed in a hollow sort of way.

"He went completely berserk. He said - well, he said loads of terrible stuff. He said he's been having to struggle against Dad's lousy reputation ever since he joined the Ministry and that Dad's got no ambition and that's why we've always been - you know - not had a lot of money, I mean -"

"What?" said Harry in disbelief, as Ginny made a noise like an angry cat.

"I know," said Ron in a low voice. "And it got worse. He said Dad was an idiot to run around with Dumbledore, that Dumbledore was heading for big trouble and Dad was going to go down with him, and that he - Percy - knew where his loyalty lay and it was with the Ministry. And if Mum and Dad were going to become traitors to the Ministry he was going to make sure everyone knew he didn't belong to our family any more. And he packed his bags the same night and left. He's living here in London now."

Harry swore under his breath. He had always liked Percy least of Ron's brothers, but he had never imagined he would say such things to Mr. Weasley.

"Mum's been in a right state," said Ron dully. "You know - crying and stuff. She came up to London to try and talk to Percy but he slammed the door in her face. I dunno what he does if he meets Dad at work - ignores him, I s'pose."

"But Percy must know Voldemort's back," said Harry s lowly. "He's not stupid, he must know your mum and dad wouldn't risk everything without proof."

"Yeah, well, your name got dragged into the row," said Ron, shooting Harry a furtive look. "Percy said the only evidence was your word and… I dunno… he didn't think it was good enough."

"Percy takes the Daily Prophet seriously," said Hermione tartly, and the others all nodded.

"What are you talking about?" Harry asked, looking around at them all. They were all regarding him warily.

"Haven't - haven't you been getting the Daily Prophet!" Hermione asked nervously.

"Yeah, I have!" said Harry.

"Have you - er - been reading it thoroughly?" Hermione asked, still more anxiously.

“Not cover to cover,” said Harry defensively. “If they were going to report anything about Voldemort it would be headline news, wouldn’t it?”

The others flinched at the sound of the name. Hermione hurried on, “Well, you’d need to read it cover to cover to pick it up, but they - um - they mention you a couple of times a week.”

“But I’d have seen -”

“Not if you’ve only been reading the front page, you wouldn’t,” said Hermione, shaking her head. “I’m not talking about big articles. They just slip you in, like you’re a standing joke.”

“What d’you -?”

“It’s quite nasty, actually,” said Hermione in a voice of forced calm. “They’re just building on Rita’s stuff.”

“But she’s not writing for them any more, is she?”

“Oh, no, she’s kept her promise - not that she’s got any choice,” Hermione added with satisfaction. “But she laid the foundation for what they’re trying to do now.”

“Which is what?” said Harry impatiently.

“Okay, you know she wrote that you were collapsing all over the place and saying your scar was hurting and all that?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, who was not likely to forget Rita Skeeters stories about him in a hurry.

“Well, they’re writing about you as though you’re this deluded, attention-seeking person who thinks he’s a great tragic hero or something,” said Hermione, very fast, as though it would be less unpleasant for Harry to hear these facts quickly. “They keep slipping in snide comments about you. If some far-fetched story appears, they say something like, ‘tale worthy of Harry Potter’, and if anyone has a funny accident or anything it’s, ‘lets hope he hasn’t got a scar on his forehead or we’ll be asked to worship him next -”

“I don’t want anyone to worship -” Harry began hotly.

“I know you don’t,” said Hermione quickly, looking frightened. “I know, Harry. But you see what they’re doing? They want to turn you into someone nobody will believe. Fudge is behind it, I’ll bet anything. They want wizards on the street to think you’re just some stupid boy who’s a bit of a joke, who tells ridiculous tall stories because he loves being famous and wants to keep it going.”

“I didn’t ask - I didn’t want - Voldemort killed my parents!” Harry spluttered. “I got famous because he murdered my family but couldn’t kill me! Who wants to be famous for that? Don’t they think I’d rather it’d never -”

“We know, Harry,” said Ginny earnestly.

“And of course, they didn’t report a word about the Dementors attacking you,” said Hermione. “Someone’s told them to keep that quiet. That should’ve been a really big story, out-of-control Dementors. They haven’t even reported that you broke the International Statute of Secrecy. We thought they would, it would tie in so well with this image of you as some stupid show-off. We think they’re biding their time until you’re expelled, then they’re really going to go to town - I mean, if you’re expelled, obviously,” she went on hastily. “You really shouldn’t be, not if they abide by their own laws, there’s no case against you.”

They were back on the hearing and Harry did not want to think about that. He cast around for another change of subject, but was saved the necessity of finding one by the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs.

“Uh oh.”

Fred gave the Extendable Ear a hearty tug; there was another loud crack and he and George vanished. Seconds later, Mrs. Weasley appeared in the bedroom doorway.

“The meeting’s over, you can come down and have dinner now. Everyone’s dying to see you, Harry. And who’s left all those Dungbombs outside the kitchen door?”

“Crookshanks,” said Ginny unblushingly. “He loves playing with them.”

“Oh,” said Mrs. Weasley, “I thought it might have been Kreacher, he keeps doing odd things like that. Now don’t forget to keep your voices down in the hall. Ginny, your hands are filthy, what have you been doing? Go and wash them before dinner, please.”

Ginny grimaced at the others and followed her mother out of the room, leaving Harry alone with Ron and Hermione. Both of them were watching him apprehensively, as though they feared he would start shouting again now that everyone else had gone. The sight of them looking so nervous made him feel slightly ashamed.

“Look…” he muttered, but Ron shook his head, and Hermione said quietly, “We knew you’d be angry, Harry, we really don’t blame you, but you’ve got to understand, we did try to persuade Dumbledore -”

“Yeah, I know,” said Harry shortly.

He cast around for a topic that didn’t involve his headmaster, because the very thought of Dumbledore made Harry’s insides burn with anger again.

“Who’s Kreacher?” he asked.
“The house-elf who lives here,” said Ron. “Nutter. Never met one like him.”

Hermione frowned at Ron.

“He’s not a nutter, Ron.”

“His life’s ambition is to have his head cut off and stuck up on a plaque just like his mother,” said Ron irritably. “Is that normal, Hermione?”

“Well - well, if he is a bit strange, it’s not his fault.”

Ron rolled his eyes at Harry.

“Hermione still hasn’t given up on SPEW -”

“It’s not SPEW!” said Hermione heatedly. “It’s the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare. And it’s not just me, Dumbledore says we should be kind to Kreacher too.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Ron. “C’mon, I’m starving.”

He led the way out of the door and on to the landing, but before they could descend the stairs -

“Hold it!” Ron breathed, flinging out an arm to stop Harry and Hermione walking any further. “They’re still in the hall, we might be able to hear something.”

The three of them looked cautiously over the banisters. The gloomy hallway below was packed with witches and wizards, including all of Harry’s guard. They were whispering excitedly together. In the very center of the group Harry saw the dark, greasy-haired head and prominent nose of his least favorite teacher at Hogwarts, Professor Snape. Harry leaned further over the banisters. He was very interested in what Snape was doing for the Order of the Phoenix…

A thin piece of flesh-colored string descended in front of Harry’s eyes. Looking up, he saw Fred and George on the landing above, cautiously lowering the Extendable Ear towards the dark knot of people below. A moment later, however, they all began to move towards the front door and out of sight.

“Damnit,” Harry heard Fred whisper, as he hoisted t he Extendable Ear back up again.

They heard the front door open, then close.

“Snape never eats here,” Ron told Harry quietly. “Thank God. C’mon.”

“And don’t forget to keep your voice down in the hall, Harry,” Hermione whispered.

As they passed the row of house-elf heads on the wall, they saw Lupin, Mrs. Weasley and Tonks at the front door, magically sealing its many locks and bolts behind those who had just left. “We’re eating down in the kitchen,” Mrs. Weasley whispered, meeting them at the bottom of the stairs. “Harry, dear, if you’ll just tiptoe across the hall, it’s through this door here -”

CRASH.

“Tonks!” cried Mrs. Weasley in exasperation, turning to look behind her.

“I’m sorry!” wailed Tonks, who was lying flat on the floor. “It’s that stupid umbrella stand, that’s the second time I’ve tripped over -”

But the rest of her words were drowned by a horrible, ear-splitting, blood-curdling screech. The moth-eaten velvet curtains Harry had passed earlier had flown apart, but there was no door behind them. For a split second, Harry thought he was looking through a window, a window behind which an old woman in a black cap was screaming and screaming as though she were being tortured - then he realized it was simply a life-size portrait, but the most realiztic, and the most unpleasant, he had ever seen in his life.

The old woman was drooling, her eyes were rolling, the yellowing skin of her face stretched taut as she screamed; and all along the hall behind them, the other portraits awoke and began to yell, too, so that Harry actually screwed up his eyes at the noise and clapped his hands over his ears. Lupin and Mrs. Weasley darted forward and tried to tug the curtains shut over the old woman, but they would not close and she screeched louder than ever, brandishing clawed hands as though trying to tear at their faces.

“Filth! Scum! By-products of dirt and vileness! Half-breeds, mutants, freaks, begone from this place! How dare you befoul the house of my fathers -”

Tonks apologized over and over again, dragging the huge, heavy troll’s leg back off the floor; Mrs. Weasley abandoned the attempt to close the curtains and hurried up and down the hall, stunning all the other portraits with her wand; and a man with long black hair came charging out of a door facing Harry.

“Shut up, you horrible old hag, shut UP!” he roared, seizing the curtain Mrs. Weasley had abandoned.

The old woman’s face blanched.

“Yoooou!” she howled, her eyes popping at the sight of the man. “Blood traitor, abomination, shame of my flesh!”

“I said - shut - UP!” roared the man, and with a stupendous effort he and Lupin managed to force the curtains closed again.

The old woman’s screeches died and an echoing silence fell. Panting slightly and sweeping his long dark hair out of his eyes, Harry’s godfather Sirius turned to face him.

“Hello, Harry,” he said grimly, “I see you’ve met my mother.”

CHAPTER FIVE

The Order of the Phoenix

“Your -?”

“My dear old mum, yeah,” said Sirius. “We’ve been trying to get her down for a month but we think she put a Permanent Sticking Charm on the back of the canvas. Let’s get downstairs, quick, before they all wake up again.”

“But what’s a portrait of your mother doing here?” Harry asked, bewildered, as they went through the door from the hall and led the way down a flight of narrow stone steps, the others just behind them.

“Hasn’t anyone told you? This was my parents’ house,” said Sirius. “But I’m the last Black left, so it’s mine now. I offered it to Dumbledore for Headquarters - about the only useful thing I’ve been able to do.”

Harry, who had expected a better welcome, noted how hard and bitter Sirius’s voice sounded. He followed his godfather to the bottom of the steps and through a door leading into the basement kitchen.

It was scarcely less gloomy than the hall above, a cavernous room with rough stone walls. Most of the light was coming from a large fire at the far end of the room. A haze of pipe smoke hung in the air like battle fumes, through which loomed the menacing shapes of heavy iron pots and pans hanging from the dark ceiling. Many chairs had been crammed into the room for the meeting and a long wooden table stood in the middle of them, littered with rolls of parchment, goblets, empty wine bottles, and a heap of what appeared to be rags. Mr. Weasley and his eldest son Bill were talking quietly with their heads together at the end of the table.

Mrs. Weasley cleared her throat. Her husband, a thin, balding, red-haired man who wore horn-rimmed glasses, looked around and jumped to his feet.

“Harry!” Mr. Weasley said, hurrying forward to greet him, and shaking his hand vigorously. “Good to see you!”

Over his shoulder Harry saw Bill, who still wore his long hair in a ponytail, hastily rolling up the lengths of parchment left on the table.

“Journey all right, Harry?” Bill called, trying to gather up twelve scrolls at once. “Mad-Eye didn’t make you come via Greenland, then?”

“He tried,” said Tonks, striding over to help Bill and immediately toppling a candle on to the last piece of parchment. “Oh no - sorry -

“Here, dear,” said Mrs. Weasley, sounding exasperated, and she repaired the parchment with a wave of her wand. In the flash of light caused by Mrs. Weasley’s charm Harry caught a glimpse of what looked like the plan of a building.

Mrs. Weasley had seen him looking. She snatched the plan off the table and stuffed it into Bill’s already overladen arms.

“This sort of thing ought to be cleared away promptly at the end of meetings,” she snapped, before sweeping off towards an ancient dresser from which she started unloading dinner plates. Bill took out his wand, muttered, “Evanesco!” and the scrolls vanished.

“Sit down, Harry,” said Sirius. “You’ve met Mundungus, haven’t you?”

The thing Harry had taken to be a pile of rags gave a prolonged, grunting snore, then jerked awake.

‘Some’n say m’name?’ Mundungus mumbled sleepily. “I ‘gree with Sirius…” He raised a very grubby hand in the air as though voting, his droopy, bloodshot eyes unfocused.

Ginny giggled.

“The meeting’s over, Dung,” said Sirius, as they all sat down around him at the table. “Harry’s arrived.”

“Eh?” said Mundungus, peering balefully at Harry through his matted ginger hair. “Blimey, so ‘e ‘as. Yeah… you all right, ‘Arry?”

“Yeah,” said Harry.

Mundungus fumbled nervously in his pockets, still staring at Harry, and pulled out a grimy black pipe. He stuck it in his mouth, ignited the end of it with his wand and took a deep pull on it. Great billowing clouds of greenish smoke obscured him within seconds.

“Owe you a ‘pology,” grunted a voice from the middle of the smelly cloud.

“For the last time, Mundungus,” called Mrs. Weasley, “will you please not smoke that thing in the kitchen, especially not when we’re about to eat!”

“Ah,” said Mundungus. “Right. Sorry, Molly.”

The cloud of smoke vanished as Mundungus stowed his pipe back in his pocket, but an acrid smell of burning socks lingered.

“And if you want dinner before midnight I’ll need a hand,” Mrs. Weasley said to the room at large. “No, you can stay where you are, Harry dear, you’ve had a long journey.”

“What can I do, Molly?” said Tonks enthusiastically, bounding forwards.

Mrs. Weasley hesitated, looking apprehensive.

“Er - no, it’s all right, Tonks, you have a rest too, you’ve done enough today.”

“No, no, I want to help!” said Tonks brightly, knocking over a chair as she hurried towards the dresser, from which Ginny was collecting cutlery.

Soon, a series of heavy knives were chopping meat and vegetables of their own accord, supervised by Mr. Weasley, while Mrs. Weasley stirred a cauldron dangling over the fire and the others took out plates, more goblets and food from the pantry. Harry was left at the table with Sirius and Mundungus, who was still blinking at him mournfully.

“Seen old Figgy since?” he asked.

“No,” said Harry, “I haven’t seen anyone.”

“See, I wouldn’t ‘ave left,” said Mundungus, leaning forward, a pleading note in his voice, “but I ‘ad a business opportunity -”

Harry felt something brush against his knees and started, but it was only Crookshanks, Hermione’s bandy-legged ginger cat, who wound himself once around Harry’s legs, purring, then jumped on to Sirius’s lap and curled up. Sirius scratched him absent-mindedly behind the ears as he turned, still grim-faced, to Harry.

“Had a good summer so far?”

“No, it’s been lousy,” said Harry.

For the first time, something like a grin flitted across Sirius’s face.

“Don’t know what you’re complaining about, myself.”

“What?” said Harry incredulously.

“Personally, I’d have welcomed a Dementor attack. A deadly struggle for my soul would have broken the monotony nicely. You think you’ve had it bad, at least you’ve been able to get out and about, stretch your legs, get into a few fights… I’ve been stuck inside for a month.”

“How come?” asked Harry, frowning.

“Because the Ministry of Magic’s still after me, and Voldemort will know all about me being an Animagus by now, Wormtail will have told him, so my big disguise is useless. There’s not much I can do for the Order of the Phoenix… or so Dumbledore feels.”

There was something about the slightly flattened tone of voice in which Sirius uttered Dumbledore's name that told Harry that Sirius, too, was not very happy with the Headmaster. Harry felt a sudden upsurge of affection for his godfather.

"At least you've known what's been going on," he said bracingly.

"Oh yeah," said Sirius sarcastically. "Listening to Snape's reports, having to take all his snide hints that he's out there risking his life while I'm sat on my backside here having a nice comfortable time… asking me how the cleanings going -"

"What cleaning?" asked Harry.

"Trying to make this place fit for human habitation," said Sirius, waving a hand around the dismal kitchen. "No one's lived here for ten years, not since my dear mother died, unless you count her old house-elf, and he's gone round the twist - hasn't cleaned anything in ages."

"Sirius," said Mundungus, who did not appear to have paid any attention to the conversation, but had been closely examining an empty goblet. "This solid silver, mate?"

"Yes," said Sirius, surveying it with distaste. "Finest fifteenth-century goblin-wrought silver, embossed with the Black family crest."

"That'd come off, though," muttered Mundungus, polishing it with his cuff.

"Fred - George - NO, JUST CARRY THEM!" Mrs. Weasley shrieked.

Harry, Sirius and Mundungus looked round and, a split second later, they had dived away from the table. Fred and George had bewitched a large cauldron of stew, an iron flagon of Butterbeer and a heavy wooden breadboard, complete with knife, to hurtle through the air towards them. The stew skidded the length of the table and came to a halt just before the end, leaving a long black burn on the wooden surface; the flagon of Butterbeer fell with a crash, spilling its contents everywhere; the bread knife slipped off the board and landed, point down and quivering ominously, exactly where Sirius's right hand had been seconds before.

"FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE!" screamed Mrs. Weasley. "THERE WAS NO NEED - I'VE HAD ENOUGH OF THIS - JUST BECAUSE YOU'RE ALLOWED TO USE MAGIC NOW, YOU DON'T HAVE TO WHIP YOUR WANDS OUT FOR EVERY TINY LITTLE THING!"

"We were just trying to save a bit of time!" said Fred, hurrying forward to wrench the bread knife out of the table. "Sorry, Sirius, mate - didn't mean to -"

Harry and Sirius were both laughing; Mundungus, who had toppled backwards off his chair, was swearing as he got to his feet; Crookshanks had given an angry hiss and shot off under the dresser, from where his large yellow eyes glowed in the darkness.

“Boys,” Mr. Weasley said, lifting the stew back into the middle of the table, “your mother’s right, you’re supposed to show a sense of responsibility now you’ve come of age -”

“None of your brothers caused this sort of trouble!” Mrs. Weasley raged at the twins as she slammed a fresh flagon of Butterbeer on to the table, and spilling almost as much again. “Bill didn’t feel the need to Apparate every few feet! Charlie didn’t charm everything he met! Percy -”

She stopped dead, catching her breath with a frightened look at her husband, whose expression was suddenly wooden.

“Let’s eat,” said Bill quickly.

“It looks wonderful, Molly,” said Lupin, ladling stew on to a plate for her and handing it across the table.

For a few minutes there was silence but for the chink of plates and cutlery and the scraping of chairs as everyone settled down to their food. Then Mrs. Weasley turned to Sirius.

“I’ve been meaning to tell you, Sirius, there’s something trapped in that writing desk in the drawing room, it keeps rattling and shaking. Of course, it could just be a Boggart, but I thought we ought to ask Alastor to have a look at it before we let it out.”

“Whatever you like,” said Sirius indifferently.

“The curtains in there are full of Doxys, too,” Mrs. Weasley went on. “I thought we might try and tackle them tomorrow.”

“I look forward to it,” said Sirius. Harry heard the sarcasm in his voice, but he was not sure that anyone else did.

Opposite Harry, Tonks was entertaining Hermione and Ginny by transforming her nose between mouthfuls. Screwing up her eyes each time with the same pained expression she had worn back in Harry’s bedroom, her nose swelled to a beak-like protuberance that resembled Snape’s, shrank to the size of a button mushroom and then sprouted a great deal of hair from each nostril. Apparently this was a regular mealtime entertainment, because Hermione and Ginny were soon requesting their favorite noses.

“Do that one like a pig snout, Tonks.”

Tonks obliged, and Harry, looking up, had the fleeting impression that a female Dudley was grinning at him from across the table.

Mr. Weasley, Bill and Lupin were having an intense discussion about goblins.

“They’re not giving anything away yet,” said Bill. “I still can’t work out whether or not they believe he’s back. Course, they might prefer not to take sides at all. Keep out of it.”

“I’m sure they’d never go over to You-Know-Who,” said Mr. Weasley, shaking his head. “They’ve suffered losses too; remember that goblin family he murdered last time, somewhere near Nottingham?”

“I think it depends what they’re offered,” said Lupin. “And I’m not talking about gold. If they’re offered the freedoms we’ve been denying them for centuries they’re going to be tempted. Have you still not had any luck with Ragnok, Bill?”

“He’s feeling pretty anti-wizard at the moment,” said Bill, “he hasn’t stopped raging about the Bagman business, he reckons the Ministry did a cover-up, those goblins never got their gold from him, you know -”

A gale of laughter from the middle of the table drowned the rest of Bill’s words. Fred, George, Ron and Mundungus were rolling around in their seats.

“… and then,” choked Mundungus, tears running down his face, “and then, if you’ll believe it, ‘e says to me, ‘e says, ‘Ere, Dung, where did ya get all them toads from? ‘Cos some son of a Bludger’s gone and nicked all mine!’ And I says, ‘Nicked all your toads, Will, what next? So you’ll be wanting some more, then?’ And if you’ll believe me, lads, the gormless gargoyle buys all ‘is own toads back orf me for a lot more’n what ‘e paid in the first place -”

“I don’t think we need to hear any more of your business dealings, thank you very much, Mundungus,” said Mrs. Weasley sharply, as Ron slumped forwards on to the table, howling with laughter.

“Beg pardon, Molly,” said Mundungus at once, wiping his eyes and winking at Harry. “But, you know, Will nicked ‘em orf Warty Harris in the first place so I wasn’t really doing nothing wrong.”

“I don’t know where you learned about right and wrong, Mundungus, but you seem to have missed a few crucial lessons,” said Mrs. Weasley coldly.

Fred and George buried their faces in their goblets of Butterbeer; George was hiccoughing. For some reason, Mrs. Weasley threw a very nasty look at Sirius before getting to her feet and going to fetch a large rhubarb crumble for pudding. Harry looked round at his godfather.

“Molly doesn’t approve of Mundungus,” said Sirius in an undertone.

“How come he’s in the Order?” Harry said, very quietly.

“He’s useful,” Sirius muttered. “Knows all the crooks - well, he would, seeing as he’s one himself. But he’s also very loyal to Dumbledore, who helped him out of a tight spot once. It pays to have someone like Dung around, he hears things we don’t. But Molly thinks inviting him to stay for dinner is going too far. She hasn’t forgiven him for slipping off duty when he was supposed to be tailing you.”

Three helpings of rhubarb crumble and custard later and the waistband on Harry's jeans was feeling uncomfortably tight (which was saying something as the jeans had once been Dudley's). As he laid down his spoon there was a lull in the general conversation: Mr. Weasley was leaning back in his chair, looking replete and relaxed; Tonks was yawning widely, her nose now back to normal; and Ginny who had lured Crookshanks out from under the dresser, was sitting cross-legged on the floor, rolling Butterbeer corks for him to chase.

"Nearly time for bed, I think," said Mrs. Weasley with a yawn.

"Not just yet, Molly" said Sirius, pushing away his empty plate and turning to look at Harry. "You know, I'm surprised at you. I thought the first thing you'd do when you got here would be to start asking questions about Voldemort."

The atmosphere in the room changed with the rapidity Harry associated with the arrival of Dementors. Where seconds before it had been sleepily relaxed, it was now alert, even tense. A frisson had gone around the table at the mention of Voldemort's name. Lupin, who had been about to take a sip of wine, lowered his goblet slowly, looking wary.

"I did!" said Harry indignantly. "I asked Ron and Hermione but they said we're not allowed in the Order, so -"

"And they're quite right," said Mrs. Weasley. "You're too young."

She was sitting bolt upright in her chair, her fists clenched on its arms, every trace of drowsiness gone.

"Since when did someone have to be in the Order of the Phoenix to ask questions?" asked Sirius. "Harry's been trapped in that Muggle house for a month. He's got the right to know what's been happen—"

"Hang on!" interrupted George loudly.

"How come Harry gets his questions answered?" said Fred angrily.

"We've been trying to get stuff out of you for a month and you haven't told us a single stinking thing!" said George.

"'You're too young, you're not in the Order'," said Fred in a high-pitched voice that sounded uncannily like his mother's. "Harry's not even of age!"

"It's not my fault you haven't been told what the Order's doing," said Sirius calmly, "that's your parents' decision. Harry, on the other hand -"

"It's not down to you to decide what's good for Harry!" said Mrs. Weasley sharply. The expression on her normally kind face looked dangerous. "You haven't forgotten what Dumbledore said, I suppose?"

“Which bit?” Sirius asked politely, but with the air of a man readying himself for a fight.

“The bit about not telling Harry more than he needs to know,” said Mrs. Weasley, placing a heavy emphasis on the last three words.

Ron, Hermione, Fred and George’s heads swiveled from Sirius to Mrs. Weasley as though they were following a tennis rally. Ginny was kneeling amid a pile of abandoned Butterbeer corks, watching the conversation with her mouth slightly open. Lupin’s eyes were fixed on Sirius.

“I don’t intend to tell him more than he needs to know, Molly,” said Sirius. “But as he was the one who saw Voldemort come back” (again, there was a collective shudder around the table at the name) “he has more right than most to -”

“He’s not a member of the Order of the Phoenix!” said Mrs. Weasley. “He’s only fifteen and -”

“And he’s dealt with as much as most in the Order,” said Sirius, “and more than some.”

“No one’s denying what he’s done!” said Mrs. Weasley, her voice rising, her fists trembling on the arms of her chair. “But he’s still -”

“He’s not a child!” said Sirius impatiently.

“He’s not an adult either!” said Mrs. Weasley, the color rising in her cheeks. “He’s not James, Sirius!”

“I’m perfectly clear who he is, thanks, Molly,” said Sirius coldly.

“I’m not sure you are!” said Mrs. Weasley. “Sometimes, the way you talk about him, it’s as though you think you’ve got your best friend back!”

“What’s wrong with that?” said Harry.

“What’s wrong, Harry, is that you are not your father, however much you might look like him!” said Mrs. Weasley, her eyes still boring into Sirius. “You are still at school and adults responsible for you should not forget it!”

“Meaning I’m an irresponsible godfather?” demanded Sirius, his voice rising.

“Meaning you have been known to act rashly, Sirius, which is why Dumbledore keeps reminding you to stay at home and -”

“We’ll leave my instructions from Dumbledore out of this, if you please!” said Sirius loudly.

“Arthur!” said Mrs. Weasley, rounding on her husband. “Arthur, back me up!”

Mr. Weasley did not speak at once. He took off his glasses and cleaned them slowly on his robes,

not looking at his wife. Only when he had replaced them carefully on his nose did he reply.

“Dumbledore knows the position has changed, Molly. He accepts that Harry will have to be filled in, to a certain extent, now that he is staying at Headquarters.”

“Yes, but there’s a difference between that and inviting him to ask whatever he likes!”

“Personally,” said Lupin quietly, looking away from Sirius at last, as Mrs. Weasley turned quickly to him, hopeful that finally she was about to get an ally, “I think it better that Harry gets the facts - not all the facts, Molly, but the general picture - from us, rather than a garbled version from… others.”

His expression was mild, but Harry felt sure Lupin, at least, knew that some Extendable Ears had survived Mrs. Weasley’s purge.

“Well,” said Mrs. Weasley, breathing deeply and looking around the table for support that did not come, “well… I can see I’m going to be overruled. I’ll just say this: Dumbledore must have had his reasons for not wanting Harry to know too much, and speaking as someone who has Harry’s best interests at heart -”

“He’s not your son,” said Sirius quietly.

“He’s as good as,” said Mrs. Weasley fiercely. “Who else has he got?”

“He’s got me!”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Weasley, her lip curling, “the thing is, it’s been rather difficult for you to look after him while you’ve been locked up in Azkaban, hasn’t it?”

Sirius started to rise from his chair.

“Molly, you’re not the only person at this table who cares about Harry,” said Lupin sharply.

“Sirius, sit down.”

Mrs. Weasley’s lower lip was trembling. Sirius sank slowly back into his chair, his face white.

“I think Harry ought to be allowed a say in this,” Lupin continued, “he’s old enough to decide for himself.”

“I want to know what’s been going on,” Harry said at once.

He did not look at Mrs. Weasley. He had been touched by what she had said about his being as good as a son, but he was also impatient with her mollycoddling. Sirius was right, he was not a child.

“Very well,” said Mrs. Weasley, her voice cracking. “Ginny - Ron - Hermione - Fred - George – I want you out of this kitchen, now.”

There was instant uproar.

“We’re of age!” Fred and George bellowed together.

“If Harry’s allowed, why can’t I?” shouted Ron.

“Mum, I want to hear!” wailed Ginny.

“NO!” shouted Mrs. Weasley, standing up, her eyes over bright. “I absolutely forbid -”

“Molly, you can’t stop Fred and George,” said Mr. Weasley wearily. “They are of age.”

“They’re still at school.”

“But they’re legally adults now,” said Mr. Weasley, in the same tired voice.

Mrs. Weasley was now scarlet in the face.

“I - oh, all right then, Fred and George can stay, but Ron -”

“Harry’ll tell me and Hermione everything you say anyway!” said Ron hotly. “Won’t - won’t you?” he added uncertainly, meeting Harry’s eyes.

For a split second, Harry considered telling Ron that he wouldn’t tell him a single word, that he could try a taste of being kept in the dark and see how he liked it. But the nasty impulse vanished as they looked at each other.

“Course I will,” Harry said.

Ron and Hermione beamed.

“Fine!” shouted Mrs. Weasley. “Fine! Ginny - BED!”

Ginny did not go quietly. They could hear her raging and storming at her mother all the way up the stairs, and when she reached the hall Mrs. Blacks ear-splitting shrieks were added to the din. Lupin hurried off to the portrait to restore calm. It was only after he had returned, closing the kitchen door behind him and taking his seat at the table again, that Sirius spoke.

“Okay, Harry… what do you want to know?”

Harry took a deep breath and asked the question that had obsessed him for the last month.

“Where’s Voldemort?” he said, ignoring the renewed shudders and winces at the name. “What’s

he doing? I've been trying to watch the Muggle news, and there hasn't been anything that looks like him yet, no funny deaths or anything."

"That's because there haven't been any funny deaths yet," said Sirius, "not as far as we know, anyway… and we know quite a lot."

"More than he thinks we do, anyway," said Lupin.

"How come he's stopped killing people?" Harry asked. He knew Voldemort had murdered more than once in the last year alone.

"Because he doesn't want to draw attention to himself," said Sirius. "It would be dangerous for him. His comeback didn't come off quite the way he wanted it to, you see. He messed it up."

"Or rather, you messed it up for him," said Lupin, with a satisfied smile.

"How?" Harry asked, perplexed.

"You weren't supposed to survive!" said Sirius. "Nobody apart from his Death Eaters was supposed to know he'd come back. But you survived to bear witness."

"And the very last person he wanted alerted to his return the moment he got back was Dumbledore," said Lupin. "And you made sure Dumbledore knew at once."

"How has that helped?" Harry asked.

"Are you kidding?" said Bill incredulously. "Dumbledore was the only one You-Know-Who was ever scared of!"

"Thanks to you, Dumbledore was able to recall the Order of the Phoenix about an hour after Voldemort returned," said Sirius.

"So, what's the Order been doing?" said Harry, looking around at them all.

"Working as hard as we can to make sure Voldemort can't carry out his plans," said Sirius.

"How d'you know what his plans are?" Harry asked quickly.

"Dumbledore's got a shrewd idea,' said Lupin, "and Dumbledore's shrewd ideas normally turn out to be accurate."

"So what does Dumbledore reckon he's planning?"

"Well, firstly, he wants to build up his army again," said Sirius. "In the old days he had huge numbers at his command: witches and wizards he'd bullied or bewitched into following him, his faithful Death Eaters, a great variety of Dark creatures. You heard him planning to recruit the

giants; well, they'll be just one of the groups he's after. He's certainly not going to try and take on the Ministry of Magic with only a dozen Death Eaters."

"So you're trying to stop him getting more followers?"

"We're doing our best," said Lupin.

"How?"

"Well, the main thing is to try and convince as many people as possible that You-Know-Who really has returned, to put them on their guard," said Bill. "It's proving tricky, though."

"Why?"

"Because of the Ministry's attitude," said Tonks. "You saw Cornelius Fudge after You-Know-Who came back, Harry. Well, he hasn't shifted his position at all. He's absolutely refusing to believe it's happened."

"But why?" said Harry desperately. "Why's he being so stupid? If Dumbledore -"

"Ah, well, you've put your finger on the problem," said Mr. Weasley with a wry smile. "Dumbledore."

"Fudge is frightened of him, you see," said Tonks sadly.

"Frightened of Dumbledore?" said Harry incredulously.

"Frightened of what he's up to," said Mr. Weasley. "Fudge thinks Dumbledore's plotting to overthrow him. He thinks Dumbledore wants to be Minister for Magic."

"But Dumbledore doesn't want -"

"Of course he doesn't," said Mr. Weasley. "He's never wanted the Minister's job, even though a lot of people wanted him to take it when Millicent Bagnold retired. Fudge came to power instead, but he's never quite forgotten how much popular support Dumbledore had, even though Dumbledore never applied for the job."

"Deep down, Fudge knows Dumbledore's much cleverer than he is - a much more powerful wizard, and in the early days of his Ministry he was forever asking Dumbledore for help and advice," said Lupin. "But it seems he's become fond of power, and much more confident. He loves being Minister for Magic and he's managed to convince himself that he's the clever one and Dumbledore's simply stirring up trouble for the sake of it."

"How can he think that?" said Harry angrily. "How can he think Dumbledore would just make it all up - that I'd make it all up?"

“Because accepting that Voldemort’s back would mean trouble like the Ministry hasn’t had to cope with for nearly fourteen years,” said Sirius bitterly. “Fudge just can’t bring himself to face it. It’s so much more comfortable to convince himself Dumbledore’s lying to destabilize him.”

“You see the problem,” said Lupin. “While the Ministry insists there is nothing to fear from Voldemort it’s hard to convince people he’s back, especially as they really don’t want to believe it in the first place. What’s more, the Ministry’s leaning heavily on the Daily Prophet not to report any of what they’re calling Dumbledore’s rumor-mongering, so most of the wizarding community are completely unaware any things happened, and that makes them easy targets for the Death Eaters if they’re using the Imperius Curse.”

“But you’re telling people, aren’t you?” said Harry, looking around at Mr. Weasley, Sirius, Bill, Mundungus, Lupin and Tonks. “You’re letting people know he’s back?”

They all smiled humorlessly.

“Well, as everyone thinks I’m a mad mass-murderer and the Ministry’s put a ten thousand Galleon price on my head, I can hardly stroll up the street and start handing out leaflets, can I?” said Sirius restlessly.

“And I’m not a very popular dinner guest with most of the community,” said Lupin. “It’s an occupational hazard of being a werewolf.”

“Tonks and Arthur would lose their jobs at the Ministry if they started shooting their mouths off,” said Sirius, “and it’s very important for us to have spies inside the Ministry, because you can bet Voldemort will have them.”

“We’ve managed to convince a couple of people, though,” said Mr. Weasley, “Tonks here, for one - she’s too young to have been in the Order of the Phoenix last time, and having Aurors on our side is a huge advantage - Kingsley Shacklebolt’s been a real asset, too; he’s in charge of the hunt for Sirius, so he’s been feeding the Ministry information that Sirius is in Tibet.”

“But if none of you are putting the news out that Voldemorts back -” Harry began.

“Who said none of us are putting the news out?” said Sirius. “Why d’you think Dumbledore’s in such trouble?”

“What d’you mean?” Harry asked.

“They’re trying to discredit him,” said Lupin. “Didn’t you see the Daily Prophet last week? They reported that he’d been voted out of the Chairmanship of the International Confederation of Wizards because he’s getting old and losing his grip, but it’s not true; he was voted out by Ministry wizards after he made a speech announcing Voldemorts return. They’ve demoted him from Chief Warlock on the Wizengamot - that’s the Wizard High Court - and they’re talking about taking away his Order of Merlin, First Class, too.”

“But Dumbledore says he doesn’t care what they do as long as they don’t take him off the Chocolate Frog Cards,” said Bill, grinning.

“It’s no laughing matter,” said Mr. Weasley sharply. “If he carries on defying the Ministry like this he could end up in Azkaban, and the last thing we want is to have Dumbledore locked up. While You-Know-Who knows Dumbledore’s out there and wise to what he’s up to he’s going to go cautiously. If Dumbledore’s out of the way - well, You-Know-Who will have a clear field.”

“But if Voldemort’s trying to recruit more Death Eaters it’s bound to get out that he’s come back, isn’t it?” asked Harry desperately.

“Voldemort doesn’t march up to people’s houses and bang on their front doors, Harry,” said Sirius. “He tricks, jinxes and blackmails them. He’s well-practiced at operating in secret. In any case, gathering followers is only one thing he’s interested in. He’s got other plans too, plans he can put into operation very quietly indeed, and he’s concentrating on those for the moment.’

“What’s he after apart from followers?” Harry asked swiftly. He thought he saw Sirius and Lupin exchange the most fleeting of looks before Sirius answered.

“Stuff he can only get by stealth.”

When Harry continued to look puzzled, Sirius said, “Like a weapon. Something he didn’t have last time.”

“When he was powerful before?”

“Yes.”

“Like what kind of weapon?” said Harry. “Something worse than the Avada Kedavra -?”

“That’s enough!”

Mrs. Weasley spoke from the shadows beside the door. Harry hadn’t noticed her return from taking Ginny upstairs. Her arms were crossed and she looked furious.

“I want you in bed, now. All of you,” she added, looking around at Fred, George, Ron and Hermione.

“You can’t boss us -” Fred began.

“Watch me,” snarled Mrs. Weasley. She was trembling slightly as she looked at Sirius. “You’ve given Harry plenty of information. Any more and you might just as well induct him into the Order straightaway.”

“Why not?” said Harry quickly. “I’ll join, I want to join, I want to fight.”

“No.”

It was not Mrs. Weasley who spoke this time, but Lupin.

“The Order is comprised only of overage wizards,” he said. “Wizards who have left school,” he added, as Fred and George opened their mouths. “There are dangers involved of which you can have no idea, any of you… I think Molly’s right, Sirius. We’ve said enough.”

Sirius half-shrugged but did not argue. Mrs. Weasley beckoned imperiously to her sons and Hermione. One by one they stood up and Harry, recognizing defeat, followed suit.

CHAPTER SIX

The Noble and Most Ancient House of Black

Mrs. Weasley followed them upstairs looking grim.

“I want you all to go straight to bed, no talking,” she said as they reached the first landing, “we’ve got a busy day tomorrow. I expect Ginny’s asleep,” she added to Hermione, “so try not to wake her up.”

“Asleep, yeah, right,” said Fred in an undertone, after Hermione bade them goodnight and they were climbing to the next floor. “If Ginny’s not lying awake waiting for Hermione to tell her everything they said downstairs then I’m a Flobberworm…”

“All right, Ron, Harry,” said Mrs. Weasley on the second landing, pointing them into their bedroom. “Off to bed with you.”

“Night,” Harry and Ron said to the twins.

“Sleep tight,” said Fred, winking.

Mrs. Weasley closed the door behind Harry with a sharp snap. The bedroom looked, if anything, even danker and gloomier than it had on first sight. The blank picture on the wall was now breathing very slowly and deeply, as though its invisible occupant was asleep. Harry put on his pajamas, took off his glasses and climbed into his chilly bed while Ron threw Owl Treats up on top of the wardrobe to pacify Hedwig and Pigwidgeon, who were clattering around and rustling their wings restlessly.

“We can’t let them out to hunt every night,” Ron explained as he pulled on his maroon pajamas. “Dumbledore doesn’t want too many owls swooping around the square, thinks it’ll look suspicious. Oh yeah… I forgot…”

He crossed to the door and bolted it.

“What’re you doing that for?”

“Kreacher,” said Ron as he turned off the light. “First night I was here he came wandering in at three in the morning. Trust me, you don’t want to wake up and find him prowling around your room. Anyway…” he got into his bed, settled down under the covers then turned to look at Harry in the darkness; Harry could see his outline by the moonlight filtering in through the grimy window, “what d’you reckon?”

Harry didn’t need to ask what Ron meant.

“Well, they didn’t tell us much we couldn’t have guessed, did they?” he said, thinking of all that

had been said downstairs. “I mean, all they’ve really said is that the Order’s trying to stop people joining Vol—”

There was a sharp intake of breath from Ron.

“—demort,” said Harry firmly. “When are you going to start using his name? Sirius and Lupin do.”

Ron ignored this last comment.

“Yeah, you’re right,” he said, “we already knew nearly everything they told us, from using the Extendable Ears. The only new bit was -”

Crack.

“OUCH!”

“Keep your voice down, Ron, or Mum’ll be back up he re.”

“You two just Apparated on my knees!”

“Yeah, well, it’s harder in the dark.”

Harry saw the blurred outlines of Fred and George leaping down from Ron’s bed. There was a groan of bedsprings and Harry’s mattress descended a few inches as George sat down near his feet.

“So, got there yet?” said George eagerly.

“The weapon Sirius mentioned?” said Harry.

“Let slip, more like,” said Fred with relish, now sitting next to Ron. “We didn’t hear about that on the old Extendables, did we?”

“What d’you reckon it is?” said Harry.

“Could be anything,” said Fred.

“But there can’t be anything worse than the Avada Kedavra Curse, can there?” said Ron. “What’s worse than death?”

“Maybe it’s something that can kill loads of people at once,” suggested George.

“Maybe it’s some particularly painful way of killing people,” said Ron fearfully.

“He’s got the Cruciatus Curse for causing pain,” said Harry, “he doesn’t need anything more

efficient than that."

There was a pause and Harry knew that the others, like him, were wondering what horrors this weapon could perpetrate.

"So who d'you think's got it now?" asked George.

"I hope it's our side," said Ron, sounding slightly nervous.

"If it is, Dumbledore's probably keeping it," said Fred.

"Where?" said Ron quickly. "Hogwarts?"

"Bet it is!" said George. "That's where he hid the Sorcerer's Stone."

"A weapons going to be a lot bigger than the Stone, though!" said Ron.

"Not necessarily" said Fred.

"Yeah, size is no guarantee of power," said George. "Look at Ginny."

"What d'you mean?" said Harry.

"You've never been on the receiving end of one of her Bat-Bogey Hexes, have you?"

"Shh!" said Fred, half-rising from the bed. "Listen!"

They fell silent. Footsteps were coming up the stairs.

"Mum," said George and without further ado there was a loud crack and Harry felt the weight vanish from the end of his bed. A few seconds later, they heard the floorboard creak outside their door; Mrs. Weasley was plainly listening to check whether or not they were talking.

Hedwig and Pigwidgeon hooted dolefully. The floorboard creaked again and they heard her heading upstairs to check on Fred and George.

"She doesn't trust us at all, you know," said Ron regretfully.

Harry was sure he would not be able to fall asleep; the evening had been so packed with things to think about that he fully expected to lie awake for hours mulling it all over. He wanted to continue talking to Ron, but Mrs. Weasley was now creaking back downstairs again, and once she had gone he distinctly heard others making their way upstairs… in fact, many-legged creatures were cantering softly up and down outside the bedroom door, and Hagrid the Care of Magical Creatures teacher was saying, "Beauties, arn' they, eh, Harry? We'll be studyin' weapons this term…" and Harry saw that the creatures had cannons for heads and were wheeling to face him… he ducked…

The next thing he knew, he was curled into a warm ball under his bedclothes and Georges loud voice was filling the room.

“Mum says get up, your breakfast is in the kitchen and then she needs you in the drawing room, there are loads more Doxys than she thought and she’s found a nest of dead Puffskeins under the sofa.”

Half an hour later Harry and Ron, who had dressed and breakfasted quickly, entered the drawing room, a long, high-ceilinged room on the first floor with olive green walls covered in dirty tapestries. The carpet exhaled little clouds of dust every time someone put their foot on it and the long, moss green velvet curtains were buzzing as though swarming with invisible bees. It was around these that Mrs. Weasley, Hermione, Ginny, Fred and George were grouped, all looking rather peculiar as they had each tied a cloth over their nose and mouth. Each of them was also holding a large bottle of black liquid with anozzle at the end.

“Cover your faces and take a spray,” Mrs. Weasley said to Harry and Ron the moment she saw them, pointing to two more bottles of black liquid standing on a spindle-legged table. “It’s Doxycide. I’ve never seen an infestation this bad - what that house-elf’s been doing for the last ten years -”

Hermione’s face was half concealed by a tea towel but Harry distinctly saw her throw a reproachful look at Mrs. Weasley.

“Kreacher’s really old, he probably couldn’t manage -”

“You’d be surprised what Kreacher can manage when he wants to, Hermione,” said Sirius, who had just entered the room carrying a bloodstained bag of what appeared to be dead rats. “I’ve just been feeding Buckbeak,” he added, in reply to Harry s enquiring look. “I keep him upstairs in my mothers bedroom. Anyway… this writing desk…”

He dropped the bag of rats into an armchair, then bent over to examine the locked cabinet which, Harry now noticed for the first time, was shaking slightly.

“Well, Molly, I’m pretty sure this is a Boggart,” said Sirius, peering through the keyhole, “but perhaps we ought to let Mad-Eye have a shifty at it before we let it out - knowing my mother, it could be something much worse.”

“Right you are, Sirius,” said Mrs. Weasley.

They were both speaking in carefully light, polite voices that told Harry quite plainly that neither had forgotten their disagreement of the night before.

A loud, clanging bell sounded from downstairs, followed at once by the cacophony of screams and wails that had been triggered the previous night by Tonks knocking over the umbrella stand.

“I keep telling them not to ring the doorbell!” said Sirius exasperatedly, hurrying out of the room.

They heard him thundering down the stairs as Mrs. Black’s screeches echoed up through the house once more:

“Stains, of dishonor, filthy half-breeds, blood traitors, children of filth”

“Close the door, please, Harry,” said Mrs. Weasley.

Harry took as much time as he dared to close the drawing-room door; he wanted to listen to what was going on downstairs. Sirius had obviously managed to shut the curtains over his mother’s portrait because she had stopped screaming. He heard Sirius walking down the hall, then the clattering of the chain on the front door, and then a deep voice he recognized as Kingsley Shacklebolt’s saying, “Hestia’s just relieved me, so she’s got Moody’s Cloak now, thought I’d leave a report for Dumbledore…”

Feeling Mrs. Weasley’s eyes on the back of his head, Harry regretfully closed the drawing-room door and rejoined the Doxy party.

Mrs. Weasley was bending over to check the page on Doxys in Gilderoy Lockhart’s Guide to Household Pests, which was lying open on the sofa.

“Right, you lot, you need to be careful, because Doxys bite and their teeth are poisonous. I’ve got a bottle of antidote here, but I’d rather nobody needed it.”

She straightened up, positioned herself squarely in front of the curtains and beckoned them all forward.

“When I say the word, start spraying immediately,” she said. “They’ll come flying out at us, I expect, but it says on the sprays one good squirt will paralyze them. When they’re immobilized, just throw them in this bucket.”

She stepped carefully out of their line of fire, and raised her own spray.

“All right - squirt!”

Harry had been spraying only a few seconds when a fully-grown Doxy came soaring out of a fold in the material, shiny beetle-like wings whirring, tiny needle-sharp teeth bared, its fairy-like body covered with thick black hair and its four tiny fists clenched with fury. Harry caught it full in the face with a blast of Doxycide. It froze in midair and fell, with a surprisingly loud hunk, on to the worn carpet below. Harry picked it up and threw it in the bucket.

“Fred, what are you doing?” said Mrs. Weasley sharply. “Spray that at once and throw it away!” Harry looked round. Fred was holding a struggling Doxy between his forefinger and thumb.

“Right-o,’ Fred said brightly, spraying the Doxy quickly in the face so that it fainted, but the moment Mrs. Weasley’s back was turned he pocketed it with a wink.

“We want to experiment with Doxy venom for our Skiving Snackboxes,” George told Harry under his breath.

Deftly spraying two Doxys at once as they soared straight for his nose, Harry moved closer to George and muttered out of the corner of his mouth, “What are Skiving Snackboxes?”

“Range of sweets to make you ill,” George whispered, keeping a wary eye on Mrs. Weasley’s back. “Not seriously ill, mind, just ill enough to get you out of a class when you feel like it. Fred and I have been developing them this summer. They’re double-ended, color-coded chews. If you eat the orange half of the Puking Pastilles, you throw up. Moment you’ve been rushed out of the lesson for the hospital wing, you swallow the purple half –”

“which restores you to full fitness, enabling you to pursue the leisure activity of your own choice during an hour that would otherwise have been devoted to unprofitable boredom. That’s what we’re putting in the adverts, anyway,” whispered Fred, who had edged over out of Mrs. Weasley’s line of vision and was now sweeping a few stray Doxys from the floor and adding them to his pocket. “But they still need a bit of work. At the moment our testers are having a bit of trouble stopping puking long enough to swallow the purple end.”

“Testers?”

“Us,” said Fred. “We take it in turns. George did the Fainting Fancies - we both tried the Nosebleed Nougat -”

“Mum thought we’d been dueling,” said George.

“Joke shop still on, then?” Harry muttered, pretending to be adjusting the nozzle on his spray.

“Well, we haven’t had a chance to get premises yet,” said Fred, dropping his voice even lower as Mrs. Weasley mopped her brow with her scarf before returning to the attack, “so we’re running it as a mail-order service at the moment. We put advertisements in the Daily Prophet last week.”

“All thanks to you, mate,” said George. “But don’t worry… Mum hasn’t got a clue. She won’t read the Daily Prophet any more, ‘cause of it telling lies about you and Dumbledore.”

Harry grinned. He had forced the Weasley twins to take the thousand Galleons prize money he had won in the Triwizard Tournament to help them realize their ambition to open a joke shop, but he was still glad to know that his part in furthering their plans was unknown to Mrs. Weasley. She did not think running a joke shop was a suitable career for two of her sons.

The de-Doxying of the curtains took most of the morning. It was past midday when Mrs. Weasley finally removed her protective scarf, sank into a sagging armchair and sprang up again with a cry of disgust, having sat on the bag of dead rats. The curtains were no longer buzzing;

they hung limp and damp from the intensive spraying. At the foot of them unconscious Doxys lay crammed in the bucket beside a bowl of their black eggs, at which Crookshanks was now sniffing and Fred and George were shooting covetous looks.

“I think we’ll tackle those after lunch.” Mrs. Weasley pointed at the dusty glass-fronted cabinets standing on either side of the mantelpiece. They were crammed with an odd assortment of objects: a selection of rusty daggers, claws, a coiled snakeskin, a number of tarnished silver boxes inscribed with languages Harry could not understand and, least pleasant of all, an ornate crystal bottle with a large opal set into the stopper, full of what Harry was quite sure was blood.

The clanging doorbell rang again. Everyone looked at Mrs. Weasley.

“Stay here,” she said firmly, snatching up the bag of rats as Mrs. Black’s screeches started up again from down below. “I’ll bring up some sandwiches.”

She left the room, closing the door carefully behind her. At once, everyone dashed over to the window to look down on the doorstep. They could see the top of an unkempt gingery head and a stack of precariously balanced cauldrons.

“Mundungus!” said Hermione. “What’s he brought all those cauldrons for?”

“Probably looking for a safe place to keep them,” said Harry. “Isn’t that what he was doing the night he was supposed to be tailing me? Picking up dodgy cauldrons?”

“Yeah, you’re right!” said Fred, as the front door opened; Mundungus heaved his cauldrons through it and disappeared from view. “Blimey, Mum won’t like that…”

He and George crossed to the door and stood beside it, listening closely. Mrs. Black’s screaming had stopped.

“Mundungus is talking to Sirius and Kingsley,” Fred muttered, frowning with concentration. “Can’t hear properly… d’you reckon we can risk the Extendable Ears?”

“Might be worth it,” said George. “I could sneak up stairs and get a pair -”

But at that precise moment there was an explosion of sound from downstairs that rendered Extendable Ears quite unnecessary. All of them could hear exactly what Mrs. Weasley was shouting at the top of her voice.

“WE ARE NOT RUNNING A HIDEOUT FOR STOLEN GOODS!”

“I love hearing Mum shouting at someone else,” said Fred, with a satisfied smile on his face as he opened the door an inch or so to allow Mrs. Weasley’s voice to permeate the room better, “it makes such a nice change.”

“- COMPLETELY IRRESPONSIBLE, AS IF WE HAVEN’T GOT ENOUGH TO WORRY

ABOUT WITHOUT YOU DRAGGING STOLEN CAULDRONS INTO THE HOUSE -”

“The idiots are letting her get into her stride,” said George, shaking his head. “You’ve got to head her off early otherwise she builds up a head of steam and goes on for hours. And she’s been dying to have a go at Mundungus ever since he sneaked off when he was supposed to be following you, Harry - and there goes Sirius’s mum again.”

Mrs. Weasley’s voice was lost amid fresh shrieks and screams from the portraits in the hall. George made to shut the door to drown the noise, but before he could do so, a house-elf edged into the room.

Except for the filthy rag tied like a loincloth around its middle, it was completely naked. It looked very old. Its skin seemed to be several times too big for it and, though it was bald like all house-elves, there was a quantity of white hair growing out of its large, batlike ears. Its eyes were a bloodshot and watery grey and its fleshy nose was large and rather snoutlike.

The elf took absolutely no notice of Harry and the rest. Acting as though it could not see them, it shuffled hunchbacked, slowly and doggedly, towards the far end of the room, all the while muttering under its breath in a hoarse, deep voice like a bullfrogs.

“… smells like a drain and a criminal to boot, but she’s no better, nasty old blood traitor with her brats messing up my mistress’s house, oh, my poor mistress, if she knew, if she knew the scum they’ve let into her house, what would she say to old Kreacher, oh, the shame of it, Mudbloods and werewolves and traitors and thieves, poor old Kreacher, what can he do…”

“Hello, Kreacher,” said Fred very loudly, closing the door with a snap.

The house-elf froze in his tracks, stopped muttering, and gave a very pronounced and very unconvincing start of surprise.

“Kreacher did not see young master,” he said, turning around and bowing to Fred. Still facing the carpet, he added, perfectly audibly, “Nasty little brat of a blood traitor it is.”

“Sorry?” said George. “Didn’t catch that last bit.”

“Kreacher said nothing,” said the elf, with a second bow to George, adding in a clear undertone, “and there’s its twin, unnatural little beasts they are.”

Harry didn’t know whether to laugh or not. The elf straightened up, eyeing them all malevolently, and apparently convinced that they could not hear him as he continued to mutter.

“… and there’s the Mudblood, standing there bold as brass, oh, if my mistress knew, oh, how she’d cry, and there’s a new boy, Kreacher doesn’t know his name. What is he doing here? Kreacher doesn’t know…”

“This is Harry, Kreacher,” said Hermione tentatively. “Harry Potter.”

Kreacher’s pale eyes widened and he muttered faster and more furiously than ever.

“The Mudblood is talking to Kreacher as though she is my friend, if Kreacher’s mistress saw him in such company, oh, what would she say -”

“Don’t call her a Mudblood!” said Ron and Ginny together, very angrily.

“It doesn’t matter,” Hermione whispered, “he’s not in his right mind, he doesn’t know what he’s -”

“Don’t kid yourself, Hermione, he knows exactly what he’s saying,” said Fred, eyeing Kreacher with great dislike.

Kreacher was still muttering, his eyes on Harry.

“Is it true? Is it Harry Potter? Kreacher can see t he scar, it must be true, that’s the boy who stopped the Dark Lord, Kreacher wonders how he did it -”

“Don’t we all, Kreacher,” said Fred.

“What do you want, anyway?” George asked.

Kreacher’s huge eyes darted towards George.

“Kreacher is cleaning,” he said evasively.

“A likely story,” said a voice behind Harry.

Sirius had come back; he was glowering at the elf from the doorway. The noise in the hall had abated; perhaps Mrs. Weasley and Mundungus had moved their argument down into the kitchen.

At the sight of Sirius, Kreacher flung himself into a ridiculously low bow that flattened his snoutlike nose on the floor.

“Stand up straight,” said Sirius impatiently. “Now, what are you up to?”

“Kreacher is cleaning,” the elf repeated. “Kreacher lives to serve the Noble House of Black -”

“And it’s getting blacker every day, it’s filthy,” said Sirius.

“Master always liked his little joke,” said Kreacher, bowing again, and continuing in an undertone, “Master was a nasty ungrateful swine who broke his mother’s heart -”

“My mother didn’t have a heart, Kreacher,” snapped Sirius. “She kept herself alive out of pure spite.”

Kreacher bowed again as he spoke.

“Whatever Master says,” he muttered furiously. “Master is not fit to wipe slime from his mother’s boots, oh, my poor mistress, what would she say if she saw Kreacher serving him, how she hated him, what a disappointment he was -”

“I asked you what you were up to,” said Sirius coldly. “Every time you show up pretending to be cleaning, you sneak something off to your room so we can’t throw it out.”

“Kreacher would never move anything from its proper place in Master’s house,” said the elf, then muttered very fast, “Mistress would never forgive Kreacher if the tapestry was thrown out, seven centuries it’s been in the family, Kreacher must save it, Kreacher will not let Master and the blood traitors and the brats destroy it -”

“I thought it might be that,” said Sirius, casting a disdainful look at the opposite wall. “She’ll have put another Permanent Sticking Charm on the back of it, I don’t doubt, but if I can get rid of it I certainly will. Now go away, Kreacher.”

It seemed that Kreacher did not dare disobey a direct order; nevertheless, the look he gave Sirius as he shuffled out past him was full of deepest loathing and he muttered all the way out of the room.

“- comes back from Azkaban ordering Kreacher around, oh, my poor mistress, what would she say if she saw the house now, scum living in it, her treasures thrown out, she swore he was no son of hers and he’s back, they say he’s a murderer too -”

“Keep muttering and I will be a murderer!” said Sirius irritably as he slammed the door shut on the elf.

“Sirius, he’s not right in the head,” Hermione pleaded, “I don’t think he realizes we can hear him.”

“He’s been alone too long,” said Sirius, “taking mad orders from my mother’s portrait and talking to himself, but he was always a foul little -”

“If you could just set him free,” said Hermione hopefully, “maybe -”

“We can’t set him free, he knows too much about the Order” said Sirius curtly. “And anyway, the shock would kill him. You suggest to him that he leaves this house, see how he takes it.”

Sirius walked across the room to where the tapestry Kreacher had been trying to protect hung the length of the wall. Harry and the others followed.

The tapestry looked immensely old; it was faded and looked as though Doxys had gnawed it in places. Nevertheless, the golden thread with which it was embroidered still glinted brightly enough to show them a sprawling family tree dating back (as far as Harry could tell) to the

Middle Ages. Large words at the very top of the tapestry read:

The Noble and Most Ancient House of Black Toujours pur

“You’re not on here!” said Harry, after scanning the bottom of the tree closely.

“I used to be there,” said Sirius, pointing at a small, round, charred hole in the tapestry, rather like a cigarette burn. “My sweet old mother blasted me off after I ran away from home - Kreacher’s quite fond of muttering the story under his breath.”

“You ran away from home?”

“When I was about sixteen,” said Sirius. “I’d had enough.”

“Where did you go?” asked Harry, staring at him.

“Your dad’s place,” said Sirius. “Your grandparents were really good about it; they sort of adopted me as a second son. Yeah, I camped out at your dad’s in the school holidays, and when I was seventeen I got a place of my own. My Uncle Alphard had left me a decent bit of gold - he’s been wiped off here, too, that’s probably why - anyway, after that I looked after myself. I was always welcome at Mr. and Mrs. Potter’s for Sunday lunch, though.”

“But… why did you…?”

“Leave?” Sirius smiled bitterly and ran his fingers through his long, unkempt hair. “Because I hated the whole lot of them: my parents, with their pure-blood mania, convinced that to be a Black made you practically royal… my idiot brother, soft enough to believe them… that’s him.” Sirius jabbed a finger at the very bottom of the tree, at the name *Regulus Black*. A date of death (some fifteen years previously) followed the date of birth.

“He was younger than me,” said Sirius, “and a much better son, as I was constantly reminded.”

“But he died,” said Harry.

“Yeah,” said Sirius. “Stupid idiot… he joined the Death Eaters.”

“You’re kidding!”

“Come on, Harry, haven’t you seen enough of this house to tell what kind of wizards my family were?” said Sirius testily.

“Were - were your parents Death Eaters as well?”

“No, no, but believe me, they thought Voldemort had the right idea, they were all for the purification of the wizarding race, getting rid of Muggle-borns and having pure-bloods in charge. They weren’t alone, either, there were quite a few people, before Voldemort showed his true

colors, who thought he had the right idea about things… they got cold feet when they saw what he was prepared to do to get power, though. But I bet my parents thought Regulus was a right little hero for joining up at first."

"Was he killed by an Auror?" Harry asked tentatively.

"Oh, no," said Sirius. "No, he was murdered by Voldemort. Or on Voldemort's orders, more likely; I doubt Regulus was ever important enough to be killed by Voldemort in person. From what I found out after he died, he got in so far, then panicked about what he was being asked to do and tried to back out. Well, you don't just hand in your resignation to Voldemort. It's a lifetime of service or death."

"Lunch," said Mrs. Weasleys voice.

She was holding her wand high in front of her, balancing a huge tray loaded with sandwiches and cake on its tip. She was very red in the face and still looked angry. The others moved over to her, eager for some food, but Harry remained with Sirius, who had bent closer to the tapestry.

"I haven't looked at this for years. There's Phineas Nigellus… my great-great-grandfather, see?… least popular Headmaster Hogwarts ever had… and Araminta Mehflua… cousin of my mothers… tried to force through a Ministry Bill to make Muggle-hunting legal… and dear Aunt Elladora… she started the family tradition of beheading house-elves when they got too old to carry tea trays… of course, any time the family produced someone halfway decent they were disowned. I see Tonks isn't on here. Maybe that's why Kreacher won't take orders from her - he's supposed to do whatever anyone in the family asks him -"

"You and Tonks are related?" Harry asked, surprised.

"Oh, yeah, her mother Andromeda was my favorite cousin," said Sirius, examining the tapestry closely. "No, Andromeda's not on here either, look -"

He pointed to another small round burn mark between two names, Bellatrix and Narcissa.

"Andromeda's sisters are still here because they made lovely, respectable pure-blood marriages, but Andromeda married a Muggle-born, Ted Tonks, so -"

Sirius mimed blasting the tapestry with a wand and laughed sourly. Harry, however, did not laugh; he was too busy staring at the names to the right of Andromeda's burn mark. A double line of gold embroidery linked Narcissa Black with Lucius Malfoy and a single vertical gold line from their names led to the name Draco.

"You're related to the Malfoys!"

"The pure-blood families are all interrelated," said Sirius. "If you're only going to let your sons and daughters marry pure-bloods your choice is very limited; there are hardly any of us left. Molly and I are cousins by marriage and Arthur's something like my second cousin once

removed. But there's no point looking for them on here - if ever a family was a bunch of blood traitors it's the Weasleys."

But Harry was now looking at the name to the left of Andromeda's burn: Bellatrix Black, which was connected by a double line to Rodolphus Lestrange.

"Lestrange…" Harry said aloud. The name had stirred something in his memory; he knew it from somewhere, but for a moment he couldn't think where, though it gave him an odd, creeping sensation in the pit of his stomach.

"They're in Azkaban," said Sirius shortly.

Harry looked at him curiously.

"Bellatrix and her husband Rodolphus came in with Barty Crouch junior," said Sirius, in the same brusque voice. "Rodolphuss brother Rabastan was with them, too."

Then Harry remembered. He had seen Bellatrix Lestrange inside Dumbledore's Pensieve, the strange device in which thoughts and memories could be stored: a tall dark woman with heavylidded eyes, who had stood at her trial and proclaimed her continuing allegiance to Lord Voldemort, her pride that she had tried to find him after his downfall and her conviction that she would one day be rewarded for her loyalty.

"You never said she was your -"

"Does it matter if she's my cousin?" snapped Sirius. "As far as I'm concerned, they're not my family. She's certainly not my family. I haven't seen her since I was your age, unless you count a glimpse of her coming into Azkaban. D'you think I'm proud of having a relative like her?"

"Sorry," said Harry quickly, "I didn't mean - I was just surprised, that's all -"

"It doesn't matter, don't apologize," Sirius mumbled. He turned away from the tapestry, his hands deep in his pockets. "I don't like being back here," he said, staring across the drawing room. "I never thought I'd be stuck in this house again."

Harry understood completely. He knew how he would feel, when he was grown up and thought he was free of the place for ever, to return and live at number four, Privet Drive.

"It's ideal for Headquarters, of course," Sirius said. "My father put every security measure known to wizard kind on it when he lived here. It's unplottable, so Muggles could never come and call - as if they'd ever have wanted to - and now Dumbledore's added his protection, you'd be hard put to find a safer house anywhere. Dumbledore is Secret Keeper for the Order, you know – nobody can find Headquarters unless he tells them personally where it is - that note Moody showed you last night, that was from Dumbledore…" Sirius gave a short, bark-like laugh. "If my parents could see the use their house was being put to now… well, my mothers portrait should give you some idea."

He scowled for a moment, then sighed.

“I wouldn’t mind if I could just get out occasionally and do something useful. I’ve asked Dumbledore whether I can escort you to your hearing - as Snuffles, obviously - so I can give you a bit of moral support, what d’you think?”

Harry felt as though his stomach had sunk through the dusty carpet. He had not thought about the hearing once since dinner the previous evening; in the excitement of being back with the people he liked best, and hearing everything that was going on, it had completely flown his mind. At Sirius’s words, however, the crushing sense of dread returned to him. He stared at Hermione and the Weasleys, all tucking into their sandwiches, and thought how he would feel if they went back to Hogwarts without him.

“Don’t worry,” Sirius said. Harry looked up and realized that Sirius had been watching him. “I’m sure they’ll clear you, there’s definitely something in the International Statute of Secrecy about being allowed to use magic to save your own life.”

“But if they do expel me,” said Harry quietly, “can I come back here and live with you?”

Sirius smiled sadly.

“We’ll see.”

“I’d feel a lot better about the hearing if I knew I didn’t have to go back to the Dursleys,” Harry pressed him.

“They must be bad if you prefer this place,” said Sirius gloomily.

“Hurry up, you two, or there won’t be any food left,” Mrs. Weasley called.

Sirius heaved another great sigh, cast a dark look at the tapestry, then he and Harry went to join the others.

Harry tried his best not to think about the hearing while they emptied the glass-fronted cabinets that afternoon. Fortunately for him, it was a job that required a lot of concentration, as many of the objects in there seemed very reluctant to leave their dusty shelves. Sirius sustained a bad bite from a silver snuffbox; within seconds his bitten hand had developed an unpleasant crusty covering like a tough brown glove.

“It’s okay,” he said, examining the hand with interest before tapping it lightly with his wand and restoring its skin to normal, “must be Wartcap powder in there.”

He threw the box aside into the sack where they were depositing the debris from the cabinets; Harry saw George wrap his own hand carefully in a cloth moments later and sneak the box into his already Doxy-filled pocket.

They found an unpleasant-looking silver instrument, something like a many-legged pair of tweezers, which scuttled up Harry's arm like a spider when he picked it up, and attempted to puncture his skin. Sirius seized it and smashed it with a heavy book entitled Nature's Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy. There was a musical box that emitted a faintly sinister, tinkling tune when wound, and they all found themselves becoming curiously weak and sleepy, until Ginny had the sense to slam the lid shut; a heavy locket that none of them could open; a number of ancient seals; and, in a dusty box, an Order of Merlin, First Class, that had been awarded to Sirius's grandfather for *services to the Ministry.*

"It means he gave them a load of gold," said Sirius contemptuously, throwing the medal into the rubbish sack.

Several times Kreacher sidled into the room and attempted to smuggle things away under his loincloth, muttering horrible curses every time they caught him at it. When Sirius wrested a large golden ring bearing the Black crest from his grip, Kreacher actually burst into furious tears and left the room sobbing under his breath and calling Sirius names Harry had never heard before.

"It was my father's," said Sirius, throwing the ring into the sack. "Kreacher wasn't quite as devoted to him as to my mother, but I still caught him snogging a pair of my father's old trousers last week."

Mrs. Weasley kept them all working very hard over the next few days. The drawing room took three days to decontaminate. Finally, the only undesirable things left in it were the tapestry of the Black family tree, which resisted all their attempts to remove it from the wall, and the rattling writing desk. Moody had not dropped by Headquarters yet, so they could not be sure what was inside it.

They moved from the drawing room to a dining room on the ground floor where they found spiders as large as saucers lurking in the dresser (Ron left the room hurriedly to make a cup of tea and did not return for an hour and a half). The china, which bore the Black crest and motto, was all thrown unceremoniously into a sack by Sirius, and the same fate met a set of old photographs in tarnished silver frames, all of whose occupants squealed shrilly as the glass covering them smashed.

Snape might refer to their work as 'cleaning', but in Harry's opinion they were really waging war on the house, which was putting up a very good fight, aided and abetted by Kreacher. The house-elf kept appearing wherever they were congregated, his muttering becoming more and more offensive as he attempted to remove anything he could from the rubbish sacks. Sirius went as far as to threaten him with clothes, but Kreacher fixed him with a watery stare and said, "Master must do as Master wishes," before turning away and muttering very loudly, "but Master will not turn Kreacher away, no, because Kreacher knows what they are up to, oh yes, he is plotting against the Dark Lord, yes, with these Mudbloods and traitors and scum…" At which Sirius, ignoring Hermione's protests, seized Kreacher by the back of his loincloth and threw him bodily from the room.

The doorbell rang several times a day, which was the cue for Sirius's mother to start shrieking

again, and for Harry and the others to attempt to eavesdrop on the visitor, though they gleaned very little from the brief glimpses and snatches of conversation they were able to sneak before Mrs. Weasley recalled them to their tasks. Snape flitted in and out of the house several times more, though to Harry's relief they never came face to face; Harry also caught sight of his Transfiguration teacher Professor McGonagall, looking very odd in a Muggle dress and coat, and she also seemed too busy to linger. Sometimes, however, the visitors stayed to help. Tonks joined them for a memorable afternoon in which they found a murderous old ghoul lurking in an upstairs toilet, and Lupin, who was staying in the house with Sirius but who left it for long periods to do mysterious work for the Order, helped them repair a grandfather clock that had developed the unpleasant habit of shooting heavy bolts at passers-by. Mundungus redeemed himself slightly in Mrs. Weasley's eyes by rescuing Ron from an ancient set of purple robes that had tried to strangle him when he removed them from their wardrobe.

Despite the fact that he was still sleeping badly, still having dreams about corridors and locked doors that made his scar prickle, Harry was managing to have fun for the first time all summer. As long as he was busy he was happy; when the action abated, however, whenever he dropped his guard, or lay exhausted in bed watching blurred shadows move across the ceiling, the thought of the looming Ministry hearing returned to him. Fear jabbed at his insides like needles as he wondered what was going to happen to him if he was expelled. The idea was so terrible that he did not dare voice it aloud, not even to Ron and Hermione, who, though he often saw them whispering together and casting anxious looks in his direction, followed his lead in not mentioning it. Sometimes, he could not prevent his imagination showing him a faceless Ministry official who was snapping his wand in two and ordering him back to the Dursleys'… but he would not go. He was determined on that. He would come back here to Grimmauld Place and live with Sirius.

He felt as though a brick had dropped into his stomach when Mrs. Weasley turned to him during dinner on Wednesday evening and said quietly, "I've ironed your best clothes for tomorrow morning, Harry, and I want you to wash your hair tonight, too. A good first impression can work wonders."

Ron, Hermione, Fred, George and Ginny all stopped talking and looked over at him. Harry nodded and tried to keep eating his chops, but his mouth had become so dry he could not chew.

"How am I getting there?" he asked Mrs. Weasley, trying to sound unconcerned.

"Arthurs taking you to work with him," said Mrs. Weasley gently.

Mr. Weasley smiled encouragingly at Harry across the table.

"You can wait in my office until it's time for the hearing," he said.

Harry looked over at Sirius, but before he could ask the question, Mrs. Weasley had answered it.

"Professor Dumbledore doesn't think it's a good idea for Sirius to go with you, and I must say I -
"

“think he’s quite right,” said Sirius through clenched teeth.

Mrs. Weasley pursed her lips.

“When did Dumbledore tell you that?” Harry said, staring at Sirius.

“He came last night, when you were in bed,” said Mr. Weasley.

Sirius stabbed moodily at a potato with his fork. Harry lowered his own eyes to his plate. The thought that Dumbledore had been in the house on the eve of his hearing and not asked to see him made him feel, if it were possible, even worse.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Ministry of Magic

Harry awoke at half past five the next morning as abruptly and completely as if somebody had yelled in his ear. For a few moments he lay immobile as the prospect of the disciplinary hearing filled every tiny particle of his brain, then, unable to bear it, he leapt out of bed and put on his glasses. Mrs. Weasley had laid out his freshly laundered jeans and T-shirt at the foot of his bed. Harry scrambled into them. The blank picture on the wall sniggered.

Ron was lying sprawled on his back with his mouth wide open, fast asleep. He did not stir as Harry crossed the room, stepped out on to the landing and closed the door softly behind him. Trying not to think of the next time he would see Ron, when they might no longer be fellow students at Hogwarts, Harry walked quietly down the stairs, past the heads of Kreacher's ancestors, and down into the kitchen.

He had expected it to be empty, but when he reached the door he heard the soft rumble of voices on the other side. He pushed it open and saw Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Sirius, Lupin and Tonks sitting there almost as though they were waiting for him. All were fully dressed except Mrs. Weasley, who was wearing a quilted purple dressing gown. She leapt to her feet the moment Harry entered.

"Breakfast," she said as she pulled out her wand and hurried over to the fire.

"M - m - morning, Harry," yawned Tonks. Her hair was blonde and curly this morning. "Sleep all right?"

"Yeah," said Harry.

"I've b - b - been up all night," she said, with another shuddering yawn. "Come and sit down…"

She drew out a chair, knocking over the one beside it in the process.

"What do you want, Harry?" Mrs. Weasley called. "Porridge? Muffins? Kippers? Bacon and eggs? Toast?"

"Just - just toast, thanks," said Harry.

Lupin glanced at Harry, then said to Tonks, "What were you saying about Scrimgeour?"

"Oh… yeah… well, we need to be a bit more careful, he's been asking Kingsley and me funny questions…"

Harry felt vaguely grateful that he was not required to join in the conversation. His insides were squirming. Mrs. Weasley placed a couple of pieces of toast and marmalade in front of him; he

tried to eat, but it was like chewing carpet. Mrs. Weasley sat down on his other side and started fussing with his T-shirt, tucking in the label and smoothing out the creases across his shoulders. He wished she wouldn't.

"… and I'll have to tell Dumbledore I can't do night duty tomorrow, I'm just too tired," Tonks finished, yawning hugely again.

"I'll cover for you," said Mr. Weasley. "I'm okay, I've got a report to finish anyway."

Mr. Weasley was not wearing wizards' robes but a pair of pinstriped trousers and an old bomber jacket. He turned from Tonks to Harry.

"How are you feeling?"

Harry shrugged.

"It'll all be over soon," Mr. Weasley said bracingly. "In a few hours time you'll be cleared."

Harry said nothing.

"The hearing's on my floor, in Amelia Bones's office. She's Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and the one who'll be questioning you."

"Amelia Bones is okay, Harry," said Tonks earnestly. "She's fair, she'll hear you out."

Harry nodded, still unable to think of anything to say.

"Don't lose your temper," said Sirius abruptly. "Be polite and stick to the facts."

Harry nodded again.

"The law's on your side," said Lupin quietly. "Even underage wizards are allowed to use magic in life-threatening situations."

Something very cold trickled down the back of Harry's neck; for a moment he thought someone was putting a Disillusionment Charm on him, then he realized that Mrs. Weasley was attacking his hair with a wet comb. She pressed hard on the top of his head.

"Doesn't it ever lie flat?" she said desperately.

Harry shook his head.

Mr. Weasley checked his watch and looked up at Harry.

"I think we'll go now," he said. "We're a bit early but I think you'll be better off at the Ministry than hanging around here."

“Okay,” said Harry automatically, dropping his toast and getting to his feet.

“You’ll be all right, Harry,” said Tonks, patting him on the arm.

“Good luck,” said Lupin. “I’m sure it will be fine.” ‘

“And if it’s not,” said Sirius grimly “I’ll see to Amelia Bones for you…”

Harry smiled weakly. Mrs. Weasley hugged him.

“We’ve all got our fingers crossed,” she said.

“Right,” said Harry. “Well… see you later then.”

He followed Mr. Weasley upstairs and along the hall. He could hear Sirius’s mother grunting in her sleep behind her curtains. Mr. Weasley unbolted the door and they stepped out into the cold, grey dawn.

“You don’t normally walk to work, do you?” Harry asked him, as they set off briskly around the square.

“No, I usually Apparate,” said Mr. Weasley, “but obviously you can’t, and I think it’s best we arrive in a thoroughly non-magical fashion… makes a better impression, given what you’re being disciplined for…”

Mr. Weasley kept his hand inside his jacket as they walked. Harry knew it was clenched around his wand. The run-down streets were almost deserted, but when they arrived at the miserable little underground station they found it already full of early-morning commuters. As ever when he found himself in close proximity to Muggles going about their daily business, Mr. Weasley was hard put to contain his enthusiasm.

“Simply fabulous,” he whispered, indicating the automatic ticket machines. “Wonderfully ingenious.”

“They’re out of order,” said Harry, pointing at the sign.

“Yes, but even so…” said Mr. Weasley, beaming at them fondly

They bought their tickets instead from a sleepy-looking guard (Harry handled the transaction, as Mr. Weasley was not very good with Muggle money) and five minutes later they were boarding an underground train that rattled them off towards the center of London. Mr. Weasley kept anxiously checking and re-checking the Underground Map above the windows.

“Four more stops, Harry… Three stops left now… Two stops to go, Harry…”

They got off at a station in the very heart of London, and were swept from the train in a tide of

besuited men and women carrying briefcases. Up the escalator they went, through the ticket barrier (Mr. Weasley delighted with the way the stile swallowed his ticket), and emerged on to a broad street lined with imposing-looking buildings and already full of traffic.

“Where are we?” said Mr. Weasley blankly, and for one heart-stopping moment Harry thought they had got off at the wrong station despite Mr. Weasley’s continual references to the map; but a second later he said, “Ah yes… this way, Harry,” and led him down a side road.

“Sorry,” he said, “but I never come by train and it all looks rather different from a Muggle perspective. As a matter of fact, I’ve never even used the visitors’ entrance before.”

The further they walked, the smaller and less imposing the buildings became, until finally they reached a street that contained several rather shabby-looking offices, a pub and an overflowing dumpster. Harry had expected a rather more impressive location for the Ministry of Magic.

“Here we are,” said Mr. Weasley brightly, pointing at an old red telephone box, which was missing several panes of glass and stood before a heavily graffitied wall. “After you, Harry.”

He opened the telephone-box door.

Harry stepped inside, wondering what on earth this was about. Mr. Weasley folded himself in beside Harry and closed the door. It was a tight fit; Harry was jammed against the telephone apparatus, which was hanging crookedly from the wall as though a vandal had tried to rip it off. Mr. Weasley reached past Harry for the receiver.

“Mr. Weasley, I think this might be out of order, too,” Harry said.

“No, no, I’m sure it’s fine,” said Mr. Weasley, holding the receiver above his head and peering at the dial. “Let’s see… six…” he dialed the number, “two… four… and another four… and another two…”

As the dial whirred smoothly back into place, a cool female voice sounded inside the telephone box, not from the receiver in Mr. Weasley’s hand, but as loudly and plainly as though an invisible woman were standing right beside them.

“Welcome to the Ministry of Magic. Please state your name and business.”

“Er…” said Mr. Weasley, clearly uncertain whether or not he should talk into the receiver. He compromised by holding the mouthpiece to his ear, “Arthur Weasley, Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, here to escort Harry Potter, who has been asked to attend a disciplinary hearing…”

“Thank you,” said the cool female voice. “Visitor, please take the badge and attach it to the front of your robes.”

There was a click and a rattle, and Harry saw something slide out of the metal chute where

returned coins usually appeared. He picked it up: it was a square silver badge with Harry Potter, Disciplinary Hearing on it. He pinned it to the front of his T-shirt as the female voice spoke again.

"Visitor to the Ministry, you are required to submit to a search and present your wand for registration at the security desk, which is located at the far end of the Atrium."

The floor of the telephone box shuddered. They were sinking slowly into the ground. Harry watched apprehensively as the pavement seemed to rise up past the glass windows of the telephone box until darkness closed over their heads. Then he could see nothing at all; he could hear only a dull grinding noise as the telephone box made its way down through the earth. After about a minute, though it felt much longer to Harry, a chink of golden light illuminated his feet and, widening, rose up his body, until it hit him in the face and he had to blink to stop his eyes from watering.

"The Ministry of Magic wishes you a pleasant day," said the woman's voice.

The door of the telephone box sprang open and Mr. Weasley stepped out of it, followed by Harry, whose mouth had fallen open.

They were standing at one end of a very long and splendid hall with a highly polished, dark wood floor. The peacock blue ceiling was inlaid with gleaming golden symbols that kept moving and changing like some enormous heavenly notice board. The walls on each side were paneled in shiny dark wood and had many gilded fireplaces set into them. Every few seconds a witch or wizard would emerge from one of the left-hand fireplaces with a soft whoosh. On the right-hand side, short queues of wizards were forming before each fireplace, waiting to depart.

Halfway down the hall was a fountain. A group of golden statues, larger than life-size, stood in the middle of a circular pool. Tallest of them all was a noble-looking wizard with his wand pointing straight up in the air. Grouped around him were a beautiful witch, a centaur, a goblin and a house-elf. The last three were all looking adoringly up at the witch and wizard. Glittering jets of water were flying from the ends of their wands, the point of the centaur's arrow, the tip of the goblins hat and each of the house-elf's ears, so that the tinkling hiss of falling water was added to the pops and cracks of the Apparators and the clatter of footsteps as hundreds of witches and wizards, most of whom were wearing glum, early-morning looks, strode towards a set of golden gates at the far end of the hall.

"This way," said Mr. Weasley.

They joined the throng, wending their way between the Ministry workers, some of whom were carrying tottering piles of parchment, others battered briefcases; still others were reading the Daily Prophet while they walked. As they passed the fountain Harry saw silver Sickles and bronze Knuts glinting up at him from the bottom of the pool. A small smudged sign beside it read:

ALL PROCEEDS FROM THE FOUNTAIN OF MAGICAL BRETHREN WILL BE GIVEN

TO ST. MUNGO'S HOSPITAL FOR MAGICAL MALADIES AND INJURIES.

If I'm not expelled from Hogwarts, I'll put in ten Galleons, Harry found himself thinking desperately.

"Over here, Harry," said Mr. Weasley, and they stepped out of the stream of Ministry employees heading for the golden gates. Seated at a desk to the left, beneath a sign saying Security, a badly shaven wizard in peacock blue robes looked up as they approached and put down his Daily Prophet.

"I'm escorting a visitor," said Mr. Weasley, gesturing towards Harry.

"Step over here," said the wizard in a bored voice.

Harry walked closer to him and the wizard held up a long golden rod, thin and flexible as a car aerial, and passed it up and down Harry's front and back.

"Wand," grunted the security wizard at Harry, putting down the golden instrument and holding out his hand.

Harry produced his wand. The wizard dropped it on to a strange brass instrument, which looked something like a set of scales with only one dish. It began to vibrate. A narrow strip of parchment came speeding out of a slit in the base. The wizard tore this off and read the writing on it.

"Eleven inches, phoenix-feather core, been in use four years. That correct?"

"Yes," said Harry nervously.

"I keep this," said the wizard, impaling the slip of parchment on a small brass spike. "You get this back," he added, thrusting the wand at Harry.

"Thank you."

"Hang on…" said the wizard slowly.

His eyes had darted from the silver visitors badge on Harry's chest to his forehead.

"Thank you, Eric," said Mr. Weasley firmly, and grasping Harry by the shoulder he steered him away from the desk and back into the stream of wizards and witches walking through the golden gates.

Jostled slightly by the crowd, Harry followed Mr. Weasley through the gates into the smaller hall beyond, where at least twenty lifts stood behind wrought golden grilles. Harry and Mr. Weasley joined the crowd around one of them. Nearby, stood a big bearded wizard holding a large cardboard box which was emitting rasping noises.

“All right, Arthur?” said the wizard, nodding at Mr. Weasley.

“What’ve you got there, Bob?” asked Mr. Weasley, looking at the box.

“We’re not sure,” said the wizard seriously. “We thought it was a bog-standard chicken until it started breathing fire. Looks like a serious breach of the Ban on Experimental Breeding to me.”

With a great jangling and clattering a lift descended in front of them; the golden grille slid back and Harry and Mr. Weasley stepped into the lift with the rest of the crowd and Harry found himself jammed against the back wall. Several witches and wizards were looking at him curiously; he stared at his feet to avoid catching anyone’s eye, flattening his fringe as he did so. The grilles slid shut with a crash and the lift ascended slowly, chains rattling, while the same cool female voice Harry had heard in the telephone box rang out again.

“Level Seven, Department of Magical Games and Sports, incorporating the British and Irish Quidditch League Headquarters, Official Gobstones Club and Ludicrous Patents Office.”

The lift doors opened. Harry glimpsed an untidy-looking corridor, with various posters of Quidditch teams tacked lopsidedly on the walls. One of the wizards in the lift, who was carrying an armful of broomsticks, extricated himself with difficulty and disappeared down the corridor.

The doors closed, the lift juddered upwards again and the woman’s voice announced:

“Level Six, Department of Magical Transportation, incorporating the Floo Network Authority, Broom Regulatory Control, Portkey Office and Apparation Test Center.”

Once again the lift doors opened and four or five witches and wizards got out; at the same time, several paper aeroplanes swooped into the lift. Harry stared up at them as they flapped idly around above his head; they were a pale violet color and he could see Ministry of Magic stamped along the edge of their wings.

“Just inter-departmental memos,” Mr. Weasley muttered to him. “We used to use owls, but the mess was unbelievable… droppings all over the desks…”

As they clattered upwards again the memos flapped around the lamp swaying from the lift’s ceiling.

“Level Five, Department of International Magical Co -operation, incorporating the International Magical Trading Standards Body, the International Magical Office of Law and the International Confederation of Wizards, British Seats.”

When the doors opened, two of the memos zoomed out with a few more of the witches and wizards, but several more memos zoomed in, so that the light from the lamp flickered and flashed overhead as they darted around it.

“Level Four, Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, incorporating

Beast, Being and Spirit Divisions, Goblin Liaison Office and Pest Advisory Bureau."

"S'cuse," said the wizard carrying the fire-breathing chicken and he left the lift pursued by a little flock of memos. The doors clanged shut yet again.

"Level Three, Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes, including the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad, Obliviator Headquarters and Muggle-Worthy Excuse Committee."

Everybody left the lift on this floor except Mr. Weasley, Harry and a witch who was reading an extremely long piece of parchment that was trailing on the floor. The remaining memos continued to soar around the lamp as the lift juddered upwards again, then the doors opened and the voice made its announcement.

"Level Two, Department of Magical Law Enforcement, including the Improper Use of Magic Office, Auror Headquarters and Wizengamot Administration Services."

"This is us, Harry," said Mr. Weasley, and they followed the witch out of the lift into a corridor lined with doors. "My office is on the other side o f the floor."

"Mr. Weasley" said Harry, as they passed a window through which sunlight was streaming, "aren't we still underground?"

"Yes, we are," said Mr. Weasley. "Those are enchanted windows. Magical Maintenance decide what weather we'll get every day. We had two months of hurricanes last time they were angling for a pay rise… Just round here, Harry."

They turned a corner, walked through a pair of heavy oak doors and emerged in a cluttered open area divided into cubicles, which was buzzing with talk and laughter. Memos were zooming in and out of cubicles like miniature rockets. A lopsided sign on the nearest cubicle read: *Auror Headquarters.*

Harry looked surreptitiously through the doorways as they passed. The Aurors had covered their cubicle walls with everything from pictures of wanted wizards and photographs of their families, to posters of their favorite Quidditch teams and articles from the Daily Prophet. A scarlet-robed man with a ponytail longer than Bill's was sitting with his boots up on his desk, dictating a report to his quill. A little further along, a witch with a patch over one eye was talking over the top of her cubicle wall to Kingsley Shacklebolt.

"Morning, Weasley," said Kingsley carelessly, as they drew nearer. "I've been wanting a word with you, have you got a second?"

"Yes, if it really is a second," said Mr. Weasley, "I'm in rather a hurry."

They were talking as though they hardly knew each other and when Harry opened his mouth to say hello to Kingsley, Mr. Weasley stood on his foot. They followed Kingsley along the row and into the very last cubicle.

Harry received a slight shock; blinking down at him from every direction was Sirius's face. Newspaper cuttings and old photographs - even the one of Sirius being best man at the Potters' wedding -papered the walls. The only Sirius-free space was a map of the world in which little red pins were glowing like jewels.

"Here," said Kingsley brusquely to Mr. Weasley, shoving a sheaf of parchment into his hand. "I need as much information as possible on flying Muggle vehicles sighted in the last twelve months. We've received information that Black might still be using his old motorcycle."

Kingsley tipped Harry an enormous wink and added, in a whisper, "Give him the magazine, he might find it interesting." Then he said in normal tones, "And don't take too long, Weasley, the delay on that firelegs report held our investigation up for a month."

"If you had read my report you would know that the term is firearms," said Mr. Weasley coolly. "And I'm afraid you'll have to wait for information on motorcycles; we're extremely busy at the moment." He dropped his voice and said, "If you can get away before seven, Molly's making meatballs."

He beckoned to Harry and led him out of Kingsley's cubicle, through a second set of oak doors, into another passage, turned left, marched along another corridor, turned right into a dimly lit and distinctly shabby corridor, and finally reached a dead end, where a door on the left stood ajar, revealing a broom cupboard, and a door on the right bore a tarnished brass plaque reading: *Misuse of Muggle Artifacts.*

Mr. Weasley's dingy office seemed to be slightly smaller than the broom cupboard. Two desks had been crammed inside it and there was barely space to move around them because of all the overflowing filing cabinets lining the walls, on top of which were tottering piles of files. The little wall space available bore witness to Mr. Weasley's obsessions: several posters of cars, including one of a dismantled engine; two illustrations of postboxes he seemed to have cut out of Muggle children's books; and a diagram showing how to wire a plug.

Sitting on top of Mr. Weasley's overflowing in-tray was an old toaster that was hiccoughing in a disconsolate way and a pair of empty leather gloves that were twiddling their thumbs. A photograph of the Weasley family stood beside the in-tray. Harry noticed that Percy appeared to have walked out of it.

"We haven't got a window," said Mr. Weasley apologetically, taking off his bomber jacket and placing it on the back of his chair. "We've asked, but they don't seem to think we need one. Have a seat, Harry, doesn't look as if Perkins is in yet."

Harry squeezed himself into the chair behind Perkins's desk while Mr. Weasley riffled through the sheaf of parchment Kingsley Shacklebolt had given him.

"Ah," he said, grinning, as he extracted a copy of a magazine entitled The Quibbler from its midst, "yes…" He flicked through it. "Yes, he's right, I'm sure Sirus will find that very amusing - oh dear, what's this now?"

A memo had just zoomed in through the open door and fluttered to rest on top of the hiccoughing toaster. Mr. Weasley unfolded it and read it aloud.

"'Third regurgitating public toilet reported in Bethnal Green, kindly investigate immediately.' This is getting ridiculous…"

"A regurgitating toilet?"

"Anti-Muggle pranksters," said Mr. Weasley, frowning. "We had two last week, one in Wimbledon, one in Elephant and Castle. Muggles are pulling the flush and instead of everything disappearing - well, you can imagine. The poor things keep calling in those - pumbles, I think they're called - you know, the ones who mend pipes and things."

"Plumbers?"

"Exactly, yes, but of course they're flummoxed. I only hope we can catch whoever's doing it."

"Will it be Aurors who catch them?"

"Oh no, this is too trivial for Aurors, it'll be the ordinary Magical Law Enforcement Patrol - ah, Harry, this is Perkins."

A stooped, timid-looking old wizard with fluffy white hair had just entered the room, panting.

"Oh, Arthur!" he said desperately, without looking at Harry. "Thank goodness, I didn't know what to do for the best, whether to wait here for you or not. I've just sent an owl to your home but you've obviously missed it - an urgent message came ten minutes ago -"

"I know about the regurgitating toilet," said Mr. Weasley.

"No, no, it's not the toilet, it's the Potter boy's hearing - they've changed the time and venue - it starts at eight o'clock now and it's down in old Courtroom Ten -"

"Down in old - but they told me - Merlin's beard!"

Mr. Weasley looked at his watch, let out a yelp and leapt from his chair.

"Quick, Harry, we should have been there five minutes ago!"

Perkins flattened himself against the filing cabinets as Mr. Weasley left the office at a run, Harry close on his heels.

"Why have they changed the time?" Harry said breathlessly, as they hurtled past the Auror cubicles; people poked out their heads and stared as they streaked past. Harry felt as though he'd left all his insides back at Perkins's desk.

“I’ve no idea, but thank goodness we got here so early, if you’d missed it, it would have been catastrophic!”

Mr. Weasley skidded to a halt beside the lifts and jabbed impatiently at the ‘down’ button.

“Come ON!”

The lift clattered into view and they hurried inside. Every time it stopped Mr. Weasley cursed furiously and pummeled the number nine button.

“Those courtrooms haven’t been used in years,” said Mr. Weasley angrily. “I can’t think why they’re doing it down there - unless - but no -”

A plump witch carrying a smoking goblet entered the lift at that moment, and Mr. Weasley did not elaborate.

“The Atrium,” said the cool female voice and the golden grilles slid open, showing Harry a distant glimpse of the golden statues in the fountain. The plump witch got out and a sallow skinned wizard with a very mournful face got in.

“Morning, Arthur,” he said in a sepulchral voice as the lift began to descend. “Don’t often see you down here.”

“Urgent business, Bode,” said Mr. Weasley, who was bouncing on the balls of his feet and throwing anxious looks over at Harry.

“Ah, yes,” said Bode, surveying Harry unblinkingly. “Of course.”

Harry barely had emotion to spare for Bode, but his unfaltering gaze did not make him feel any more comfortable.

“Department of Mysteries,” said the cool female voice, and left it at that.

“Quick, Harry,” said Mr. Weasley as the lift doors rattled open, and they sped up a corridor that was quite different from those above. The walls were bare; there were no windows and no doors apart from a plain black one set at the very end of the corridor. Harry expected them to go through it, but instead Mr. Weasley seized him by the arm and dragged him to the left, where there was an opening leading to a flight of steps.

“Down here, down here,” panted Mr. Weasley, taking two steps at a time. “The lift doesn’t even come down this far… why they’re doing it down there I…”

They reached the bottom of the steps and ran along yet another corridor, which bore a great resemblance to the one that led to Snape’s dungeon at Hogwarts, with rough stone walls and torches in brackets. The doors they passed here were heavy wooden ones with iron bolts and keyholes.

“Courtroom… Ten… I think… we’re nearly… yes.”

Mr. Weasley stumbled to a halt outside a grimy dark door with an immense iron lock and slumped against the wall, clutching at a stitch in his chest.

“Go on,” he panted, pointing his thumb at the door. “Get in there.”

“Aren’t - aren’t you coming with -”

“No, no, I’m not allowed. Good luck!”

Harry’s heart was beating a violent tattoo against his Adam’s apple. He swallowed hard, turned the heavy iron door handle and stepped inside the courtroom.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Hearing

Harry gasped; he could not help himself. The large dungeon he had entered was horribly familiar. He had not only seen it before, he had been here before. This was the place he had visited inside Dumbledore's Pensieve, the place where he had watched the Lestranges sentenced to life imprisonment in Azkaban.

The walls were made of dark stone, dimly lit by torches. Empty benches rose on either side of him, but ahead, in the highest benches of all, were many shadowy figures. They had been talking in low voices, but as the heavy door swung closed behind Harry an ominous silence fell.

A cold male voice rang across the courtroom.

"You're late."

"Sorry," said Harry nervously "I — I didn't know the time had been changed."

"That is not the Wizengamot's fault," said the voice. "An owl was sent to you this morning. Take your seat."

Harry dropped his gaze to the chair in the center of the room, the arms of which were covered in chains. He had seen those chains spring to life and bind whoever sat between them. His footsteps echoed loudly as he walked across the stone floor. When he sat gingerly on the edge of the chair the chains clinked threateningly, but did not bind him. Feeling rather sick, he looked up at the people seated at the bench above.

There were about fifty of them, all, as far as he could see, wearing plum-colored robes with an elaborately worked silver W on the left-hand side of the chest and all staring down their noses at him, some with very austere expressions, others looks of frank curiosity.

In the very middle of the front row sat Cornelius Fudge, the Minister for Magic. Fudge was a portly man who often sported a lime-green bowler hat, though today he had dispensed with it; he had dispensed, too, with the indulgent smile he had once worn when he spoke to Harry. A broad, square-jawed witch with very short grey hair sat on Fudge's left; she wore a monocle and looked forbidding. On Fudge's right was another witch, but she was sitting so far back on the bench that her face was in shadow.

"Very well," said Fudge. "The accused being present - finally - let us begin. Are you ready?" he called down the row.

"Yes, sir," said an eager voice Harry knew. Ron's brother Percy was sitting at the very end of the front bench. Harry looked at Percy, expecting some sign of recognition from him, but none came. Percy's eyes, behind his horn-rimmed glasses, were fixed on his parchment, a quill poised

in his hand.

“Disciplinary hearing of the twelfth of August,” said Fudge in a ringing voice, and Percy began taking notes at once, “into offences committed under the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery and the International Statute of Secrecy by Harry James Potter, resident at number four, Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey.

“Interrogators: Cornelius Oswald Fudge, Minister for Magic; Amelia Susan Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement; Dolores Jane Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister. Court Scribe, Percy Ignatius Weasley -”

“Witness for the defense, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore,” said a quiet voice from behind Harry, who turned his head so fast he cricked his neck.

Dumbledore was striding serenely across the room wearing long midnight-blue robes and a perfectly calm expression. His long silver beard and hair gleamed in the torchlight as he drew level with Harry and looked up at Fudge through the half-moon spectacles that rested halfway down his very crooked nose.

The members of the Wizengamot were muttering. All eyes were now on Dumbledore. Some looked annoyed, others slightly frightened; two elderly witches in the back row, however, raised their hands and waved in welcome.

A powerful emotion had risen in Harry’s chest at the sight of Dumbledore, a fortified, hopeful feeling rather like that which phoenix song gave him. He wanted to catch Dumbledore’s eye, but Dumbledore was not looking his way; he was continuing to look up at the obviously flustered Fudge.

“Ah,” said Fudge, who looked thoroughly disconcerted. “Dumbledore. Yes. You - er - got our – er - message that the time and -er - place of the hearing had been changed, then?”

“I must have missed it,” said Dumbledore cheerfully…”However, due to a lucky mistake I arrived at the Ministry three hours early, so no harm done.”

“Yes - well - I suppose we’ll need another chair - I - Weasley, could you -?”

“Not to worry, not to worry,” said Dumbledore pleasantly; he took out his wand, gave it a little flick, and a squashy chintz armchair appeared out of nowhere next to Harry. Dumbledore sat down, put the tips of his long fingers together and surveyed Fudge over them with an expression of polite interest. The Wizengamot was still muttering and fidgeting restlessly; only when Fudge spoke again did they settle down.

“Yes,” said Fudge again, shuffling his notes. “Well, then. So. The charges. Yes.”

He extricated a piece of parchment from the pile before him, took a deep breath, and read out, “the charges against the accused are as follows: That he did knowingly, deliberately and in full

awareness of the illegality of his actions, having received a previous written warning from the Ministry of Magic on a similar charge, produce a Patronus Charm in a Muggle-inhabited area, in the presence of a Muggle, on the second of August at twenty-three minutes past nine, which constitutes an offence under Paragraph C of the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery, 1875, and also under Section 13 of the International Confederation of Warlocks' Statute of Secrecy.

"You are Harry James Potter, of number four, Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey?" Fudge said, glaring at Harry over the top of his parchment.

"Yes," Harry said.

"You received an official warning from the Ministry for using illegal magic three years ago, did you not?"

"Yes, but -"

"And yet you conjured a Patronus on the night of the second of August?" said Fudge.

"Yes," said Harry, "but -"

"Knowing that you are not permitted to use magic outside school while you are under the age of seventeen?"

"Yes, but -"

"Knowing that you were in an area full of Muggles?"

"Yes, but -"

"Fully aware that you were in close proximity to a Muggle at the time?"

"Yes," said Harry angrily, "but I only used it because we were -"

The witch with the monocle cut across him in a booming voice.

"You produced a fully-fledged Patronus?"

"Yes," said Harry, "because -"

"A corporeal Patronus?"

"A - what?" said Harry.

"Your Patronus had a clearly defined form? I mean t o say, it was more than vapour or smoke?"

“Yes,” said Harry, feeling both impatient and slightly desperate, “it’s a stag, it’s always a stag.”

“Always?” boomed Madam Bones. “You have produced a Patronus before now?”

“Yes,” said Harry, “I’ve been doing it for over a year.”

“And you are fifteen years old?”

“Yes, and -”

“You learned this at school?”

“Yes, Professor Lupin taught me in my third year, because of the -”

“Impressive,” said Madam Bones, staring down at him, “a true Patronus at his age… very impressive indeed.”

Some of the wizards and witches around her were muttering again; a few nodded, but others were frowning and shaking their heads.

“It’s not a question of how impressive the magic was,” said Fudge in a testy voice, “in fact, the more impressive the worse it is, I would have thought, given that the boy did it in plain view of a Muggle!”

Those who had been frowning now murmured in agreement, but it was the sight of Percy’s sanctimonious little nod that goaded Harry into speech.

“I did it because of the Dementors!” he said loudly, before anyone could interrupt him again.

He had expected more muttering, but the silence that fell seemed to be somehow denser than before.

“Dementors?” said Madam Bones after a moment, her thick eyebrows rising until her monocle looked in danger of falling out. “What do you mean, boy?”

“I mean there were two Dementors down that alleyway and they went for me and my cousin!”

“Ah,” said Fudge again, smirking unpleasantly as he looked around at the Wizengamot, as though inviting them to share the joke. “Yes. Yes, I thought we’d be hearing something like this.”

“Dementors in Little Whinging?” Madam Bones said, in a tone of great surprise. “I don’t understand -”

“Don’t you, Amelia?” said Fudge, still smirking. “Let me explain. He’s been thinking it through and decided Dementors would make a very nice little cover story, very nice indeed. Muggles

can’t see Dementors, can they, boy? Highly convenient, highly convenient… so it’s just your word and no witnesses…”

“I’m not lying!” said Harry loudly, over another outbreak of muttering from the court. “There were two of them, coming from opposite ends of the alley, everything went dark and cold and my cousin felt them and ran for it -”

“Enough, enough!” said Fudge, with a very supercilious look on his face. “I’m sorry to interrupt what I’m sure would have been a very well-rehearsed story -”

Dumbledore cleared his throat. The Wizengamot fell silent again.

“We do, in fact, have a witness to the presence of Dementors in that alleyway,” he said, “other than Dudley Dursley, I mean.”

Fudge’s plump face seemed to slacken, as though somebody had let air out of it. He stared down at Dumbledore for a moment or two, then, with the appearance of a man pulling himself back together, said, “We haven’t got time to listen to more tarradiddles, I’m afraid, Dumbledore. I want this dealt with quickly -”

“I may be wrong,” said Dumbledore pleasantly, “but I am sure that under the Wizengamot Charter of Rights, the accused has the right to present witnesses for his or her case? Isn’t that the policy of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Madam Bones?” he continued, addressing the witch in the monocle.

“True,” said Madam Bones. “Perfectly true.”

“Oh, very well, very well,” snapped Fudge. “Where is this person?”

“I brought her with me,” said Dumbledore. “She’s just outside the door. Should I -?”

“No — Weasley, you go,” Fudge barked at Percy, who got up at once, ran down the stone steps from the judge’s balcony and hurried past Dumbledore and Harry without glancing at them.

A moment later, Percy returned, followed by Mrs. Figg. She looked scared and more batty than ever. Harry wished she had thought to change out of her carpet slippers.

Dumbledore stood up and gave Mrs. Figg his chair, conjuring a second one for himself.

“Full name?” said Fudge loudly, when Mrs. Figg had perched herself nervously on the very edge of her seal.

“Arabella Doreen Figg,” said Mrs. Figg in her quavery voice.

“And who exactly are you?” said Fudge, in a bored and lofty voice.

“I’m a resident of Little Whinging, close to where Harry Potter lives,” said Mrs. Figg.

“We have no record of any witch or wizard living in Little Whinging, other than Harry Potter,” said Madam Bones at once. “That situation has always been closely monitored, given… given past events.”

“I’m a Squib,” said Mrs. Figg. “So you wouldn’t have me registered, would you?”

“A Squib, eh?” said Fudge, eyeing her closely. “We’ll be checking that. You’ll leave details of your parentage with my assistant Weasley. Incidentally, can Squibs see Dementors?” he added, looking left and right along the bench.

“Yes, we can!” said Mrs. Figg indignantly.

Fudge looked back down at her, his eyebrows raised. “Very well,” he said aloofly. “What is your story?”

“I had gone out to buy cat food from the corner shop at the end of Wisteria Walk, around about nine o’clock, on the evening of the second of August,” gabbled Mrs. Figg at once, as though she had learned what she was saying by heart, “when I heard a disturbance down the alleyway between Magnolia Crescent and Wisteria Walk. On approaching the mouth of the alleyway I saw Dementors running -”

“Running?” said Madam Bones sharply. “Dementors don’t run, they glide.”

“That’s what I meant to say,” said Mrs. Figg quickly, patches of pink appearing in her withered cheeks. “Gliding along the alley towards what looked like two boys.”

“What did they look like?” said Madam Bones, narrowing her eyes so that the edge of the monocle disappeared into her flesh.

“Well, one was very large and the other one rather skinny -”

“No, no,” said Madam Bones impatiently. “The Dementors… describe them.”

“Oh,” said Mrs. Figg, the pink flush creeping up her neck now. “They were big. Big and wearing cloaks.”

Harry felt a horrible sinking in the pit of his stomach. Whatever Mrs. Figg might say, it sounded to him as though the most she had ever seen was a picture of a Dementor, and a picture could never convey the truth of what these beings were like: the eerie way they moved, hovering inches over the ground; or the rotting smell of them; or that terrible rattling noise they made as they sucked on the surrounding air…

In the second row, a dumpy wizard with a large black moustache leaned close to whisper in the ear of his neighbor, a frizzy-haired witch. She smirked and nodded.

"Big and wearing cloaks," repeated Madam Bones coolly, while Fudge snorted derisively. "I see. Anything else?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Figg. "I felt them. Everything went cold, and this was a very warm summer's night, mark you. And I felt… as though all happiness had gone from the world… and I remembered… dreadful things…"

Her voice shook and died.

Madam Bones's eyes widened slightly. Harry could see red marks under her eyebrow where the monocle had dug into it.

"What did the Dementors do?" she asked, and Harry felt a rush of hope.

"They went for the boys," said Mrs. Figg, her voice stronger and more confident now, the pink flush ebbing away from her face. "One of them had fallen. The other was backing away, trying to repel the Dementor. That was Harry. He tried twice and produced only silver vapour. On the third attempt, he produced a Patronus, which charged down the first Dementor and then, with his encouragement, chased the second one away from his cousin. And that that is what happened," Mrs. Figg finished, somewhat lamely.

Madam Bones looked down at Mrs. Figg in silence. Fudge was not looking at her at all, but fidgeting with his papers. Finally, he raised his eyes and said, rather aggressively, "that's what you saw, is it?"

"That is what happened," Mrs. Figg repeated.

"Very well," said Fudge. "You may go."

Mrs. Figg cast a frightened look from Fudge to Dumbledore, then got up and shuffled off towards the door. Harry heard it thud shut behind her.

"Not a very convincing witness," said Fudge loftily.

"Oh, I don't know," said Madam Bones, in her booming voice. "She certainly described the effects of a Dementor attack very accurately. And I can't imagine why she would say they were there if they weren't."

"But Dementors wandering into a Muggle suburb and just happening to come across a wizard?" snorted Fudge. "The odds on that must be very, very long. Even Bagman wouldn't have bet -"

"Oh, I don't think any of us believe the Dementors were there by coincidence," said Dumbledore lightly.

The witch sitting to the right of Fudge, with her face in shadow, moved slightly but everyone else was quite still and silent.

“And what is that supposed to mean?” Fudge asked icily.

“It means that I think they were ordered there,” said Dumbledore.

“I think we might have a record of it if someone had ordered a pair of Dementors to go strolling through Little Whanging!” barked Fudge.

“Not if the Dementors are taking orders from someone other than the Ministry of Magic these days,” said Dumbledore calmly. “I have already given you my views on this matter, Cornelius.”

“Yes, you have”‘ said Fudge forcefully, “and I have no reason to believe that your views are anything other than bilge, Dumbledore. The Dementors remain in place in Azkaban and are doing everything we ask them to.”

“Then,” said Dumbledore, quietly but clearly, “we must ask ourselves why somebody within the Ministry ordered a pair of Dementors into that alleyway on the second of August.”

In the complete silence that greeted these words, the witch to the right of Fudge leaned forwards so that Harry saw her for the first time.

He thought she looked just like a large, pale toad. She was rather squat with a broad, flabby face, as little neck as Uncle Vernon and a very wide, slack mouth. Her eyes were large, round and slightly bulging. Even the little black velvet bow perched on top of her short curly hair put him in mind of a large fly she was about to catch on a long sticky tongue.

“The Chair recognizes Dolores Jane Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister,” said Fudge.

The witch spoke in a fluttery, girlish, high-pitched voice that took Harry aback; he had been expecting a croak.

“I’m sure I must have misunderstood you, Professor Dumbledore,” she said, with a simper that left her big, round eyes as cold as ever. “So silly of me. But it sounded for a teensy moment as though you were suggesting that the Ministry of Magic had ordered an attack on this boy!”

She gave a silvery laugh that made the hairs on the back of Harry’s neck stand up. A few other members of the Wizengamot laughed with her. It could not have been plainer that not one of them was really amused.

“If it is true that the Dementors are taking orders only from the Ministry of Magic, and it is also true that two Dementors attacked Harry and his cousin a week ago, then it follows logically that somebody at the Ministry might have ordered the attacks,” said Dumbledore politely. “Of course, these particular Dementors may have been outside Ministry control -”

“There are no Dementors outside Ministry control!” snapped Fudge, who had turned brick red.

Dumbledore inclined his head in a little bow.

“Then undoubtedly the Ministry will be making a full inquiry into why two Dementors were so very far from Azkaban and why they attacked without authorization.”

“It is not for you to decide what the Ministry of Magic does or does not do, Dumbledore!” snapped Fudge, now a shade of magenta of which Uncle Vernon would have been proud.

“Of course it isn’t,” said Dumbledore mildly. “I was merely expressing my confidence that this matter will not go uninvestigated.”

He glanced at Madam Bones, who readjusted her monocle and stared back at him, frowning slightly.

“I would remind everybody that the behavior of these Dementors, if indeed they are not figments of this boy’s imagination, is not the subject of this hearing!” said Fudge. “We are here to examine Harry Potter’s offences under the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery!”

“Of course we are,” said Dumbledore, “but the presence of Dementors in that alleyway is highly relevant. Clause Seven of the Decree states that magic may be used before Muggles in exceptional circumstances, and as those exceptional circumstances include situations which threaten the life of the wizard or witch him - or herself, or any witches, wizards or Muggles present at the time of the -”

“We are familiar with Clause Seven, thank you very much!” snarled Fudge.

“Of course you are,” said Dumbledore courteously. “Then we are in agreement that Harry’s use of the Patronus Charm in these circumstances falls precisely into the category of exceptional circumstances the clause describes?”

“If there were Dementors, which I doubt.”

“You have heard it from an eyewitness,” Dumbledore interrupted. “If you still doubt her truthfulness, call her back, question her again. I am sure she would not object.”

“I - that - not -” blustered Fudge, fiddling with the papers before him. “It’s - I want this over with today, Dumbledore!”

“But naturally, you would not care how many times you heard from a witness, if the alternative was a serious miscarriage of justice,” said Dumbledore.

“Serious miscarriage, my hat!” said Fudge at the top of his voice. “Have you ever bothered to tot up the number of cock-and-bull stories this boy has come out with, Dumbledore, while trying to cover up his flagrant misuse of magic out of school? I suppose you’ve forgotten the Hover Charm he used three years ago -”

“That wasn’t me, it was a house-elf!” said Harry.

“YOU SEE” roared Fudge, gesturing flamboyantly in Harry’s direction. “A house-elf! In a Muggle house! I ask you.”

“The house-elf in question is currently in the employ of Hogwarts School,” said Dumbledore. “I can summon him here in an instant to give evidence if you wish.”

“I - not - I haven’t got time to listen to house-elves! Anyway, that’s not the only - he blew up his aunt, for God’s sake!” Fudge shouted, banging his fist on the judge’s bench and upsetting a bottle of ink.

“And you very kindly did not press charges on that occasion, accepting, I presume, that even the best wizards cannot always control their emotions,” said Dumbledore calmly, as Fudge attempted to scrub the ink off his notes.

“And I haven’t even started on what he gets up to at school.”

“But, as the Ministry has no authority to punish Hogwarts students for misdemeanors at school, Harry’s behavior there is not relevant to this hearing,” said Dumbledore, as politely as ever, but now with a suggestion of coolness behind his words.

“Oho!” said Fudge. “Not our business what he does at school, eh? You think so?”

“The Ministry does not have the power to expel Hogwarts students, Cornelius, as I reminded you on the night of the second of August,” said Dumbledore. “Nor does it have the right to confiscate wands until charges have been successfully proven; again, as I reminded you on the night of the second of August. In your admirable haste to ensure that the law is upheld, you appear, inadvertently I am sure, to have overlooked a few laws yourself.”

“Laws can be changed,” said Fudge savagely.

“Of course they can,” said Dumbledore, inclining his head. “And you certainly seem to be making many changes, Cornelius. Why, in the few short weeks since I was asked to leave the Wizengamot, it has already become the practice to hold a full criminal trial to deal with a simple matter of underage magic!”

A few of the wizards above them shifted uncomfortably in their seats. Fudge turned a slightly deeper shade of puce. The toadlike witch on his right, however, merely gazed at Dumbledore, her face quite expressionless.

“As far as I am aware,” Dumbledore continued, “there is no law yet in place that says this court’s job is to punish Harry for every bit of magic he has ever performed. He has been charged with a specific offence and he has presented his defense. All he and I can do now is to await your verdict.”

Dumbledore put his fingertips together again and said no more. Fudge glared at him, evidently incensed. Harry glanced sideways at Dumbledore, seeking reassurance; he was not at all sure that Dumbledore was right in telling the Wizengamot, in effect, that it was about time they made a decision. Again, however, Dumbledore seemed oblivious to Harry's attempt to catch his eye. He continued to look up at the benches where the entire Wizengamot had fallen into urgent, whispered conversations.

Harry looked at his feet. His heart, which seemed to have swollen to an unnatural size, was thumping loudly under his ribs. He had expected the hearing to last longer than this. He was not at all sure that he had made a good impression. He had not really said very much. He ought to have explained more fully about the Dementors, about how he had fallen over, about how both he and Dudley had nearly been kissed…

Twice he looked up at Fudge and opened his mouth to speak, but his swollen heart was now constricting his air passages and both times he merely took a deep breath and looked back down at his shoes.

Then the whispering stopped. Harry wanted to look up at the judges, but found that it was really much, much easier to keep examining his laces.

“Those in favor of clearing the witness of all charges?” said Madam Boness booming voice. Harry's head jerked upwards. There were hands in the air, many of them… more than half! Breathing very fast, he tried to count, but before he could finish, Madam Bones had said, “And those in favor of conviction?”

Fudge raised his hand; so did half a dozen others, including the witch on his right and the heavily-moustached wizard and the frizzy-haired witch in the second row.

Fudge glanced around at them all, looking as though there was something large stuck in his throat, then lowered his own hand. He took two deep breaths and said, in a voice distorted by suppressed rage, “Very well, very well… cleared of all charges.”

“Excellent,” said Dumbledore briskly, springing to his feet, pulling out his wand and causing the two chintz armchairs to vanish. “Well, I must be getting along. Good-day to you all.” And without looking once at Harry, he swept from the dungeon.

CHAPTER NINE

The Woes of Mrs. Weasley

Dumbledore’s abrupt departure took Harry completely by surprise. He remained sitting where he was in the chained chair, struggling with his feelings of shock and relief. The Wizengamot were all getting to their feet, talking, gathering up their papers and packing them away. Harry stood up. Nobody seemed to be paying him the slightest bit of attention, except the toadlike witch on Fudge’s right, who was now gazing down at him instead of at Dumbledore. Ignoring her, he tried to catch Fudge’s eye, or Madam Bones’s, wanting to ask whether he was free to go, but Fudge seemed quite determined not to notice Harry, and Madam Bones was busy with her briefcase, so he took a few tentative steps towards the exit and, when nobody called him back, broke into a very fast walk.

He took the last few steps at a run, wrenched open the door and almost collided with Mr. Weasley, who was standing right outside, looking pale and apprehensive.

“Dumbledore didn’t say -”

“Cleared,” Harry said, pulling the door closed behind him, “of all charges!”

Beaming, Mr. Weasley seized Harry by the shoulders.

“Harry, that’s wonderful! Well, of course, they couldn’t have found you guilty, not on the evidence, but even so, I can’t pretend I wasn’t -”

But Mr. Weasley broke off, because the courtroom door had just opened again. The Wizengamot were filing out.

“Merlin’s beard!” exclaimed Mr. Weasley wonderingly, pulling Harry aside to let them all pass. “You were tried by the full court?”

“I think so,” said Harry quietly.

One or two of the wizards nodded to Harry as they passed and a few, including Madam Bones, said, “Morning, Arthur,” to Mr. Weasley, but most averted their eyes. Cornelius Fudge and the toadlike witch were almost the last to leave the dungeon. Fudge acted as though Mr. Weasley and Harry were part of the wall, but again, the witch looked almost appraisingly at Harry as she passed. Last of all to pass was Percy. Like Fudge, he completely ignored his father and Harry; he marched past clutching a large roll of parchment and a handful of spare quills, his back rigid and his nose in the air. The lines around Mr. Weasleys mouth tightened slightly, but other than this he gave no sign that he had seen his third son.

“I’m going to take you straight back so you can tell the others the good news,” he said, beckoning Harry forwards as Percy’s heels disappeared up the steps to Level Nine. “I’ll drop you off on the way to that toilet in Bethnal Green. Come on…”

“So, what will you have to do about the toilet?” Harry asked, grinning. Everything suddenly seemed five times funnier than usual. It was starting to sink in: he was cleared, he was going back to Hogwarts.

“Oh, it’s a simple enough anti-jinx,” said Mr. Weasley as they mounted the stairs, “but it’s not so much having to repair the damage, it’s more the attitude behind the vandalism, Harry. Mugglebaiting might strike some wizards as funny, but it’s an expression of something much deeper and nastier, and I for one -”

Mr. Weasley broke off in mid-sentence. They had just reached the ninth-level corridor and Cornelius Fudge was standing a few feet away from them, talking quietly to a tall man with sleek blond hair and a pointed, pale face.

The second man turned at the sound of their footsteps. He, too, broke off in mid-conversation, his cold grey eyes narrowed and fixed upon Harry’s face.

“Well, well, well… Patronus Potter,” said Lucius Malfoy coolly.

Harry felt winded, as though he had just walked into something solid. He had last seen those cold grey eyes through slits in a Death Eaters hood, and last heard that man’s voice jeering in a dark graveyard while Lord Voldemort tortured him. Harry could not believe that Lucius Malfoy dared look him in the face; he could not believe that he was here, in the Ministry of Magic, or that Cornelius Fudge was talking to him, when Harry had told Fudge mere weeks ago that Malfoy was a Death Eater.

“The Minister was just telling me about your lucky escape, Potter,” drawled Mr. Malfoy. “Quite astonishing, the way you continue to wriggle out of very tight holes… snakelike, in fact.”

Mr. Weasley gripped Harry’s shoulder in warning.

“Yeah,” said Harry, “yeah, I’m good at escaping.”

Lucius Malfoy raised his eyes to Mr. Weasley’s face.

“And Arthur Weasley too! What are you doing here, Arthur?”

“I work here,” said Mr. Weasley curtly.

“Not here, surely?” said Mr. Malfoy, raising his eye brows and glancing towards the door over Mr. Weasley’s shoulder. “I thought you were up on the second floor… don’t you do something that involves sneaking Muggle artifacts home and bewitching them?”

“No,” Mr. Weasley snapped, his fingers now biting into Harry’s shoulder.

“What are you doing here, anyway?” Harry asked Lucius Malfoy.

“I don’t think private matters between myself and the Minister are any concern of yours, Potter,” said Malfoy, smoothing the front of his robes. Harry distinctly heard the gentle clinking of what sounded like a full pocket of gold. “Really, just because you are Dumbledore’s favorite boy, you must not expect the same indulgence from the rest of us… shall we go up to your office, then, Minister?”

“Certainly” said Fudge, turning his back on Harry and Mr. Weasley. “This way, Lucius.”

They strode off together, talking in low voices. Mr. Weasley did not let go of Harry’s shoulder until they had disappeared into the lift.

“Why wasn’t he waiting outside Fudge’s office if they’ve got business to do together?” Harry burst out furiously. “What was he doing down here?”

“Trying to sneak down to the courtroom, if you ask me,” said Mr. Weasley, looking extremely agitated and glancing over his shoulder as though making sure they could not be overheard. “Trying to find out whether you’d been expelled or not. I’ll leave a note for Dumbledore when I drop you off, he ought to know Malfoys been talking to Fudge again.”

“What private business have they got together, anyway?”

“Gold, I expect,” said Mr. Weasley angrily. “Malfoy’s been giving generously to all sorts of things for years… gets him in with the right people… then he can ask favors… delay laws he doesn’t want passed… oh, he’s very well-connected, Lucius Malfoy.”

The lift arrived; it was empty except for a flock of memos that flapped around Mr. Weasley’s head as he pressed the button for the Atrium and the doors clanged shut. He waved them away irritably.

“Mr. Weasley” said Harry slowly, “if Fudge is meeting Death Eaters like Malfoy, if he’s seeing them alone, how do we know they haven’t put the Imperius Curse on him?”

“Don’t think it hasn’t occurred to us, Harry” said Mr. Weasley quietly. “But Dumbledore thinks Fudge is acting of his own accord at the moment - which, as Dumbledore says, is not a lot of comfort. Best not talk about it any more just now, Harry.”

The doors slid open and they stepped out into the now almost-deserted Atrium. Eric the watchwizard was hidden behind his Daily Prophet again. They had walked straight past the golden fountain before Harry remembered.

“Wait…” he told Mr. Weasley, and, pulling his moneybag from his pocket, he turned back to the fountain.

He looked up into the handsome wizard's face, but up close Harry thought he looked rather weak and foolish. The witch was wearing a vapid smile like a beauty contestant, and from what Harry knew of goblins and centaurs, they were most unlikely to be caught staring so soppily at humans of any description. Only the house-elf's attitude of creeping servility looked convincing. With a grin at the thought of what Hermione would say if she could see the statue of the elf, Harry turned his moneybag upside-down and emptied not just ten Galleons, but the whole contents into the pool.

"I knew it!" yelled Ron, punching the air. "You always get away with stuff!"

"They were bound to clear you," said Hermione, who had looked positively faint with anxiety when Harry had entered the kitchen and was now holding a shaking hand over her eyes, "there was no case against you, none at all."

"Everyone seems quite relieved, though, considering you all knew I'd get off," said Harry, smiling.

Mrs. Weasley was wiping her face on her apron, and Fred, George and Ginny were doing a kind of war dance to a chant that went: "He got off, he got off, he got off…"

"That's enough! Settle down!" shouted Mr. Weasley, though he too was smiling. "Listen, Sirius, Lucius Malfoy was at the Ministry -"

"What?" said Sirius sharply.

"He got off, he got off, he got off…"

"Be quiet, you three! Yes, we saw him talking to Fudge on Level Nine, then they went up to Fudge's office together. Dumbledore ought to know."

"Absolutely," said Sirius. "We'll tell him, don't worry."

"Well, I'd better get going, there's a vomiting toilet waiting for me in Bethnal Green. Molly, I'll be late, I'm covering for Tonks, but Kingsley might be dropping in for dinner -"

"He got off, he got off, he got off…"

"That's enough - Fred - George - Ginny!" said Mrs. Weasley, as Mr. Weasley left the kitchen.

"Harry, dear, come and sit down, have some lunch, you hardly ate breakfast."

Ron and Hermione sat themselves down opposite him, looking happier than they had done since he had first arrived at Grimmauld Place, and Harry's feeling of giddy relief, which had been somewhat dented by his encounter with Lucius Malfoy, swelled again. The gloomy house seemed warmer and more welcoming all of a sudden; even Kreacher looked less ugly as he poked his snoutlike nose into the kitchen to investigate the source of all the noise.

“Course, once Dumbledore turned up on your side, there was no way they were going to convict you,” said Ron happily, now dishing great mounds of mashed potatoes on to everyone’s plates.

“Yeah, he swung it for me,” said Harry. He felt it would sound highly ungrateful, not to mention childish, to say, “I wish he’d talked to me, though. Or even looked at me.”

And as he thought this, the scar on his forehead burned so badly that he clapped his hand to it.

“What’s up?” said Hermione, looking alarmed.

“Scar,” Harry mumbled. “But it’s nothing… it happens all the time now…”

None of the others had noticed a thing; all of them were now helping themselves to food while gloating over Harry’s narrow escape; Fred, George and Ginny were still singing. Hermione looked rather anxious, but before she could say anything, Ron had said happily, “I bet Dumbledore turns up this evening, to celebrate with us, you know.”

“I don’t think he’ll be able to, Ron,” said Mrs. Weasley, setting a huge plate of roast chicken down in front of Harry. “He’s really very busy at the moment.”

“HE GOT OFF, HE GOT OFF, HE GOT OFF”

“SHUT UP!” roared Mrs. Weasley.

Over the next few days Harry could not help noticing that there was one person within number twelve, Grimmauld Place, who did not seem wholly overjoyed that he would be returning to Hogwarts. Sirius had put up a very good show of happiness on first hearing the news, wringing Harry’s hand and beaming just like the rest of them. Soon, however, he was moodier and surlier than before, talking less to everybody, even Harry, and spending increasing amounts of time shut up in his mother’s room with Buckbeak.

“Don’t you go feeling guilty!” said Hermione sternly, after Harry had confided some of his feelings to her and Ron while they scrubbed out a mouldy cupboard on the third floor a few days later. “You belong at Hogwarts and Sirius knows it. Personally, I think he’s being selfish.”

“That’s a bit harsh, Hermione,” said Ron, frowning as he attempted to prize off a bit of mould that had attached itself firmly to his finger, “you wouldn’t want to be stuck inside this house without any company.”

“He’ll have company!” said Hermione. “It’s Headquarters to the Order of the Phoenix, isn’t it? He just got his hopes up that Harry would be coming to live here with him.”

“I don’t think that’s true” said Harry, wringing out his cloth. “He wouldn’t give me a straight answer when I asked him if I could.”

“He just didn’t want to get his own hopes up even more,” said Hermione wisely. “And he

probably felt a bit guilty himself, because I think a part of him was really hoping you'd be expelled. Then you'd both be outcasts together."

"Come off it!" said Harry and Ron together, but Hermione merely shrugged.

"Suit yourselves. But I sometimes think Ron's mums right and Sirius gets confused about whether you're you or your father, Harry."

"So you think he's touched in the head?" said Harry heatedly.

"No, I just think he's been very lonely for a long time," said Hermione simply.

At this point, Mrs. Weasley entered the bedroom behind them.

"Still not finished?" she said, poking her head into the cupboard.

"I thought you might be here to tell us to have a break" said Ron bitterly. "D'you know how much mould we've got rid of since we arrived here?"

"You were so keen to help the Order," said Mrs. Weasley, "you can do your bit by making Headquarters fit to live in."

"I feel like a house-elf," grumbled Ron.

"Well, now you understand what dreadful lives they lead, perhaps you'll be a bit more active in SPEW!" said Hermione hopefully, as Mrs. Weasley left them to it. "You know, maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea to show people exactly how horrible it is to clean all the time - we could do a sponsored scrub of Gryffindor common room, all proceeds to SPEW, it would raise awareness as well as funds."

"I'll sponsor you to shut up about SPEW," Ron muttered irritably, but only so Harry could hear him.

Harry found himself daydreaming about Hogwarts more and more as the end of the holidays approached; he could not wait to see Hagrid again, to play Quidditch, even to stroll across the vegetable patches to the Herbology greenhouses; it would be a treat just to leave this dusty, musty house, where half of the cupboards were still bolted shut and Kreacher wheezed insults out of the shadows as you passed, though Harry was careful not to say any of this within earshot of Sirius.

The fact was that living at the Headquarters of the anti-Voldemort movement was not nearly as interesting or exciting as Harry would have expected before he'd experienced it. Though members of the Order of the Phoenix came and went regularly, sometimes staying for meals, sometimes only for a few minutes of whispered conversation, Mrs. Weasley made sure that Harry and the others were kept well out of earshot (whether Extendable or normal) and nobody, not even Sirius, seemed to feel that Harry needed to know anything more than he had heard on

the night of his arrival.

On the very last day of the holidays Harry was sweeping up Hedwigs owl droppings from the top of the wardrobe when Ron entered their bedroom carrying a couple of envelopes.

“Booklists have arrived,” he said, throwing one of the envelopes up to Harry, who was standing on a chair. “About time, I thought they’d forgotten, they usually come much earlier than this…”

Harry swept the last of the droppings into a rubbish bag and threw the bag over Ron’s head into the wastepaper basket in the corner, which swallowed it and belched loudly. He then opened his letter. It contained two pieces of parchment: one the usual reminder that term started on the first of September; the other telling him which books he would need for the coming year.

“Only two new ones,” he said, reading the list, “The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 5, by Miranda Goshawk, and Defensive Magical Theory, by Wilbert Slinkhard.”

Crack.

Fred and George Apparated right beside Harry. He was so used to them doing this by now that he didn’t even fall off his chair.

“We were just wondering who assigned the Slinkhard book,” said Fred conversationally.

“Because it means Dumbledore’s found a new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher,” said George.

“And about time too,” said Fred.

“What d’you mean?” Harry asked, jumping down beside them.

“Well, we overheard Mum and Dad talking on the Extendable Ears a few weeks back,” Fred told Harry, “and from what they were saying, Dumbledore was having real trouble finding anyone to do the job this year.”

“Not surprising, is it, when you look at what’s happened to the last four?” said George.

“One sacked, one dead, one’s memory removed and one locked in a trunk for nine months,” said Harry, counting them off on his fingers. “Yeah, I see what you mean.”

“What’s up with you, Ron?” asked Fred.

Ron did not answer. Harry looked round. Ron was standing very still with his mouth slightly open, gaping at his letter from Hogwarts.

“What’s the matter?” said Fred impatiently, moving around Ron to look over his shoulder at the parchment.

Fred’s mouth fell open, too.

“Prefect?” he said, staring incredulously at the letter. “Prefect?”

George leapt forwards, seized the envelope in Ron’s other hand and turned it upside-down. Harry saw something scarlet and gold fall into George’s palm.

“No way,” said George in a hushed voice.

“There’s been a mistake,” said Fred, snatching the letter out of Ron’s grasp and holding it up to the light as though checking for a watermark. “No one in their right mind would make Ron a prefect.”

The twins’ heads turned in unison and both of them stared at Harry.

“We thought you were a cert!” said Fred, in a tone that suggested Harry had tricked them in some way.

“We thought Dumbledore was bound to pick you!” said George indignantly.

“Winning the Triwizard and everything!” said Fred.

“I suppose all the mad stuff must’ve counted against him,” said George to Fred.

“Yeah,” said Fred slowly. “Yeah, you’ve caused too much trouble, mate. Well, at least one of you’s got their priorities right.”

He strode over to Harry and clapped him on the back while giving Ron a scathing look.

“Prefect… ickle Ronnie the Prefect.”

“Oh, Mum’s going to be revolting,” groaned George, thrusting the prefect badge back at Ron as though it might contaminate him.

Ron, who still had not said a word, took the badge, stared at it for a moment, then held it out to Harry as though asking mutely for confirmation that it was genuine. Harry took it. A large P was superimposed on the Gryffindor lion. He had seen a badge just like this on Percy’s chest on his very first day at Hogwarts.

The door banged open. Hermione came tearing into the room, her cheeks flushed and her hair flying. There was an envelope in her hand.

“Did you - did you get -?”

She spotted the badge in Harry’s hand and let out a shriek.

“I knew it!’ she said excitedly, brandishing her letter. “Me too, Harry, me too!”

“No,” said Harry quickly, pushing the badge back into Ron’s hand. “It’s Ron, not me.”

“It - what?”

“Ron’s prefect, not me,” Harry said.

“Ron?” said Hermione, her jaw dropping. “But… are you sure? I mean -”

She turned red as Ron looked round at her with a defiant expression on his face.

“It’s my name on the letter,” he said.

“I…” said Hermione, looking thoroughly bewildered. “I… well… wow! Well done, Ron! That’s really -”

“Unexpected,” said George, nodding.

“No,” said Hermione, blushing harder than ever, “no it’s not… Ron’s done loads of… he’s really…”

The door behind her opened a little wider and Mrs. Weasley backed into the room carrying a pile of freshly laundered robes.

“Ginny said the booklists had come at last,” she said, glancing around at all the envelopes as she made her way over to the bed and started sorting the robes into two piles. “If you give them to me I’ll take them over to Diagon Alley this afternoon and get your books while you’re packing. Ron, I’ll have to get you more pajamas, these are at least six inches too short, I can’t believe how fast you’re growing… what color would you like?”

“Get him red and gold to match his badge,” said George, smirking.

“Match his what?” said Mrs. Weasley absently, rolling up a pair of maroon socks and placing them on Ron’s pile.

“His badge,” said Fred, with the air of getting the worst over quickly. “His lovely shiny new prefect’s badge.”

Fred’s words took a moment to penetrate Mrs. Weasley’s preoccupation with pajamas.

“His… but… Ron, you’re not…?”

Ron held up his badge.

Mrs. Weasley let out a shriek just like Hermione’s.

“I don’t believe it! I don’t believe it! Oh, Ron, how wonderful! A prefect! That’s everyone in the family!”

“What are Fred and I, next-door neighbors?” said George indignantly, as his mother pushed him aside and flung her arms around her youngest son.

“Wait until your father hears! Ron, I’m so proud of you, what wonderful news, you could end up Head Boy just like Bill and Percy, it’s the first step! Oh, what a thing to happen in the middle of all this worry, I’m just thrilled, oh, Ronnie —”

Fred and George were both making loud retching noises behind her back but Mrs. Weasley did not notice; arms tight around Ron’s neck, she was kissing him all over his face, which had turned a brighter scarlet than his badge.

“Mum… don’t… Mum, get a grip…” he muttered, trying to push her away.

She let go of him and said breathlessly, “Well, what will it be? We gave Percy an owl, but you’ve already got one, of course.”

“W-what do you mean?” said Ron, looking as though he did not dare believe his ears.

“You’ve got to have a reward for this!” said Mrs. Weasley fondly. “How about a nice new set of dress robes?”

“We’ve already bought him some,” said Fred sourly, who looked as though he sincerely regretted this generosity.

“Or a new cauldron, Charlie’s old one’s rusting through, or a new rat, you always liked Scabbers”

“Mum,” said Ron hopefully, “can I have a new broom?”

Mrs. Weasley’s face fell slightly; broomsticks were expensive.

“Not a really good one!” Ron hastened to add. “Just - just a new one for a change…”

Mrs. Weasley hesitated, then smiled.

“Of course you can… well, I’d better get going if I’ve got a broom to buy too. I’ll see you all later… little Ronnie, a prefect! And don’t forget to pack your trunks… a prefect… oh, I’m all of a dither!”

She gave Ron yet another kiss on the cheek, sniffed loudly, and bustled from the room.
Fred and George exchanged looks.

“You don’t mind if we don’t kiss you, do you, Ron?” said Fred in a falsely anxious voice.

“We could curtsey, if you like,” said George.

“Oh, shut up,” said Ron, scowling at them.

“Or what?” said Fred, an evil grin spreading across his face. “Going to put us in detention?”

“I’d love to see him try,” sniggered George.

“He could if you don’t watch out!” said Hermione angrily.

Fred and George burst out laughing, and Ron muttered, “Drop it, Hermione.”

“We’re going to have to watch our step, George,” said Fred, pretending to tremble, “with these two on our case…”

“Yeah, it looks like our law-breaking days are finally over,” said George, shaking his head.

And with another loud crack, the twins Disapparated.

“Those two!” said Hermione furiously, staring up at the ceiling, through which they could now hear Fred and George roaring with laughter in the room upstairs. “Don’t pay any attention to them, Ron, they’re only jealous!”

“I don’t think they are,” said Ron doubtfully, also looking up at the ceiling. “They’ve always said only prats become prefects… still,” he added on a happier note, “they’ve never had new brooms! I wish I could go with Mum and choose… she’ll never be able to afford a Nimbus, but there’s the new Cleansweep out, that’d be great… yeah, I think I’ll go and tell her I like the Cleansweep, just so she knows.”

He dashed from the room, leaving Harry and Hermione alone.

For some reason, Harry found he did not want to look at Hermione. He turned to his bed, picked up the pile of clean robes Mrs. Weasley had laid on it and crossed the room to his trunk.

“Harry?” said Hermione tentatively.

“Well done, Hermione,” said Harry, so heartily it did not sound like his voice at all, and, still not looking at her, “brilliant. Prefect. Great.”

“Thanks,” said Hermione. “Erm - Harry - could I borrow Hedwig so I can tell Mum and Dad? They’ll be really pleased - I mean prefect is something they can understand.”

“Yeah, no problem,” said Harry, still in the horrible hearty voice that did not belong to him. “Take her!”

He leaned over his trunk, laid the robes on the bottom of it and pretended to be rummaging for

something while Hermione crossed to the wardrobe and called Hedwig down. A few moments passed; Harry heard the door close but remained bent double, listening; the only sounds he could hear were the blank picture on the wall sniggering again and the wastepaper basket in the corner coughing up the owl droppings.

He straightened up and looked behind him. Hermione had left and Hedwig had gone. Harry hurried across the room, closed the door, then returned slowly to his bed and sank on to it, gazing unseeingly at the foot of the wardrobe.

He had forgotten completely about prefects being chosen in the fifth year. He had been too anxious about the possibility of being expelled to spare a thought for the fact that badges must be winging their way towards certain people. But if he had remembered… if he had thought about it… what would he have expected?

Not this, said a small and truthful voice inside his head.

Harry screwed up his face and buried it in his hands. He could not lie to himself; if he had known the prefect badge was on its way, he would have expected it to come to him, not Ron. Did this make him as arrogant as Draco Malfoy? Did he think himself superior to everyone else? Did he really believe he was better than Ron?

No, said the small voice defiantly.

Was that true? Harry wondered, anxiously probing his own feelings.

I'm better at Quidditch, said the voice. *But I'm not better at anything else.*

That was definitely true, Harry thought; he was no better than Ron in lessons. But what about outside lessons? What about those adventures he, Ron and Hermione had had together since starting at Hogwarts, often risking much worse than expulsion?

Well, Ron and Hermione were with me most of the time, said the voice in Harry's head.
Not all the time, though, Harry argued with himself. They didn't fight Quirrell with me. They didn't take on Riddle and the Basilisk. They didn't get rid of all those Dementors the night Sirius escaped. They weren't in that graveyard with me, the night Voldemort returned…

And the same feeling of ill-usage that had overwhelmed him on the night he had arrived rose again. I've definitely done more, Harry thought indignantly. I've done more than either of them!

But maybe, said the small voice fairly, *maybe Dumbledore doesn't choose prefects because they've got themselves into a load of dangerous situations… maybe he chooses them for other reasons… Ron must have something you don't…*

Harry opened his eyes and stared through his fingers at the wardrobe's clawed feet, remembering what Fred had said: "No one in their right mind would make Ron a prefect…"

Harry gave a small snort of laughter. A second later he felt sickened with himself.

Ron had not asked Dumbledore to give him the prefect badge. This was not Ron’s fault. Was he, Harry, Ron’s best friend in the world, going to sulk because he didn’t have a badge, laugh with the twins behind Ron’s back, ruin this for Ron when, for the first time, he had beaten Harry at something?

At this point Harry heard Ron’s footsteps on the stairs again. He stood up, straightened his glasses, and hitched a grin on to his face as Ron bounded back through the door.

“Just caught her!” he said happily. “She says she’ll get the Cleansweep if she can.”

“Cool,” Harry said, and he was relieved to hear that his voice had stopped sounding hearty.

“Listen - Ron - well done, mate.”

The smile faded off Ron’s face.

“I never thought it would be me!” he said, shaking his head. “I thought it would be you!”

“Nah, I’ve caused too much trouble,” Harry said, echoing Fred.

“Yeah,” said Ron, “yeah, I suppose… well, we’d better get our trunks packed, hadn’t we?”

It was odd how widely their possessions seemed to have scattered themselves since they had arrived. It took them most of the afternoon to retrieve their books and belongings from all over the house and stow them back inside their school trunks. Harry noticed that Ron kept moving his prefects badge around, first placing it on his bedside table, then putting it into his jeans pocket, then taking it out and lying it on his folded robes, as though to see the effect of the red on the black. Only when Fred and George dropped in and offered to attach it to his forehead with a Permanent Sticking Charm did he wrap it tenderly in his maroon socks and lock it in his trunk. Mrs. Weasley returned from Diagon Alley around six o’clock, laden with books and carrying a long package wrapped in thick brown paper that Ron took from her with a moan of longing.

“Never mind unwrapping it now, people are arriving for dinner, I want you all downstairs,” she said, but the moment she was out of sight Ron ripped off the paper in a frenzy and examined every inch of his new broom, an ecstatic expression on his face.

Down in the basement Mrs. Weasley had hung a scarlet banner over the heavily laden dinner table, which read:

CONGRATULATIONS

RON AND HERMIONE

NEW PREFECTS

She looked in a better mood than Harry had seen her all holiday.

“I thought we’d have a little party, not a sit-down dinner,” she told Harry, Ron, Hermione, Fred, George and Ginny as they entered the room. “Your father and Bill are on their way, Ron. I’ve sent them both owls and they’re thrilled,” she added, beaming.

Fred rolled his eyes.

Sirius, Lupin, Tonks and Kingsley Shacklebolt were already there and Mad-Eye Moody stumped in shortly after Harry had got himself a Butterbeer.

“Oh, Alastor, I am glad you’re here,” said Mrs. Weasley brightly, as Mad-Eye shrugged off his traveling cloak. “We’ve been wanting to ask you for ages - could you have a look in the writing desk in the drawing room and tell us what’s inside it? We haven’t wanted to open it just in case it’s something really nasty.”

“No problem, Molly…”

Moody’s electric-blue eye swiveled upwards and stared fixedly through the ceiling of the kitchen.

“Drawing room…” he growled, as the pupil contracted. “Desk in the corner? Yeah, I see it… yeah, it’s a Boggart… want me to go up and get rid of it, Molly?”

“No, no, I’ll do it myself later,” beamed Mrs. Weasley, “you have your drink. We’re having a little bit of a celebration, actually…” She gesture d at the scarlet banner. “Fourth prefect in the family!” she said fondly, ruffling Ron’s hair.

“Prefect, eh?” growled Moody, his normal eye on Ron and his magical eye swiveling around to gaze into the side of his head. Harry had the very uncomfortable feeling it was looking at him and moved away towards Sirius and Lupin.

“Well, congratulations,” said Moody, still glaring at Ron with his normal eye, “authority figures always attract trouble, but I suppose Dumbledore thinks you can withstand most major jinxes or he wouldn’t have appointed you…”

Ron looked rather startled at this view of the matter but was saved the trouble of responding by the arrival of his father and eldest brother. Mrs. Weasley was in such a good mood she did not even complain that they had brought Mundungus with them; he was wearing a long overcoat that seemed oddly lumpy in unlikely places and declined the offer to remove it and put it with Moody’s traveling cloak.

“Well, I think a toast is in order,” said Mr. Weasley, when everyone had a drink. He raised his goblet. “To Ron and Hermione, the new Gryffindor prefects!”

Ron and Hermione beamed as everyone drank to them, and then applauded.

“I was never a prefect myself,” said Tonks brightly from behind Harry as everybody moved towards the table to help themselves to food. Her hair was tomato red and waist-length today; she looked like Ginny’s older sister. “My Head of House said I lacked certain necessary qualities.”

“Like what?” said Ginny, who was choosing a baked potato.

“Like the ability to behave myself,” said Tonks.

Ginny laughed; Hermione looked as though she did not know whether to smile or not and compromised by taking an extra large gulp of Butterbeer and choking on it.

“What about you, Sirius?” Ginny asked, thumping Hermione on the back.

Sirius, who was right beside Harry, let out his usual bark-like laugh.

“No one would have made me a prefect, I spent too much time in detention with James. Lupin was the good boy, he got the badge.”

“I think Dumbledore might have hoped I would be able to exercise some control over my best friends,” said Lupin. “I need scarcely say that I failed dismally.”

Harry’s mood suddenly lifted. His father had not been a prefect either. All at once the party seemed much more enjoyable; he loaded up his plate, feeling doubly fond of everyone in the room.

Ron was rhapsodizing about his new broom to anybody who would listen.

“… nought to seventy in ten seconds, not bad, is it? When you think the Comet Two Ninety’s only nought to sixty and that’s with a decent tailwind according to Which Broomstick?”

Hermione was talking very earnestly to Lupin about her view of elf rights.

“I mean, it’s the same kind of nonsense as werewolf segregation, isn’t it? It all stems from this horrible thing wizards have of thinking they’re superior to other creatures…”

Mrs. Weasley and Bill were having their usual argument about Bill’s hair.

“… getting really out of hand, and you’re so good-looking, it would look much better shorter, wouldn’t it, Harry?”

“Oh - I dunno -” said Harry, slightly alarmed at being asked his opinion; he slid away from them in the direction of Fred and George, who were huddled in a corner with Mundungus.

Mundungus stopped talking when he saw Harry, but Fred winked and beckoned Harry closer.

“It’s okay,” he told Mundungus, “we can trust Harry, he’s our financial backer.”

“Look what Dung’s got us,” said George, holding out his hand to Harry. It was full of what looked like shriveled black pods. A faint rattling noise was coming from them, even though they were completely stationary.

“Venomous Tentacula seeds,” said George. “We need them for the Skiving Snackboxes but they’re a Class C Non-Tradable Substance so we’ve been having a bit of trouble getting hold of them.”

“Ten Galleons the lot, then Dung?” said Fred.

“Wiv all the trouble I went to to get ‘em?” said Mundungus, his saggy, bloodshot eyes stretching even wider. “I’m sorry, lads, but I’m not taking a Knut under twenty.”

“Dung likes his little joke,” Fred said to Harry.

“Yeah, his best one so far has been six Sickles for a bag of Knarl quills,” said George.

“Be careful,” Harry warned them quietly.

“What?” said Fred. “Mum’s busy cooing over Prefect Ron, we’re okay.”

“But Moody could have his eye on you,” Harry pointed out.

Mundungus looked nervously over his shoulder.

“Good point, that,” he grunted. “All right, lads, ten it is, if you’ll take ‘em quick.”

“Cheers, Harry!” said Fred delightedly, when Mundungus had emptied his pockets into the twins’ outstretched hands and scuttled off towards the food. “We’d better get these upstairs…”

Harry watched them go, feeling slightly uneasy. It had just occurred to him that Mr. and Mrs. Weasley would want to know how Fred and George were financing their joke shop business when, as was inevitable, they finally found out about it. Giving the twins his Triwizard winnings had seemed a simple thing to do at the time, but what if it led to another family row and a Percylike estrangement? Would Mrs. Weasley still feel that Harry was as good as her son if she found out he had made it possible for Fred and George to start a career she thought quite unsuitable?

Standing where the twins had left him, with nothing but a guilty weight in the pit of his stomach for company, Harry caught the sound of his own name. Kingsley Shacklebolt’s deep voice was audible even over the surrounding chatter.

“… why Dumbledore didn’t make Potter a prefect?” said Kingsley.

“He’ll have had his reasons,” replied Lupin.

“But it would’ve shown confidence in him. It’s what I’d’ve done,” persisted Kingsley, “specially with the Daily Prophet having a go at him every few days…”

Harry did not look round; he did not want Lupin or Kingsley to know he had heard. Though not remotely hungry, he followed Mundungus back towards the table. His pleasure in the party had evaporated as quickly as it had come; he wished he were upstairs in bed.

Mad-Eye Moody was sniffing at a chicken-leg with what remained of his nose; evidently he could not detect any trace of poison, because he then tore a strip off it with his teeth.

“… the handles made of Spanish oak with anti-jinx varnish and in-built vibration control -” Ron was saying to Tonks.

Mrs. Weasley yawned widely.

“Well, I think I’ll sort out that Boggart before I turn in… Arthur, I don’t want this lot up too late, all right? Night, Harry, dear.”

She left the kitchen. Harry set down his plate and wondered whether he could follow her without attracting attention.

“You all right, Potter?” grunted Moody.

“Yeah, fine,” lied Harry.

Moody took a swig from his hipflask, his electric-blue eye staring sideways at Harry.

“Come here, I’ve got something that might interest you,” he said.

From an inner pocket of his robes Moody pulled a very tattered old wizarding photograph.

“Original Order of the Phoenix,” growled Moody. “Found it last night when I was looking for my spare Invisibility Cloak, seeing as Podmore hasn’t had the manners to return my best one… thought people might like to see it.”

Harry took the photograph. A small crowd of people, some waving at him, others lifting their glasses, looked back up at him.

“There’s me,” said Moody, unnecessarily pointing at himself. The Moody in the picture was unmistakable, though his hair was slightly less grey and his nose was intact. “And there’s Dumbledore beside me, Dedalus Diggle on the other side… that’s Marlene McKinnon, she was killed two weeks after this was taken, they got her whole family. That’s Frank and Alice Longbottom -”

Harry’s stomach, already uncomfortable, clenched as he looked at Alice Longbottom; he knew her round, friendly face very well, even though he had never met her, because she was the image of her son, Neville.

“— poor devils,” growled Moody. “Better dead than what happened to them… and that’s Emmeline Vance, you’ve met her, and that there’s Lupin, obviously… Benjy Fenwick, he copped it too, we only ever found bits of him… shift aside there,” he added, poking the picture, and the little photographic people edged sideways, so that those who were partially obscured could move to the front.

“That’s Edgar Bones… brother of Amelia Bones, they got him and his family, too, he was a great wizard… Sturgis Podmore, blimey, he looks young… Caradoc Dearborn, vanished six months after this, we never found his body… Hagrid, of course, looks exactly the same as ever… Elphias Doge, you’ve met him, I’d forgotten he used to wear that stupid hat… Gideon Prewett, it took five Death Eaters to kill him and his brother Fabian, they fought like heroes… budge along, budge along…”

The little people in the photograph jostled among themselves and those hidden right at the back appeared at the forefront of the picture.

“That’s Dumbledore’s brother Aberforth, only time I ever met him, strange bloke… that’s Dorcas Meadowes, Voldemort killed her personally… Sirius, when he still had short hair… and… there you go, thought that would interest you!”

Harry’s heart turned over. His mother and father were beaming up at him, sitting on either side of a small, watery-eyed man whom Harry recognized at once as Wormtail, the one who had betrayed his parents’ whereabouts to Voldemort and so helped to bring about their deaths.

“Eh?” said Moody.

Harry looked up into Moody’s heavily scarred and pitted face. Evidently Moody was under the impression he had just given Harry a bit of a treat.

“Yeah,” said Harry, once again attempting to grin. “Er… listen, I’ve just remembered, I haven’t packed my…”

He was spared the trouble of inventing an object he had not packed. Sirius had just said, “What’s that you’ve got there, Mad-Eye?” and Moody had turned towards him. Harry crossed the kitchen, slipped through the door and up the stairs before anyone could call him back.

He did not know why it had been such a shock; he had seen pictures of his parents before, after all, and he had met Wormtail but to have them sprung on him like that, when he was least expecting it… no one would like that, he thought angrily…

And then, to see them surrounded by all those other happy faces… Benjy Fenwick, who had been found in bits, and Gideon Prewett, who had died like a hero, and the Longbottoms, who had

been tortured into madness… all waving happily out of the photograph forever more, not knowing that they were doomed… well, Moody might find that interesting… he, Harry, found it disturbing…

Harry tiptoed up the stairs in the hall past the stuffed elf-heads, glad to be on his own again, but as he approached the first landing he heard noises. Someone was sobbing in the drawing room.

“Hello?” Harry said.

There was no answer but the sobbing continued. He climbed the remaining stairs two at a time, walked across the landing and opened the drawing-room door.

Someone was cowering against the dark wall, her wand in her hand, her whole body shaking with sobs. Sprawled on the dusty old carpet in a patch of moonlight, clearly dead, was Ron. All the air seemed to vanish from Harry’s lungs; he felt as though he were falling through the floor; his brain turned icy cold - Ron dead, no, it couldn’t be -

But wait a moment, it couldn’t be - Ron was downstairs -

“Mrs. Weasley?” Harry croaked.

“R - r - riddikulus!” Mrs. Weasley sobbed, pointing her shaking wand at Ron’s body.

Crack.

Ron’s body turned into Bill’s, spread-eagled on his back, his eyes wide open and empty. Mrs. Weasley sobbed harder than ever.

“R -riddikulus!” she sobbed again.

Crack.

Mr. Weasley’s body replaced Bill’s, his glasses askew, a trickle of blood running down his face.

“No!” Mrs. Weasley moaned. “No… riddikulus! Riddikulus! RIDDlKULUS”

Crack. Dead twins. Crack. Dead Percy. Crack. Dead Harry…

“Mrs. Weasley, just get out of here!” shouted Harry, staring down at his own dead body on the floor. “Let someone else -”

“What’s going on?”

Lupin had come running into the room, closely followed by Sirius, with Moody stumping along behind them. Lupin looked from Mrs. Weasley to the dead Harry on the floor and seemed to understand in an instant. Pulling out his own wand, he said, very firmly and clearly:

“Riddikulus!”

Harry’s body vanished. A silvery orb hung in the air over the spot where it had lain. Lupin waved his wand once more and the orb vanished in a puff of smoke.

“Oh - oh - oh!” gulped Mrs. Weasley, and she broke into a storm of crying, her face in her hands.

“Molly,” said Lupin bleakly, walking over to her. “Molly don’t…”

Next second, she was sobbing her heart out on Lupin’s shoulder.

“Molly, it was just a Boggart,” he said soothingly, patting her on the head, “just a stupid Boggart…”

“I see them d-d - dead all the time!” Mrs. Weasley moaned into his shoulder. “All the’t -’t - time! I d - d - dream about it…”

Sirius was staring at the patch of carpet where the Boggart, pretending to be Harry’s body, had lain. Moody was looking at Harry, who avoided his gaze. He had a funny feeling Moody’s magical eye had followed him all the way out of the kitchen.

“D-d - don’t tell Arthur,” Mrs. Weasley was gulping now, mopping her eyes frantically with her cuffs. “I d - d - don’t want him to know… being silly…”

Lupin handed her a handkerchief and she blew her nose.

“Harry, I’m so sorry. What must you think of me?” she said shakily. “Not even able to get rid of a Boggart…”

“Don’t be stupid,” said Harry, trying to smile.

“I’m just’s -’s - so worried,” she said, tears spilling out of her eyes again. “Half the f - f - family’s in the Order, it’ll b - b - be a miracle if we all come through this… and P - P - Percy’s not talking to us… what if something d-d - dreadful happens and we’ve never m - m - made it up with him? And what’s going to happen if Arthur and I get killed, who’s g - g - going to look after Ron and Ginny?”

“Molly that’s enough” said Lupin firmly. “This isn’t like last time. The Order are better prepared, we’ve got a head start, we know what Voldemorts up to -”

Mrs. Weasley gave a little squeak of fright at the sound of the name.

“Oh, Molly, come on, it’s about time you got used to hearing his name - look, I can’t promise no one’s going to get hurt, nobody can promise that, but we’re much better off than we were last time. You weren’t in the Order then, you don’t understand. Last time we were outnumbered twenty to one by the Death Eaters and they were picking us off one by one…”

Harry thought of the photograph again, of his parents' beaming faces. He knew Moody was still watching him.

"Don't worry about Percy" said Sirius abruptly. "He'll come round. It's only a matter of time before Voldemort moves into the open; once he does, the whole Ministry's going to be begging us to forgive them. And I'm not sure I'll be accepting their apology," he added bitterly.

"And as for who's going to look after Ron and Ginny if you and Arthur died," said Lupin, smiling slightly, "what do you think we'd do, let them starve?"

Mrs. Weasley smiled tremulously.

"Being silly," she muttered again, mopping her eyes.

But Harry, closing his bedroom door behind him some ten minutes later, could not think Mrs. Weasley silly. He could still see his parents beaming up at him from the tattered old photograph, unaware that their lives, like so many of those around them, were drawing to a close. The image of the Boggart posing as the corpse of each member of Mrs. Weasley's family in turn kept flashing before his eyes.

Without warning, the scar on his forehead seared with pain again and his stomach churned horribly.

"Cut it out," he said firmly, rubbing the scar as the pain receded.

"First sign of madness, talking to your own head," said a sly voice from the empty picture on the wall.

Harry ignored it. He felt older than he had ever felt in his life and it seemed extraordinary to him that barely an hour ago he had been worried about a joke shop and who had got a prefects badge.

CHAPTER TEN

Luna Lovegood

Harry had a troubled nights sleep. His parents wove in and out of his dreams, never speaking; Mrs. Weasley sobbed over Kreachers dead body, watched by Ron and Hermione who were wearing crowns, and yet again Harry found himself walking down a corridor ending in a locked door. He awoke abruptly with his scar prickling to find Ron already dressed and talking to him.

"… better hurry up, Mum's going ballistic, she says we're going to miss the train."

There was a lot of commotion in the house. From what he heard as he dressed at top speed, Harry gathered that Fred and George had bewitched their trunks to fly downstairs to save the bother of carrying them, with the result that they had hurtled straight into Ginny and knocked her down two flights of stairs into the hall; Mrs. Black and Mrs. Weasley were both screaming at the top of their voices.

"- COULD HAVE DONE HER A SERIOUS INJURY, YOU IDIOTS -"

"- FILTHY HALF-BREEDS, BESMIRCHING THE HOUSE OF MY FATHERS -"

Hermione came hurrying into the room looking flustered, just as Harry was putting on his trainers. Hedwig was swaying on her shoulder, and she was carrying a squirming Crookshanks in her arms.

"Mum and Dad just sent Hedwig back." The owl fluttered obligingly over and perched on top of her cage. "Are you ready yet?"

"Nearly. Is Ginny all right?" Harry asked, shoving on his glasses.

"Mrs. Weasley's patched her up," said Hermione. "But now Mad-Eye's complaining that we can't leave unless Sturgis Podmore's here, otherwise the guard will be one short.'

"Guard?" said Harry. "We have to go to King's Cross with a guard?"

"You have to go to King's Cross with a guard," Hermione corrected him.

"Why?" said Harry irritably. "I thought Voldemort was supposed to be lying low, or are you telling me he's going to jump out from behind a dustbin to try and do me in?"

"I don't know, it's just what Mad-Eye says," said Hermione distractedly, looking at her watch, "but if we don't leave soon we're definitely going to miss the train…"

“WILL YOU LOT GET DOWN HERE NOW, PLEASE!” Mrs. Weasley bellowed and Hermione jumped as though scalded and hurried out of the room. Harry seized Hedwig, stuffed her unceremoniously into her cage, and set off downstairs after Hermione, dragging his trunk. Mrs. Black’s portrait was howling with rage but nobody was bothering to close the curtains over her; all the noise in the hall was bound to rouse her again, anyway.

“Harry, you’re to come with me and Tonks,” shouted Mrs. Weasley - over the repeated screeches of “MUDBLOODS! SCUM! CREATURES OF DIRT!” - “Leave your trunk and your owl, Alastor’s going to deal with the luggage… oh, for heaven’s sake, Sirius, Dumbledore said no!”

A bear-like black dog had appeared at Harry’s side as he was clambering over the various trunks cluttering the hall to get to Mrs. Weasley.

“Oh honestly…” said Mrs. Weasley despairingly. “Well, on your own head be it!’

She wrenched open the front door and stepped out into the weak September sunlight. Harry and the dog followed her. The door slammed behind them and Mrs. Blacks screeches were cut off instantly.

“Where’s Tonks?” Harry said, looking round as they went down the stone steps of number twelve, which vanished the moment they reached the pavement.

“She’s waiting for us just up here,” said Mrs. Weasley stiffly, averting her eyes from the lolloping black dog beside Harry.

An old woman greeted them on the corner. She had tightly curled grey hair and wore a purple hat shaped like a pork pie.

“Wotcher, Harry,” she said, winking. “Better hurry up, hadn’t we, Molly?” she added, checking her watch.

“I know, I know,” moaned Mrs. Weasley, lengthening her stride, “but Mad-Eye wanted to wait for Sturgis… if only Arthur could have got us cars from the Ministry again… but Fudge won’t let him borrow so much as an empty ink bottle these days… how Muggles can stand traveling without magic.”

But the great black dog gave a joyful bark and gamboled around them, snapping at pigeons and chasing its own tail. Harry couldn’t help laughing. Sirius had been trapped inside for a very long time. Mrs. Weasley pursed her lips in an almost Aunt Petunia-ish way.

It took them twenty minutes to reach King’s Cross on foot and nothing more eventful happened during that time than Sirius scaring a couple of cats for Harry’s entertainment. Once inside the station they lingered casually beside the barrier between platforms nine and ten until the coast was clear, then each of them leaned against it in turn and fell easily through on to platform nine and three-quarters, where the Hogwarts Express stood belching sooty steam over a platform packed with departing students and their families. Harry inhaled the familiar smell and felt his

spirits soar… he was really going back…

“I hope the others make it in time,” said Mrs. Weasley anxiously, staring behind her at the wrought-iron arch spanning the platform, through which new arrivals would come.

“Nice dog, Harry!” called a tall boy with dreadlocks.

“Thanks, Lee,” said Harry, grinning, as Sirius wagged his tail frantically.

“Oh good,” said Mrs. Weasley, sounding relieved, “here’s Alastor with the luggage, look…”

A porter’s cap pulled low over his mismatched eyes, Moody came limping through the archway pushing a trolley loaded with their trunks.

“All okay,” he muttered to Mrs. Weasley and Tonks, “don’t think we were followed…”

Seconds later, Mr. Weasley emerged on to the platform with Ron and Hermione. They had almost unloaded Moody’s luggage trolley when Fred, George and Ginny turned up with Lupin.

“No trouble?” growled Moody.

“Nothing,” said Lupin.

“I’ll still be reporting Sturgis to Dumbledore,” said Moody, “that’s the second time he’s not turned up in a week. Getting as unreliable as Mundungus.”

“Well, look after yourselves,” said Lupin, shaking hands all round. He reached Harry last and gave him a clap on the shoulder. “You too Harry. Be careful.”

“Yeah, keep your head down and your eyes peeled,” said Moody, shaking Harry’s hand too. “And don’t forget, all of you - careful what you put in writing. If in doubt, don’t put it in a letter at all.”

“It’s been great meeting all of you,” said Tonks, hugging Hermione and Ginny “We’ll see you soon, I expect.”

A warning whistle sounded; the students still on the platform started hurrying on to the train.

“Quick, quick,” said Mrs. Weasley distractedly, hugging them at random and catching Harry twice. “Write… be good… if you’ve forgotten anything we’ll send it on… on to the train, now, hurry…”

For one brief moment, the great black dog reared on to its hind legs and placed its front paws on Harry’s shoulders, but Mrs. Weasley shoved Harry away towards the train door, hissing, “For heaven’s sake, act more like a dog, Sirius!”

“See you!” Harry called out of the open window as the train began to move, while Ron, Hermione and Ginny waved beside him. The figures of Tonks, Lupin, Moody and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley shrank rapidly but the black dog was bounding alongside the window, wagging its tail; blurred people on the platform were laughing to see it chasing the train, then they rounded a bend, and Sirius was gone.

“He shouldn’t have come with us,” said Hermione in a worried voice.

“Oh, lighten up,” said Ron, “he hasn’t seen daylight for months, poor bloke.”

“Well,” said Fred, clapping his hands together, “can’t stand around chatting all day, we’ve got business to discuss with Lee. See you later,” and he and George disappeared down the corridor to the right.

The train was gathering still more speed, so that the houses outside the window flashed past, and they swayed where they stood.

“Shall we go and find a compartment, then?” Harry asked.

Ron and Hermione exchanged looks.

“Er,” said Ron.

“We’re - well - Ron and I are supposed to go into the prefect carriage,” Hermione said awkwardly.

Ron wasn’t looking at Harry; he seemed to have become intensely interested in the fingernails on his left hand.

“Oh,” said Harry. “Right. Fine.”

“I don’t think we’ll have to stay there all journey,” said Hermione quickly. “Our letters said we just get instructions from the Head Boy and Girl and then patrol the corridors from time to time.”

“Fine,” said Harry again. “Well, I - I might see you later, then.”

“Yeah, definitely,” said Ron, casting a shifty, anxious look at Harry. “It’s a pain having to go down there, I’d rather - but we have to -I mean, I’m not enjoying it, I’m not Percy,” he finished defiantly.

“I know you’re not,” said Harry and he grinned. But as Hermione and Ron dragged their trunks, Crookshanks and a caged Pigwidgeon off towards the engine end of the train, Harry felt an odd sense of loss. He had never traveled on the Hogwarts Express without Ron.

“Come on,” Ginny told him, “if we get a move on we’ll be able to save them places.”

“Right,” said Harry, picking up Hedwig’s cage in one hand and the handle of his trunk in the other. They struggled off down the corridor, peering through the glass-paneled doors into the compartments they passed, which were already full. Harry could not help noticing that a lot of people stared back at him with great interest and that several of them nudged their neighbors and pointed him out. After he had met this behavior in five consecutive carriages he remembered that the Daily Prophet had been telling its readers all summer what a lying show-off he was. He wondered dully whether the people now staring and whispering believed the stories.

In the very last carriage they met Neville Longbottom, Harry’s fellow fifth-year Gryffindor, his round face shining with the effort of pulling his trunk along and maintaining a one-handed grip on his struggling toad, Trevor.

“Hi, Harry” he panted. “Hi, Ginny… everywhere’s full… I can’t find a seat…”

“What are you talking about?” said Ginny, who had squeezed past Neville to peer into the compartment behind him. “There’s room in this one, there’s only Loony Lovegood in here —”

Neville mumbled something about not wanting to disturb anyone.

“Don’t be silly,” said Ginny, laughing, “she’s all right.”

She slid the door open and pulled her trunk inside. Harry and Neville followed.

“Hi, Luna,” said Ginny, “is it okay if we take these seats?”

The girl beside the window looked up. She had straggly, waist-length, dirty blonde hair, very pale eyebrows and protuberant eyes that gave her a permanently surprised look. Harry knew at once why Neville had chosen to pass this compartment by. The girl gave off an aura of distinct dottiness. Perhaps it was the fact that she had stuck her wand behind her left ear for safekeeping, or that she had chosen to wear a necklace of Butterbeer corks, or that she was reading a magazine upside-down. Her eyes ranged over Neville and came to rest on Harry. She nodded.

“Thanks,” said Ginny, smiling at her.

Harry and Neville stowed the three trunks and Hedwig’s cage in the luggage rack and sat down. Luna watched them over her upside-down magazine, which was called The Quibbler. She did not seem to need to blink as much as normal humans. She stared and stared at Harry, who had taken the seat opposite her and now wished he hadn’t.

“Had a good summer, Luna?” Ginny asked.

“Yes,” said Luna dreamily, without taking her eyes off Harry. “Yes, it was quite enjoyable, you know. You’re Harry Potter,” she added.

“I know I am,” said Harry.

Neville chuckled. Luna turned her pale eyes on him instead.

“And I don’t know who you are.”

“I’m nobody,” said Neville hurriedly.

“No you’re not,” said Ginny sharply. “Neville Longbottom - Luna Lovegood. Luna’s in my year, but in Ravenclaw.”

“Wit beyond measure is man’s greatest treasure,” said Luna in a singsong voice.

She raised her upside-down magazine high enough to hide her face and fell silent. Harry and Neville looked at each other with their eyebrows raised. Ginny suppressed a giggle.

The train rattled onwards, speeding them out into open country. It was an odd, unsettled sort of day; one moment the carriage was full of sunlight and the next they were passing beneath ominously grey clouds.

“Guess what I got for my birthday?” said Neville.

“Another Remembrall?” said Harry, remembering the marble-like device Neville’s grandmother had sent him in an effort to improve his abysmal memory.

“No,” said Neville. “I could do with one, though, I lost the old one ages ago… no, look at this…”

He dug the hand that was not keeping a firm grip on Trevor into his schoolbag and after a little bit of rummaging pulled out what appeared to be a small grey cactus in a pot, except that it was covered with what looked like boils rather than spines.

“Mimbulus mimbletonia,” he said proudly.

Harry stared at the thing. It was pulsating slightly, giving it the rather sinister look of some diseased internal organ.

“It’s really, really rare,” said Neville, beaming. “I don’t know if there’s one in the greenhouse at Hogwarts, even. I can’t wait to show it to Professor Sprout. My Great Uncle Algie got it for me in Assyria. I’m going to see if I can breed from it.”

Harry knew that Neville’s favorite subject was Herbology but for the life of him he could not see what he would want with this stunted little plant.

“Does it - er - do anything?” he asked.

“Loads of stuff!” said Neville proudly. “It’s got an amazing defensive mechanism. Here, hold Trevor for me…”

He dumped the toad into Harry's lap and took a quill from his schoolbag. Luna Lovegood's popping eyes appeared over the top of her upside-down magazine again, to watch what Neville was doing. Neville held the Mimbulus mimbletonia up t o his eyes, his tongue between his teeth, chose his spot, and gave the plant a sharp prod with the tip of his quill.

Liquid squirted from every boil on the plant; thick, stinking, dark green jets of it. They hit the ceiling, the windows, and spattered Luna Lovegood's magazine; Ginny, who had flung her arms up in front of her face just in time, merely looked as though she was wearing a slimy green hat, but Harry, whose hands had been busy preventing Trevor's escape, received a faceful. It smelled like rancid manure.

Neville, whose face and torso were also drenched, shook his head to get the worst out of his eyes.

"S - sorry," he gasped. "I haven't tried that before… didn't realize it would be quite so… don't worry, though, Stinksap's not poisonous," he added nervously, as Harry spat a mouthful on to the floor.

At that precise moment the door of their compartment slid open.

"Oh… hello, Harry," said a nervous voice. "Um… bad time?"

Harry wiped the lenses of his glasses with his Trevor-free hand. A very pretty girl with long, shiny black hair was standing in the doorway smiling at him: Cho Chang, the Seeker on the Ravenclaw Quidditch team.

"Oh… hi," said Harry blankly.

"Um…" said Cho. "Well… just thought I'd say hello… bye then."

Rather pink in the face, she closed the door and departed. Harry slumped back in his seat and groaned. He would have liked Cho to discover him sitting with a group of very cool people laughing their heads off at a joke he had just told; he would not have chosen to be sitting with Neville and Loony Lovegood, clutching a toad and dripping in Stinksap.

"Never mind," said Ginny bracingly. "Look, we can easily get rid of all this." She pulled out her wand. "Scourgify!"

The Stinksap vanished.

"Sorry," said Neville again, in a small voice.

Ron and Hermione did not turn up for nearly an hour, by which time the food trolley had already gone by. Harry, Ginny and Neville had finished their pumpkin pasties and were busy swapping Chocolate Frog Cards when the compartment door slid open and they walked in, accompanied by Crookshanks and a shrilly hooting Pigwidgeon in his cage.

“I’m starving,” said Ron, stowing Pigwidgeon next to Hedwig, grabbing a Chocolate Frog from Harry and throwing himself into the seat next to him. He ripped open the wrapper, bit off the frog’s head and leaned back with his eyes closed as though he had had a very exhausting morning.

“Well, there are two fifth-year prefects from each house,” said Hermione, looking thoroughly disgruntled as she took her seat. “Boy and girl from each.”

“And guess who’s a Slytherin prefect?” said Ron, still with his eyes closed.

“Malfoy,” replied Harry at once, certain his worst fear would be confirmed.

“Course,” said Ron bitterly, stuffing the rest of the Frog into his mouth and taking another.

“And that complete cow Pansy Parkinson,” said Hermione viciously. “How she got to be a prefect when she’s thicker than a concussed troll…”

“Who’s Hufflepuff?” Harry asked.

“Ernie Macmillan and Hannah Abbott,” said Ron thickly.

“And Anthony Goldstein and Padma Patil for Ravenclaw,” said Hermione.

“You went to the Yule Ball with Padma Patil,” said a vague voice.

Everyone turned to look at Luna Lovegood, who was gazing unblinkingly at Ron over the top of The Quibbler. He swallowed his mouthful of Frog.

“Yeah, I know I did,” he said, looking mildly surprised.

“She didn’t enjoy it very much,” Luna informed him. “She doesn’t think you treated her very well, because you wouldn’t dance with her. I don’t think I’d have minded,” she added thoughtfully, “I don’t like dancing very much.”

She retreated behind The Quibbler again. Ron stared at the cover with his mouth hanging open for a few seconds, then looked around at Ginny for some kind of explanation, but Ginny had stuffed her knuckles in her mouth to stop herself giggling. Ron shook his head, bemused, then checked his watch.

“We’re supposed to patrol the corridors every so often,” he told Harry and Neville, “and we can give out punishments if people are misbehaving. I can’t wait to get Crabbe and Goyle for something.”

“You’re not supposed to abuse your position, Ron!” said Hermione sharply.

“Yeah, right, because Malfoy won’t abuse it at all,” said Ron sarcastically.

“So you’re going to descend to his level?”

“No, I’m just going to make sure I get his mates before he gets mine.”

“For heaven’s sake, Ron -”

“I’ll make Goyle do lines, it’ll kill him, he hates writing,” said Ron happily. He lowered his voice to Goyle’s low grunt and, screwing up his face in a look of pained concentration, mimed writing in midair. “I… must… not… look… like… a… baboon’s… backside.”

Everyone laughed, but nobody laughed harder than Luna Lovegood. She let out a scream of mirth that caused Hedwig to wake up and flap her wings indignantly and Crookshanks to leap up into the luggage rack, hissing. Luna laughed so hard her magazine slipped out of her grasp, slid down her legs and on to the floor.

“That was funny!”

Her prominent eyes swam with tears as she gasped for breath, staring at Ron. Utterly nonplussed, he looked around at the others, who were now laughing at the expression on Ron’s face and at the ludicrously prolonged laughter of Luna Lovegood, who was rocking backwards and forwards, clutching her sides.

“Are you taking the mickey?” said Ron, frowning at her.

“Baboon’s… backside!” she choked, holding her ribs.

Everyone else was watching Luna laughing, but Harry glancing at the magazine on the floor, noticed something that made him dive for it. Upside-down it had been hard to tell what the picture on the front was, but Harry now realized it was a fairly bad cartoon of Cornelius Fudge; Harry only recognized him because of the lime-green bowler hat. One of Fudge’s hands was clenched around a bag of gold; the other hand was throttling a goblin. The cartoon was captioned: *How Far Will Fudge Go to Gain Gringotts?*

Beneath this were listed the titles of other articles inside the magazine.

Corruption in the Quidditch League:

How the Tornados are Taking Control

Secrets of the Ancient Runes Revealed

Sirius Black: Villain or Victim?

“Can I have a look at this?” Harry asked Luna eagerly.

She nodded, still gazing at Ron, breathless with laughter.

Harry opened the magazine and scanned the index. Until this moment he had completely forgotten the magazine Kingsley had handed Mr. Weasley to give to Sirius, but it must have been this edition of The Quibbler.

He found the page, and turned excitedly to the article.

This, too, was illustrated by a rather bad cartoon; in fact, Harry would not have known it was supposed to be Sirius if it hadn't been captioned. Sirius was standing on a pile of human bones with his wand out. The headline on the article said:

SIRIUS - BLACK AS HE'S PAINTED?

Notorious mass murderer or innocent singing sensation?

Harry had to read this first sentence several times before he was convinced that he had not misunderstood it. Since when had Sirius been a singing sensation?

For fourteen years Sirius Black has been believed guilty of the mass murder of twelve innocent Muggles and one wizard. Black's audacious escape from Azkaban two years ago has led to the widest manhunt ever conducted by the Ministry of Magic. None of us has ever questioned that he deserves to be recaptured and handed back to the Dementors.

BUT DOES HE?

Startling new evidence has recently come to light that Sirius Black may not have committed the crimes for which he was sent to Azkaban. In fact, says Doris Purkiss, of 18 Acanthia Way, Little Norton, Black may not even have been present at the killings.

"*What people don't realize is that Sirius Black is a false name," says Mrs. Purkiss. "The man people believe to be Sirius Black is actually Stubby Boardman, lead singer of popular singing group The Hobgoblins, who retired fro m public life after being struck on the ear by a turnip at a concert in Little Norton Church Hall nearly fifteen years ago. I recognized him the moment I saw his picture in the paper. Now, Stubby couldn't possibly have committed those crimes, because on the day in question he happened to be enjoying a romantic candlelit dinner with me. I have written to the Minister for Magic and am expecting him to give Stubby, alias - Sirius, a full pardon any day now.*"

Harry finished reading and stared at the page in disbelief. Perhaps it was a joke, he thought, perhaps the magazine often printed spoof Hems. He flicked back a few pages and found the piece on Fudge.

Cornelius Fudge, the Minister for Magic, denied that he had any plans to take over the running of the Wizarding Bank, Gringotts, when he was elected Minister for Magic five years ago. Fudge has always insisted that he wants nothing more than to 'co-operate peacefully' with the guardians of our gold.

BUT DOES HE?

Sources close to the Minister have recently disclosed that Fudge's dearest ambition is to seize control of the goblin gold supplies and that he will not hesitate to use force if need be.

"*It wouldn't be the first time, either,*" *said a Ministry insider.* "*Cornelius 'Goblin-Crusher' Fudge, that's what his friends call him. If you could hear him when he thinks no one's listening, oh, he's always talking about the goblins he's had done in; he's had them drowned, he's had them dropped off buildings, he's had them poisoned, he's had them cooked in pies…*"

Harry did not read any further. Fudge might have many faults but Harry found it extremely hard to imagine him ordering goblins to be cooked in pies. He flicked through the rest of the magazine. Pausing every few pages, he read: an accusation that the Tutshill Tornados were winning the Quidditch League by a combination of blackmail, illegal broom-tampering and torture; an interview with a wizard who claimed to have flown to the moon on a Cleansweep Six and brought back a bag of moon frogs to prove it; and an article on ancient runes which at least explained why Luna had been reading The Quibbler upside-down. According to the magazine, if you turned the runes on their heads they revealed a spell to make your enemy's ears turn into kumquats. In fact, compared to the rest of the articles in The Quibbler, the suggestion that Sirius might really be the lead singer of The Hobgoblins was quite sensible.

"Anything good in there?" asked Ron as Harry closed the magazine.

"Of course not," said Hermione scathingly, before Harry could answer. "The Quibbler's rubbish, everyone knows that."

"Excuse me," said Luna; her voice had suddenly lost its dreamy quality. "My father's the editor."

"I - oh," said Hermione, looking embarrassed. "Well, it's got some interesting… I mean, it's quite…"

"I'll have it back, thank you," said Luna coldly, and leaning forwards she snatched it out of Harry's hands. Riffling through it to page fifty-seven, she turned it resolutely upside-down again and disappeared behind it, just as the compartment door opened for the third time.

Harry looked around; he had expected this, but that did not make the sight of Draco Malfoy smirking at him from between his cronies Crabbe and Goyle any more enjoyable.

"What?" he said aggressively, before Malfoy could open his mouth.

"Manners, Potter, or I'll have to give you a detention," drawled Malfoy, whose sleek blond hair and pointed chin were just like his fathers. "You see, I, unlike you, have been made a prefect, which means that I, unlike you, have the power to hand out punishments."

"Yeah," said Harry, "but you, unlike me, are a git, so get out and leave us alone."

Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Neville laughed. Malfoy's lip curled.

"Tell me, how does it feel being second-best to Weasley, Potter?" he asked.

"Shut up, Malfoy," said Hermione sharply.

"I seem to have touched a nerve," said Malfoy, smirking. "Well, just watch yourself, Potter, because I'll be dogging your footsteps in case you step out of line."

"Get out!" said Hermione, standing up.

Sniggering, Malfoy gave Harry a last malicious look and departed, with Crabbe and Goyle lumbering along in his wake. Hermione slammed the compartment door behind them and turned to look at Harry, who knew at once that she, like him, had registered what Malfoy had said and been just as unnerved by it.

"Chuck us another Frog," said Ron, who had clearly noticed nothing.

Harry could not talk freely in front of Neville and Luna. He exchanged another nervous look with Hermione, then stared out of the window.

He had thought Sirius coming with him to the station was a bit of a laugh, but suddenly it seemed reckless, if not downright dangerous… Hermione had been right… Sirius should not have come. What if Mr. Malfoy had noticed the black dog and told Draco? What if he had deduced that the Weasleys, Lupin, Tonks and Moody knew where Sirius was hiding? Or had Malfoy's use of the word *dogging* been a coincidence?

The weather remained undecided as they traveled further and further north. Rain spattered the windows in a half-hearted way, then the sun put in a feeble appearance before clouds drifted over it once more. When darkness fell and lamps came on inside the carriages, Luna rolled up The Quibbler, put it carefully away in her bag and took to staring at everyone in the compartment instead.

Harry was sitting with his forehead pressed against the train window, trying to get a first distant glimpse of Hogwarts, but it was a moonless night and the rain-streaked window was grimy.

"We'd better change," said Hermione at last, and all of them opened their trunks with difficulty and pulled on their school robes. She and Ron pinned their prefect badges carefully to their chests. Harry saw Ron checking his reflection in the black window.

At last, the train began to slow down and they heard the usual racket up and down it as everybody scrambled to get their luggage and pets assembled, ready to get off. As Ron and Hermione were supposed to supervise all this, they disappeared from the carriage again, leaving Harry and the others to look after Crookshanks and Pigwidgeon.

"I'll carry that owl, if you like, " said Luna to Harry, reaching out for Pigwidgeon as Neville

stowed Trevor carefully in an inside pocket.

“Oh - er - thanks, “ said Harry, handing her the cage and hoisting Hedwig’s more securely into his arms.

They shuffled out of the compartment feeling the first sting of the night air on their faces as they joined the crowd in the corridor. Slowly, they moved towards the doors. Harry could smell the pine trees that lined the path down to the lake. He stepped down on to the platform and looked around, listening for the familiar call of “firs’-years over ‘ere… firs’-years…”

But it did not come. Instead, a quite different voice, a brisk female one, was calling out, “First years line up over here, please! All first-years to me!”

A lantern came swinging towards Harry and by its light he saw the prominent chin and severe haircut of Professor Grubbly-Plank, the witch who had taken over Hagrid’s Care of Magical Creatures lessons for a while the previous year.

“Where’s Hagrid?” he said out loud.

“I don’t know,” said Ginny, “but we’d better get out of the way, we’re blocking the door.”

“Oh, yeah…”

Harry and Ginny became separated as they moved off along the platform and out through the station. Jostled by the crowd, Harry squinted through the darkness for a glimpse of Hagrid; he had to be here, Harry had been relying on it - seeing Hagrid again was one of the things he’d been looking forward to most. But there was no sign of him.

He can’t have left, Harry told himself as he shuffled slowly through a narrow doorway on to the road outside with the rest of the crowd. He’s just got a cold or something…

He looked around for Ron or Hermione, wanting to know what they thought about the reappearance of Professor Grubbly-Plank, but neither of them was anywhere near him, so he allowed himself to be shunted forwards on to the dark rain-washed road outside Hogsmeade Station.

Here stood the hundred or so horseless stagecoaches that always took the students above first year up to the castle. Harry glanced quickly at them, turned away to keep a lookout for Ron and Hermione, then did a double-take.

The coaches were no longer horseless. There were creatures standing between the carriage shafts. If he had had to give them a name, he supposed he would have called them horses, though there was something reptilian about them, too. They were completely fleshless, their black coats clinging to their skeletons, of which every bone was visible. Their heads were dragonish, and their pupil-less eyes white and staring. Wings sprouted from each wither - vast, black leathery wings that looked as though they ought to belong to giant bats. Standing still and quiet in the

gathering gloom, the creatures looked eerie and sinister. Harry could not understand why the coaches were being pulled by these horrible horses when they were quite capable of moving along by themselves.

“Where’s Pig?” said Ron’s voice, right behind Harry.

“That Luna girl was carrying him,” said Harry, turning quickly, eager to consult Ron about Hagrid. “Where d’you reckon -”

“- Hagrid is? I dunno,” said Ron, sounding worried. “He’d better be okay…”

A short distance away, Draco Malfoy, followed by a small gang of cronies including Crabbe, Goyle and Pansy Parkinson, was pushing some timid-looking second-years out of the way so that he and his friends could get a coach to themselves. Seconds later, Hermione emerged panting from the crowd.

“Malfoy was being absolutely foul to a first-year back there. I swear I’m going to report him, he’s only had his badge three minutes and he’s using it to bully people worse than ever… where’s Crookshanks?”

“Ginny’s got him,” said Harry. “There she is…”

Ginny had just emerged from the crowd, clutching a squirming Crookshanks.

“Thanks,” said Hermione, relieving Ginny of the cat. “Come on, let’s get a carriage together before they all fill up…”

“I haven’t got Pig yet!” Ron said, but Hermione was already heading off towards the nearest unoccupied coach. Harry remained behind with Ron.

“What are those things, d’you reckon?” he asked Ron, nodding at the horrible horses as the other students surged past them.

“What things?”

“Those horse -”

Luna appeared holding Pigwidgeon’s cage in her arms; the tiny owl was twittering excitedly as usual.

“Here you are,” she said. “He’s a sweet little owl, isn’t he?”

“Er… yeah… he’s all right,” said Ron gruffly. “Well, come on then, let’s get in… what were you saying, Harry?”

“I was saying, what are those horse things?” Harry said, as he, Ron and Luna made for the

carriage in which Hermione and Ginny were already sitting.

“What horse things?”

“The horse things pulling the carriages!” said Harry impatiently. They were, after all, about three feet from the nearest one; it was watching them with empty white eyes. Ron, however, gave Harry a perplexed look.

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about - look!”

Harry grabbed Ron’s arm and wheeled him about so that he was face to face with the winged horse. Ron stared straight at it for a second, then looked back at Harry.

“What am I supposed to be looking at?”

“At the - there, between the shafts! Harnessed to the coach! It’s right there in front -”

But as Ron continued to look bemused, a strange thought occurred to Harry.

“Can’t… can’t you see them?”

“See what?”

“Can’t you see what’s pulling the carriages?”

Ron looked seriously alarmed now.

“Are you feeling all right, Harry?”

“I… yeah…”

Harry felt utterly bewildered. The horse was there in front of him, gleaming solidly in the dim light issuing from the station windows behind them, vapour rising from its nostrils in the chilly night air. Yet, unless Ron was faking - and it was a very feeble joke if he was - Ron could not see it at all.

“Shall we get in, then?” said Ron uncertainly, looking at Harry as though worried about him.

“Yeah,” said Harry. “Yeah, go on…”

“It’s all right,” said a dreamy voice from beside Harry as Ron vanished into the coach’s dark interior. “You’re not going mad or anything. I can see them, too.”

“Can you?” said Harry desperately, turning to Luna. He could see the bat-winged horses reflected in her wide silvery eyes.

“Oh, yes,” said Luna, “I’ve been able to see them ever since my first day here. They’ve always pulled the carriages. Don’t worry. You’re just as sane as I am”

Smiling faintly, she climbed into the musty interior of the carriage after Ron. Not altogether reassured, Harry followed her.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Sorting Hat's New Song

Harry did not want to tell the others that he and Luna were having the same hallucination, if that was what it was, so he said nothing more about the horses as he sat down inside the carriage and slammed the door behind him. Nevertheless, he could not help watching the silhouettes of the horses moving beyond the window.

"Did everyone see that Grubbly-Plank woman?" asked Ginny. "What's she doing back here? Hagrid can't have left, can he?"

"I'll be quite glad if he has," said Luna, "he isn't a very good teacher, is he?"

"Yes, he is!" said Harry, Ron and Ginny angrily.

Harry glared at Hermione. She cleared her throat and quickly said, "Erm… yes… he's very good."

"Well, we in Ravenclaw think he's a bit of a joke," said Luna, unfazed.

"You've got a rubbish sense of humor then," Ron snapped, as the wheels below them creaked into motion.

Luna did not seem perturbed by Ron's rudeness; on the contrary, she simply watched him for a while as though he were a mildly interesting television program.

Rattling and swaying, the carriages moved in convoy up the road. When they passed between the tall stone pillars topped with winged boars on either side of the gates to the school grounds, Harry leaned forwards to try and see whether there were any lights on in Hagrid's cabin by the Forbidden Forest, but the grounds were in complete darkness. Hogwarts Castle, however, loomed ever closer: a towering mass of turrets, jet black against the dark sky, here and there a window blazing fiery bright above them.

The carriages jingled to a halt near the stone steps leading up to the oak front doors and Harry got out of the carriage first. He turned again to look for lit windows down by the Forest, but there was definitely no sign of life within Hagrids cabin. Unwillingly, because he had half-hoped they would have vanished, he turned his eyes instead upon the strange, skeletal creatures standing quietly in the chill night air, their blank white eyes gleaming.

Harry had once before had the experience of seeing something that Ron could not, but that had been a reflection in a mirror, something much more insubstantial than a hundred very solid looking beasts strong enough to pull a fleet of carriages. If Luna was to be believed, the beasts had always been there but invisible. Why, then, could Harry suddenly see them, and why could Ron not?

“Are you coming or what” said Ron beside him.

“Oh… yeah,” said Harry quickly and they joined the crowd hurrying up the stone steps into the castle.

The Entrance Hall was ablaze with torches and echoing with footsteps as the students crossed the flagged stone floor for the double doors to the right, leading to the Great Hall and the start-of-term feast.

The four long house tables in the Great Hall were filling up under the starless black ceiling, which was just like the sky they could glimpse through the high windows. Candles floated in midair all along the tables, illuminating the silvery ghosts who were dotted about the Hall and the faces of the students talking eagerly, exchanging summer news, shouting greetings at friends from other houses, eyeing one another’s new haircuts and robes. Again, Harry noticed people putting their heads together to whisper as he passed; he gritted his teeth and tried to act as though he neither noticed nor cared.

Luna drifted away from them at the Ravenclaw table. The moment they reached Gryffindors, Ginny was hailed by some fellow fourth-years and left to sit with them; Harry, Ron, Hermione and Neville found seats together about halfway down the table between Nearly Headless Nick, the Gryffindor house ghost, and Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown, the last two of whom gave Harry airy, overly-friendly greetings that made him quite sure they had stopped talking about him a split second before. He had more important things to worry about, however: he was looking over the students’ heads to the staff table that ran along the top wall of the Hall.

“He’s not there.”

Ron and Hermione scanned the staff table too, though there was no real need; Hagrid’s size made him instantly obvious in any lineup.

“He can’t have left,” said Ron, sounding slightly anxious.

“Of course he hasn’t,” said Harry firmly.

“You don’t think he’s… hurt, or anything, do you?” said Hermione uneasily.

“No,” said Harry at once.

“But where is he, then?”

There was a pause, then Harry said very quietly, so that Neville, Parvati and Lavender could not hear, “Maybe he’s not back yet. You know - from his mission - the thing he was doing over the summer for Dumbledore.’

“Yeah… yeah, that’ll be it,” said Ron, sounding reassured, but Hermione bit her lip, looking up and down the staff table as though hoping for some conclusive explanation of Hagrid’s absence.

“Who’s that?” she said sharply, pointing towards the middle of the staff table.

Harry’s eyes followed hers. They lit first upon Professor Dumbledore, sitting in his high-backed golden chair at the center of the long staff table, wearing deep-purple robes scattered with silvery stars and a matching hat. Dumbledore’s head was inclined towards the woman sitting next to him, who was talking into his ear. She looked, Harry thought, like somebody’s maiden aunt: squat, with short, curly, mouse-brown hair in which she had placed a horrible pink Alice band that matched the fluffy pink cardigan she wore over her robes. Then she turned her face slightly to take a sip from her goblet and he saw, with a shock of recognition, a pallid, toadlike face and a pair of prominent, pouchy eyes.

“It’s that Umbridge woman!”

“Who?” said Hermione.

“She was at my hearing, she works for Fudge!”

“Nice cardigan,” said Ron, smirking.

“She works for Fudge!” Hermione repeated, frowning. “What on earth’s she doing here, then?”

“Dunno…”

Hermione scanned the staff table, her eyes narrowed.

“No,” she muttered, “no, surely not…”

Harry did not understand what she was talking about but did not ask; his attention had been caught by Professor Grubbly-Plank who had just appeared behind the staff table; she worked her way along to the very end and took the seat that ought to have been Hagrids. That meant the first-years must have crossed the lake and reached the castle, and sure enough, a few seconds later, the doors from the Entrance Hall opened. A long line of scared-looking first-years entered, led by Professor McGonagall, who was carrying a stool on which sat an ancient wizard’s hat, heavily patched and darned with a wide rip near the frayed brim.

The buzz of talk in the Great Hall faded away. The first-years lined up in front of the staff table facing the rest of the students, and Professor McGonagall placed the stool carefully in front of them, then stood back.

The first-years’ faces glowed palely in the candlelight. A small boy right in the middle of the row looked as though he was trembling. Harry recalled, fleetingly, how terrified he had felt when he had stood there, waiting for the unknown test that would determine to which house he belonged. The whole school waited with bated breath. Then the rip near the hat’s brim opened wide like a mouth and the Sorting Hat burst into song:

In times of old when I was new,

And Hogwarts barely started,

The founders of our noble school,

Thought never to be parted,

United by a common goal,

They had the selfsame yearning,

To make the world's best magic school,

And pass along their learning.

"*Together we will build and teach!*"

The four good friends decided,

And never did they dream,

That they might some day be divided,

For were there such friends anywhere,

As Slytherin and Gryffindor?

Unless it was the second pair

Of Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw?

So how could it have gone so wrong?

How could such friendships fail?

Why, I was there and so can tell,

The whole sad, sorry tale.

Said Slytherin, "We'll teach just those whose
Ancestry is purest."

Said Ravenclaw, "We'll teach those whose
Intelligence is surest."

Said Gryffindor, "We'll teach all those
With brave deeds to their name."

Said Hufflepuff, “I’ll teach the lot,
And treat them just the same.”

These differences caused little strife,

When first they came to light,

For each of the four founders had

A house in which they might

Take only those they wanted,

So, for instance, Slytherin

Took only pure-blood wizards

Of great cunning, just like him,

And only those of sharpest mind

Were taught by Ravenclaw

While the bravest and the boldest

Went to daring Gryffindor.

Good Hufflepuff, she took the rest,

And taught them all she knew,

Thus the houses and their founders

Retained friendships firm and true.

So Hogwarts worked in harmony

For several happy years,

But then discord crept among us

Feeding on our faults and fears.

The houses that, like pillars four,

Had once held up our school,

Now turned upon each other and,

Divided, sought to rule.

And for a while it seemed the school

Must meet an early end,

What with dueling and with fighting

And the clash of friend on friend

And at last there came a morning

When old Slytherin departed

And though the fighting then died out

He left us quite downhearted.

And never since the founders four

Were whittled down to three

Have the houses been united

As they once were meant to be.

And now the Sorting Hat is here

And you all know the score:

I sort you into houses

Because that is what I'm for,

But this year I'll go further,

Listen closely to my song:

Though condemned I am to split you

Still I worry that it's wrong,

Though I must fulfill my duty

And must quarter every year

Still I wonder whether Sorting

May not bring the end I fear.

Oh, know the perils, read the signs,

The warning history shows,

For our Hogwarts is in danger

From external, deadly foes

And we must unite inside her

Or we'll crumble from within

I have told you, I have warned you…

Let the Sorting now begin.

The Hat became motionless once more; applause broke out, though it was punctured, for the first time in Harry's memory, with muttering and whispers. All across the Great Hall students were exchanging remarks with their neighbors, and Harry, clapping along with everyone else, knew exactly what they were talking about.

"Branched out a bit this year, hasn't it?" said Ron, his eyebrows raised.

"Too right it has," said Harry.

The Sorting Hat usually confined itself to describing the different qualities looked for by each of the four Hogwarts houses and its own role in Sorting them. Harry could not remember it ever trying to give the school advice before.

"I wonder if it's ever given warnings before?" said Hermione, sounding slightly anxious.

"Yes, indeed," said Nearly Headless Nick knowledgeably, leaning across Neville towards her (Neville winced; it was very uncomfortable to have a ghost lean through you). "The Hat feels itself honor-bound to give the school due warning whenever it feels –"

But Professor McGonagall, who was waiting to read out the list of first-years' names, was giving the whispering students the sort of look that scorches. Nearly Headless Nick placed a see-through finger to his lips and sat primly upright again as the muttering came to an abrupt end.

With a last frowning look that swept the four house tables, Professor McGonagall lowered her

eyes to her long piece of parchment and called out the first name.

“Abercrombie, Euan.”

The terrified-looking boy Harry had noticed earlier stumbled forwards and put the Hat on his head; it was only prevented from falling right down to his shoulders by his very prominent ears. The Hat considered for a moment, then the rip near the brim opened again and shouted:

“Gryffindor!”

Harry clapped loudly with the rest of Gryffindor house as Euan Abercrombie staggered to their table and sat down, looking as though he would like very much to sink through the floor and never be looked at again.

Slowly, the long line of first-years thinned. In the pauses between the names and the Sorting Hat’s decisions, Harry could hear Ron’s stomach rumbling loudly. Finally, “Zeller, Rose” was Sorted into Hufflepuff, and Professor McGonagall picked up the Hat and stool and marched them away as Professor Dumbledore rose to his feet.

Whatever his recent bitter feelings had been towards his Headmaster, Harry was somehow soothed to see Dumbledore standing before them all. Between the absence of Hagrid and the presence of those dragonish horses, he had felt that his return to Hogwarts, so long anticipated, was full of unexpected surprises, like jarring notes in a familiar song. But this, at least, was how it was supposed to be: their Headmaster rising to greet them all before the start-of-term feast.

“To our newcomers,” said Dumbledore in a ringing voice, his arms stretched wide and a beaming smile on his lips, “welcome! To our old hands - welcome back! There is a time for speechmaking, but this is not it. Tuck in!”

There was an appreciative laugh and an outbreak of applause as Dumbledore sat down neatly and threw his long beard over his shoulder so as to keep it out of the way of his plate - for food had appeared out of nowhere, so that the five long tables were groaning under joints and pies and dishes of vegetables, bread and sauces and flagons of pumpkin juice.

“Excellent,” said Ron, with a kind of groan of longing, and he seized the nearest plate of chops and began piling them on to his plate, watched wistfully by Nearly Headless Nick.

“What were you saying before the Sorting?” Hermione asked the ghost. “About the Hat giving warnings?”

“Oh, yes,” said Nick, who seemed glad of a reason to turn away from Ron, who was now eating roast potatoes with almost indecent enthusiasm. “Yes, I have heard the Hat give several warnings before, always at times when it detects periods of great danger for the school. And always, of course, its advice is the same: stand together, be strong from within.”

“Ow kunnit nofe skusin danger ifzat?” said Ron.

His mouth was so full Harry thought it was quite an achievement for him to make any noise at all.

“I beg your pardon?” said Nearly Headless Nick politely, while Hermione looked revolted. Ron gave an enormous swallow and said, “How can it know if the school’s in danger if it’s a Hat?”

“I have no idea,” said Nearly Headless Nick. “Of course, it lives in Dumbledore’s office, so I daresay it picks things up there.”

“And it wants all the houses to be friends?” said Harry, looking over at the Slytherin table, where Draco Malfoy was holding court. “Fat chance.”

“Well, now, you shouldn’t take that attitude,” said Nick reprovingly. “Peaceful cooperation, that’s the key. We ghosts, though we belong to separate houses, maintain links of friendship. In spite of the competitiveness between Gryffindor and Slytherin, I would never dream of seeking an argument with the Bloody Baron.”

“Only because you’re terrified of him,” said Ron.

Nearly Headless Nick looked highly affronted.

“Terrified? I hope I, Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington, have never been guilty of cowardice in my life! The noble blood that runs in my veins -”

“What blood?” asked Ron. “Surely you haven’t still got -?”

“Its a figure of speech!” said Nearly Headless Nick, now so annoyed his head was trembling ominously on his partially severed neck. “I assume I am still allowed to enjoy the use of whichever words I like, even if the pleasures of eating and drinking are denied me! But I am quite used to students poking fun at my death, I assure you!”

“Nick, he wasn’t really laughing at you!” said Hermione, throwing a furious look at Ron. Unfortunately, Ron’s mouth was packed to exploding point again and all he could manage was “Node iddum eentup sechew,” which Nick did not seem to think constituted an adequate apology.

Rising into the air, he straightened his feathered hat and swept away from them to the other end of the table, coming to rest between the Creevey brothers, Colin and Dennis.

“Well done, Ron,” snapped Hermione.

“What?” said Ron indignantly, having managed, finally, to swallow his food. “I’m not allowed to ask a simple question?”

“Oh, forget it,” said Hermione irritably, and the pair of them spent the rest of the meal in huffy silence.

Harry was too used to their bickering to bother trying to reconcile them; he felt it was a better use of his time to eat his way steadily through his steak and kidney pie, then a large plateful of his favorite treacle tart.

When all the students had finished eating and the noise level in the Hall was starting to creep upwards again, Dumbledore got to his feet once more. Talking ceased immediately as all turned to lace the Headmaster. Harry was feeling pleasantly drowsy now. His four-poster bed was waiting somewhere above, wonderfully warm and soft…

“Well, now that we are all digesting another magnificent feast, I beg a few moments of your attention for the usual start-of-term notices,” said Dumbledore. “First-years ought to know that the Forest in the grounds is out-of-bounds to students - and a few of our older students ought to know by now, too.” (Harry, Ron and Hermione exchanged smirks.)

“Mr. Filch, the caretaker, has asked me, for what he tells me is the four-hundred-and-sixty second time, to remind you all that magic is not permitted in corridors between classes, nor are a number of other things, all of which can be checked on the extensive list now fastened to Mr. Filch’s office door.

“We have had two changes in staffing this year. We are very pleased to welcome back Professor Grubbly-Plank, who will be taking Care of Magical Creatures lessons; we are also delighted to introduce Professor Umbridge, our new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher.”

There was a round of polite but fairly unenthusiastic applause, during which Harry, Ron and Hermione exchanged slightly panicked looks; Dumbledore had not said for how long Grubbly-Plank would be teaching.

Dumbledore continued, “Tryouts for the house Quidditch teams will take place on the -”

He broke off, looking enquiringly at Professor Umbridge. As she was not much taller standing than sitting, there was a moment when nobody understood why Dumbledore had stopped talking, but then Professor Umbridge cleared her throat, “Hem, hem,” and it became clear that she had got to her feet and was intending to make a speech.

Dumbledore only looked taken aback for a moment, then he sat down smartly and looked alertly at Professor Umbridge as though he desired nothing better than to listen to her talk. Other members of staff were not as adept at hiding their surprise. Professor Sprout’s eyebrows had disappeared into her flyaway hair and Professor McGonagall’s mouth was as thin as Harry had ever seen it. No new teacher had ever interrupted Dumbledore before. Many of the students were smirking; this woman obviously did not know how things were done at Hogwarts.

“Thank you, Headmaster,” Professor Umbridge simpered, “for those kind words of welcome.”

Her voice was high-pitched, breathy and little-girlish and, again, Harry felt a powerful rush of dislike that he could not explain to himself; all he knew was that he loathed everything about her, from her stupid voice to her fluffy pink cardigan. She gave another little throat-clearing cough

("hem, hem") and continued.

"Well, it is lovely to be back at Hogwarts, I must say!" She smiled, revealing very pointed teeth. "And to see such happy little faces looking up at me!"

Harry glanced around. None of the faces he could see looked happy. On the contrary, they all looked rather taken-aback at being addressed as though they were five years old.

"I am very much looking forward to getting to know you all and I'm sure we'll be very good friends!"

Students exchanged looks at this; some of them were barely concealing grins.

"I'll be her friend as long as I don't have to borrow that cardigan," Parvati whispered to Lavender, and both of them lapsed into silent giggles.

Professor Umbridge cleared her throat again ("hem, hem"), but when she continued, some of the breathiness had vanished from her voice. She sounded much more businesslike and now her words had a dull learned-by-heart sound to them.

"The Ministry of Magic has always considered the education of young witches and wizards to be of vital importance. The rare gifts with which you were born may come to nothing if not nurtured and honed by careful instruction. The ancient skills unique to the wizarding community must be passed down the generations lest we lose them for ever. The treasure trove of magical knowledge amassed by our ancestors must be guarded, replenished and polished by those who have been called to the noble profession of teaching."

Professor Umbridge paused here and made a little bow to her fellow staff members, none of whom bowed back to her. Professor McGonagall's dark eyebrows had contracted so that she looked positively hawklike, and Harry distinctly saw her exchange a significant glance with Professor Sprout as Umbridge gave another little "hem, hem" and went on with her speech.

"Every headmaster and headmistress of Hogwarts has brought something new to the weighty task of governing this historic school, and that is as it should be, for without progress there will be stagnation and decay. There again, progress for progress's sake must be discouraged, for our tried and tested traditions often require no tinkering. A balance, then, between old and new, between permanence and change, between tradition and innovation…"

Harry found his attentiveness ebbing, as though his brain was slipping in and out of tune. The quiet that always filled the Hall when Dumbledore was speaking was breaking up as students put their heads together, whispering and giggling. Over on the Ravenclaw table Cho Chang was chatting animatedly with her friends. A few seats along from Cho, Luna Lovegood had got out The Quibbler again. Meanwhile, at the Hufflepuff table Ernie Macmillan was one of the few still staring at Professor Umbridge, but he was glassy-eyed and Harry was sure he was only pretending to listen in an attempt to live up to the new prefect's badge gleaming on his chest. Professor Umbridge did not seem to notice the restlessness of her audience. Harry had the

impression that a full-scale riot could have broken out under her nose and she would have ploughed on with her speech. The teachers, however, were still listening very attentively, and Hermione seemed to be drinking in every word Umbridge spoke, though, judging by her expression, they were not at all to her taste.

"… because some changes will be for the better, while others will come, in the fullness of time, to be recognized as errors of judgment. Meanwhile, some old habits will be retained, and rightly so, whereas others, outmoded and outworn, must be abandoned. Let us move forward, then, into a new era of openness, effectiveness and accountability, intent on preserving what ought to be preserved, perfecting what needs to be perfected, and pruning wherever we find practices that ought to be prohibited."

She sat down. Dumbledore clapped. The staff followed his lead, though Harry noticed that several of them brought their hands together only once or twice before stopping. A few students joined in, but most had been taken unawares by the end of the speech, not having listened to more than a few words of it, and before they could start applauding properly, Dumbledore had stood up again.

"Thank you very much, Professor Umbridge, that was most illuminating," he said, bowing to her. "Now, as I was saying, Quidditch tryouts will be held…"

"Yes, it certainly was illuminating," said Hermione in a low voice.

"You're not telling me you enjoyed it?" Ron said quietly, turning a glazed face towards Hermione. "That was about the dullest speech I've ever heard, and I grew up with Percy."

"I said illuminating, not enjoyable," said Hermione. "It explained a lot.'

"Did it" said Harry in surprise. "Sounded like a load of waffle to me."

"There was some important stuff hidden in the waffle," said Hermione grimly.

"Was there?" said Ron blankly.

"How about: 'progress for progress's sake must be discouraged'? How about: 'pruning wherever we find practices that ought to be prohibited'?"

"Well, what does that mean?" said Ron impatiently.

"I'll tell you what it means," said Hermione through gritted teeth. "It means the Ministry's interfering at Hogwarts."

There was a great clattering and banging all around them; Dumbledore had obviously just dismissed the school, because everyone was standing up ready to leave the Hall. Hermione jumped up, looking flustered.

“Ron, we’re supposed to show the first-years where to go!”

“Oh yeah,” said Ron, who had obviously forgotten. “Hey - hey, you lot! Midgets!”

“Ron!”

“Well, they are, they’re titchy…”

“I know, but you can’t call them midgets! - First-years!” Hermione called commandingly along the table. “This way, please!”

A group of new students walked shyly up the gap between the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tables, all of them trying hard not to lead the group. They did indeed seem very small; Harry was sure he had not appeared that young when he had arrived here. He grinned at them. A blond boy next to Euan Abercrombie looked petrified; he nudged Euan and whispered something in his ear. Euan Abercrombie looked equally frightened and stole a horrified look at Harry, who felt the grin slide off his face like Stinksap.

“See you later,” he said dully to Ron and Hermione and he made his way out of the Great Hall alone, doing everything he could to ignore more whispering, staring and pointing as he passed. He kept his eyes fixed ahead as he wove his way through the crowd in the Entrance Hall, then he hurried up the marble staircase, took a couple of concealed short cuts and had soon left most of the crowds behind.

He had been stupid not to expect this, he thought angrily as he walked through the much emptier upstairs corridors. Of course everyone was staring at him; he had emerged from the Triwizard maze two months previously clutching the dead body of a fellow student and claiming to have seen Lord Voldemort return to power. There had not been time last term to explain himself before they’d all had to go home - even if he had felt up to giving the whole school a detailed account of the terrible events in that graveyard.

Harry had reached the end of the corridor to the Gryffindor common room and come to a halt in front of the portrait of the Fat Lady before he realized that he did not know the new password.

“Er…” he said glumly, staring up at the Fat Lady, who smoothed the folds of her pink satin dress and looked sternly back at him.

“No password, no entrance,” she said loftily.

“Harry, I know it!” Someone panted up behind him and he turned to see Neville jogging towards him. “Guess what it is? I’m actually going to be able to remember it for once -” He waved the stunted little cactus he had shown them on the train. “Mimbulus mimbletonia!”

“Correct,” said the Fat Lady, and her portrait swung open towards them like a door, revealing a circular hole in the wall behind, through which Harry and Neville now climbed.

The Gryffindor common room looked as welcoming as ever, a cozy circular tower room full of dilapidated squashy armchairs and rickety old tables. A fire was crackling merrily in the grate and a few people were warming their hands by it before going up to their dormitories; on the other side of the room Fred and George Weasley were pinning something up on the noticeboard. Harry waved goodnight to them and headed straight for the door to the boys' dormitories; he was not in much of a mood for talking at the moment. Neville followed him.

Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnigan had reached the dormitory first and were in the process of covering the walls beside their beds with posters and photographs. They had been talking as Harry pushed open the door but stopped abruptly the moment they saw him. Harry wondered whether they had been talking about him, then whether he was being paranoid.

“Hi,” he said, moving across to his own trunk and opening it.

“Hey, Harry,” said Dean, who was putting on a pair of pajamas in the West Ham colors. “Good holiday?”

“Not bad,” muttered Harry, as a true account of his holiday would have taken most of the night to relate and he could not face it. “You?”

“Yeah, it was okay,” chuckled Dean. “Better than Seamus's, anyway, he was just telling me.”

“Why, what happened, Seamus?” Neville asked as he placed his Mimbulus mimbletonia tenderly on his bedside cabinet.

Seamus did not answer immediately; he was making rather a meal of ensuring that his poster of the Kenmare Kestrels Quidditch team was quite straight. Then he said, with his back still turned to Harry, “Me mam didn't want me to come back.”

“What?” said Harry, pausing in the act of pulling off his robes.

“She didn't want me to come back to Hogwarts.”

Seamus turned away from his poster and pulled his own pajamas out of his trunk, still not looking at Harry.

“But - why?” said Harry, astonished. He knew that Seamus's mother was a witch and could not understand, therefore, why she should have come over so Dursleyish.

Seamus did not answer until he had finished buttoning his pajamas.

“Well,” he said in a measured voice, “I suppose… because of you.”

“What d'you mean?” said Harry quickly.

His heart was beating rather fast. He felt vaguely as though something was closing in on him.

“Well,” said Seamus again, still avoiding Harry’s eye, “she… er… well, it’s not just you, it’s Dumbledore, too…”

“She believes the Daily Prophet?” said Harry. “She thinks I’m a liar and Dumbledore’s an old fool?”

Seamus looked up at him.

“Yeah, something like that.”

Harry said nothing. He threw his wand down on to his bedside table, pulled off his robes, stuffed them angrily into his trunk and pulled on his pajamas. He was sick of it; sick of being the person who was stared at and talked about all the time. If any of them knew, if any of them had the faintest idea what it felt like to be the one all these things had happened to… Mrs. Finnigan had no idea, the stupid woman, he thought savagely.

He got into bed and made to pull the hangings closed around him, but before he could do so, Seamus said, “Look… what did happen that night when… you know, when… with Cedric Diggory and all?”

Seamus sounded nervous and eager at the same time. Dean, who had been bending over his trunk trying to retrieve a slipper, went oddly still and Harry knew he was listening hard.

“What are you asking me for?” Harry retorted. “Just read the Daily Prophet like your mother, why don’t you? That’ll tell you all you need to know.”

“Don’t you have a go at my mother,” Seamus snapped.

“I’ll have a go at anyone who calls me a liar,” said Harry.

“Don’t talk to me like that!”

“I’ll talk to you how I want,” said Harry, his temper rising so fast he snatched his wand back from his bedside table. “If you’ve got a problem sharing a dormitory with me, go and ask McGonagall if you can be moved… stop your mummy worrying -”

“Leave my mother out of this, Potter!”

“What’s going on?”

Ron had appeared in the doorway. His wide eyes traveled from Harry, who was kneeling on his bed with his wand pointing at Seamus, to Seamus, who was standing there with his fists raised.

“He’s having a go at my mother!” Seamus yelled.

“What?” said Ron. “Harry wouldn’t do that — we met your mother, we liked her…”

“That’s before she started believing every word the stinking Daily Prophet writes about me!” said Harry at the top of his voice.

“Oh,” said Ron, comprehension dawning across his freckled face. “Oh… right.”

“You know what?” said Seamus heatedly, casting Harry a venomous look. “He’s right, I don’t want to share a dormitory with him any more, he’s a madman.”

“That’s out of order, Seamus,” said Ron, whose ears were starting to glow red - always a danger sign.

“Out of order, am I?” shouted Seamus, who in contrast with Ron was tuning paler. “You believe all the rubbish he’s come out with about You-Know-Who, do you, you reckon he’s telling the truth?”

“Yeah, I do!” said Ron angrily.

“Then you’re mad, too,” said Seamus in disgust.

“Yeah? Well, unfortunately for you, pal, I’m also a prefect!” said Ron, jabbing himself in the chest with a finger. “So unless you want detention, watch your mouth!”

Seamus looked for a few seconds as though detention would be a reasonable price to pay to say what was going through his mind; but with a noise of contempt he turned on his heel, vaulted into bed and pulled the hangings shut with such violence that they were ripped from the bed and fell in a dusty pile to the floor. Ron glared at Seamus, then looked at Dean and Neville.

“Anyone else’s parents got a problem with Harry?” he said aggressively.

“My parents are Muggles, mate,” said Dean, shrugging. “They don’t know nothing about no deaths at Hogwarts, because I’m not stupid enough to tell them.”

“You don’t know my mother, she’d weasel anything out of anyone!” Seamus snapped at him. “Anyway your parents don’t get the Daily Prophet. They don’t know our Headmaster’s been sacked from the Wizengamot and the International Confederation of Wizards because he’s losing his marbles -”

“My gran says that’s rubbish,” piped up Neville. “She says it’s the Daily Prophet that’s going downhill, not Dumbledore. She’s cancelled our subscription. We believe Harry” said Neville simply. He climbed into bed and pulled the covers up to his chin, looking owlishly over them at Seamus. “My gran’s always said You-Know-Who would come back one day. She says if Dumbledore says he’s back, he’s back.”

Harry felt a rush of gratitude towards Neville. Nobody else said anything. Seamus got out his wand, repaired the bed hangings and vanished behind them. Dean got into bed, rolled over and fell silent. Neville, who appeared to have nothing more to say either, was gazing fondly at his

moonlit cactus.

Harry lay back on his pillows while Ron bustled around the next bed, putting his things away. He felt shaken by the argument with Seamus, whom he had always liked very much. How many more people were going to suggest that he was lying, or unhinged?

Had Dumbledore suffered like this all summer, as first the Wizengamot, then the International Confederation of Wizards had thrown him from their ranks? Was it anger at Harry, perhaps, that had stopped Dumbledore getting in touch with him for months? The two of them were in this together, after all; Dumbledore had believed Harry, announced his version of events to the whole school and then to the wider wizarding community. Anyone who thought Harry was a liar had to think that Dumbledore was, too, or else that Dumbledore had been hoodwinked…

They'll know we're right in the end, thought Harry miserably, as Ron got into bed and extinguished the last candle in the dormitory. But he wondered how many more attacks like Seamus's he would have to endure before that time came.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Professor Umbridge

Seamus dressed at top speed next morning and left the dormitory before Harry had even put on his socks.

“Does he think he’ll turn into a nutter if he stays in a room with me too long?” asked Harry loudly, as the hem of Seamus’s robes whipped out of sight.

“Don’t worry about it, Harry,” Dean muttered, hoisting his schoolbag on to his shoulder, “he’s just…”

But apparently he was unable to say exactly what Seamus was, and after a slightly awkward pause followed him out of the room.

Neville and Ron both gave Harry an it’s-his-problem-not-yours look, but Harry was not much consoled. How much more of this would he have to take?

“What’s the matter?” asked Hermione five minutes later, catching up with Harry and Ron halfway across the common room as they all headed towards breakfast. “You look absolutely - Oh for heaven’s sake.”

She was staring at the common-room noticeboard, where a large new sign had been put up.

GALLONS OF GALLEONS.

Pocket money failing to keep pace with your outgoings? Like to earn a little extra gold? Contact Fred and George Weasley, Gryffindor common room, for simple, part-time, virtually painless jobs. (We regret that all work is undertaken at applicant’s own risk.)

“They are the limit,” said Hermione grimly, taking d own the sign, which Fred and George had pinned up over a poster giving the date of the first Hogsmeade weekend in October. “We’ll have to talk to them, Ron.”

Ron looked positively alarmed.

“Why?”

“Because we’re prefects!” said Hermione, as they c l imbed out through the portrait hole. “It’s up to us to stop this kind of thing!”

Ron said nothing; Harry could tell from his glum expression that the prospect of stopping Fred and George doing exactly what they liked was not one he found inviting.

“Anyway, what’s up, Harry?” Hermione continued, as they walked down a flight of stairs lined with portraits of old witches and wizards, all of whom ignored them, being engrossed in their own conversation. “You look really angry about something.”

“Seamus reckons Harry’s lying about You-Know-Who,” said Ron succinctly, when Harry did not respond.

Hermione, who Harry had expected to react angrily on his behalf, sighed.

“Yes, Lavender thinks so too,” she said gloomily.

“Been having a nice little chat with her about whet her or not I’m a lying, attention-seeking prat, have you?” Harry said loudly.

“No,” said Hermione calmly. “I told her to keep her big fat mouth shut about you, actually. And it would be quite nice if you stopped jumping down our throats, Harry, because in case you haven’t noticed, Ron and I are on your side.”

There was a short pause.

“Sorry,” said Harry in a low voice.

“That’s quite all right,” said Hermione with dignity… Then she shook her head. “Don’t you remember what Dumbledore said at the last end-of-term feast?”

Harry and Ron both looked at her blankly and Hermione sighed again.

“About You-Know-Who. He said his ‘gift for spreading discord and enmity is very great. We can fight it only by showing an equally strong bond of friendship and trust —’”

“How do you remember stuff like that?” asked Ron, looking at her in admiration.

“I listen, Ron,” said Hermione, with a touch of asperity.

“So do I, but I still couldn’t tell you exactly what -”

“The point,” Hermione pressed on loudly, “is that this sort of thing is exactly what Dumbledore was talking about. You-Know-Who’s only been back two months and we’ve already started fighting among ourselves. And the Sorting Hats warning was the same: stand together, be united —”

“And Harry got it right last night,” retorted Ron. “If that means we’re supposed to get matey with the Slytherins-fat chance.”

“Well, I think it’s a pity we’re not trying for a bit of inter-house unity,” said Hermione crossly.

They had reached the foot of the marble staircase. A line of fourth-year Ravenclaws was crossing the Entrance Hall; they caught sight of Harry and hurried to form a tighter group, as though frightened he might attack stragglers.

“Yeah, we really ought to be trying to make friends with people like that,” said Harry sarcastically.

They followed the Ravenclaws into the Great Hall, all looking instinctively at the staff table as they entered. Professor Grubbly-Plank was chatting to Professor Sinistra, the Astronomy teacher, and Hagrid was once again conspicuous only by his absence. The enchanted ceiling above them echoed Harry’s mood; it was a miserable rain-cloud grey.

“Dumbledore didn’t even mention how long that Grubbly-Plank woman’s staying,” he said, as they made their way across to the Gryffindor table.

“Maybe…” said Hermione thoughtfully.

“What?” said both Harry and Ron together.

“Well… maybe he didn’t want to draw attention to Hagrid not being here.”

“What d’you mean, draw attention to it?” said Ron, half-laughing. “How could we not notice?”

Before Hermione could answer, a tall black girl with long braided hair had marched up to Harry.

“Hi, Angelina.”

“Hi,” she said briskly, “good summer?” And without waiting for an answer, “Listen, I’ve been made Gryffindor Quidditch Captain.”

“Nice one,” said Harry, grinning at her; he suspected Angelina’s pep talks might not be as longwinded as Oliver Wood’s had been, which could only be an improvement.

“Yeah, well, we need a new Keeper now Oliver’s left. Tryouts are on Friday at five o’clock and I want the whole team there, all right? Then we can see how the new personnel fit in.”

“Okay,” said Harry.

Angelina smiled at him and departed.

“I’d forgotten Wood had left,” said Hermione vaguely as she sat down beside Ron and pulled a plate of toast towards her. “I suppose that will make quite a difference to the team?”

“I s’pose,” said Harry, taking the bench opposite. “He was a good Keeper…”

“Still, it won’t hurt to have some new blood, will it?” said Ron.

With a whoosh and a clatter, hundreds of owls came soaring in through the upper windows. They descended all over the Hall, bringing letters and packages to their owners and showering the breakfasters with droplets of water; it was clearly raining hard outside. Hedwig was nowhere to be seen, but Harry was hardly surprised; his only correspondent was Sirius, and he doubted Sirius would have anything new to tell him after only twenty-four hours apart. Hermione, however, had to move her orange juice aside quickly to make way for a large damp barn owl bearing a sodden Daily Prophet in its beak.

“What are you still getting that for?” said Harry irritably, thinking of Seamus as Hermione placed a Knut in the leather pouch on the owl’s leg and it took off again. “I’m not bothering… load of rubbish.”

“It’s best to know what the enemy is saying,” said Hermione darkly, and she unfurled the newspaper and disappeared behind it, not emerging until Harry and Ron had finished eating. “Nothing,” she said simply, rolling up the newspaper and laying it down by her plate. “Nothing about you or Dumbledore or anything.”

Professor McGonagall was now moving along the table handing out schedules.

“Look at today!” groaned Ron. “History of Magic, double Potions, Divination and double Defense Against the Dark Arts… Binns, Snape, Trelawney and that Umbridge woman all in one day! I wish Fred and George’d hurry up and get those Skiving Snackboxes sorted…”

“Do mine ears deceive me?’“ said Fred, arriving with George and squeezing on to the bench beside Harry. “Hogwarts prefects surely don’t wish to skive off lessons?”

“Look what we’ve got today,” said Ron grumpily, shoving his timetable under Fred’s nose. “That’s the worst Monday I’ve ever seen.”

“Fair point, little bro,” said Fred, scanning the column. “You can have a bit of Nosebleed Nougat cheap if you like.”

“Why’s it cheap?” said Ron suspiciously.

“Because you’ll keep bleeding till you shrivel up, we haven’t got an antidote yet,” said George, helping himself to a kipper.

“Cheers,” said Ron moodily, pocketing his timetable, “but I think I’ll take the lessons.”

“And speaking of your Skiving Snackboxes,” said Hermione, eyeing Fred and George beadily, “you can’t advertise for testers on the Gryffindor noticeboard.”

“Says who?” said George, looking astonished.

“Says me,” said Hermione. “And Ron.”

“Leave me out of it,” said Ron hastily.

Hermione glared at him. Fred and George sniggered.

“You’ll be singing a different tune soon enough, Hermione,” said Fred, thickly buttering a crumpet. “You’re starting your fifth year, you’ll be begging us for a Snackbox before long.”

“And why would starting fifth year mean I want a Skiving Snackbox?” asked Hermione.

“Fifth year’s OWL year,” said George.

“So?”

“So you’ve got your exams coming up, haven’t you? They’ll be keeping your noses so hard to that grindstone they’ll be rubbed raw,” said Fred with satisfaction.

“Half our year had minor breakdowns coming up to OWLs,” said George happily. “Tears and tantrums… Patricia Stimpson kept coming over faint…”

“Kenneth Towler came out in boils, d’you remember?” said Fred reminiscently.

“That’s ‘cause you put Bulbadox powder in his pajamas,” said George.

“Oh yeah,” said Fred, grinning. “I’d forgotten… hard to keep track sometimes, isn’t it?”

“Anyway, it’s a nightmare of a year, the fifth,” said George. “If you care about exam results, anyway. Fred and I managed to keep our spirits up somehow.”

“Yeah… you got, what was it, three OWLs each?” said Ron.

“Yep,” said Fred unconcernedly. “But we feel our futures lie outside the world of academic achievement.”

“We seriously debated whether we were going to bother coming back for our seventh year,” said George brightly, “now that we’ve got-”

He broke off at a warning look from Harry, who knew George had been about to mention the Triwizard winnings he had given them.

“- now that we’ve got our OWLs,” George said hastily. “I mean, do we really need NEWTs? But we didn’t think Mum could take us leaving school early, not on top of Percy turning out to be the world’s biggest prat.”

“We’re not going to waste our last year here, though,” said Fred, looking affectionately around at the Great Hall. “We’re going to use it to do a bit of market research, find out exactly what the average Hogwarts student requires from a joke shop, carefully evaluate the results of our

research, then produce products to fit the demand.”

“But where are you going to get the gold to start a joke shop?” Hermione asked skeptically. “You’re going to need all the ingredients and materials - and premises too, I suppose…”

Harry did not look at the twins. His face felt hot; he deliberately dropped his fork and dived down to retrieve it. He heard Fred say overhead, “Ask us no questions and we’ll tell you no lies, Hermione. C’mon, George, if we get there early we might be able to sell a few Extendable Ears before Herbology.”

Harry emerged from under the table to see Fred and George walking away, each carrying a stack of toast.

“What did that mean?” said Hermione, looking from Harry to Ron. “‘Ask us no questions… ’ Does that mean they’ve already got some gold to start a joke shop?”

“You know, I’ve been wondering about that,” said Ron, his brow furrowed. “They bought me a new set of dress robes this summer and I couldn’t understand where they got the Galleons…”

Harry decided it was time to steer the conversation out of these dangerous waters.

“D’you reckon it’s true this year’s going to be really tough? Because of the exams?”

“Oh, yeah,” said Ron. “Bound to be, isn’t it? OWLs are really important, affect the jobs you can apply for and everything. We get career advice, too, later this year, Bill told me. So you can choose what NEWTs you want to do next year.”

“D’you know what you want to do after Hogwarts?” Harry asked the other two, as they left the Great Hall shortly afterwards and set off towards their History of Magic classroom.

“Not really,” said Ron slowly. “Except… well…”

He looked slightly sheepish.

“What?” Harry urged him.

‘“Well, it’d be cool to be an Auror,’“ said Ron in an off-hand voice.

“Yeah, it would,” said Harry fervently.

“But they’re, like, the elite,” said Ron. “You’ve got to be really good. What about you, Hermione?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I think I’d like to do something really worthwhile.”

“An Auror’s worthwhile!” said Harry.

“Yes, it is, but it’s not the only worthwhile thing,” said Hermione thoughtfully, “I mean, if I could take SPEW further…”

Harry and Ron carefully avoided looking at each other.

History of Magic was by common consent the most boring subject ever devised by wizardkind. Professor Binns, their ghost teacher, had a wheezy, droning voice that was almost guaranteed to cause severe drowsiness within ten minutes, five in warm weather. He never varied the form of their lessons, but lectured them without pausing while they took notes, or rather, gazed sleepily into space. Harry and Ron had so far managed to scrape passes in this subject only by copying Hermione’s notes before exams; she alone seemed able to resist the soporific power of Binns’s voice.

Today, they suffered an hour and a half’s droning on the subject of giant wars. Harry heard just enough within the first ten minutes to appreciate dimly that in another teacher’s hands this subject might have been mildly interesting, but then his brain disengaged, and he spent the remaining hour and twenty minutes playing hangman on a corner of his parchment with Ron, while Hermione shot them filthy looks out of the corner of her eye.

“How would it be,” she asked them coldly, as they left the classroom for break (Binns drifting away through the blackboard), “if I refused to lend you my notes this year?”

“We’d fail our OWL,” said Ron. “If you want that on your conscience, Hermione…”

“Well, you’d deserve it,” she snapped. “You don’t even try to listen to him, do you?”

“We do try” said Ron. “We just haven’t got your brains or your memory or your concentration - you’re just cleverer than we are - is it nice to rub it in?”

“Oh, don’t give me that rubbish,” said Hermione, but she looked slightly mollified as she led the way out into the damp courtyard.

A fine misty drizzle was falling, so that the people standing in huddles around the edges of the yard looked blurred at the edges. Harry, Ron and Hermione chose a secluded corner under a heavily dripping balcony, turning up the collars of their robes against the chilly September air and talking about what Snape was likely to set them in the first lesson of the year. They had got as far as agreeing that it was likely to be something extremely difficult, just to catch them off guard after a two-month holiday, when someone walked around the corner towards them.

“Hello, Harry!”

It was Cho Chang and, what was more, she was on her own again. This was most unusual: Cho was almost always surrounded by a gang of giggling girls; Harry remembered the agony of trying to get her by herself to ask her to the Yule Ball.

“Hi,” said Harry, feeling his face grow hot. At least you’re not covered in Stinksap this time, he

told himself. Cho seemed to be thinking along the same lines.

“You got that stuff off, then?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, trying to grin as though the memory of their last meeting was funny as opposed to mortifying. “So, did you… er… have a good summer?”

The moment he had said this he wished he hadn’t - Cedric had been Cho’s boyfriend and the memory of his death must have affected her holiday almost as badly as it had affected Harrys. Something seemed to tauten in her face, but she said, “Oh, it was all right, you know…”

“Is that a Tornados badge?” Ron demanded suddenly, pointing to the front of Cho’s robes, where a sky-blue badge emblazoned with a double gold ‘T’ was pinned. “You don’t support them, do you?”

“Yeah, I do,” said Cho.

“Have you always supported them, or just since they started winning the league?” said Ron, in what Harry considered an unnecessarily accusatory tone of voice.

“I’ve supported them since I was six,” said Cho coolly. “Anyway… see you, Harry.”

She walked away. Hermione waited until Cho was halfway across the courtyard before rounding on Ron.

“You are so tactless!”

“What? I only asked her if -”

“Couldn’t you tell she wanted to talk to Harry on her own?”

“So? She could’ve done, I wasn’t stopping -”

“Why on earth were you attacking her about her Quidditch team?”

“Attacking? I wasn’t attacking her, I was only -”

“Who cares if she supports the Tornados?”

“Oh, come on, half the people you see wearing those badges only bought them last season -”

“But what does it matter!”

“It means they’re not real fans, they’re just jumping on the bandwagon -”

“That’s the bell,” said Harry dully, because Ron and Hermione were bickering too loudly to hear

it. They did not stop arguing all the way down to Snape's dungeon, which gave Harry plenty of time to reflect that between Neville and Ron he would be lucky ever to have two minutes of conversation with Cho that he could look back on without wanting to leave the country.

And yet, he thought, as they joined the queue lining up outside Snape's classroom door, she had chosen to come and talk to him, hadn't she? She had been Cedric's girlfriend; she could easily have hated Harry for coming out of the Triwizard maze alive when Cedric had died, yet she was talking to him in a perfectly friendly way, not as though she thought him mad, or a liar, or in some horrible way responsible for Cedric's death… yes, she had definitely chosen to come and talk to him, and that made the second time in two days… and at this thought, Harry's spirits rose. Even the ominous sound of Snape's dungeon door creaking open did not puncture the small, hopeful bubble that seemed to have swelled in his chest. He filed into the classroom behind Ron and Hermione and followed them to their usual table at the back, where he sat down between Ron and Hermione and ignored the huffy, irritable noises now issuing from both of them.

"Settle down," said Snape coldly, shutting the door behind him.

There was no real need for the call to order; the moment the class had heard the door close, quiet had fallen and all fidgeting stopped. Snape's mere presence was usually enough to ensure a class's silence.

"Before we begin today's lesson," said Snape, sweeping over to his desk and staring around at them all, "I think it appropriate to remind you that next June you will be sitting an important examination, during which you will prove how much you have learned about the composition and use of magical potions. Moronic though some of this class undoubtedly are, I expect you to scrape an 'Acceptable' in your OWL, or suffer my… displeasure."

His gaze lingered this time on Neville, who gulped.

"After this year, of course, many of you will cease studying with me," Snape went on. "I take only the very best into my NEWT Potions class, which means that some of us will certainly be saying goodbye."

His eyes rested on Harry and his lip curled. Harry glared back, feeling a grim pleasure at the idea that he would be able to give up Potions after fifth year.

"But we have another year to go before that happy moment of farewell," said Snape softly, "so, whether or not you are intending to attempt NEWT, I advise all of you to concentrate your efforts upon maintaining the high pass level I have come to expect from my OWL students.

"Today we will be mixing a potion that often comes up at Ordinary Wizarding Level: the Draught of Peace, a potion to calm anxiety and soothe agitation. Be warned: if you are too heavy-handed with the ingredients you will put the drinker into a heavy and sometimes irreversible sleep, so you will need to pay close attention to what you are doing." On Harry's left, Hermione sat up a little straighter, her expression one of utmost attention. "The ingredients and

method -” Snape flicked his wand “- are on the blackboard -” (they appeared there) “- you will find everything you need —” he flicked his wand again “- in the store cupboard —” (the door of the said cupboard sprang open) “- you have an hour and a half… start.”

Just as Harry, Ron and Hermione had predicted, Snape could hardly have set them a more difficult, fiddly potion. The ingredients had to be added to the cauldron in precisely the right order and quantities; the mixture had to be stirred exactly the right number of times, firstly in clockwise, then in anti-clockwise directions; the heat of the flames on which it was simmering had to be lowered to exactly the right level for a specific number of minutes before the final ingredient was added.

“A light silver vapour should now be rising from your potion,” called Snape, with ten minutes left to go.

Harry, who was sweating profusely, looked desperately around the dungeon. His own cauldron was issuing copious amounts of dark grey steam; Ron’s was spitting green sparks. Seamus was feverishly prodding the flames at the base of his cauldron with the tip of his wand, as they seemed to be going out. The surface of Hermione’s potion, however, was a shimmering mist of silver vapour, and as Snape swept by he looked down his hooked nose at it without comment, which meant he could find nothing to criticize.

At Harry’s cauldron, however, Snape stopped, and looked down at it with a horrible smirk on his face.

“Potter, what is this supposed to be?”

The Slytherins at the front of the class all looked up eagerly; they loved hearing Snape taunt Harry.

“The Draught of Peace,” said Harry tensely.

“Tell me, Potter,” said Snape softly, “can you read?”

Draco Malfoy laughed.

“Yes, I can,” said Harry, his fingers clenched tightly around his wand.

“Read the third line of the instructions for me, Potter.”

Harry squinted at the blackboard; it was not easy to make out the instructions through the haze of multi-colored steam now filling the dungeon.

“‘Add powdered moonstone, stir three times counter-clockwise, allow to simmer for seven minutes then add two drops of syrup of hellebore.’”

His heart sank. He had not added syrup of hellebore, but had proceeded straight to the fourth line

of the instructions after allowing his potion to simmer for seven minutes.

“Did you do everything on the third line, Potter?”

“No,” said Harry very quietly.

“I beg your pardon?”

“No,” said Harry, more loudly. “I forgot the hellebore.”

“I know you did, Potter, which means that this mess is utterly worthless. Evanesco.”

The contents of Harry’s potion vanished; he was left standing foolishly beside an empty cauldron.

“Those of you who have managed to read the instructions, fill one flagon with a sample of your potion, label it clearly with your name and bring it up to my desk for testing,” said Snape.

“Homework: twelve inches of parchment on the properties of moonstone and its uses in potion making, to be handed in on Thursday.”

While everyone around him filled their flagons, Harry cleared away his things, seething. His potion had been no worse than Ron’s, which was now giving off a foul odour of bad eggs; or Neville’s, which had achieved the consistency of just-mixed cement and which Neville was now having to gouge out of his cauldron; yet it was he, Harry, who would be receiving zero marks for the day’s work. He stuffed his wand back into his bag and slumped down on to his seat, watching everyone else march up to Snape’s desk with filled and corked flagons. When at long last the bell rang, Harry was first out of the dungeon and had already started his lunch by the time Ron and Hermione joined him in the Great Hall. The ceiling had turned an even murkier grey during the morning. Rain was lashing the high windows.

“That was really unfair,” said Hermione consolingly, sitting down next to Harry and helping herself to shepherd’s pie. “Your potion wasn’t nearly as bad as Goyle’s; when he put it in his flagon the whole thing shattered and set his robes on fire.”

“Yeah, well,” said Harry, glowering at his plate, “since when has Snape ever been fair to me?”

Neither of the others answered; all three of them knew that Snape and Harry’s mutual enmity had been absolute from the moment Harry had set foot in Hogwarts.

“I did think he might be a bit better this year,” said Hermione in a disappointed voice. “I mean… you know…” she looked around carefully; there were half a dozen empty seats on either side of them and nobody was passing the table “… now he’s in the Order and everything.”

“Poisonous toadstools don’t change their spots,” said Ron sagely. “Anyway I’ve always thought

Dumbledore was cracked trusting Snape. Where's the evidence he ever really stopped working for You-Know-Who?"

"I think Dumbledore's probably got plenty of evidence, even if he doesn't share it with you, Ron," snapped Hermione.

"Oh, shut up, the pair of you," said Harry heavily, as Ron opened his mouth to argue back. Hermione and Ron both froze, looking angry and offended. "Can't you give it a rest?" said Harry. "You're always having a go at each other, it's driving me mad." And abandoning his shepherd's pie, he swung his schoolbag back over his shoulder and left them sitting there.

He walked up the marble staircase two steps at a time, past the many students hurrying towards lunch. The anger that had just flared so unexpectedly still blazed inside him, and the vision of Ron and Hermione's shocked faces afforded him a sense of deep satisfaction. Serve them right, he thought, why can't they give it a rest… bickering all the time… it's enough to drive anyone upthe wall…

He passed the large picture of Sir Cadogan the knight on a landing; Sir Cadogan drew his sword and brandished it fiercely at Harry, who ignored him.

"Come back, you scurvy dog! Stand fast and fight!" yelled Sir Cadogan in a muffled voice from behind his visor, but Harry merely walked on and when Sir Cadogan attempted to follow him by running into a neighboring picture, he was rebuffed by its inhabitant, a large and angry-looking wolfhound.

Harry spent the rest of the lunch hour sitting alone underneath the trapdoor at the top of North Tower. Consequently, he was the first to ascend the silver ladder that led to Sibyll Trelawney's classroom when the bell rang.

After Potions, Divination was Harrys least favorite class, which was due mainly to Professor Trelawney's habit of predicting his premature death every few lessons. A thin woman, heavily draped in shawls and glittering with strings of beads, she always reminded Harry of some kind of insect, with her glasses hugely magnifying her eyes. She was busy putting copies of battered leather-bound books on each of the spindly little tables with which her room was littered when Harry entered the room, but the light cast by the lamps covered by scarves and the low-burning, sickly-scented fire was so dim she appeared not to notice him as he took a seat in the shadows. The rest of the class arrived over the next five minutes. Ron emerged from the trapdoor, looked around carefully, spotted Harry and made directly for him, or as directly as he could while having to wend his way between tables, chairs and overstuffed pouffes.

"Hermione and me have stopped arguing," he said, sitting down beside Harry.

"Good," grunted Harry.

"But Hermione says she thinks it would be nice if you stopped taking out your temper on us," said Ron.

“I’m not -”

“I’m just passing on the message,” said Ron, talking over him. “But I reckon she’s right. It’s not our fault how Seamus and Snape treat you.”

“I never said it -”

“Good-day,” said Professor Trelawney in her usual misty, dreamy voice, and Harry broke off, again feeling both annoyed and slightly ashamed of himself. “And welcome back to Divination. I have, of course, been following your fortunes most carefully over the holidays, and am delighted to see that you have all returned to Hogwarts safely - as, of course, I knew you would.

“You will find on the tables before you copies of The Dream Oracle, by Inigo Imago. Dream interpretation is a most important means of divining the future and one that may very probably be tested in your OWL. Not, of course, that I believe examination passes or failures are of the remotest importance when it comes to the sacred art of divination. If you have the Seeing Eye, certificates and grades matter very little. However, the Headmaster likes you to sit the examination, so…”

Her voice trailed away delicately, leaving them all in no doubt that Professor Trelawney considered her subject above such sordid matters as examinations.

“Turn, please, to the introduction and read what Imago has to say on the matter of dream interpretation. Then, divide into pairs. Use The Dream Oracle to interpret each others most recent dreams. Carry on.”

The one good thing to be said for this lesson was that it was not a double period. By the time they had all finished reading the introduction of the book, they had barely ten minutes left for dream interpretation. At the table next to Harry and Ron, Dean had paired up with Neville, who immediately embarked on a long-winded explanation of a nightmare involving a pair of giant scissors wearing his grandmother’s best hat; Harry and Ron merely looked at each other glumly.

“I never remember my dreams,” said Ron, “you say one.”

“You must remember one of them,” said Harry impatiently.

He was not going to share his dreams with anyone. He knew perfectly well what his regular nightmare about a graveyard meant, he did not need Ron or Professor Trelawney or the stupid Dream Oracle to tell him.

“Well, I dreamed I was playing Quidditch the other night,” said Ron, screwing up his face in an effort to remember. “What d’you reckon that means?”

“Probably that you’re going to be eaten by a giant marshmallow or something,” said Harry, turning the pages of The Dream Oracle without interest. It was very dull work looking up bits of dreams in the Oracle and Harry was not cheered up when Professor Trelawney set them the task

of keeping a dream diary for a month as homework. When the bell went, he and Ron led the way back down the ladder, Ron grumbling loudly.

“D’you realize how much homework we’ve got already? Binns set us a foot-and-a-half-long essay on giant wars, Snape wants a foot on the use of moonstones, and now we’ve got a month’s dream diary from Trelawney! Fred and George weren’t wrong about OWL year, were they? That Umbridge woman had better not give us any…”

When they entered the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom they found Professor Umbridge already seated at the teacher’s desk, wearing the fluffy pink cardigan of the night before and the black velvet bow on top of her head. Harry was again reminded forcibly of a large fly perched unwisely on top of an even larger toad.

The class was quiet as it entered the room; Professor Umbridge was, as yet, an unknown quantity and nobody knew how strict a disciplinarian she was likely to be.

“Well, good afternoon!” she said, when finally the whole class had sat down.

A few people mumbled “good afternoon” in reply.

“Tut, tut,” said Professor Umbridge. “That won’t do, now, will it? I should like you, please, to reply ‘Good afternoon, Professor Umbridge’. One more time, please. Good afternoon, class!”

“Good afternoon, Professor Umbridge,” they chanted back at her.

“There, now,” said Professor Umbridge sweetly. “That wasn’t too difficult, was it? Wands away and quills out, please.”

Many of the class exchanged gloomy looks; the order “wands away” had never yet been followed by a lesson they had found interesting. Harry shoved his wand back inside his bag and pulled out quill, ink and parchment. Professor Umbridge opened her handbag, extracted her own wand, which was an unusually short one, and tapped the blackboard sharply with it; words appeared on the board at once:

Defense Against the Dark Arts A Return to Basic Principles

“Well now, your teaching in this subject has been rather disrupted and fragmented, hasn’t it?” stated Professor Umbridge, turning to face the class with her hands clasped neatly in front of her. “The constant changing of teachers, many of whom do not seem to have followed any Ministry approved curriculum, has unfortunately resulted in your being far below the standard we would expect to see in your OWL year.

“You will be pleased to know, however, that these problems are now to be rectified. We will be following a carefully structured, theory-centerd, Ministry-approved course of defensive magic this year. Copy down the following, please.”

She rapped the blackboard again; the first message vanished and was replaced by: *Course Aims:*

1. Understanding the principles underlying defensive magic.

2. Learning to recognize situations in which defensive magic can legally be used.

3. Placing the use of defensive magic in a context for practical use.

For a couple of minutes the room was full of the sound of scratching quills on parchment. When everyone had copied down Professor Umbridge's three course aims she asked, "Has everybody got a copy of Defensive Magical Theory by Wilbert Slinkhard?"

There was a dull murmur of assent throughout the class.

"I think we'll try that again," said Professor Umbridge. "When I ask you a question, I should like you to reply, 'Yes, Professor Umbridge', or 'No, Professor Umbridge'. So: has everyone got a copy of Defensive Magical Theory by Wilbert Slinkhard?"

"Yes, Professor Umbridge," rang through the room.

"Good," said Professor Umbridge. "I should like you to turn to page five and read 'Chapter One, Basics for Beginners'. There will be no need to talk."

Professor Umbridge left the blackboard and settled herself in the chair behind the teacher's desk, observing them all closely with those pouchy toad's eyes. Harry turned to page five of his copy of Defensive Magical Theory and started to read.

It was desperately dull, quite as bad as listening to Professor Binns. He felt his concentration sliding away from him; he had soon read the same line half a dozen times without taking in more than the first few words. Several silent minutes passed. Next to him, Ron was absent-mindedly turning his quill over and over in his fingers, staring at the same spot on the page. Harry looked right and received a surprise to shake him out of his torpor. Hermione had not even opened her copy of Defensive Magical Theory. She was staring fixedly at Professor Umbridge with her hand in the air.

Harry could not remember Hermione ever neglecting to read when instructed to, or indeed resisting the temptation to open any book that came under her nose. He looked at her enquiringly, but she merely shook her head slightly to indicate that she was not about to answer questions, and continued to stare at Professor Umbridge, who was looking just as resolutely in another direction.

After several more minutes had passed, however, Harry was not the only one watching Hermione. The chapter they had been instructed to read was so tedious that more and more people were choosing to watch Hermione's mute attempt to catch Professor Umbridge's eye rather than struggle on with 'Basics for Beginners'.

When more than half the class were staring at Hermione rather than at their books, Professor Umbridge seemed to decide that she could ignore the situation no longer.

“Did you want to ask something about the chapter, dear?” she asked Hermione, as though she had only just noticed her.

“Not about the chapter, no,” said Hermione.

“Well, we’re reading just now,” said Professor Umbridge, showing her small pointed teeth. “If you have other queries we can deal with them at the end of class.”

“I’ve got a query about your course aims,” said Hermione.

Professor Umbridge raised her eyebrows.

“And your name is?”

“Hermione Granger,” said Hermione.

“Well, Miss Granger, I think the course aims are perfectly clear if you read them through carefully” said Professor Umbridge in a voice of determined sweetness.

“Well, I don’t,” said Hermione bluntly. “There’s nothing written up there about using defensive spells.”

There was a short silence in which many members of the class turned their heads to frown at the three course aims still written on the blackboard.

“Using defensive spells?” Professor Umbridge repeated with a little laugh. “Why, I can’t imagine any situation arising in my classroom that would require you to use a defensive spell, Miss Granger. You surely aren’t expecting to be attacked during class?”

“We’re not going to use magic?” Ron exclaimed loudly.

“Students raise their hands when they wish to speak in my class, Mr. -?”

“Weasley,” said Ron, thrusting his hand into the air.

Professor Umbridge, smiling still more widely, turned her back on him. Harry and Hermione immediately raised their hands too. Professor Umbridge’s pouchy eyes lingered on Harry for a moment before she addressed Hermione.

“Yes, Miss Granger? You wanted to ask something else?”

“Yes,” said Hermione. “Surely the whole point of Defence Against the Dark Arts is to practice defensive spells?”

“Are you a Ministry-trained educational expert, Miss Granger?” asked Professor Umbridge, in her falsely sweet voice.

“No, but -”

“Well then, I’m afraid you are not qualified to decide what the ‘whole point’ of any class is. Wizards much older and cleverer than you have devised our new program of study. You will be learning about defensive spells in a secure, risk-free way -”

“What use is that?” said Harry loudly. “If we’re going to be attacked, it won’t be in a -”

“Hand, Mr. Potter!” sang Professor Umbridge.

Harry thrust his fist in the air. Again, Professor Umbridge promptly turned away from him, but now several other people had their hands up, too.

“And your name is?” Professor Umbridge said to Dean.

“Dean Thomas.”

“Well, Mr. Thomas?”

“Well, it’s like Harry said, isn’t it?” said Dean. “If we’re going to be attacked, it won’t be risk free.”

“I repeat,” said Professor Umbridge, smiling in a very irritating fashion at Dean, “do you expect to be attacked during my classes?”

“No, but -”

Professor Umbridge talked over him. “I do not wish to criticize the way things have been run in this school,” she said, an unconvincing smile stretching her wide mouth, “but you have been exposed to some very irresponsible wizards in this class, very irresponsible indeed - not to mention,” she gave a nasty little laugh, “extremely dangerous half-breeds.”

“If you mean Professor Lupin,” piped up Dean angrily, “he was the best we ever -”

“Hand, Mr. Thomas! As I was saying - you have been introduced to spells that have been complex, inappropriate to your age group and potentially lethal. You have been frightened into believing that you are likely to meet Dark attacks every other day -”

“No we haven’t,” Hermione said, “we just -”

“Your hand is not up, Miss Granger!”

Hermione put up her hand. Professor Umbridge turned away from her.

“It is my understanding that my predecessor not only performed illegal curses in front of you, he actually performed them on you.”

“Well, he turned out to be a maniac, didn’t he?” said Dean hotly. “Mind you, we still learned loads.”

“Your hand is not up, Mr. Thomas!” trilled Professor Umbridge. “Now, it is the view of the Ministry that a theoretical knowledge will be more than sufficient to get you through your examination, which, after all, is what school is all about. And your name is?” she added, staring at Parvati, whose hand had just shot up.

“Parvati Patil, and isn’t there a practical bit in our Defense Against the Dark Arts OWL? Aren’t we supposed to show that we can actually do the counter-curses and things?”

“As long as you have studied the theory hard enough, there is no reason why you should not be able to perform the spells under carefully controlled examination conditions,” said Professor Umbridge dismissively.

“Without ever practicing them beforehand?” said Parvati incredulously. “Are you telling us that the first time we’ll get to do the spells will be during our exam?”

“I repeat, as long as you have studied the theory hard enough -”

“And what good’s theory going to be in the real world?” said Harry loudly, his fist in the air again.

Professor Umbridge looked up.

“This is school, Mr. Potter, not the real world,” she said softly.

“So we’re not supposed to be prepared for what’s waiting for us out there?”

“There is nothing waiting out there, Mr. Potter.”

“Oh, yeah?” said Harry. His temper, which seemed to have been bubbling just beneath the surface all day, was reaching boiling point.

“Who do you imagine wants to attack children like yourselves?” enquired Professor Umbridge in a horribly honeyed voice.

“Hmm, let’s think…” said Harry in a mock thoughtful voice. “Maybe… Lord Voldemort!”

Ron gasped; Lavender Brown uttered a little scream; Neville slipped sideways off his stool. Professor Umbridge, however, did not flinch. She was staring at Harry with a grimly satisfied expression on her face.

“Ten points from Gryffindor, Mr. Potter.”

The classroom was silent and still. Everyone was staring at either Umbridge or Harry.

“Now, let me make a few things quite plain.”

Professor Umbridge stood up and leaned towards them, her stubby-fingered hands splayed on her desk.

“You have been told that a certain Dark wizard has returned from the dead -”

“He wasn’t dead,” said Harry angrily, “but yeah, he’s returned!”

‘“Mr-Potter-you-have-already-lost-your-house-ten-points-do-not-make-matters-worse-for yourself,” said Professor Umbridge in one breath without looking at him. “As I was saying, you have been informed that a certain Dark wizard is at large once again. This is a lie.”

“It is NOT a lie!” said Harry. “I saw him, I fought him!”

“Detention, Mr. Potter!” said Professor Umbridge triumphantly. “Tomorrow evening. Five o’clock. My office. I repeat, this is a lie. The Ministry of Magic guarantees that you are not in danger from any Dark wizard. If you are still worried, by all means come and see me outside class hours. If someone is alarming you with fibs about reborn Dark wizards, I would like to hear about it. I am here to help. I am your friend. And now, you will kindly continue your reading. Page five, ‘Basics for Beginners’.”

Professor Umbridge sat down behind her desk. Harry, however, stood up. Everyone was staring at him; Seamus looked half-scared, half-fascinated.

“Harry, no!” Hermione whispered in a warning voice, tugging at his sleeve, but Harry jerked his arm out of her reach.

“So, according to you, Cedric Diggory dropped dead of his own accord, did he?” Harry asked, his voice shaking.

There was a collective intake of breath from the class, for none of them, apart from Ron and Hermione, had ever heard Harry talk about what had happened on the night Cedric had died. They stared avidly from Harry to Professor Umbridge, who had raised her eyes and was staring at him without a trace of a fake smile on her face.

“Cedric Diggory’s death was a tragic accident,” she said coldly.

“It was murder,” said Harry. He could feel himself shaking. He had hardly spoken to anyone about this, least of all thirty eagerly listening classmates. “Voldemort killed him and you know it.”

Professor Umbridge's face was quite blank. For a moment, Harry thought she was going to scream at him. Then she said, in her softest, most sweetly girlish voice, "Come here, Mr. Potter, dear."

He kicked his chair aside, strode around Ron and Hermione and up to the teacher's desk. He could feel the rest of the class holding its breath. He felt so angry he did not care what happened next.

Professor Umbridge pulled a small roll of pink parchment out of her handbag, stretched it out on the desk, dipped her quill into a bottle of ink and started scribbling, hunched over so that Harry could not see what she was writing. Nobody spoke. After a minute or so she rolled up the parchment and tapped it with her wand; it sealed itself seamlessly so that he could not open it.

"Take this to Professor McGonagall, dear," said Professor Umbridge, holding out the note to him.

He took it from her without saying a word, turned on his heel and left the room, not even looking back at Ron and Hermione, slamming the classroom door shut behind him. He walked very fast along the corridor, the note to McGonagall clutched tight in his hand, and turning a corner walked slap into Peeves the poltergeist, a wide-mouthed little man floating on his back in midair, juggling several inkwells.

"Why it's Potty Wee Potter!" cackled Peeves, allowing two of the inkwells to fall to the ground where they smashed and spattered the walls with ink; Harry jumped backwards out of the way with a snarl.

"Get out of it, Peeves."

"Oooh, Crackpot's feeling cranky" said Peeves, pursuing Harry along the corridor, leering as he zoomed along above him. "What is it this time, my fine Potty friend? Hearing voices? Seeing visions? Speaking in -" Peeves blew a gigantic raspberry "— tongues?"

"I said, leave me ALONE!" Harry shouted, running down the nearest flight of stairs, but Peeves merely slid down the banister on his back beside him.

"Oh, most think he's barking, the potty wee lad, But some are more kindly and think he's just sad, but Peevesy knows better and says that he's mad — "

"SHUT UP!"

A door to his left flew open and Professor McGonagall emerged from her office looking grim and slightly harassed.

"What on earth are you shouting about, Potter?" she snapped, as Peeves cackled gleefully and zoomed out of sight. '"Why aren't you in class?"

“I’ve been sent to see you,” said Harry stiffly.

“Sent? What do you mean, sent?”

He held out the note from Professor Umbridge. Professor McGonagall took it from him, frowning, slit it open with a tap of her wand, stretched it out and began to read. Her eyes zoomed from side to side behind their square spectacles as she read what Umbridge had written, and with each line they became narrower.

“Come in here, Potter.”

He followed her inside her study. The door closed automatically behind him.

“Well?” said Professor McGonagall, rounding on him. “Is this true?”

“Is what true?” Harry asked, rather more aggressively than he had intended. “Professor?” he added, in an attempt to sound more polite.

“Is it true that you shouted at Professor Umbridge?”

“Yes,” said Harry.

“You called her a liar?”

“Yes.”

“You told her He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is back?”

“Yes.”

Professor McGonagall sat down behind her desk, watching Harry closely. Then she said, “Have a biscuit, Potter.”

“Have - what?”

“Have a biscuit,” she repeated impatiently, indicating a tartan tin of cookies lying on top of one of the piles of papers on her desk. “And sit down.”

There had been a previous occasion when Harry, expecting to be caned by Professor McGonagall, had instead been appointed by her to the Gryffindor Quidditch team. He sank into a chair opposite her and helped himself to a Ginger Newt, feeling just as confused and wrong footed as he had done on that occasion.

Professor McGonagall set down Professor Umbridge’s note and looked very seriously at Harry.

“Potter, you need to be careful.”

Harry swallowed his mouthful of Ginger Newt and stared at her. Her tone of voice was not at all what he was used to; it was not brisk, crisp and stern; it was low and anxious and somehow much more human than usual.

“Misbehavior in Dolores Umbridge’s class could cost you much more than house points and a detention.”

“What do you -?”

“Potter, use your common sense,” snapped Professor McGonagall, with an abrupt return to her usual manner. “You know where she comes from, you must know to whom she is reporting.”

The bell rang for the end of the lesson. Overhead and all around came the elephantine sounds of hundreds of students on the move.

“It says here she’s given you detention every evening this week, starting tomorrow,” Professor McGonagall said, looking down at Umbridge’s note again.

“Every evening this week!” Harry repeated, horrified. “But, Professor, couldn’t you -?”

“No, I couldn’t,” said Professor McGonagall flatly.

“But -”

“She is your teacher and has every right to give you detention. You will go to her room at five o’clock tomorrow for the first one. Just remember: tread carefully around Dolores Umbridge.”

“But I was telling the truth!” said Harry, outraged. “Voldemort is back, you know he is; Professor Dumbledore knows he is -”

“For heaven’s sake, Potter!” said Professor McGonagall, straightening her glasses angrily (she had winced horribly when he had used Voldemort’s name). “Do you really think this is about truth or lies? It’s about keeping your head down and your temper under control!”

She stood up, nostrils wide and mouth very thin, and Harry stood up, too.

“Have another biscuit,” she said irritably, thrusting the tin at him.

“No, thanks,” said Harry coldly.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she snapped.

He took one.

“Thanks,” he said grudgingly.

“Didn’t you listen to Dolores Umbridge’s speech at the start-of-term feast, Potter?”

“Yeah,” said Harry. “Yeah… she said… progress will be prohibited or… well, it meant that… that the Ministry of Magic is trying to interfere at Hogwarts.”

Professor McGonagall eyed him closely for a moment, then sniffed, walked around her desk and held open the door for him.

“Well, I’m glad you listen to Hermione Granger at any rate,” she said, pointing him out of her office.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Detention with Dolores

Dinner in the Great Hall that night was not a pleasant experience for Harry. The news about his shouting match with Umbridge had traveled exceptionally fast even by Hogwarts' standards. He heard whispers all around him as he sat eating between Ron and Hermione. The funny thing was that none of the whisperers seemed to mind him overhearing what they were saying about him. On the contrary, it was as though they were hoping he would get angry and start shouting again, so that they could hear his story first-hand.

"He says he saw Cedric Diggory murdered…"

"He reckons he dueled with You-Know-Who…"

"Come off it…"

"Who does he think he's kidding?"

"Pur-Lease…"

"What I don't get," said Harry through clenched teeth, laying down his knife and fork (his hands were shaking too much to hold them steady), "is why they all believed the story two months ago when Dumbledore told them…"

"The thing is, Harry, I'm not sure they did," said Hermione grimly. "Oh, let's get out of here."

She slammed down her own knife and fork; Ron looked longingly at his half-finished apple pie but followed suit. People stared at them all the way out of the Hall.

"What d'you mean, you're not sure they believed Dumbledore?" Harry asked Hermione when they reached the first-floor landing.

"Look, you don't understand what it was like after it happened," said Hermione quietly. "You arrived back in the middle of the lawn clutching Cedric's dead body… none of us saw what happened in the maze… we just had Dumbledore's word for it that You-Know-Who had come back and killed Cedric and fought you."

"Which is the truth!" said Harry loudly.

"I know it is, Harry, so will you please stop biting my head off?" said Hermione wearily. "It's just that before the truth could sink in, everyone went home for the summer, where they spent two months reading about how you're a nutcase and Dumbledore's going senile!"

Rain pounded on the windowpanes as they strode along the empty corridors back to Gryffindor

Tower. Harry felt as though his first day had lasted a week, but he still had a mountain of homework to do before bed. A dull pounding pain was developing over his right eye. He glanced out of a rain-washed window at the dark grounds as they turned into the Fat Lady's corridor. There was still no light in Hagrid's cabin.

"Mimbulus mimbletonia," said Hermione, before the Fat Lady could ask. The portrait swung open to reveal the hole behind it and the three of them scrambled through it.

The common room was almost empty; nearly everyone was still down at dinner. Crookshanks uncoiled himself from an armchair and trotted to meet them, purring loudly, and when Harry, Ron and Hermione took their three favorite chairs at the fireside he leapt lightly on to Hermione's lap and curled up there like a furry ginger cushion. Harry gazed into the flames, feeling drained and exhausted.

"How can Dumbledore have let this happen?" Hermione cried suddenly, making Harry and Ron jump; Crookshanks leapt off her, looking affronted. She pounded the arms of her chair in fury, so that bits of stuffing leaked out of the holes. "How can he let that terrible woman teach us? And in our OWL year, too!"

"Well, we've never had great Defense Against the Dark Arts teachers, have we?" said Harry. "You know what it's like, Hagrid told us, nobody wants the job; they say it's jinxed."

"Yes, but to employ someone who's actually refusing to let us do magic! What's Dumbledore playing at?"

"And she's trying to get people to spy for her," said Ron darkly. "Remember when she said she wanted us to come and tell her if we hear anyone saying You-Know-Who's back?"

"Of course she's here to spy on us all, that's obvious, why else would Fudge have wanted her to come?" snapped Hermione.

"Don't start arguing again," said Harry wearily, as Ron opened his mouth to retaliate. "Can't we just… let's just do that homework, get it out of the way…"

They collected their schoolbags from a corner and returned to the chairs by the fire. People were coming back from dinner now. Harry kept his face averted from the portrait hole, but could still sense the stares he was attracting.

"Shall we do Snape's stuff first?" said Ron, dipping his quill into his ink. "The properties… of moonstone… and its uses… in potion-making…" he muttered, writing the words across the top of his parchment as he spoke them. "There." He underlined the title, then looked up expectantly at Hermione.

"So, what are the properties of moonstone and its uses in potion-making?"

But Hermione was not listening; she was squinting over into the far corner of the room, where

Fred, George and Lee Jordan were now sitting at the center of a knot of innocent-looking first years, all of whom were chewing something that seemed to have come out of a large paper bag that Fred was holding.

“No, I’m sorry, they’ve gone too far,” she said, standing up and looking positively furious. “Come on, Ron.”

“I - what?” said Ron, plainly playing for time. “No- come on, Hermione - we can’t tell them off for giving out sweets.”

“You know perfectly well that those are bits of Nosebleed Nougat or - or Puking Pastilles or -”

“Fainting Fancies?” Harry suggested quietly.

One by one, as though hit over the head with an invisible mallet, the first-years were slumping unconscious in their seats; some slid right on to the floor, others merely hung over the arms of their chairs, their tongues lolling out. Most of the people watching were laughing; Hermione, however, squared her shoulders and marched directly over to where Fred and George now stood with clipboards, closely observing the unconscious first-years. Ron rose halfway out of his chair, hovered uncertainly for a moment or two, then muttered to Harry, “She’s got it under control,” before sinking as low in his chair as his lanky frame permitted.

“That’s enough!” Hermione said forcefully to Fred and George, both of whom looked up in mild surprise.

“Yeah, you’re right,” said George, nodding, “this dosage looks strong enough, doesn’t it?”

“I told you this morning, you can’t test your rubbish on students!”

“We’re paying them!” said Fred indignantly.

“I don’t care, it could be dangerous!”

“Rubbish,” said Fred.

“Calm down, Hermione, they’re fine!” said Lee reassuringly as he walked from first-year to first year, inserting purple sweets into their open mouths.

“Yeah, look, they’re coming round now,” said George.

A few of the first-years were indeed stirring. Several looked so shocked to find themselves lying on the floor, or dangling off their chairs, that Harry was sure Fred and George had not warned them what the sweets were going to do.

“Feel all right?” said George kindly to a small dark-haired girl lying at his feet.

“I - I think so,” she said shakily.

“Excellent,” said Fred happily, but the next second Hermione had snatched both his clipboard and the paper bag of Fainting Fancies from his hands.

“It is NOT excellent!”

“Course it is, they’re alive, aren’t they?” said Fred angrily.

“You can’t do this, what if you made one of them really ill?”

“We’re not going to make them ill, we’ve already tested them all on ourselves, this is just to see if everyone reacts the same -”

“If you don’t stop doing it, I’m going to -”

“Put us in detention?” said Fred, in an I’d-like-to-see-you-try-it voice.

“Make us write lines?” said George, smirking.

Onlookers all over the room were laughing. Hermione drew herself up to her full height; her eyes were narrowed and her bushy hair seemed to crackle with electricity.

“No,” she said, her voice quivering with anger, “but I will write to your mother.”

“You wouldn’t,” said George, horrified, taking a step back from her.

“Oh, yes, I would,” said Hermione grimly. “I can’t stop you eating the stupid things yourselves, but you’re not to give them to the first-years.”

Fred and George looked thunderstruck. It was clear that as far as they were concerned, Hermione’s threat was way below the belt. With a last threatening look at them, she thrust Fred’s clipboard and the bag of Fancies back into his arms, and stalked back to her chair by the fire. Ron was now so low in his seat that his nose was roughly level with his knees.

“Thank you for your support, Ron,” Hermione said acidly.

“You handled it fine by yourself,” Ron mumbled.

Hermione stared down at her blank piece of parchment for a few seconds, then said edgily, “Oh, it’s no good, I can’t concentrate now. I’m going to bed.”

She wrenched her bag open; Harry thought she was about to put her books away, but instead she pulled out two misshapen woolly objects, placed them carefully on a table by the fireplace, covered them with a few screwed-up bits of parchment and a broken quill and stood back to admire the effect.

“What in the name of Merlin are you doing?” said Ron, watching her as though fearful for her sanity.

“They’re hats for house-elves,” she said briskly, now stuffing her books back into her bag. “I did them over the summer. I’m a really slow knitter without magic but now I’m back at school I should be able to make lots more.”

“You’re leaving out hats for the house-elves?” said Ron slowly. “And you’re covering them up with rubbish first?”

“Yes,” said Hermione defiantly, swinging her bag on to her back.

“That’s not on,” said Ron angrily. “You’re trying to trick them into picking up the hats. You’re setting them free when they might not want to be free.”

“Of course they want to be free!” said Hermione at once, though her face was turning pink. “Don’t you dare touch those hats, Ron!”

She turned on her heel and left. Ron waited until she had disappeared through the door to the girls’ dormitories, then cleared the rubbish off the woolly hats.

“They should at least see what they’re picking up,” he said firmly. “Anyway…” he rolled up the parchment on which he had written the title of Snape’s essay, “there’s no point trying to finish this now, I can’t do it without Hermione, I haven’t got a clue what you’re supposed to do with moonstones, have you?”

Harry shook his head, noticing as he did so that the ache in his right temple was getting worse. He thought of the long essay on giant wars and the pain stabbed at him sharply. Knowing perfectly well that when the morning came, he would regret not finishing his homework that night, he piled his books back into his bag.

“I’m going to bed too.”

He passed Seamus on the way to the door leading to the dormitories, but did not look at him. Harry had a fleeting impression that Seamus had opened his mouth to speak, but he sped up and reached the soothing peace of the stone spiral staircase without having to endure any more provocation.

The following day dawned just as leaden and rainy as the previous one. Hagrid was still absent from the staff table at breakfast.

“But on the plus side, no Snape today” said Ron bracingly.

Hermione yawned widely and poured herself some coffee. She looked mildly pleased about something, and when Ron asked her what she had to be so happy about, she simply said, “The hats have gone. Seems the house-elves do want freedom after all.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it,” Ron told her cuttingly. “They might not count as clothes. They didn’t look anything like hats to me, more like woolly bladders.”

Hermione did not speak to him all morning.

Double Charms was succeeded by double Transfiguration. Professor Flitwick and Professor McGonagall both spent the first fifteen minutes of their lessons lecturing the class on the importance of OWLs.

“What you must remember,” said little Professor Flitwick squeakily perched as ever on a pile of books so that he could see over the top of his desk, “is that these examinations may influence your futures for many years to come! If you have not already given serious thought to your careers, now is the time to do so. And in the meantime, I’m afraid, we shall be working harder than ever to ensure that you all do yourselves justice!”

They then spent over an hour reviewing Summoning Charms, which according to Professor Flitwick were bound to come up in their OWL, and he rounded off the lesson by setting them their largest ever amount of Charms homework.

It was the same, if not worse, in Transfiguration.

“You cannot pass an OWL,” said Professor McGonagall grimly, “without serious application, practice and study. I see no reason why everybody in this class should not achieve an OWL in Transfiguration as long as they put in the work.” Neville made a sad little disbelieving noise.

“Yes, you too, Longbottom,” said Professor McGonagall. “There’s nothing wrong with your work except lack of confidence. So… today we are starting Vanishing Spells. These are easier than Conjuring Spells, which you would not usually attempt until NEWT level, but they are still among the most difficult magic you will be tested on in your OWL.”

She was quite right; Harry found the Vanishing Spells horribly difficult. By the end of a double period neither he nor Ron had managed to vanish the snails on which they were practicing, though Ron said hopefully he thought his looked a bit paler. Hermione, on the other hand, successfully vanished her snail on the third attempt, earning her a ten-point bonus for Gryffindor from Professor McGonagall. She was the only person not given homework; everybody else was told to practice the spell overnight, ready for a fresh attempt on their snails the following afternoon.

Now panicking slightly about the amount of homework they had to do, Harry and Ron spent their lunch hour in the library looking up the uses of moonstones in potion-making. Still angry about Ron’s slur on her woolly hats, Hermione did not join them. By the time they reached Care of Magical Creatures in the afternoon, Harry’s head was aching again.

The day had become cool and breezy, and as they walked down the sloping lawn towards Hagrid’s cabin on the edge of the Forbidden Forest, they felt the occasional drop of rain on their faces. Professor Grubbly-Plank stood waiting for the class some ten yards from Hagrid’s front

door, a long trestle table in front of her laden with twigs. As Harry and Ron reached her, a loud shout of laughter sounded behind them; turning, they saw Draco Malfoy striding towards them, surrounded by his usual gang of Slytherin cronies. He had clearly just said something highly amusing, because Crabbe, Goyle, Pansy Parkinson and the rest continued to snigger heartily as they gathered around the trestle table and, judging by the way they all kept looking over at Harry, he was able to guess the subject of the joke without too much difficulty.

“Everyone here?” barked Professor Grubbly-Plank, once all the Slytherins and Gryffindors had arrived. “Let’s crack on then. Who can tell me what these things are called?”

She indicated the heap of twigs in front of her. Hermione’s hand shot into the air. Behind her back, Malfoy did a buck-toothed imitation of her jumping up and down in eagerness to answer a question. Pansy Parkinson gave a shriek of laughter that turned almost at once into a scream, as the twigs on the table leapt into the air and revealed themselves to be what looked like tiny pixieish creatures made of wood, each with knobbly brown arms and legs, two twiglike fingers at the end of each hand and a funny flat, barklike face in which a pair of beetle-brown eyes glittered.

“Oooooh!” said Parvati and Lavender, thoroughly irritating Harry. Anyone would have thought Hagrid had never shown them impressive creatures; admittedly, the Flobberworms had been a bit dull, but the Salamanders and Hippogriffs had been interesting enough, and the Blast-Ended Skrewts perhaps too much so.

“Kindly keep your voices down, girls!” said Professor Grubbly-Plank sharply, scattering a handful of what looked like brown rice among the stick-creatures, who immediately fell upon the food. “So - anyone know the names of these creatures? Miss Granger?”

“Bowtruckles,” said Hermione. “They’re tree-guardians, usually live in wand-trees.”

“Five points for Gryffindor,” said Professor Grubbly-Plank. “Yes, these are Bowtruckles, and as Miss Granger rightly says, they generally live in trees whose wood is of wand quality. Anybody know what they eat?”

“Woodlice,” said Hermione promptly which explained why what Harry had taken to be grains of brown rice were moving. “But fairy eggs if they can get them.”

“Good girl, take another five points. So, whenever you need leaves or wood from a tree in which a Bowtruckle lodges, it is wise to have a gift of woodlice ready to distract or placate it. They may not look dangerous, but if angered they will try to gouge at human eyes with their fingers, which, as you can see, are very sharp and not at all desirable near the eyeballs. So if you’d like to gather closer, take a few woodlice and a Bowtruckle - I have enough here for one between three - you can study them more closely. I want a sketch from each of you with all body-parts labeled by the end of the lesson.”

The class surged forwards around the trestle table. Harry deliberately circled around the back so that he ended up right next to Professor Grubbly-Plank.

“Where’s Hagrid?” he asked her, while everyone else was choosing Bowtruckles.

“Never you mind,” said Professor Grubbly-Plank repressively, which had been her attitude last time Hagrid had failed to turn up for a class, too. Smirking all over his pointed face, Draco Malfoy leaned across Harry and seized the largest Bowtruckle.

“Maybe,” said Malfoy in an undertone, so that only Harry could hear him, “the stupid great oaf’s got himself badly injured.”

“Maybe you will if you don’t shut up,” said Harry out of the side of his mouth.

“Maybe he’s been messing with stuff that’s too big for him, if you get my drift.”

Malfoy walked away, smirking over his shoulder at Harry, who felt suddenly sick. Did Malfoy know something? His father was a Death Eater after all; what if he had information about Hagrid’s fate that had not yet reached the ears of the Order? He hurried back around the table to Ron and Hermione who were squatting on the grass some distance away and attempting to persuade a Bowtruckle to remain still long enough for them to draw it. Harry pulled out parchment and quill, crouched down beside the others and related in a whisper what Malfoy had just said.

“Dumbledore would know if some thing had happened to Hagrid,” said Hermione at once. “It’s just playing into Malfoy’s hands to look worried; it tells him we don’t know exactly what’s going on. We’ve got to ignore him, Harry. Here, hold the Bowtruckle for a moment, just so I can draw its face…”

“Yes,” came Malfoy’s clear drawl from the group nearest them, “Father was talking to the Minister just a couple of days ago, you know, and it sounds as though the Ministry’s really determined to crack down on sub-standard teaching in this place. So even if that overgrown moron does show up again, he’ll probably be sent packing straightaway.”

“OUCH!”

Harry had gripped the Bowtruckle so hard that it had almost snapped, and it had just taken a great retaliatory swipe at his hand with its sharp fingers, leaving two long deep cuts there. Harry dropped it. Crabbe and Goyle, who had already been guffawing at the idea of Hagrid being sacked, laughed still harder as the Bowtruckle set off at full tilt towards the Forest, a little moving stick-man soon swallowed up among the tree roots. When the bell echoed distantly over the grounds, Harry rolled up his blood-stained Bowtruckle picture and marched off to Herbology with his hand wrapped in Hermione’s handkerchief, and Malfoy’s derisive laughter still ringing in his ears.

“If he calls Hagrid a moron one more time…” said Harry through gritted teeth.

“Harry, don’t go picking a row with Malfoy, don’t forget, he’s a prefect now, he could make life difficult for you…”

“Wow, I wonder what it’d be like to have a difficult life?” said Harry sarcastically. Ron laughed, but Hermione frowned. Together, they traipsed across the vegetable patch. The sky still appeared unable to make up its mind whether it wanted to rain or not.

“I just wish Hagrid would hurry up and get back, that’s all,” said Harry in a low voice, as they reached the greenhouses. “And don’t say that Grubbly-Plank woman’s a better teacher!” he added threateningly.

“I wasn’t going to,” said Hermione calmly.

“Because she’ll never be as good as Hagrid,” said Harry firmly, fully aware that he had just experienced an exemplary Care of Magical Creatures lesson and was thoroughly annoyed about it.

The door of the nearest greenhouse opened and some fourth-years spilled out of it, including Ginny.

“Hi,” she said brightly as she passed. A few seconds later, Luna Lovegood emerged, trailing behind the rest of the class, a smudge of earth on her nose, and her hair tied in a knot on the top of her head. When she saw Harry, her prominent eyes seemed to bulge excitedly and she made a beeline straight for him. Many of his classmates turned curiously to watch. Luna took a great breath and then said, without so much as a preliminary hello, “I believe He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is back and I believe you fought him and escaped from him.”

“Er - right,” said Harry awkwardly. Luna was wearing what looked like a pair of orange radishes for earrings, a fact that Parvati and Lavender seemed to have noticed, as they were both giggling and pointing at her earlobes.

“You can laugh,” Luna said, her voice rising, apparently under the impression that Parvati and Lavender were laughing at what she had said rather than what she was wearing, “but people used to believe there were no such things as the Blibbering Humdinger or the Crumple-Horned Snorkack!”

“Well, they were right, weren’t they?’ said Hermione impatiently. “There weren’t any such things as the Blibbering Humdinger or the Crumple-Horned Snorkack.”

Luna gave her a withering look and flounced away, radishes swinging madly Parvati and Lavender were not the only ones hooting with laughter now.

“D’you mind not offending the only people who believe me?” Harry asked Hermione as they made their way into class.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Harry, you can do better than her,” said Hermione. “Ginny’s told me all about her; apparently, she’ll only believe in things as long as there’s no proof at all. Well, I wouldn’t expect anything else from someone whose father runs The Quibbler.”

Harry thought of the sinister winged horses he had seen on the night he had arrived and how Luna had said she could see them too. His spirits sank slightly. Had she been lying? But before he could devote much more thought to the matter, Ernie Macmillan had stepped up to him.

“I want you to know, Potter,” he said in a loud, carrying voice, “that it’s not only weirdos who support you. I personally believe you one hundred percent. My family have always stood firm behind Dumbledore, and so do I.”

“Er - thanks very much, Ernie,” said Harry, taken aback but pleased. Ernie might be pompous on occasions like this, but Harry was in a mood to deeply appreciate a vote of confidence from somebody who did not have radishes dangling from their ears. Ernie’s words had certainly wiped the smile from Lavender Brown’s face and as he turned to talk to Ron and Hermione, Harry caught Seamus’s expression, which looked both confused and defiant.

To nobody’s surprise, Professor Sprout started their lesson by lecturing them about the importance of OWLs. Harry wished all the teachers would stop doing this; he was starting to get an anxious, twisted feeling in his stomach every time he remembered how much homework he had to do, a feeling that worsened dramatically when Professor Sprout gave them yet another essay at the end of class. Tired and smelling strongly of dragon dung, Professor Sprout’s preferred type of fertilizer, the Gryffindors trooped back up to the castle an hour and a half later, none of them talking very much; it had been another long day.

As Harry was starving, and he had his first detention with Umbridge at five o’clock, he headed straight for dinner without dropping off his bag in Gryffindor Tower so that he could bolt something down before facing whatever she had in store for him. He had barely reached the entrance of the Great Hall, however, when a loud and angry voice yelled, “Oy, Potter!”

“What now?” he muttered wearily, turning to face Angelina Johnson, who looked as though she was in a towering temper.

“I’ll tell you what now,” she said, marching straight up to him and poking him hard in the chest with her finger. “How come you’ve landed yourself in detention for five o’clock on Friday?”

“What?” said Harry. “Why… oh yeah, Keeper tryouts!”

“Now he remembers!” snarled Angelina. “Didn’t I tell you I wanted to do a tryout with the wholeteam, and find someone who fitted in with everyone! Didn’t I tell you I’d booked the Quidditch pitch specially? And now you’ve decided you’re not going to be there!”

“I didn’t decide not to be there!” said Harry, stun g by the injustice of these words. “I got detention from that Umbridge woman, just because I told her the truth about You-Know-Who.”

“Well, you can just go straight to her and ask her to let you off on Friday,” said Angelina fiercely, “and I don’t care how you do it. Tell her You-Know-Who’s a figment of your imagination if you like, just make sure you’re there!”

She turned on her heel and stormed away.

“You know what?” Harry said to Ron and Hermione as they entered the Great Hall. “I think we’d better check with Puddlemere United whether Oliver Wood’s been killed during a training session, because Angelina seems to be channeling his spirit.”

“What d’you reckon are the odds of Umbridge letting you off on Friday?” said Ron skeptically, as they sat down at the Gryffindor table.

“Less than zero,” said Harry glumly, tipping lamb c hops on to his plate and starting to eat. “Better try, though, hadn’t I? I’ll offer to do two more detentions or something, I dunno…” He swallowed a mouthful of potato and added, “I hope she doesn’t keep me too long this evening. You realize we’ve got to write three essays, practice Vanishing Spells for McGonagall, work out a counter-charm for Flitwick, finish the Bowtruckle drawing and start that stupid dream diary for Trelawney?”

Ron moaned and for some reason glanced up at the ceiling.

“And it looks like it’s going to rain.”

“What’s that got to do with our homework?” said Hermione, her eyebrows raised.

“Nothing,” said Ron at once, his ears reddening.

At five to five Harry bade the other two goodbye and set off for Umbridge’s office on the third floor. When he knocked on the door she called, “Come in,” in a sugary voice. He entered cautiously, looking around.

He had known this office under three of its previous occupants.

In the days when Gilderoy Lockhart had lived here it had been plastered in beaming portraits of himself. When Lupin had occupied it, it was likely you would meet some fascinating Dark creature in a cage or tank if you came to call. In the impostor Moody’s days it had been packed with various instruments and artifacts for the detection of wrong doing and concealment.
Now, however, it looked totally unrecognizable. The surfaces had all been draped in lacy covers and cloths. There were several vases full of dried flowers, each one residing on its own doily, and on one of the walls was a collection of ornamental plates, each decorated with a large technicolor kitten wearing a different bow around its neck. These were so foul that Harry stared at them, transfixed, until Professor Umbridge spoke again.

“Good evening, Mr. Potter.”

Harry started and looked around. He had not noticed her at first because she was wearing a luridly flowered set of robes that blended only too well with the tablecloth on the desk behind her.

“Evening, Professor Umbridge,” Harry said stiffly.

“Well, sit down,” she said, pointing towards a small table draped in lace beside which she had drawn up a straight-backed chair. A piece of blank parchment lay on the table, apparently waiting for him.

“Er,” said Harry, without moving. “Professor Umbridge. Er - before we start, I - I wanted to ask you a… a favor.”

Her bulging eyes narrowed.

“Oh, yes?”

“Well, I’m… I’m in the Gryffindor Quidditch team. And I was supposed to be at the tryouts for the new Keeper at five o’clock on Friday and I was - was wondering whether I could skip detention that night and do it - do it another night… instead…”

He knew long before he reached the end of his sentence that it was no good.

“Oh, no,” said Umbridge, smiling so widely that she looked as though she had just swallowed a particularly juicy fly. “Oh, no, no, no. This is your punishment for spreading evil, nasty, attention-seeking stories, Mr. Potter, and punishments certainly cannot be adjusted to suit the guilty one’s convenience. No, you will come here at five o’clock tomorrow, and the next day, and on Friday too, and you will do your detentions as planned. I think it rather a good thing that you are missing something you really want to do. It ought to reinforce the lesson I am trying to teach you.”

Harry felt the blood surge to his head and heard a thumping noise in his ears. So he told ‘evil, nasty, attention-seeking stones’, did he?

She was watching him with her head slightly to one side, still smiling widely, as though she knew exactly what he was thinking and was waiting to see whether he would start shouting again. With a massive effort, Harry looked away from her, dropped his schoolbag beside the straight-backed chair and sat down.

“There,” said Umbridge sweetly, “we’re getting better at controlling our temper already, aren’t we? Now, you are going to be doing some lines for me, Mr. Potter. No, not with your quill,” she added, as Harry bent down to open his bag. “You’re going to be using a rather special one of mine. Here you are.”

She handed him a long, thin black quill with an unusually sharp point.

“I want you to write, *I must not tell lies*,” she told him softly.

“How many times?” Harry asked, with a creditable imitation of politeness.

“Oh, as long as it takes for the message to sink in,” said Umbridge sweetly. “Off you go.”

She moved over to her desk, sat down and bent over a stack of parchment that looked like essays for marking. Harry raised the sharp black quill, then realized what was missing.

“You haven’t given me any ink,” he said.

“Oh, you won’t need ink,” said Professor Umbridge, with the merest suggestion of a laugh in her voice.

Harry placed the point of the quill on the paper and wrote: *I must not tell lies.*

He let out a gasp of pain. The words had appeared on the parchment in what appeared to be shining red ink. At the same time, the words had appeared on the back of Harrys right hand, cut into his skin as though traced there by a scalpel - yet even as he stared at the shining cut, the skin healed over again, leaving the place where it had been slightly redder than before but quite smooth.

Harry looked round at Umbridge. She was watching him, her wide, toadlike mouth stretched in a smile.

“Yes?”

“Nothing,” said Harry quietly.

He looked back at the parchment, placed the quill on it once more, wrote *I must not tell lies,* and felt the searing pain on the back of his hand for a second time; once again, the words had been cut into his skin; once again, they healed over seconds later.

And on it went. Again and again Harry wrote the words on the parchment in what he soon came to realize was not ink, but his own blood. And, again and again, the words were cut into the back of his hand, healed, and reappeared the next time he set quill to parchment.

Darkness fell outside Umbridge’s window. Harry did not ask when he would be allowed to stop. He did not even check his watch. He knew she was watching him for signs of weakness and he was not going to show any, not even if he had to sit there all night, cutting open his own hand with this quill…

“Come here,” she said, after what seemed hours.

He stood up. His hand was stinging painfully. When he looked down at it he saw that the cut had healed, but that the skin there was red raw.

“Hand,” she said.

He extended it. She took it in her own. Harry repressed a shudder as she touched him with her

thick, stubby fingers on which she wore a number of ugly old rings.

“Tut, tut, I don’t seem to have made much of an impression yet,” she said, smiling. “Well, we’ll just have to try again tomorrow evening, won’t we? You may go.”

Harry left her office without a word. The school was quite deserted; it was surely past midnight. He walked slowly up the corridor, then, when he had turned the corner and was sure she would not hear him, broke into a run.

He had not had time to practice Vanishing Spells, had not written a single dream in his dream diary and had not finished the drawing of the Bowtruckle, nor had he written his essays. He skipped breakfast next morning to scribble down a couple of made-up dreams for Divination, their first lesson, and was surprised to find a disheveled Ron keeping him company.

“How come you didn’t do it last night?” Harry asked, as Ron stared wildly around the common room for inspiration. Ron, who had been fast asleep when Harry got back to the dormitory, muttered something about “doing other stuff”, bent low over his parchment and scrawled a few words.

“That’ll have to do,” he said, slamming the diary shut. “I’ve said I dreamed I was buying a new pair of shoes, she can’t make anything weird out of that, can she?”

They hurried off to North Tower together.

“How was detention with Umbridge, anyway? What did she make you do?”

Harry hesitated for a fraction of a second, then said, “Lines.”

“That’s not too bad, then, eh?” said Ron.

“Nope,” said Harry.

“Hey - I forgot - did she let you off for Friday?”

“No,” said Harry.

Ron groaned sympathetically.

It was another bad day for Harry; he was one of the worst in Transfiguration, not having practiced Vanishing Spells at all. He had to give up his lunch hour to complete the picture of the Bowtruckle and, meanwhile, Professors McGonagall, Grubbly-Plank and Sinistra gave them yet more homework, which he had no prospect of finishing that evening because of his second detention with Umbridge. To cap it all, Angelina Johnson tracked him down at dinner again and, on learning that he would not be able to attend Friday’s Keeper tryouts, told him she was not at all impressed by his attitude and that she expected players who wished to remain on the team to put training before their other commitments.

“I’m in detention!” Harry yelled after her as she s talked away. “D’you think I’d rather be stuck in a room with that old toad or playing Quidditch?”

“At least it’s only lines,” said Hermione consolingly, as Harry sank back on to his bench and looked down at his steak and kidney pie, which he no longer fancied very much. “It’s not as if it’s a dreadful punishment, really…”

Harry opened his mouth, closed it again and nodded. He was not really sure why he was not telling Ron and Hermione exactly what was happening in Umbridge’s room: he only knew that he did not want to see their looks of horror; that would make the whole thing seem worse and therefore more difficult to face. He also felt dimly that this was between himself and Umbridge, a private battle of wills, and he was not going to give her the satisfaction of hearing that he had complained about it.

“I can’t believe how much homework we’ve got,” said Ron miserably.

“Well, why didn’t you do any last night?” Hermione asked him. “Where were you, anyway?”

“I was… I fancied a walk,” said Ron shiftily.

Harry had the distinct impression that he was not alone in concealing things at the moment.

The second detention was just as bad as the previous one. The skin on the back of Harry’s hand became irritated more quickly now and was soon red and inflamed. Harry thought it unlikely that it would keep healing as effectively for long. Soon the cut would remain etched into his hand and Umbridge would, perhaps, be satisfied. He let no gasp of pain escape him, however, and from the moment of entering the room to the moment of his dismissal, again past midnight, he said nothing but “good evening” and “goodnight.”

His homework situation, however, was now desperate, and when he returned to the Gryffindor common room he did not, though exhausted, go to bed, but opened his books and began Snape’s moonstone essay. It was half past two by the time he had finished it. He knew he had done a poor job, but there was no help for it; unless he had something to give in he would be in detention with Snape next. He then dashed off answers to the questions Professor McGonagall had set them, cobbled together something on the proper handling of Bowtruckles for Professor Grubbly-Plank, and staggered up to bed, where he fell fully clothed on top of the covers and fell asleep immediately.

Thursday passed in a haze of tiredness. Ron seemed very sleepy too, though Harry could not see why he should be. Harry’s third detention passed in the same way as the previous two, except that after two hours the words *I must not tell lies* did not fade from the back of Harrys hand, but remained scratched there, oozing droplets of blood. The pause in the pointed quill’s scratching made Professor Umbridge look up.

“Ah,” she said softly, moving around her desk to examine his hand herself. “Good. That ought to serve as a reminder to you, oughtn’t it? You may leave for tonight.”

“Do I still have to come back tomorrow?” said Harry picking up his schoolbag with his left hand rather than his smarting right one.

“Oh yes,” said Professor Umbridge, smiling as widely as before. “Yes, I think we can etch the message a little deeper with another evening’s work.”

Harry had never before considered the possibility that there might be another teacher in the world he hated more than Snape, but as he walked back towards Gryffindor Tower he had to admit he had found a strong contender. She’s evil, he thought, as he climbed a staircase to the seventh floor, she’s an evil, twisted, mad old-

“Ron?”

He had reached the top of the stairs, turned right and almost walked into Ron, who was lurking behind a statue of Lachlan the Lanky, clutching his broomstick. He gave a great leap of surprise when he saw Harry and attempted to hide his new Cleansweep Eleven behind his back.

“What are you doing?”

“Er - nothing. What are you doing?”

Harry frowned at him.

“Come on, you can tell me! What are you hiding here for?”

“I’m - I’m hiding from Fred and George, if you must know,” said Ron. “They just went past with a bunch of first-years, I bet they’re testing stuff on them again. I mean, they can’t do it in the common room now, can they, not with Hermione there.”

He was talking in a very fast, feverish way.

“But what have you got your broom for, you haven’t been flying, have you?” Harry asked.

“I - well - well, okay, I’ll tell you, but don’t laugh, all right?” Ron said defensively, turning redder with every second. “I - I thought I’d try out for Gryffindor Keeper now I’ve got a decent broom. There. Go on. Laugh.”

“I’m not laughing,” said Harry. Ron blinked. “It’s a brilliant idea! It’d be really cool if you got on the team! I’ve never seen you play Keeper, are you good?”

“I’m not bad,” said Ron, who looked immensely relieved at Harry’s reaction. “Charlie, Fred and George always made me Keep for them when they were training during the holidays.”

“So you’ve been practicing tonight?”

“Every evening since Tuesday… just on my own, though. I’ve been trying to bewitch Quaffles to

fly at me, but it hasn't been easy and I don't know how much use it'll be." Ron looked nervous and anxious. "Fred and George are going to laugh themselves stupid when I turn up for the tryouts. They haven't stopped taking the mickey out of me since I got made a prefect."

"I wish I was going to be there," said Harry bitterly, as they set off together towards the common room.

"Yeah, so do - Harry, what's that on the back of your hand?"

Harry, who had just scratched his nose with his free right hand, tried to hide it, but had as much success as Ron with his Cleansweep.

"It's just a cut - it's nothing - it's -"

But Ron had grabbed Harry's forearm and pulled the back of Harry's hand up level with his eyes. There was a pause, during which he stared at the words carved into the skin, then, looking sick, he released Harry.

"I thought you said she was just giving you lines?"

Harry hesitated, but after all, Ron had been honest with him, so he told Ron the truth about the hours he had been spending in Umbridge's office.

"The old hag!" Ron said in a revolted whisper as they came to a halt in front of the Fat Lady, who was dozing peacefully with her head against her frame. "She's sick! Go to McGonagall, say something!"

"No," said Harry at once. "I'm not giving her the satisfaction of knowing she's got to me."

"Got to you? You can't let her get away with this!"

"I don't know how much power McGonagall's got over her," said Harry.

"Dumbledore, then, tell Dumbledore!"

"No," said Harry flatly.

"Why not?"

"He's got enough on his mind," said Harry, but that was not the true reason. He was not going to go to Dumbledore for help when Dumbledore had not spoken to him once since June.

"Well, I reckon you should -" Ron began, but he was interrupted by the Fat Lady, who had been watching them sleepily and now burst out, "Are you going to give me the password or will I have to stay awake all night waiting for you to finish your conversation?"

Friday dawned sullen and sodden as the rest of the week. Though Harry automatically glanced towards the staff table when he entered the Great Hall, it was without any real hope of seeing Hagrid, and he turned his mind immediately to his more pressing problems, such as the mountainous pile of homework he had to do and the prospect of yet another detention with Umbridge.

Two things sustained Harry that day. One was the thought that it was almost the weekend; the other was that, dreadful though his final detention with Umbridge was sure to be, he had a distant view of the Quidditch pitch from her window and might, with luck, be able to see something of Ron's tryout. These were rather feeble rays of light, it was true, but Harry was grateful for anything that might lighten his present darkness; he had never had a worse first week of term at Hogwarts.

At five o'clock that evening he knocked on Professor Umbridge's office door for what he sincerely hoped would be the final time, and was told to enter. The blank parchment lay ready for him on the lace-covered table, the pointed black quill beside it.

"You know what to do, Mr. Potter," said Umbridge, smiling sweetly at him.

Harry picked up the quill and glanced through the window. If he just shifted his chair an inch or so to the right… on the pretext of shifting himself closer to the table, he managed it. He now had a distant view of the Gryffindor Quidditch team soaring up and down the pitch, while half a dozen black figures stood at the foot of the three high goalposts, apparently awaiting their turn to Keep. It was impossible to tell which one was Ron at this distance.

I must not tell lies, Harry wrote. The cut in the back of his right hand opened and began to bleed afresh.

I must not tell lies. The cut dug deeper, stinging and smarting.

I must not tell lies. Blood trickled down his wrist.

He chanced another glance out of the window. Whoever was defending the goalposts now was doing a very poor job indeed. Katie Bell scored twice in the few seconds Harry dared to watch. Hoping very much that the Keeper wasn't Ron, he dropped his eyes back to the parchment shining with blood.

I must not tell lies.

I must not tell lies.

He looked up whenever he thought he could risk it; when he could hear the scratching of Umbridges quill or the opening of a desk drawer. The third person to try out was pretty good, the fourth was terrible, the fifth dodged a Bludger exceptionally well but then fumbled an easy save. The sky was darkening, and Harry doubted he would be able to see the sixth and seventh people at all.

I must not tell lies.

I must not tell lies.

The parchment was now dotted with drops of blood from the back of his hand, which was searing with pain. When he next looked up, night had fallen and the Quidditch pitch was no longer visible.

“Let’s see if you’ve gotten the message yet, shall we?” said Umbridges soft voice half an hour later. She moved towards him, stretching out her short ringed fingers for his arm. And then, as she took hold of him to examine the words now cut into his skin, pain seared, not across the back of his hand, but across the scar on his forehead. At the same time, he had a most peculiar sensation somewhere around his midriff.

He wrenched his arm out of her grip and leapt to his feet, staring at her. She looked back at him, a smile stretching her wide, slack mouth.

“Yes, it hurts, doesn’t it?” she said softly.

He did not answer. His heart was thumping very hard and fast. Was she talking about his hand or did she know what he had just felt in his forehead?

“Well, I think I’ve made my point, Mr. Potter. You may go.”

He caught up his schoolbag and left the room as quickly as he could.

Stay calm, he told himself, as he sprinted up the stairs. Stay calm, it doesn’t necessarily mean what you think it means…

“Mimbulus mimbletonia!” he gasped at the Fat Lady, who swung forwards once more.

A roar of sound greeted him. Ron came running towards him, beaming all over his face and slopping Butterbeer down his front from the goblet he was clutching.

“Harry, I did it, I’m in, I’m Keeper!”

“What? Oh - brilliant!” said Harry, trying to smile naturally, while his heart continued to race and his hand throbbed and bled.

“Have a Butterbeer.” Ron pressed a bottle on him. “I can’t believe it - where’s Hermione gone?”

“She’s there,” said Fred, who was also swigging Butterbeer, and pointed to an armchair by the fire. Hermione was dozing in it, her drink tipping precariously in her hand.

“Well, she said she was pleased when I told her,” said Ron, looking slightly put out.

“Let her sleep,” said George hastily. It was a few moments before Harry noticed that several of the first-years gathered around them bore unmistakable signs of recent nosebleeds.

“Come here, Ron, and see if Oliver’s old robes fit you,” called Katie Bell, “we can take off his name and put yours on instead…”

As Ron moved away, Angelina came striding up to Harry.

“Sorry I was a bit short with you earlier, Potter,” she said abruptly. “It’s stressful this managing lark, you know, I’m starting to think I was a bit hard on Wood sometimes.” She was watching Ron over the rim of her goblet with a slight frown on her face.

“Look, I know he’s your best mate, but he’s not fabulous,” she said bluntly. “I think with a bit of training he’ll be all right, though. He comes from a family of good Quidditch players. I’m banking on him turning out to have a bit more talent than he showed today, to be honest. Vicky Frobisher and Geoffrey Hooper both flew better this evening, but Hoopers a real whiner, he’s always moaning about something or other, and Vicky’s involved in all sorts of societies. She admitted herself that if training clashed with her Charms Club she’d put Charms first. Anyway, we’re having a practice session at two o’clock tomorrow, so just make sure you’re there this time. And do me a favor and help Ron as much as you can, okay?”

He nodded, and Angelina strolled back to Alicia Spinnet. Harry moved over to sit next to Hermione, who awoke with a jerk as he put down his bag.

“Oh, Harry, it’s you… good about Ron, isn’t it?” she said blearily. “I’m just so-so - so tired,” she yawned. “I was up until one o’clock making more hat s. They’re disappearing like mad!”

And sure enough, now that he looked, Harry saw that there were woolly hats concealed all around the room where unwary elves might accidentally pick them up.

“Great,” said Harry distractedly; if he did not tell somebody soon, he would burst. “Listen, Hermione, I was just up in Umbridge’s office and she touched my arm.”

Hermione listened closely. When Harry had finished, she said slowly “You’re worried You-Know-Who’s controlling her like he controlled Quirrell?”

“Well,” said Harry, dropping his voice, “it’s a possibility, isn’t it?”

“I suppose so,” said Hermione, though she sounded unconvinced. “But I don’t think he can be possessing her the way he possessed Quirrell, I mean, he’s properly alive again now, isn’t he, he’s got his own body, he wouldn’t need to share someone else’s. He could have her under the Imperius Curse, I suppose…”

Harry watched Fred, George and Lee Jordan juggling empty Butterbeer bottles for a moment. Then Hermione said, “But last year your scar hurt when nobody was touching you, and didn’t Dumbledore say it had to do with what You-Know-Who was feeling at the time? I mean, maybe

this hasn't got anything to do with Umbridge at all, maybe it's just coincidence it happened while you were with her?"

"She's evil," said Harry flatly. "Twisted."

"She's horrible, yes, but… Harry, I think you ought to tell Dumbledore your scar hurt."

It was the second time in two days he had been advised to go to Dumbledore and his answer to Hermione was just the same as his answer to Ron.

"I'm not bothering him with this. Like you just said, its not a big deal. It's been hurting on and off all summer - it was just a bit worse tonight, that's all -"

"Harry, I'm sure Dumbledore would want to be bothered by this -"

"Yeah," said Harry, before he could stop himself, "that's the only bit of me Dumbledore cares about, isn't it, my scar?"

"Don't say that, it's not true!"

"I think I'll write and tell Sirius about it, see what he thinks -"

"Harry, you can't put something like that in a letter!" said Hermione, looking alarmed. "Don't you remember, Moody told us to be careful what we put in writing! We just can't guarantee owls aren't being intercepted any more!"

"All right, all right, I won't tell him, then!" said Harry irritably. He got to his feet. "I'm going to bed. Tell Ron for me, will you?"

"Oh no," said Hermione, looking relieved, "if you're going that means I can go too, without being rude. I'm absolutely exhausted and I want to make some more hats tomorrow. Listen, you can help me if you like, it's quite fun, I'm getting better, I can do patterns and bobbles and all sorts of things now."

Harry looked into her face, which was shining with glee, and tried to look as though he was vaguely tempted by this offer.

"Er… no, I don't think I will, thanks," he said. "Er- not tomorrow. I've got loads of homework to do…"

And he traipsed off to the boys' stairs, leaving her looking slightly disappointed.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Percy and Padfoot

Harry was first to wake up in his dormitory next morning. He lay for a moment watching dust swirl in the chink of sunlight coming through the gap in his four-posters hangings, and savored the thought that it was Saturday. The first week of term seemed to have dragged on forever, like one gigantic History of Magic lesson.

Judging by the sleepy silence and the freshly minted look of that beam of sunlight, it was just after daybreak. He pulled open the curtains around his bed, got up and started to dress. The only sound apart from the distant twittering of birds was the slow, deep breathing of his fellow Gryffindors. He opened his schoolbag carefully, pulled out parchment and quill and headed out of the dormitory for the common room.

Making straight for his favorite squashy old armchair beside the now extinct fire, Harry settled himself down comfortably and unrolled his parchment while looking around the room. The detritus of crumpled-up bits of parchment, old Gobstones, empty ingredient jars and sweet wrappers that usually covered the common room at the end of each day was gone, as were all Hermione's elf hats. Wondering vaguely how many elves had now been set free whether they wanted to be or not, Harry uncorked his ink bottle, dipped his quill into it, then held it suspended an inch above the smooth yellowish surface of his parchment, thinking hard… but after a minute or so he found himself staring into the empty grate, at a complete loss for what to say.

He could now appreciate how hard it had been for Ron and Hermione to write him letters over the summer. How was he supposed to tell Sirius everything that had happened over the past week and pose all the questions he was burning to ask without giving potential letter-thieves a lot of information he did not want them to have?

He sat quite motionless for a while, gazing into the fireplace, then, finally coming to a decision, he dipped his quill into the ink bottle once more and set it resolutely on the parchment.

Dear Snuffles,

Hope you're okay, the first week back here's been terrible, I'm really glad it's the weekend.

We've got a new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Umbridge. She's nearly as nice as your mum. I'm writing because that thing I wrote to you about last summer happened again last night when I was doing a detention with Umbridge.

We're all missing our biggest friend, we hope he'll be back soon.

Please write back quickly.

Best,

Harry

Harry reread the letter several times, trying to see it from the point of view of an outsider. He could not see how they would know what he was talking about - or who he was talking to - just from reading this letter. He did hope Sirius would pick up the hint about Hagrid and tell them when he might be back. Harry did not want to ask directly in case it drew too much attention to what Hagrid might be up to while he was not at Hogwarts.

Considering it was a very short letter, it had taken a long time to write; sunlight had crept halfway across the room while he had been working on it and he could now hear distant sounds of movement from the dormitories above. Sealing the parchment carefully, he climbed through the portrait hole and headed off for the Owlery.

“I would not go that way if I were you,” said Nearly Headless Nick, drifting disconcertingly through a wall just ahead of Harry as he walked down the passage. “Peeves is planning an amusing joke on the next person to pass the bust of Paracelsus halfway down the corridor.”

“Does it involve Paracelsus falling on top of the persons head?” asked Harry.

“Funnily enough, it does,” said Nearly Headless Nick in a bored voice. “Subtlety has never been Peeves’s strong point. I’m off to try and find the Bloody Baron… he might be able to put a stop to it… see you, Harry”

“Yeah, bye,” said Harry and instead of turning right, he turned left, taking a longer but safer route up to the Owlery. His spirits rose as he walked past window after window showing brilliantly blue sky; he had training later, he would be back on the Quidditch pitch at last. Something brushed his ankles. He looked down and saw the caretaker’s skeletal grey cat, Mrs. Norris, slinking past him. She turned lamplike yellow eyes on him for a moment before disappearing behind a statue of Wilfred the Wistful.

“I’m not doing anything wrong,” Harry called after her. She had the unmistakable air of a cat that was off to report to her boss, yet Harry could not see why; he was perfectly entitled to walk up to the Owlery on a Saturday morning.

The sun was high in the sky now and when Harry entered the Owlery the glassless windows dazzled his eyes; thick silvery beams of sunlight crisscrossed the circular room in which hundreds of owls nestled on rafters, a little restless in the early-morning light, some clearly just returned from hunting. The straw-covered floor crunched a little as he stepped across tiny animal bones, craning his neck for a sight of Hedwig.

“There you are,” he said, spotting her somewhere near the very top of the vaulted ceiling. “Get down here, I’ve got a letter for you.”

With a low hoot she stretched her great white wings and soared down on to his shoulder.

“Right, I know this says Snuffles on the outside,” he told her, giving her the letter to clasp in her

beak and, without knowing exactly why, whispering, “but it’s for Sirius, okay?”

She blinked her amber eyes once and he took that to mean that she understood.

“Safe flight, then,” said Harry and he carried her to one of the windows; with a moment’s pressure on his arm, Hedwig took off into the blindingly bright sky. He watched her until she became a tiny black speck and vanished, then switched his gaze to Hagrid’s hut, clearly visible from this window, and just as clearly uninhabited, the chimney smokeless, the curtains drawn.

The treetops of the Forbidden Forest swayed in a light breeze. Harry watched them, savoring the fresh air on his face, thinking about Quidditch later… then he saw it. A great, reptilian winged horse, just like the ones pulling the Hogwarts carriages, with leathery black wings spread wide like a pterodactyl’s, rose up out of the trees like a grotesque, giant bird. It soared in a great circle, then plunged back into the trees. The whole thing had happened so quickly, Harry could hardly believe what he had seen, except that his heart was hammering madly.

The Owlery door opened behind him. He leapt in shock and, turning quickly, saw Cho Chang holding a letter and a parcel in her hands.

“Hi,” said Harry automatically.

“Oh… hi,” she said breathlessly. “I didn’t think anyone would be up here this early… I only remembered five minutes ago, it’s my mum’s birthday.”

She held up the parcel.

“Right,” said Harry. His brain seemed to have jammed. He wanted to say something funny and interesting, but the memory of that terrible winged horse was fresh in his mind.

“Nice day,” he said, gesturing to the windows. His insides seemed to shrivel with embarrassment.

The weather. He was talking about the weather…

“Yeah,” said Cho, looking around for a suitable owl. “Good Quidditch conditions. I haven’t been out all week, have you?”

“No,” said Harry.

Cho had selected one of the school barn owls. She coaxed it down on to her arm where it held out an obliging leg so that she could attach the parcel.

“Hey, has Gryffindor got a new Keeper yet?” she asked.

“Yeah,” said Harry. “It’s my friend Ron Weasley, d’you know him?”

“The Tornados-hater?” said Cho rather coolly. “Is he any good?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, “I think so. I didn’t see his tryout, though, I was in detention.”

Cho looked up, the parcel only half-attached to the owl’s legs.

“That Umbridge woman’s foul,” she said in a low voice. “Putting you in detention just because you told the truth about how - how - how he died. Everyone heard about it, it was all over the school. You were really brave standing up to her like that.”

Harry’s insides re-inflated so rapidly he felt as though he might actually float a few inches off the dropping-strewn floor. Who cared about a stupid flying horse; Cho thought he had been really brave. For a moment, he considered accidentally-on-purpose showing her his cut hand as he helped her tie her parcel on to her owl… but the very instant this thrilling thought occurred, the Owlery door opened again.

Filch the caretaker came wheezing into the room. There were purple patches on his sunken, veined cheeks, his jowls were aquiver and his thin grey hair disheveled; he had obviously run here. Mrs. Norris came trotting at his heels, gazing up at the owls overhead and mewing hungrily.

There was a restless shifting of wings from above and a large brown owl snapped his beak in a menacing fashion.

“Aha!’ said Filch, taking a flat-footed step toward s Harry, his pouchy cheeks trembling with anger. “I’ve had a tip-off that you are intending to place a massive order for Dungbombs!”

Harry folded his arms and stared at the caretaker.

“Who told you I was ordering Dungbombs?”

Cho was looking from Harry to Filch, also frowning; the barn owl on her arm, tired of standing on one leg, gave an admonitory hoot but she ignored it.

“I have my sources,” said Filch in a self-satisfied hiss. “Now hand over whatever it is you’re sending.”

Feeling immensely thankful that he had not dawdled in posting off the letter, Harry said, “I can’t, it’s gone.”

“Gone?” said Filch, his face contorting with rage.

“Gone,” said Harry calmly.

Filch opened his mouth furiously, mouthed for a few seconds, then raked Harrys robes with his eyes.

“How do I know you haven’t got it in your pocket?”

“Because -”

“I saw him send it,” said Cho angrily.

Filch rounded on her.

“You saw him -?”

“That’s right, I saw him,” she said fiercely.

There was a moments pause in which Filch glared at Cho and Cho glared right back, then the caretaker turned on his heel and shuffled back towards the door. He stopped with his hand on the handle and looked back at Harry.

“If I get so much as a whiff of a Dungbomb.”

He stumped off down the stairs. Mrs. Norris cast a last longing look at the owls and followed him.

Harry and Cho looked at each other.

“Thanks,” Harry said.

“No problem,” said Cho, finally fixing the parcel to the barn owl’s other leg, her face slightly pink. “You weren’t ordering Dungbombs, were you?”

“No,” said Harry.

“I wonder why he thought you were, then?” she said as she carried the owl to the window. Harry shrugged. He was quite as mystified by that as she was, though oddly it was not bothering him very much at the moment.

They left the Owlery together. At the entrance of a corridor that led towards the west wing of the castle, Cho said, “I’m going this way. Well, I’ll… I’ll see you around, Harry.”

“Yeah… see you.”

She smiled at him and departed. Harry walked on, feeling quietly elated. He had managed to have an entire conversation with her and not embarrassed himself once… you were really brave standing up to her like that… Cho had called him brave… she did not hate him for being alive… Of course, she had preferred Cedric, he knew that… though if he’d only asked her to the Ball before Cedric had, things might have turned out differently… she had seemed sincerely sorry that she’d had to refuse when Harry asked her…

“Morning,” Harry said brightly to Ron and Hermione as he joined them at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall.

“What are you looking so pleased about?” said Ron, eyeing Harry in surprise.

“Erm… Quidditch later,” said Harry happily, pulling a large platter of bacon and eggs towards him.

“Oh… yeah…” said Ron. He put down the piece of toast he was eating and took a large swig of pumpkin juice. Then he said, “Listen… you don’t fancy going out a bit earlier with me, do you? Just to - er - give me some practice before training? So I can, you know, get my eye in a bit.”

“Yeah, okay,” said Harry.

“Look, I don’t think you should,” said Hermione seriously. “You’re both really behind on homework as it -”

But she broke off; the morning post was arriving and, as usual, the Daily Prophet was soaring towards her in the beak of a screech owl, which landed perilously close to the sugar bowl and held out a leg. Hermione pushed a Knut into its leather pouch, took the newspaper, and scanned the front page critically as the owl took off.

“Anything interesting?” said Ron. Harry grinned, knowing Ron was keen to keep her off the subject of homework.

“No,” she sighed, “just some guff about the bass player in the Weird Sisters getting married.”

Hermione opened the paper and disappeared behind it. Harry devoted himself to another helping of eggs and bacon. Ron was staring up at the high windows, looking slightly preoccupied.

“Wait a moment,” said Hermione suddenly. “Oh no… Sirius!”

“What’s happened?” said Harry, snatching at the paper so violently it ripped down the middle, with him and Hermione each holding one half.

“‘The Ministry of Magic has received a tip-off from a reliable source that Sirius Black, notorious mass murderer… blah blah blah… is currently hiding in London!’” Hermione read from her half in an anguished whisper.

“Lucius Malfoy I’ll bet anything,” said Harry in a low, furious voice. “He did recognize Sirius on the platform…”

“What?” said Ron, looking alarmed. “You didn’t say -”

“Shh!” said the other two.

"… 'warns wizarding community that Black is very dangerous… killed thirteen people… broke out of Azkaban… ' the usual rubbish," Hermione concluded, laying down her half of the paper and looking fearfully at Harry and Ron. "Well, he just won't be able to leave the house again, that's all," she whispered. "Dumbledore did warn him not to."

Harry looked down glumly at the bit of the Prophet he had torn off. Most of the page was devoted to an advertisement for Madam Malkins Robes for All Occasions, which was apparently having a sale.

"Hey!" he said, flattening it down so Hermione and Ron could see it. "Look at this!"

"I've got all the robes I want," said Ron.

"No," said Harry. "Look… this little piece here…"

Ron and Hermione bent closer to read it; the item was barely an inch long and placed right at the bottom of a column. It was headlined:

TRESPASS AT MINISTRY

Sturgis Podmore, 38, of number two, Laburnum Garden s, Clapham, has appeared in front of the Wizengamot charged with trespass and attempted robbery at the Ministry of Magic on31st August. Podmore was arrested by Ministry of Magic watchwizard Eric Munch, who found him attempting to force his way through a top-security door at one o'clock in the morning. Podmore, who refused to speak in his own defense, was convicted on both charges and sentenced to six months in Azkaban.

"Sturgis Podmore?" said Ron slowly. "He's that bloke who looks like his head's been thatched, isn't he? He's one of the Ord—"

"Ron, shh!" said Hermione, casting a terrified look around them.

"Six months in Azkaban!" whispered Harry, shocked. "Just for trying to get through a door!"

"Don't be silly, it wasn't just for trying to get through a door. What on earth was he doing at the Ministry of Magic at one o'clock in the morning?" breathed Hermione.

"D'you reckon he was doing something for the Order?" Ron muttered.

"Wait a moment…" said Harry slowly. "Sturgis was supposed to come and see us off, remember?"

The other two looked at him.

"Yeah, he was supposed to be part of our guard going to King's Cross, remember? And Moody was all annoyed because he didn't turn up; so he couldn't have been on a job for them, could

he?”

“Well, maybe they didn’t expect him to get caught,” said Hermione.

“It could be a frame-up!” Ron exclaimed excitedly. “No - listen!” he went on, dropping his voice dramatically at the threatening look on Hermione’s face. “The Ministry suspects he’s one of Dumbledore’s lot so - I dunno - they lured him to the Ministry, and he wasn’t trying to get through a door at all! Maybe they’ve just made something up to get him!”

There was a pause while Harry and Hermione considered this. Harry thought it seemed farfetched.

Hermione, on the other hand, looked rather impressed.

“Do you know, I wouldn’t be at all surprised if that were true.”

She folded up her half of the newspaper thoughtfully. As Harry laid down his knife and fork, she seemed to come out of a reverie.

“Right, well, I think we should tackle that essay for Sprout on self-fertilizing shrubs first and if we’re lucky we’ll be able to start McGonagall’s Inanimatus Conjurus Spell before lunch…”

Harry felt a small twinge of guilt at the thought of the pile of homework awaiting him upstairs, but the sky was a clear, exhilarating blue, and he had not been on his Firebolt for a week…

“I mean, we can do it tonight,” said Ron, as he and Harry walked down the sloping lawns towards the Quidditch pitch, their broomsticks over their shoulders, and with Hermione’s dire warnings that they would fail all their OWLs still ringing in their ears. “And we’ve got tomorrow. She gets too worked up about work, that’s her trouble…” There was a pause and he added, in a slightly more anxious tone, “D’you think she meant it when she said we weren’t copying from her?”

“Yeah, I do,” said Harry. “Still, this is important, too, we’ve got to practice if we want to stay on the Quidditch team…”

“Yeah, that’s right,” said Ron, in a heartened tone. “And we have got plenty of time to do it all…”

As they approached the Quidditch pitch, Harry glanced over to his right to where the trees of the Forbidden Forest were swaying darkly. Nothing flew out of them; the sky was empty but for a few distant owls fluttering around the Owlery tower. He had enough to worry about; the flying horse wasn’t doing him any harm; he pushed it out of his mind.

They collected balls from the cupboard in the changing room and set to work, Ron guarding the three tall goalposts, Harry playing Chaser and trying to get the Quaffle past Ron. Harry thought Ron was pretty good; he blocked three-quarters of the goals Harry attempted to put past him and

played better the longer they practiced. After a couple of hours they returned to the castle for lunch - during which Hermione made it quite clear she thought they were irresponsible — then returned to the Quidditch pitch for the real training session. All their teammates but Angelina were already in the changing room when they entered.

“All right, Ron?” said George, winking at him.

“Yeah,” said Ron, who had become quieter and quieter all the way down to the pitch.

“Ready to show us all up, Ickle Prefect?” said Fred, emerging tousle-haired from the neck of his Quidditch robes, a slightly malicious grin on his face.

“Shut up,” said Ron, stony-faced, pulling on his own team robes for the first time. They fitted him well considering they had been Oliver Wood’s, who was rather broader in the shoulder.

“Okay, everyone,” said Angelina, entering from the Captain’s office, already changed. “Let’s get to it; Alicia and Fred, if you can just bring out the ball crate for us. Oh, and there are a couple of people out there watching but I want you to just ignore them, all right?”

Something in her would-be casual voice made Harry think he might know who the uninvited spectators were, and sure enough, when they left the changing room for the bright sunlight of the pitch it was to a storm of catcalls and jeers from the Slytherin Quidditch team and assorted hangers-on, who were grouped halfway up the empty stands and whose voices echoed loudly around the stadium.

“What’s that Weasley’s riding?’” Malfoy called in his sneering drawl. “Why would anyone put a flying charm on a mouldy old log like that?”

Crabbe, Goyle and Pansy Parkinson guffawed and shrieked with laughter. Ron mounted his broom and kicked off from the ground and Harry followed him, watching his ears turn red from behind.

“Ignore them,” he said, accelerating to catch up with Ron, “we’ll see who’s laughing after we play them…”

“Exactly the attitude I want, Harry,” said Angelina approvingly, soaring around them with the Quaffle under her arm and slowing to hover on the spot in front of her airborne team. “Okay, everyone, we’re going to start with some passes just to warm up, the whole team please -”

“Hey, Johnson, what’s with that hairstyle, anyway?” shrieked Pansy Parkinson from below. “Why would anyone want to look like they’ve got worms coming out of their head?”

Angelina swept her long braided hair out of her face and continued calmly, “Spread out, then, and let’s see what we can do…”

Harry reversed away from the others to the far side of the pitch. Ron fell back towards the

opposite goal. Angelina raised the Quaffle with one hand and threw it hard to Fred, who passed to George, who passed to Harry, who passed to Ron, who dropped it.

The Slytherins, led by Malfoy, roared and screamed with laughter. Ron, who had pelted towards the ground to catch the Quaffle before it landed, pulled out of the dive untidily, so that he slipped sideways on his broom, and returned to playing height, blushing. Harry saw Fred and George exchange looks, but uncharacteristically neither of them said anything, for which he was grateful.

“Pass it on, Ron,” called Angelina, as though nothing had happened.

Ron threw the Quaffle to Alicia, who passed back to Harry, who passed to George…

“Hey, Potter, how’s your scar feeling?” called Malfoy. “Sure you don’t need a lie down? It must be, what, a whole week since you were in the hospital wing, that’s a record for you, isn’t it?”

George passed to Angelina; she reverse-passed to Harry, who had not been expecting it, but caught it in the very tips of his fingers and passed it quickly to Ron, who lunged for it and missed by inches.

“Come on now, Ron,” said Angelina crossly, as he dived for the ground again, chasing the Quaffle. “Pay attention.”

It would have been hard to say whether Ron’s face or the Quaffle was a deeper scarlet when he again returned to playing height. Malfoy and the rest of the Slytherin team were howling with laughter.

On his third attempt, Ron caught the Quaffle; perhaps out of relief he passed it on so enthusiastically that it soared straight through Katie’s outstretched hands and hit her hard in the face.

“Sorry!” Ron groaned, zooming forwards to see whether he had done any damage.

“Get back in position, she’s fine!” barked Angelina. “But as you’re passing to a teammate, do try not to knock her off her broom, won’t you? We’ve got Bludgers for that!”

Katie’s nose was bleeding. Down below, the Slytherins were stamping their feet and jeering. Fred and George converged on Katie.

“Here, take this,” Fred told her, handing her something small and purple from out of his pocket, “it’ll clear it up in no time.”

“All right,” called Angelina, “Fred, George, go and get your bats and a Bludger. Ron, get up to the goalposts. Harry, release the Snitch when I say so. We’re going to aim for Ron’s goal, obviously.”

Harry zoomed off after the twins to fetch the Snitch.

“Ron’s making a right pig’s ear of things, isn’t he?” muttered George, as the three of them landed at the crate containing the balls and opened it to extract one of the Bludgers and the Snitch.

“He’s just nervous,” said Harry, “he was fine when I was practicing with him this morning.”

“Yeah, well, I hope he hasn’t peaked too soon,” said Fred gloomily.

They returned to the air. When Angelina blew her whistle, Harry released the Snitch and Fred and George let fly the Bludger. From that moment on, Harry was barely aware of what the others were doing. It was his job to recapture the tiny fluttering golden ball that was worth a hundred and fifty points to the Seeker’s team and doing so required enormous speed and skill. He accelerated, rolling and swerving in and out of the Chasers, the warm autumn air whipping his face, and the distant yells of the Slytherins so much meaningless roaring in his ears… but too soon, the whistle brought him to a halt again.

“Stop - stop - STOP!” screamed Angelina. “Ron - you’re not covering your middle post!”

Harry looked round at Ron, who was hovering in front of the left-hand hoop, leaving the other two completely unprotected.

“Oh… sorry…”

“You keep shifting around while you’re watching the Chasers!” said Angelina. “Either stay in center position until you have to move to defend a hoop, or else circle the hoops, but don’t drift vaguely off to one side, that’s how you let in the last three goals!”

“Sorry…” Ron repeated, his red face shining like a beacon against the bright blue sky.

“And Katie, can’t you do something about that nosebleed?”

“It’s just getting worse!” said Katie thickly, attempting to stem the flow with her sleeve.
Harry glanced round at Fred, who was looking anxious and checking his pockets. He saw Fred pull out something purple, examine it for a second and then look round at Katie, evidently horror-struck.

“Well, let’s try again,” said Angelina. She was ignoring the Slytherins, who had now set up a chant of “Gryffindor are losers, Gryffindor are losers,” but there was a certain rigidity about her seat on the broom nevertheless.

This time they had been flying for barely three minutes when Angelina’s whistle sounded. Harry, who had just sighted the Snitch circling the opposite goalpost, pulled up feeling distinctly aggrieved.

“What now?” he said impatiently to Alicia, who was nearest.

“Katie,” she said shortly.

Harry turned and saw Angelina, Fred and George all flying as fast as they could towards Katie. Harry and Alicia sped towards her, too. It was plain that Angelina had stopped training just in time; Katie was now chalk white and covered in blood.

“She needs the hospital wing,” said Angelina.

“We’ll take her,” said Fred. “She - er - might have swallowed a Blood Blisterpod by mistake -”

“Well, there’s no point continuing with no Beaters and a Chaser gone,” said Angelina glumly as Fred and George zoomed off towards the castle supporting Katie between them. “Come on, let’s go and get changed.”

The Slytherins continued to chant as they trailed back into the changing rooms.

“How was practice?” asked Hermione rather coolly half an hour later, as Harry and Ron climbed through the portrait hole into the Gryffindor common room.

“It was -” Harry began.

“Completely lousy,” said Ron in a hollow voice, sinking into a chair beside Hermione. She looked up at Ron and her frostiness seemed to melt.

“Well, it was only your first one,” she said consolingly, “it’s bound to take time to -”

“Who said it was me who made it lousy?” snapped Ron.

“No one,” said Hermione, looking taken aback, “I thought -”

“You thought I was bound to be rubbish?”

“No, of course I didn’t! Look, you said it was lousy so I just -”

“I’m going to get started on some homework,” said Ron angrily and stomped off to the staircase to the boys’ dormitories and vanished from sight. Hermione turned to Harry.

“Was he lousy?”

“No,” said Harry loyally.

Hermione raised her eyebrows.

“Well, I suppose he could’ve played better,” Harry muttered, “but it was only the first training session, like you said…”

Neither Harry nor Ron seemed to make much headway with their homework that night. Harry knew Ron was too preoccupied with how badly he had performed at Quidditch practice and he himself was having difficulty in getting the “Gryffindor are losers” chant out of his head.

They spent the whole of Sunday in the common room, buried in their books while the room around them filled up, then emptied. It was another clear, fine day and most of their fellow Gryffindors spent the day out in the grounds, enjoying what might well be some of the last sunshine that year. By the evening, Harry felt as though somebody had been beating his brain against the inside of his skull.

“You know, we probably should try and get more homework done during the week,” Harry muttered to Ron, as they finally laid aside Professor McGonagall’s long essay on the Inanimatus Conjurus Spell and turned miserably to Professor Sinistra’s equally long and difficult essay about Jupiter’s many moons.

“Yeah,” said Ron, rubbing slightly bloodshot eyes and throwing his fifth spoiled bit of parchment into the fire beside them. “Listen… shall we just ask Hermione if we can have a look at what she’s done?”

Harry glanced over at her; she was sitting with Crookshanks on her lap and chatting merrily to Ginny as a pair of knitting needles flashed in midair in front of her, now knitting a pair of shapeless elf socks.

“No,” he said heavily, “you know she won’t let us.”

And so they worked on while the sky outside the windows became steadily darker. Slowly, the crowd in the common room began to thin again. At half past eleven, Hermione wandered over to them, yawning.

“Nearly done?”

“No,” said Ron shortly.

“Jupiter’s biggest moon is Ganymede, not Callisto,” she said, pointing over Ron’s shoulder at a line in his Astronomy essay, “and it’s lo that’s got the volcanoes.”

“Thanks,” snarled Ron, scratching out the offending sentences.

“Sorry, I only -”

“Yeah, well, if you’ve just come over here to criticize -”

“Ron -”

“I haven’t got time to listen to a sermon, all right, Hermione, I’m up to my neck in it here -”

“No - look!”

Hermione was pointing to the nearest window. Harry and Ron both looked over. A handsome screech owl was standing on the windowsill, gazing into the room at Ron.

“Isn’t that Hermes?” said Hermione, sounding amazed.

“Blimey, it is!” said Ron quietly, throwing down his quill and getting to his feet. “What’s Percy writing to me for?”

He crossed to the window and opened it; Hermes flew inside, landed on Ron’s essay and held out a leg to which a letter was attached. Ron took the letter off it and the owl departed at once, leaving inky footprints across Ron’s drawing of the moon lo.

“That’s definitely Percy’s handwriting,” said Ron, s inking back into his chair and staring at the words on the outside of the scroll: Ronald Weasley, Gryffindor House, Hogwarts. He looked up at the other two. “What d’you reckon?”

“Open it!” said Hermione eagerly, and Harry nodded.

Ron unrolled the scroll and began to read. The further down the parchment his eyes traveled, the more pronounced became his scowl. When he had finished reading, he looked disgusted. He thrust the letter at Harry and Hermione, who leaned towards each other to read it together:

Dear Ron,

I have only just heard (from no less a person than the Minister for Magic himself, who has it from your new teacher, Professor Umbridge) that you have become a Hogwarts prefect.

I was most pleasantly surprised when I heard this news and must firstly offer my congratulations. I must admit that I have always been afraid that you would take what we might call the ‘Fred and George’ route, rather than following in my footsteps, so you can imagine my feelings on hearing you have stopped flouting authority and have decided to shoulder some real responsibility.

But I want to give you more than congratulations, Ron, I want to give you some advice, which is why I am sending this at night rather than by the usual morning post. Hopefully, you will be able to read this away from prying eyes and avoid awkward questions.

From something the Minister let slip when telling me you are now a prefect, I gather that you are still seeing a lot of Harry Potter. I must tell you, Ron, that nothing could put you in danger of losing your badge more than continued fraternization with that boy. Yes, I am sure you are surprised to hear this - no doubt you will say that Potter has always been Dumbledore’s favorite — but I feel bound to tell you that Dumbledore may not be in charge at Hogwarts much longer and the people who count have a very different - and probably more accurate - view of Potter’s behavior. I shall say no more here, but if you look at the Daily Prophet tomorrow you will get a

good idea of the way the wind is blowing — and see if you can spot yours truly!

Seriously, Ron, you do not want to be tarred with the same brush as Potter, it could be very damaging to your future prospects, and I am talking here about life after school, too. As you must be aware, given that our father escorted him to court, Potter had a disciplinary hearing this summer in front of the whole Wizengamot and he did not come out of it looking too good. He got off on a mere technicality, if you ask me, and many of the people I've spoken to remain convinced of his guilt.

It may be that you are afraid to sever ties with Potter - I know that he can be unbalanced and, for all I know, violent - but if you have any worries about this, or have spotted anything else in Potter's behavior that is troubling you, I urge you to speak to Dolores Umbridge, a truly delightful woman who I know will be only too happy to advise you.

This leads me to my other bit of advice. As I have hinted above, Dumbledore's regime at Hogwarts may soon be over. Your loyalty, Ron, should be not to him, but to the school and the Ministry. I am very sorry to hear that, so far, Professor Umbridge is encountering very little cooperation from staff as she strives to make those necessary changes within Hogwarts that the Ministry so ardently desires (although she should find this easier from next week — again, see the Daily Prophet tomorrow!). I shall say only this - a student who shows himself willing to help Professor Umbridge now may be very well-placed for Head Boyship in a couple of years!

I am sorry that I was unable to see more of you over the summer. It pains me to criticize our parents, but I am afraid I can no longer live under their roof while they remain mixed up with the dangerous crowd around Dumbledore. (If you are writing to Mother at any point, you might tell her that a certain Sturgis Podmore, who is a great friend of Dumbledore's, has recently been sent to Azkaban for trespass at the Ministry. Perhaps that will open their eyes to the kind of petty criminals with whom they are currently rubbing shoulders.) I count myself very lucky to have escaped the stigma of association with such people - the Minister really could not be more gracious to me — and I do hope, Ron, that you will not allow family ties to blind you to the misguided nature of our parents' beliefs and actions, either. I sincerely hope that, in time, they will realize how mistaken they were and I shall, of course, be ready to accept a full apology when that day comes.

Please think over what I have said most carefully, particularly the bit about Harry Potter, and congratulations again on becoming prefect.

Your brother,

Percy

Harry looked up at Ron.

"Well," he said, trying to sound as though he found the whole thing a joke, "if you want to - er - what is it?" - he checked Percy's letter - "Oh yeah - 'severe ties' with me, I swear I won't get violent."

“Give it back,” said Ron, holding out his hand. “He is -” Ron said jerkily, tearing Percy’s letter in half “the world’s -” he tore it into quarters “biggest -” he tore it into eighths “git.” He threw the pieces into the fire.

“Come on, we’ve got to get this finished sometime before dawn,” he said briskly to Harry, pulling Professor Sinistra’s essay back towards him.

Hermione was looking at Ron with an odd expression on her face.

“Oh, give them here,” she said abruptly.

“What?” said Ron.

“Give them to me, I’ll look through them and correct them,” she said.

“Are you serious? Ah, Hermione, you’re a life-saver,” said Ron, “what can I -?”

“What you can say is, promise we’ll never leave our homework this late again,” she said, holding out both hands for their essays, but she looked slightly amused all the same.

“Thanks a million, Hermione,” said Harry weakly, passing over his essay and sinking back into his armchair, rubbing his eyes.

It was now past midnight and the common room was deserted but for the three of them and Crookshanks. The only sound was that of Hermione’s quill scratching out sentences here and there on their essays and the ruffle of pages as she checked various facts in the reference books strewn across the table. Harry was exhausted. He also felt an odd, sick, empty feeling in his stomach that had nothing to do with tiredness and everything to do with the letter now curling blackly in the heart of the fire.

He knew that half the people inside Hogwarts thought him strange, even mad; he knew that the Daily Prophet had been making snide allusions to him for months, but there was something about seeing it written down like that in Percys writing, about knowing that Percy was advising Ron to drop him and even to tell tales about him to Umbridge, that made his situation real to him as nothing else had. He had known Percy for four years, had stayed in his house during the summer holidays, shared a tent with him during the Quidditch World Cup, had even been awarded full marks by him in the second task of the Triwizard Tournament last year, yet now, Percy thought him unbalanced and possibly violent.

And with a surge of sympathy for his godfather, Harry thought Sirius was probably the only person he knew who could really understand how he felt at the moment, because Sirius was in the same situation. Nearly everyone in the wizarding world thought Sirius a dangerous murderer and a great Voldemort supporter and he had had to live with that knowledge for fourteen years…

Harry blinked. He had just seen something in the fire that could not have been there. It had flashed into sight and vanished immediately. No… it could not have been… he had imagined it

because he had been thinking about Sirius…

“Okay, write that down,” Hermione said to Ron, pushing his essay and a sheet covered in her own writing back to Ron, “then add this conclusion I’ve written for you.”

“Hermione, you are honestly the most wonderful person I’ve ever met,” said Ron weakly, “and if I’m ever rude to you again -”

“- I’ll know you’re back to normal,” said Hermione. “Harry, yours is okay except for this bit at the end, I think you must have misheard Professor Sinistra, Europa’s covered in ice, not mice - Harry?”

Harry had slid off his chair on to his knees and was now crouching on the singed and threadbare hearthrug, gazing into the flames.

“Er - Harry?” said Ron uncertainly. “Why are you down there?”

“Because I’ve just seen Sirius’s head in the fire,” said Harry.

He spoke quite calmly; after all, he had seen Sirius’s head in this very fire the previous year and talked to it, too; nevertheless, he could not be sure that he had really seen it this time… it had vanished so quickly…

“Sirius’s head?” Hermione repeated. “You mean like when he wanted to talk to you during the Triwizard Tournament? But he wouldn’t do that now, it would be too - Sirius!”

She gasped, gazing at the fire; Ron dropped his quill. There in the middle of the dancing flames sat Sirius’s head, long dark hair falling around his grinning face.

“I was starting to think you’d go to bed before everyone else had disappeared,” he said. “I’ve been checking every hour.”

“You’ve been popping into the fire every hour?” Harry said, half-laughing.

“Just for a few seconds to check if the coast was clear.”

“But what if you’d been seen?” said Hermione anxiously.

“Well, I think a girl - first-year, by the look of her - might’ve got a glimpse of me earlier, but don’t worry” Sirius said hastily, as Hermione clapped a hand to her mouth, “I was gone the moment she looked back at me and I’ll bet she just thought I was an oddly-shaped log or something.”

“But, Sirius, this is taking an awful risk -” Hermione began.

“You sound like Molly,” said Sirius. “This was the only way I could come up with of answering

Harrys letter without resorting to a code - and codes are breakable."

At the mention of Harry's letter, Hermione and Ron both turned to stare at him.

"You didn't say you'd written to Sirius!" said Hermione accusingly.

"I forgot," said Harry, which was perfectly true; h is meeting with Cho in the Owlery had driven everything before it out of his mind. "Don't look at me like that, Hermione, there was no way anyone would have got secret information out of it, was there, Sirius?"

"No, it was very good," said Sirius, smiling. "Anyway, we'd better be quick, just in case we're disturbed - your scar."

"What about -?" Ron began, but Hermione interrupted him. "We'll tell you afterwards. Go on, Sirius."

"Well, I know it can't be fun when it hurts, but we don't think it's anything to really worry about. It kept aching all last year, didn't it?"

"Yeah, and Dumbledore said it happened whenever Voldemort was feeling a powerful emotion," said Harry, ignoring, as usual, Ron and Hermione's winces. "So maybe he was just, I dunno, really angry or something the night I had that detention."

"Well, now he's back it's bound to hurt more often," said Sirius.

"So you don't think it had anything to do with Umbridge touching me when I was in detention with her?" Harry asked.

"I doubt it," said Sirius. "I know her by reputation and I'm sure she's no Death Eater -"

"She's foul enough to be one," said Harry darkly, and Ron and Hermione nodded vigorously in agreement.

"Yes, but the world isn't split into good people and Death Eaters," said Sirius with a wry smile. "I know she's a nasty piece of work, though — you should hear Remus talk about her."

"Does Lupin know her?" asked Harry quickly, remembering Umbridge's comments about dangerous half-breeds during her first lesson.

"No," said Sirius, "but she drafted a bit of anti-werewolf legislation two years ago that makes it almost impossible for him to get a job."

Harry remembered how much shabbier Lupin looked these days and his dislike of Umbridge deepened even further.

"What's she got against werewolves?" said Hermione angrily.

“Scared of them, I expect,” said Sirius, smiling at her indignation. “Apparently she loathes part humans; she campaigned to have merpeople rounded up and tagged last year, too. Imagine wasting your time and energy persecuting merpeople when there are little toerags like Kreacher on the loose.”

Ron laughed but Hermione looked upset.

“Sirius!” she said reproachfully. “Honestly, if you made a bit of an effort with Kreacher, I’m sure he’d respond. After all, you are the only member of his family he’s got left, and Professor Dumbledore said -”

“So, what are Umbridge’s lessons like?” Sirius interrupted. “Is she training you all to kill half-breeds?”

“No,” said Harry, ignoring Hermione’s affronted look at being cut off in her defense of Kreacher. “She’s not letting us use magic at all!”

“All we do is read the stupid textbook,” said Ron.

“Ah, well, that figures,” said Sirius. “Our information from inside the Ministry is that Fudge doesn’t want you trained in combat.”

“Trained in combat!” repeated Harry incredulously. “What does he think we’re doing here, forming some sort of wizard army?”

“That’s exactly what he thinks you’re doing,” said Sirius, “or, rather, that’s exactly what he’s afraid Dumbledore’s doing - forming his own private army, with which he will be able to take on the Ministry of Magic.”

There was a pause at this, then Ron said, “That’s the most stupid thing I’ve ever heard, including all the stuff that Luna Lovegood comes out with.”

“So we’re being prevented from learning Defense Against the Dark Arts because Fudge is scared we’ll use spells against the Ministry?” said Hermione, looking furious.

“Yep,” said Sirius. “Fudge thinks Dumbledore will stop at nothing to seize power. He’s getting more paranoid about Dumbledore by the day. It’s a matter of time before he has Dumbledore arrested on some trumped-up charge.”

This reminded Harry of Percy’s letter.

“D’you know if there’s going to be anything about Dumbledore in the Daily Prophet tomorrow? Ron’s brother Percy reckons there will be -”

“I don’t know,” said Sirius, “I haven’t seen anyone from the Order all weekend, they’re all busy. It’s just been Kreacher and me here.”

There was a definite note of bitterness in Sirius's voice.

"So you haven't had any news about Hagrid, either?"

"Ah…" said Sirius, "well, he was supposed to be back by now, no one's sure what's happened to him." Then, seeing their stricken faces, he added quickly, "But Dumbledore's not worried, so don't you three get yourselves in a state; I'm sure Hagrid's fine."

"But if he was supposed to be back by now…" said Hermione in a small, anxious voice.

"Madame Maxime was with him, we've been in touch with her and she says they got separated on the journey home - but there's nothing to suggest he's hurt or - well, nothing to suggest he's not perfectly okay."

Unconvinced, Harry, Ron and Hermione exchanged worried looks.

"Listen, don't go asking too many questions about Hagrid," said Sirius hastily, "it'll just draw even more attention to the fact that he's not back and I know Dumbledore doesn't want that. Hagrid's tough, he'll be okay." And when they did not appear cheered by this, Sirius added, "When's your next Hogsmeade weekend, anyway? I was thinking, we got away with the dog disguise at the station, didn't we? I thought I could —"

"NO!" said Harry and Hermione together, very loudly.

"Sirius, didn't you see the Daily Prophet?" said Hermione anxiously.

"Oh, that," said Sirius, grinning, "they're always guessing where I am, they haven't really got a clue -"

"Yeah, but we think this time they have,' said Harry. "Something Malfoy said on the train made us think he knew it was you, and his father was on the platform, Sirius - you know, Lucius Malfoy - so don't come up here, whatever you do. If Malfoy recognizes you again -"

"All right, all right, I've got the point," said Sirius. He looked most displeased. "Just an idea, thought you might like to get together."

"I would, I just don't want you chucked back in Azkaban!" said Harry.

There was a pause in which Sirius looked out of the fire at Harry, a crease between his sunken eyes.

"You're less like your father than I thought," he said finally, a definite coolness in his voice. "The risk would've been what made it fun for James."

"Look -"

“Well, I’d better get going, I can hear Kreacher coming down the stairs,” said Sirius, but Harry was sure he was lying. “I’ll write to tell you a time I can make it back into the fire, then, shall I? If you can stand to risk it?”

There was a tiny pop, and the place where Sirius’s head had been was flickering flame once more.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Hogwarts High Inquisitor

They had expected to have to comb Hermione's Daily Prophet carefully next morning to find the article Percy had mentioned in his letter. However, the departing delivery owl had barely cleared the top of the milk jug when Hermione let out a huge gasp and flattened the newspaper to reveal a large photograph of Dolores Umbridge, smiling widely and blinking slowly at them from beneath the headline.

MINISTRY SEEKS EDUCATIONAL REFORM

DOLORES UMBRIDGE APPOINTED

FIRST EVER HIGH INQUISITOR

"Umbridge – Inquisitor?" said Harry darkly, his half-eaten piece of toast slipping from his fingers. "What does that maen?" Hermione rad aloud:

"*In a surprise move last night the Ministry of Magic passed new legislation giving itself an unprecedented level of control at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.*

"'*The Minister has been growing uneasy about goings-on at Hogwarts for some time,' said junior Assistant to the Minister, Percy Weasley. 'He is now responding to concerns voiced by anxious parents, who feel the school may be moving in a direction they do not approve.'*

"*This is not the first time in recent weeks that the Minister, Cornelius Fudge, has used new laws to effect improvements at the wizarding school. As recently as August 30th, Educational Decree Number Twenty-two was passed, to ensure that, in the event of the current Headmaster being unable to provide a candidate for a teaching post, the Ministry should select an appropriate person. 'That's how Dolores Umbridge came to be appointed to the teaching staff at Hogwarts,' said Weasley last night. 'Dumboldore couldn't find anyone so the Minister put in Umbridge, and of course, she's been an immediate success —'*"

"She's been a WHAT?" said Harry loudly.

"Wait, there's more," said Hermione grimly.

"'*—an immediate success, totally revolutionizing the teaching of Defense Against the Dark Arts and providing the Minister with on-the-ground feedback about what's really happening at Hogwarts.'*

"*It is this last function that the Ministry has now formalized with the passing of Educational Decree Number Twenty-three, which creates the new position of Hogwarts High Inquisitor.*

“‘*This is an exciting new phase in the Minister’s plan to get to grips with what some are calling the falling standards at Hogwarts,’ said Weasley. ‘The Inquisitor will have powers to inspect her fellow educators and make sure that they are coming up to scratch. Professor Umbridge has been offered this position in addition to her own teaching post and we are delighted to say that she has accepted.’*

“*The Ministry’s new moves have received enthusiastic support from parents of students at Hogwarts.*

‘*I feel much easier in my mind now that I know Dumbledore is being subjected to fair and objective evaluation,’ said Mr. Lucius Malfoy, 41, speaking from his Wiltshire mansion last night. ‘Many of us with our children’s best interests at heart have been concerned about some of Dumbledore’s eccentric decisions in the last few years and are glad to know that the Ministry is keeping an eye on the situation.’*

“*Among those eccentric decisions are undoubtedly the controversial staff appointments previously described in this newspaper, which have included the employment of werewolf Remus Lupin, half-giant Rubeus Hagrid and delusional ex-Auror, ‘Mad - Eye’ Moody.*

“*Rumors abound, of course, that Albus Dumbledore, once Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards and Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, is no longer up to the task of managing the prestigious school of Hogwarts*

“‘*I think the appointment of the Inquisitor is a first step towards ensuring that Hogwarts has a headmaster in whom we can all repose our confidence,’ said a Ministry insider last night.*

“*Wizengamot elders Griselda Marchbanks and Tiberius Ogden have resigned in protest at the introduction of the post of Inquisitor to Hogwarts.*

“‘*Hogwarts is a school, not an outpost of Cornelius Fudge’s office,’ said Madam Marchbanks. ‘This is a further disgusting attempt to discredit Albus Dumbledore.’*

“*(For a full account of Madam Marchbanks’s alleged links to subversive goblin groups, turn to page seventeen.)”*

Hermione finished reading and looked across the table at the other two.

“So now we know how we ended up with Umbridge! Fudge passed this Decree and forced her on us! And now he’s given her the power to inspect the other teachers!” Hermione was breathing fast and her eyes were very bright. “I can’t believe this. It’s outrageous!”

“I know it is,” said Harry. He looked down at his right hand, clenched on the table-top, and saw the faint white outline of the words Umbridge had forced him to cut into his skin.

But a grin was unfurling on Ron’s face.

“What?” said Harry and Hermione together, staring at him.

“Oh, I can’t wait to see McGonagall inspected,” said Ron happily. “Umbridge won’t know what’s hit her.”

“Well, come on,” said Hermione, jumping up, “we’d better get going, if she’s inspecting Binns’s class we don’t want to be late…”

But Professor Umbridge was not inspecting their History of Magic lesson, which was just as dull as the previous Monday, nor was she in Snape’s dungeon when they arrived for double Potions, where Harry’s moonstone essay was handed back to him with a large, spiky black ‘D’ scrawled in an upper corner.

“I have awarded you the grades you would have received if you presented this work in your OWL,” said Snape with a smirk, as he swept among them, passing back their homework. “This should give you a realiztic idea of what to expect in the examination.”

Snape reached the front of the class and turned on his heel to face them.

“The general standard of this homework was abysmal. Most of you would have failed had this been your examination. I expect to see a great deal more effort for this weeks essay on the various varieties of venom antidotes, or I shall have to start handing out detentions to those dunces who get a D.”

He smirked as Malfoy sniggered and said in a carrying whisper, “Some people got a D? Ha!”

Harry realized that Hermione was looking sideways to see what grade he had received; he slid his moonstone essay back into his bag as quickly as possible, feeling that he would rather keep that information private.

Determined not to give Snape an excuse to fail him this lesson, Harry read and reread every line of instructions on the blackboard at least three times before acting on them. His Strengthening Solution was not precisely the clear turquoise shade of Hermione’s but it was at least blue rather than pink, like Neville’s, and he delivered a flask of it to Snape’s desk at the end of the lesson with a feeling of mingled defiance and relief.

“Well, that wasn’t as bad as last week, was it?” said Hermione, as they climbed the steps out of the dungeon and made their way across the Entrance Hall towards lunch. “And the homework didn’t go too badly, either, did it?”

When neither Ron nor Harry answered, she pressed on, “I mean, all right, I didn’t expect the top grade, not if he’s marking to OWL standard, but a pass is quite encouraging at this stage, wouldn’t you say?”

Harry made a non-committal noise in his throat.

“Of course, a lot can happen between now and the exam, we’ve got plenty of time to improve, but the grades we’re getting now are a sort of baseline, aren’t they? Something we can build on…”

They sat down together at the Gryffindor table.

“Obviously, I’d have been thrilled if I’d got an O -”

“Hermione,” said Ron sharply “if you want to know what grades we got, ask.”

“I don’t - I didn’t mean - well, if you want to tell me -”

“I got a P,” said Ron, ladling soup into his bowl. “Happy?”

“Well, that’s nothing to be ashamed of,” said Fred, who had just arrived at the table with George and Lee Jordan and was sitting down on Harry’s right. “Nothing wrong with a good healthy P.”

“But,” said Hermione, “doesn’t P stand for…”

“Poor, yeah,” said Lee Jordan. “Still, better than D, isn’t it? ‘Dreadful’?”

Harry felt his face grow warm and faked a small coughing fit over his roll. When he emerged from this he was sorry to find that Hermione was still in full flow about OWL grades.

“So top grade’s O for ‘Outstanding’,” she was saying, ‘and then there’s A-”

“No, E,” George corrected her, “E for ‘Exceeds Expectations’. And I’ve always thought Fred and I should’ve got E in everything, because we exceeded expectations just by turning up for the exams.”

They all laughed except Hermione, who ploughed on, “So, after E it’s A for ‘Acceptable’, and that’s the last pass grade, isn’t it?”

“Yep,” said Fred, dunking an entire roll in his soup, transferring it to his mouth and swallowing it whole.

“Then you get P for ‘Poor’-” Ron raised both his arms in mock celebration - “and D for ‘Dreadful’.”

“And then T,” George reminded him.

“T?” asked Hermione, looking appalled. “Even lower than a D? What on earth does that stand for?”

“Troll”, said George promptly.

Harry laughed again, though he was not sure whether or not George was joking. He imagined trying to conceal from Hermione that he had received T's in all his OWLs and immediately resolved to work harder from now on.

"You lot had an inspected lesson yet?" Fred asked them.

"No," said Hermione at once. "Have you?"

"Just now, before lunch," said George. "Charms."

"What was it like?" Harry and Hermione asked together.

Fred shrugged.

"Not that bad. Umbridge just lurked in the corner making notes on a clipboard. You know what Flitwick's like, he treated her like a guest, didn't seem to bother him at all. She didn't say much. Asked Alicia a couple of questions about what the classes are normally like, Alicia told her they were really good, that was it."

"I can't see old Flitwick getting marked down," said George, "he usually gets everyone through their exams all right."

"Who've you got this afternoon?" Fred asked Harry.

"Trelawney -"

"A T if ever I saw one."

"- and Umbridge herself."

"Well, be a good boy and keep your temper with Umbridge today" said George. "Angelina'll do her nut if you miss any more Quidditch practices."

But Harry did not have to wait for Defense Against the Dark Arts to meet Professor Umbridge. He was pulling out his dream diary in a seat at the very back of the shadowy Divination room when Ron elbowed him in the ribs and, looking round, he saw Professor Umbridge emerging through the trapdoor in the floor. The class, which had been talking cheerily fell silent at once. The abrupt fall in the noise level made Professor Trelawney, who had been wafting about handing out copies of The Dream Oracle, look round.

"Good afternoon, Professor Trelawney," said Professor Umbridge with her wide smile. "You received my note, I trust? Giving the time and date of your inspection?"

Professor Trelawney nodded curtly and, looking very disgruntled, turned her back on Professor Umbridge and continued to give out books. Still smiling, Professor Umbridge grasped the back of the nearest armchair and pulled it to the front of the class so that it was a few inches behind

Professor Trelawneys seat. She then sat down, took her clipboard from her flowery bag and looked up expectantly, waiting for the class to begin.

Professor Trelawney pulled her shawls tight about her with slightly trembling hands and surveyed the class through her hugely magnifying lenses.

“We shall be continuing our study of prophetic dreams today,” she said in a brave attempt at her usual mystic tones, though her voice shook slightly. “Divide into pairs, please, and interpret each other’s latest night-time visions with the aid of the Oracle.”

She made as though to sweep back to her seat, saw Professor Umbridge sitting right beside it, and immediately veered left towards Parvati and Lavender, who were already deep in discussion about Parvati’s most recent dream.

Harry opened his copy of The Dream Oracle, watching Umbridge covertly. She was already making notes on her clipboard. After a few minutes she got to her feet and began to pace the room in Trelawney’s wake, listening to her conversations with students and posing questions here and there. Harry bent his head hurriedly over his book.

“Think of a dream, quick,” he told Ron, “in case the old toad comes our way.”

“I did it last time,” Ron protested, “it’s your turn, you tell me one.”

“Oh, I dunno…” said Harry desperately, who could not remember dreaming anything at all over the last few days. “Lets say I dreamed I was… drowning Snape in my cauldron. Yeah, that’ll do…”

Ron chortled as he opened his Dream Oracle.

“Okay, we’ve got to add your age to the date you had the dream, the number of letters in the subject… would that be ‘drowning’ or ‘cauldron’ or ‘Snape’?”

“It doesn’t matter, pick any of them,” said Harry, chancing a glance behind him. Professor Umbridge was now standing at Professor Trelawneys shoulder making notes while the Divination teacher questioned Neville about his dream diary.

“What night did you dream this again?” Ron said, immersed in calculations.

“I dunno, last night, whenever you like,” Harry told him, trying to listen to what Umbridge was saying to Professor Trelawney. They were only a table away from him and Ron now. Professor Umbridge was making another note on her clipboard and Professor Trelawney was looking extremely put out.

“Now,” said Umbridge, looking up at Trelawney, “you’ve been in this post how long, exactly?”

Professor Trelawney scowled at her, arms crossed and shoulders hunched as though wishing to

protect herself as much as possible from the indignity of the inspection. After a slight pause in which she seemed to decide that the question was not so offensive that she could reasonably ignore it, she said in a deeply resentful tone, “Nearly sixteen years.”

“Quite a period,” said Professor Umbridge, making a note on her clipboard. “So it was Professor Dumbledore who appointed you?”

“That’s right,” said Professor Trelawney shortly.

Professor Umbridge made another note.

“And you are a great-great-granddaughter of the celebrated Seer Cassandra Trelawney?”

“Yes,” said Professor Trelawney, holding her head a little higher.

Another note on the clipboard.

“But I think - correct me if I am mistaken - that you are the first in your family since Cassandra to be possessed of Second Sight?”

“These things often skip - er - three generations,” said Professor Trelawney.

Professor Umbridge’s toadlike smile widened.

“Of course,” she said sweetly, making yet another note. “Well, if you could just predict something for me, then?” And she looked up enquiringly, still smiling.

Professor Trelawney stiffened as though unable to believe her ears. “I don’t understand you,” she said, clutching convulsively at the shawl around her scrawny neck.

“I’d like you to make a prediction for me,” said Professor Umbridge very clearly.

Harry and Ron were not the only people now watching and listening sneakily from behind their books. Most of the class were staring transfixed at Professor Trelawney as she drew herself up to her full height, her beads and bangles clinking.

“The Inner Eye does not See upon command!” she said in scandalized tones.

“I see,” said Professor Umbridge softly, making yet another note on her clipboard.

“I - but - but… wait!” said Professor Trelawney suddenly, in an attempt at her usual ethereal voice, though the mystical effect was ruined somewhat by the way it was shaking with anger. “I… I think I do see something… something that concerns you… why, I sense something… something dark… some grave peril…”

Professor Trelawney pointed a shaking finger at Professor Umbridge who continued to smile

blandly at her, eyebrows raised.

“I am afraid… I am afraid that you are in grave danger!” Professor Trelawney finished dramatically.

There was a pause. Professor Umbridge surveyed Professor Trelawney.

“Right,” she said softly, scribbling on her clipboard once more. “Well, if that’s really the best you can do…”

She turned away, leaving Professor Trelawney standing rooted to the spot, her chest heaving. Harry caught Ron’s eye and knew that Ron was thinking exactly the same as he was: they both knew that Professor Trelawney was an old fraud, but on the other hand, they loathed Umbridge so much that they felt very much on Trelawneys side - until she swooped down on them a few seconds later, that is.

“Well?” she said, snapping her long fingers under Harry’s nose, uncharacteristically brisk. “Let me see the start you’ve made on your dream diary, please.”

And by the time she had interpreted Harrys dreams at the top of her voice (all of which, even the ones that involved eating porridge, apparently foretold a gruesome and early death), he was feeling much less sympathetic towards her. All the while, Professor Umbridge stood a few feet away, making notes on that clipboard, and when the bell rang she descended the silver ladder first and was waiting for them all when they reached their Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson ten minutes later.

She was humming and smiling to herself when they entered the room. Harry and Ron told Hermione, who had been in Arithmancy, exactly what had happened in Divination while they all took out their copies of Defensive Magical Theory, but before Hermione could ask any questions Professor Umbridge had called them all to order and silence fell.

“Wands away” she instructed them all with a smile, and those people who had been hopeful enough to take them out, sadly returned them to their bags. “As we finished Chapter One last lesson, I would like you all to turn to page nineteen today and commence ‘Chapter Two, Common Defensive Theories and their Derivation’. There will be no need to talk.”

Still smiling her wide, self-satisfied smile, she sat down at her desk. The class gave an audible sigh as it turned, as one, to page nineteen. Harry wondered dully whether there were enough chapters in the book to keep them reading through all this year’s lessons and was on the point of checking the contents page when he noticed that Hermione had her hand in the air again.

Professor Umbridge had noticed, too, and what was more, she seemed to have worked out a strategy for just such an eventuality. Instead of trying to pretend she had not noticed Hermione she got to her feet and walked around the front row of desks until they were face to face, then she bent down and whispered, so that the rest of the class could not hear, “What is it this time, Miss Granger?”

“I’ve already read Chapter Two,” said Hermione.

“Well then, proceed to Chapter Three.”

“I’ve read that too. I’ve read the whole book.”

Professor Umbridge blinked but recovered her poise almost instantly.

“Well, then, you should be able to tell me what Slinkhard says about counter-jinxes in Chapter Fifteen.”

“He says that counter-jinxes are improperly named,” said Hermione promptly. “He says - ‘jinx’ is just a name people give their jinxes when they want to make them sound more acceptable.”

Professor Umbridge raised her eyebrows and Harry knew she was impressed, against her will.

“But I disagree,” Hermione continued.

Professor Umbridge’s eyebrows rose a little higher and her gaze became distinctly colder.

“You disagree?” she repeated.

“Yes, I do,” said Hermione, who, unlike Umbridge, was not whispering, but speaking in a clear, carrying voice that had by now attracted the attention of the rest of the class. “Mr. Slinkhard doesn’t like jinxes, does he? But, I think they can be very useful when they’re used defensively.”

“Oh, you do, do you?” said Professor Umbridge, forgetting to whisper and straightening up. “Well, I’m afraid it is Mr. Slinkhard’s opinion, and not yours, that matters within this classroom, Miss Granger.”

“But -” Hermione began.

“That is enough,” said Professor Umbridge. She walked back to the front of the class and stood before them, all the jauntiness she had shown at the beginning of the lesson gone. “Miss Granger, I am going to take five points from Gryffindor house.”

There was an outbreak of muttering at this.

“What for?” said Harry angrily.

“Don’t you get involved!” Hermione whispered urgently to him.

“For disrupting my class with pointless interruptions,” said Professor Umbridge smoothly. “I am here to teach you using a Ministry-approved method that does not include inviting students to give their opinions on matters about which they understand very little. Your previous teachers in this subject may have allowed you more license, but as none of them - with the possible

exception of Professor Quirrell, who did at least appear to have restricted himself to age appropriate subjects - would have passed a Ministry inspection -”

“Yeah, Quirrell was a great teacher,” said Harry loudly, “there was just that minor drawback of him having Lord Voldemort sticking out of the back of his head.”

This pronouncement was followed by one of the loudest silences Harry had ever heard. Then -

“I think another week’s detentions would do you some good, Mr. Potter,” said Umbridge sleekly.

The cut on the back of Harry’s hand had barely healed and, by the following morning, it was bleeding again. He did not complain during the evening’s detention; he was determined not to give Umbridge the satisfaction; over and over again he wrote *I must not tell lies* and not a sound escaped his lips, though the cut deepened with every letter.

The very worst part of this second week’s worth of detentions was, just as George had predicted, Angelinas reaction. She cornered him just as he arrived at the Gryffindor table for breakfast on Tuesday and shouted so loudly that Professor McGonagall came sweeping down upon the pair of them from the staff table.

“Miss Johnson, how dare you make such a racket in the Great Hall! Five points from Gryffindor!”

“But Professor - he’s gone and landed himself in detention again -”

“What’s this, Potter?” said Professor McGonagall sharply, rounding on Harry. “Detention? From whom?”

“From Professor Umbridge,” muttered Harry, not meeting Professor McGonagalls beady, square-framed eyes.

“Are you telling me,” she said, lowering her voice so that the group of curious Ravenclaws behind them could not hear, “that after the warning I gave you last Monday you lost your temper in Professor Umbridge’s class again?”

“Yes,” Harry muttered, speaking to the floor.

“Potter, you must get a grip on yourself! You are heading for serious trouble! Another five points from Gryffindor!”

“But - what -? Professor, no!” Harry said, furious at this injustice, “I’m already being punished by her, why do you have to take points as well?”

“Because detentions do not appear to have any effect on you whatsoever!” said Professor McGonagall tartly. “No, not another word of complaint, Potter! And as for you, Miss Johnson, you will confine your shouting matches to the Quidditch pitch in future or risk losing the team

captaincy!”

Professor McGonagall strode back towards the staff table. Angelina gave Harry a look of deepest disgust and stalked away, upon which he flung himself on to the bench beside Ron, fuming.

“She’s taken points off Gryffindor because I’m having my hand sliced open every night! How is that fair, how?”

“I know, mate,” said Ron sympathetically, tipping bacon on to Harry’s plate, “she’s bang out of order.”

Hermione, however, merely rustled the pages of her Daily Prophet and said nothing.

“You think McGonagall was right, do you?” said Harry angrily to the picture of Cornelius Fudge obscuring Hermione’s face.

“I wish she hadn’t taken points from you, but I think she’s right to warn you not to lose your temper with Umbridge,” said Hermione’s voice, while Fudge gesticulated forcefully from the front page, clearly giving some kind of speech.

Harry did not speak to Hermione all through Charms, but when they entered Transfiguration he forgot about being cross with her. Professor Umbridge and her clipboard were sitting in a corner and the sight of her drove the memory of breakfast right out of his head.

“Excellent,” whispered Ron, as they sat down in their usual seats. “Let’s see Umbridge get what she deserves.”

Professor McGonagall marched into the room without giving the slightest indication that she knew Professor Umbridge was there.

“That will do,” she said and silence fell immediately. “Mr. Finnigan, kindly come here and hand back the homework - Miss Brown, please take this box of mice - don’t be silly, girl, they won’t hurt you - and hand one to each student -”

“Hem, hem,” said Professor Umbridge, employing the same silly little cough she had used to interrupt Dumbledore on the first night of term. Professor McGonagall ignored her. Seamus handed back Harry’s essay; Harry took it without looking at him and saw, to his relief, that he had managed an A.

“Right then, everyone, listen closely - Dean Thomas, if you do that to the mouse again I shall put you in detention - most of you have now successfully Vanished your snails and even those who were left with a certain amount of shell have got the gist of the spell. Today, we shall be -”

“Hem, hem,” said Professor Umbridge.

“Yes?” said Professor McGonagall, turning round, her eyebrows so close together they seemed to form one long, severe line.

“I was just wondering, Professor, whether you received my note telling you of the date and time of your inspec—”

“Obviously I received it, or I would have asked you what you are doing in my classroom,” said Professor McGonagall, turning her back firmly on Professor Umbridge. Many of the students exchanged looks of glee. “As I was saying: today, we shall be practicing the altogether more difficult Vanishment of mice. Now, the Vanishing Spell -”

“Hem, hem.”

“I wonder,” said Professor McGonagall in cold fury, turning on Professor Umbridge, “how you expect to gain an idea of my usual teaching methods if you continue to interrupt me? You see, I do not generally permit people to talk when I am talking.”

Professor Umbridge looked as though she had just been slapped in the face. She did not speak, but straightened the parchment on her clipboard and began scribbling furiously.

Looking supremely unconcerned, Professor McGonagall addressed the class once more.

“As I was saying: the Vanishing Spell becomes more difficult with the complexity of the animal to be Vanished. The snail, as an invertebrate, does not present much of a challenge; the mouse, as a mammal, offers a much greater one. This is not, therefore, magic you can accomplish with your mind on your dinner. So - you know the incantation, let me see what you can do…”

“How she can lecture me about not losing my temper with Umbridge!” Harry muttered to Ron under his breath, but he was grinning - his anger with Professor McGonagall had quite evaporated.

Professor Umbridge did not follow Professor McGonagall around the class as she had followed Professor Trelawney; perhaps she realized Professor McGonagall would not permit it. She did, however, take many more notes while sitting in her corner, and when Professor McGonagall finally told them all to pack away, she rose with a grim expression on her face.

“Well, it’s a start,” said Ron, holding up a long wriggling mouse-tail and dropping it back into the box Lavender was passing around.

As they filed out of the classroom, Harry saw Professor Umbridge approach the teacher’s desk; he nudged Ron, who nudged Hermione in turn, and the three of them deliberately fell back to eavesdrop.

“How long have you been teaching at Hogwarts?” Professor Umbridge asked.

“Thirty-nine years this December,” said Professor McGonagall brusquely, snapping her bag shut.

Professor Umbridge made a note.

“Very well,” she said, “you will receive the results of your inspection in ten days’ time.”

“I can hardly wait,” said Professor McGonagall, in a coldly indifferent voice, and she strode off towards the door. “Hurry up, you three,” she added, sweeping Harry, Ron and Hermione before her.

Harry could not help giving her a faint smile and could have sworn he received one in return.

He had thought that the next time he would see Umbridge would be in his detention that evening, but he was wrong. When they walked down the lawns towards the Forest for Care of Magical Creatures, they found her and her clipboard waiting for them beside Professor Grubbly-Plank.

“You do not usually take this class, is that correct?” Harry heard her ask as they arrived at the trestle table where the group of captive Bowtruckles were scrabbling around for woodlice like so many living twigs.

“Quite correct,” said Professor Grubbly-Plank, hands behind her back and bouncing on the balls of her feet. “I am a substitute teacher standing in for Professor Hagrid.”

Harry exchanged uneasy looks with Ron and Hermione. Malfoy was whispering with Crabbe and Goyle; he would surely love this opportunity to tell tales on Hagrid to a member of the Ministry.

“Hmm,” said Professor Umbridge, dropping her voice, though Harry could still hear her quite clearly. “I wonder - the Headmaster seems strangely reluctant to give me any information on the matter - can you tell me what is causing Professor Hagrid’s very extended leave of absence?”

Harry saw Malfoy look up eagerly and watch Umbridge and Grubbly-Plank closely.

“Fraid I can’t,” said Professor Grubbly-Plank breezily. “Don’t know anything more about it than you do. Got an owl from Dumbledore, would I like a couple of weeks’ teaching work. I accepted. That’s as much as I know. Well… shall I get started then?”

“Yes, please do,” said Professor Umbridge, scribbling on her clipboard.

Umbridge took a different tack in this class and wandered amongst the students, questioning them on magical creatures. Most people were able to answer well and Harry’s spirits lifted somewhat; at least the class was not letting Hagrid down.

“Overall,” said Professor Umbridge, returning to Professor Grubbly-Plank’s side after a lengthy interrogation of Dean Thomas, “how do you, as a temporary member of staff- an objective outsider, I suppose you might say — how do you find Hogwarts? Do you feel you receive enough support from the school management?”

“Oh, yes, Dumbledore’s excellent,” said Professor Grubbly-Plank heartily. “Yes, I’m very happy

with the way things are run, very happy indeed."

Looking politely incredulous, Umbridge made a tiny note on her clipboard and went on, "And what are you planning to cover with this class this year - assuming, of course, that Professor Hagrid does not return?"

"Oh, I'll take them through the creatures that most often come up in OWL," said Professor Grubbly-Plank. "Not much left to do - they've studied unicorns and Nifflers, I thought we'd cover Porlocks and Kneazles, make sure they can recognize Crups and Knarls, you know…"

"Well, you seem to know what you're doing, at any rate," said Professor Umbridge, making a very obvious tick on her clipboard. Harry did not like the emphasis she put on 'you' and liked it even less when she put her next question to Goyle. "Now, I hear there have been injuries in this class?"

Goyle gave a stupid grin. Malfoy hastened to answer the question.

"That was me," he said. "I was slashed by a Hippogriff."

"A Hippogriff?" said Professor Umbridge, now scribbling frantically.

"Only because he was too stupid to listen to what Hagrid told him to do," said Harry angrily.

Both Ron and Hermione groaned. Professor Umbridge turned her head slowly in Harry's direction.

"Another nights detention, I think," she said softly. "Well, thank you very much, Professor Grubbly-Plank, I think that's all I need here. You will be receiving the results of your inspection within ten days."

"Jolly good," said Professor Grubbly-Plank, and Professor Umbridge set off back across the lawn to the castle.

It was nearly midnight when Harry left Umbridge's office that night, his hand now bleeding so severely that it was staining the scarf he had wrapped around it. He expected the common room to be empty when he returned, but Ron and Hermione had sat up waiting for him. He was pleased to see them, especially as Hermione was disposed to be sympathetic rather than critical.

"Here," she said anxiously, pushing a small bowl of yellow liquid towards him, "soak your hand in that, it's a solution of strained and pickled Murtlap tentacles, it should help."

Harry placed his bleeding, aching hand into the bowl and experienced a wonderful feeling of relief. Crookshanks curled around his legs, purring loudly, then leapt into his lap and settled down.

"Thanks," he said gratefully, scratching behind Crookshanks's ears with his left hand.

“I still reckon you should complain about this,” said Ron in a low voice.

“No,” said Harry flatly.

“McGonagall would go nuts if she knew —”

“Yeah, she probably would,” said Harry dully. “And how long do you reckon it’d take Umbridge to pass another decree saying anyone who complains about the High Inquisitor gets sacked immediately?”

Ron opened his mouth to retort but nothing came out and, after a moment, he closed it again, defeated.

“She’s an awful woman,” said Hermione in a small voice. “Awful. You know, I was just saying to Ron when you came in… we’ve got to do something about her.”

“I suggested poison,” said Ron grimly.

“No… I mean, something about what a dreadful teacher she is, and how we’re not going to learn any Defense from her at all,” said Hermione.

“Well, what can we do about that?” said Ron, yawning. “It’s too late, isn’t it? She’s got the job, she’s here to stay. Fudge’ll make sure of that.”

“Well,” said Hermione tentatively. “You know, I was thinking today…” she shot a slightly nervous look at Harry and then plunged on, “I was thinking that - maybe the time’s come when we should just - just do it ourselves.”

“Do what ourselves?” said Harry suspiciously, still floating his hand in the essence of Murtlap tentacles.

“Well - learn Defense Against the Dark Arts ourselves,” said Hermione.

“Come off it,” groaned Ron. “You want us to do extra work? D’you realize Harry and I are behind on homework again and it’s only the second week?”

“But this is much more important than homework!” said Hermione.

Harry and Ron goggled at her.

“I didn’t think there was anything in the universe more important than homework!” said Ron.

“Don’t be silly, of course there is,” said Hermione, and Harry saw, with an ominous feeling, that her face was suddenly alight with the kind of fervour that SPEW usually inspired in her. “It’s about preparing ourselves, like Harry said in Umbridge’s first lesson, for what’s waiting for us out there. It’s about making sure we really can defend ourselves. If we don’t learn anything for a

whole year -”

“We can’t do much by ourselves,” said Ron in a defeated voice. “I mean, all right, we can go and look jinxes up in the library and try and practice them, I suppose -”

“No, I agree, we’ve gone past the stage where we can just learn things out of books”‘ said Hermione. “We need a teacher, a proper one, who can show us how to use the spells and correct us if we’re going wrong.”

“If you’re talking about Lupin…” Harry began.

“No, no, I’m not talking about Lupin,” said Hermione. “He’s too busy with the Order and, anyway, the most we could see him is during Hogsmeade weekends and that’s not nearly often enough.”

“Who, then?” said Harry, frowning at her.

Hermione heaved a very deep sigh.

“Isn’t it obvious?” she said. “I’m talking about you, Harry.”

There was a moment’s silence. A light night breeze rattled the windowpanes behind Ron, and the fire guttered.

“About me what?” said Harry.

“I’m talking about you teaching us Defense Against the Dark Arts.”

Harry stared at her. Then he turned to Ron, ready to exchange the exasperated looks they sometimes shared when Hermione elaborated on far-fetched schemes like SPEW to Harrys consternation, however, Ron did not look exasperated.

He was frowning slightly, apparently thinking. Then he said, “That’s an idea.”

“What’s an idea?” said Harry.

“You,” said Ron. “Teaching us to do it.”

“But…”

Harry was grinning now, sure the pair of them were pulling his leg.

“But I’m not a teacher, I can’t -”

“Harry, you’re the best in the year at Defense Against the Dark Arts,” said Hermione.

“Me?” said Harry, now grinning more broadly than ever. “No I’m not, you’ve beaten me in every test -”

“Actually, I haven’t,” said Hermione coolly. “You beat me in our third year - the only year we both sat the test and had a teacher who actually knew the subject. But I’m not talking about test results, Harry. Think what you’ve done!”

“How d’you mean?”

“You know what, I’m not sure I want someone this stupid teaching me,” Ron said to Hermione, smirking slightly. He turned to Harry.

“Let’s think,” he said, pulling a face like Goyle concentrating. “Uh… first year - you saved the Sorcerer’s Stone from You-Know-Who.”

“But that was luck,” said Harry, “it wasn’t skill.”

“Second year,” Ron interrupted, “you killed the Basilisk and destroyed Riddle.”

“Yeah, but if Fawkes hadn’t turned up, I -”

“Third year,” said Ron, louder still, “you fought off about a hundred Dementors at once -”

“You know that was a fluke, if the Time-Turner hadn’t -”

“Last year,” Ron said, almost shouting now, “you fought off You-Know-Who again-”

“Listen to me!” said Harry, almost angrily, because Ron and Hermione were both smirking now. “Just listen to me, all right? It sounds great when you say it like that, but all that stuff was luck - I didn’t know what I was doing half the time, I didn’t plan any of it, I just did whatever I could think of, and I nearly always had help -”

Ron and Hermione were still smirking and Harry felt his temper rise; he wasn’t even sure why he was feeling so angry.

“Don’t sit there grinning like you know better than I do, I was there, wasn’t I?” he said heatedly. “I know what went on, all right? And I didn’t get through any of that because I was brilliant at Defense Against the Dark Arts, I got through it all because - because help came at the right time, or because I guessed right - but I just blundered through it all, I didn’t have a clue what I was doing - STOP LAUGHING!”

The bowl of Murtlap essence fell to the floor and smashed. He became aware that he was on his feet, though he couldn’t remember standing up. Crookshanks streaked away under a sofa. Ron and Hermione’s smiles had vanished.

“You don’t know what it’s like! You - neither of you - you’ve never had to face him, have you?

You think it's just memorizing a bunch of spells and throwing them at him, like you're in class or something? The whole time you're sure you know there's nothing between you and dying except your own - your own brain or guts or whatever - like you can think straight when you know you're about a second from being murdered, or tortured, or watching your friends die - they've never taught us that in their classes, what it's like to deal with things like that - and you two sit there acting like I'm a clever little boy to be standing here, alive, like Diggory was stupid, like he messed up — you just don't get it, that could just as easily have been me, it would have been if Voldemort hadn't needed me -"

"We weren't saying anything like that, mate," said Ron, looking aghast. "We weren't having a go at Diggory, we didn't - you've got the wrong end of the -"

He looked helplessly at Hermione, whose face was stricken.

"Harry," she said timidly, "don't you see? This… this is exactly why we need you… we need to know what it's r-really like… facing him… facing V-Voldemort."

It was the first time she had ever said Voldemort's name and it was this, more than anything else, that calmed Harry. Still breathing hard, he sank back into his chair, becoming aware as he did so that his hand was throbbing horribly again. He wished he had not smashed the bowl of Murtlap essence.

"Well… think about it," said Hermione quietly. "Please?"

Harry could not think of anything to say. He was feeling ashamed of his outburst already. He nodded, hardly aware of what he was agreeing to. Hermione stood up.

"Well, I'm off to bed," she said, in a voice that was clearly as natural as she could make it. "Erm… night."

Ron had gotten to his feet, too.

"Coming?" he said awkwardly to Harry.

"Yeah," said Harry. "In… in a minute. I'll just clear this up."

He indicated the smashed bowl on the floor. Ron nodded and left.

"Reparo," Harry muttered, pointing his wand at the broken pieces of china. They flew back together, good as new, but there was no returning the Murtlap essence to the bowl.

He was suddenly so tired he was tempted to sink back into his armchair and sleep there, but instead he forced himself to his feet and followed Ron upstairs. His restless night was punctuated once more by dreams of long corridors and locked doors and he awoke next day with his scar prickling again.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

In the Hogs Head

Hermione made no mention of Harry giving Defense Against the Dark Arts lessons for two whole weeks after her original suggestion. Harry's detentions with Umbridge were finally over (he doubted whether the words now etched into the back of his hand would ever fade entirely); Ron had had four more Quidditch practices and not been shouted at during the last two; and all three of them had managed to Vanish their mice in Transfiguration (Hermione had actually progressed to Vanishing kittens), before the subject was broached again, on a wild, blustery evening at the end of September, when the three of them were sitting in the library, looking up potion ingredients for Snape.

"I was wondering," Hermione said suddenly, "whether you'd thought any more about Defense Against the Dark Arts, Harry."

"Course I have," said Harry grumpily, "can't forget it, can we, with that hag teaching us -"

"I meant the idea Ron and I had -" Ron cast her an alarmed, threatening kind of look. She frowned at him, "- Oh, all right, the idea I had then - about you teaching us."

Harry did not answer at once. He pretended to be perusing a page of Asiatic Anti-Venoms, because he did not want to say what was in his mind.

He had given the matter a great deal of thought over the past fortnight. Sometimes it seemed an insane idea, just as it had on the night Hermione had proposed it, but at others, he had found himself thinking about the spells that had served him best in his various encounters with Dark creatures and Death Eaters - found himself, in fact, subconsciously planning lessons…

"Well," he said slowly, when he could no longer pretend to find Asiatic Anti-Venoms interesting, "yeah, I - I've thought about it a bit."

"And?" said Hermione eagerly.

"I dunno," said Harry, playing for time. He looked up at Ron.

"I thought it was a good idea from the start," said Ron, who seemed keener to join in this conversation now that he was sure Harry was not going to start shouting again.

Harry shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

"You did listen to what I said about a load of it being luck, didn't you?"

"Yes, Harry," said Hermione gently, "but all the same, there's no point pretending that you're not good at Defense Against the Dark Arts, because you are. You were the only person last year

who could throw off the Imperius Curse completely, you can produce a Patronus, you can do all sorts of stuff that full-grown wizards can't, Viktor always said -"

Ron looked round at her so fast he appeared to crick his neck. Rubbing it, he said, "Yeah? What did Vicky say?"

"Ho ho," said Hermione in a bored voice. "He said Harry knew how to do stuff even he didn't, and he was in the final year at Durmstrang."

Ron was looking at Hermione suspiciously.

"You're not still in contact with him, are you?"

"So what if I am" said Hermione coolly, though her face was a little pink. "I can have a pen-pal if I -"

"He didn't only want to be your pen-pal," said Ron accusingly.

Hermione shook her head exasperatedly and, ignoring Ron, who was continuing to watch her, said to Harry, "Well, what do you think? Will you teach us?"

"Just you and Ron, yeah?"

"Well," said Hermione, looking a mite anxious again. "Well… now, don't fly off the handle again, Harry, please… but I really think you ought to teach anyone who wants to learn. I mean, we're talking about defending ourselves against V-Voldemort. Oh, don't be pathetic, Ron. It doesn't seem fair if we don't offer the chance to other people."

Harry considered this for a moment, then said, "Yeah, but I doubt anyone except you two would want to be taught by me. I'm a nutter, remember?"

"Well, I think you might be surprised how many people would be interested in hearing what you've got to say" said Hermione seriously. "Look," she leaned towards him - Ron, who was still watching her with a frown on his face, leaned forwards to listen too - "you know the first weekend in October's a Hogsmeade weekend? How would it be if we tell anyone who's interested to meet us in the village and we can talk it over?"

"Why do we have to do it outside school?" said Ron.

"Because," said Hermione, returning to the diagram of the Chinese Chomping Cabbage she was copying, "I don't think Umbridge would be very happy if she found out what we were up to."

Harry had been looking forward to the weekend trip into Hogsmeade, but there was one thing worrying him. Sirius had maintained a stony silence since he had appeared in the fire at the beginning of September; Harry knew they had made him angry by saying they didn't want him to come - but he still worried from time to time that Sirius might throw caution to the winds and

turn up anyway. What were they going to do if the great black dog came bounding up the street towards them in Hogsmeade, perhaps under the nose of Draco Malfoy?

“Well, you can’t blame him for wanting to get out and about,” said Ron, when Harry discussed his fears with him and Hermione. “I mean, he’s been on the run for over two years, hasn’t he, and I know that can’t have been a laugh, but at least he was free, wasn’t he? And now he’s just shut up all the time with that ghastly elf.”

Hermione scowled at Ron, but otherwise ignored the slight on Kreacher.

“The trouble is,” she said to Harry, “until V-Voldemort - oh, for heaven’s sake, Ron - comes out into the open, Sirius is going to have to stay hidden, isn’t he? I mean, the stupid Ministry isn’t going to realize Sirius is innocent until they accept that Dumbledore’s been telling the truth about him all along. And once the fools start catching real Death Eaters again, it’ll be obvious Sirius isn’t one… I mean, he hasn’t got the Mark, for one thing.”

“I don’t reckon he’d be stupid enough to turn up,” said Ron bracingly. “Dumbledore’d go mad if he did and Sirius listens to Dumbledore even if he doesn’t like what he hears.”

When Harry continued to look worried, Hermione said, “Listen, Ron and I have been sounding out people who we thought might want to learn some proper Defense Against the Dark Arts, and there are a couple who seem interested. We’ve told them to meet us in Hogsmeade.”

“Right,” said Harry vaguely, his mind still on Sirius.

“Don’t worry, Harry” Hermione said quietly. “You’ve got enough on your plate without Sirius, too.”

She was quite right, of course, he was barely keeping up with his homework, though he was doing much better now that he was no longer spending every evening in detention with Umbridge. Ron was even further behind with his work than Harry, because while they both had Quidditch practice twice a week, Ron also had his prefect duties. However, Hermione, who was taking more subjects than either of them, had not only finished all her homework but was also finding time to knit more elf clothes. Harry had to admit that she was getting better; it was now almost always possible to distinguish between the hats and the socks.

The morning of the Hogsmeade visit dawned bright but windy. After breakfast they queued up in front of Filch, who matched their names to the long list of students who had permission from their parents or guardian to visit the village. With a slight pang, Harry remembered that if it hadn’t been for Sirius, he would not have been going at all.

When Harry reached Filch, the caretaker gave a great sniff as though trying to detect a whiff of something from Harry. Then he gave a curt nod that set his jowls aquiver again and Harry walked on, out on to the stone steps and the cold, sunlit day.

“Er - why was Filch sniffing you?” asked Ron, as he, Harry and Hermione set off at a brisk pace

down the wide drive to the gates.

“I suppose he was checking for the smell of Dungbombs,” said Harry with a small laugh. “I forgot to tell you…”

And he recounted the story of sending his letter to Sirius and Filch bursting in seconds later, demanding to see the letter. To his slight surprise, Hermione found this story highly interesting, much more, indeed, than he did himself.

“He said he was tipped off you were ordering Dungbombs? But who tipped him off?”

“I dunno,” said Harry, shrugging. “Maybe Malfoy, he’d think it was a laugh.”

They walked between the tall stone pillars topped with winged boars and turned left on to the road into the village, the wind whipping their hair into their eyes.

“Malfoy?” said Hermione, skeptically. “Well… yes… maybe…”

And she remained deep in thought all the way into the outskirts of Hogsmeade.

“Where are we going, anyway?” Harry asked. “The Three Broomsticks?”

“Oh - no,” said Hermione, coming out of her reverie, “no, it’s always packed and really noisy. I’ve told the others to meet us in the Hog’s Head, that other pub, you know the one, it’s not on the main road. I think it’s a bit… you know… dodgy… but students don’t normally go in there, so I don’t think we’ll be overheard.”

They walked down the main street past Zonko’s Wizarding Joke Shop, where they were not surprised to see Fred, George and Lee Jordan, past the post office, from which owls issued at regular intervals, and turned up a side-street at the top of which stood a small inn. A battered wooden sign hung from a rusty bracket over the door, with a picture on it of a wild boar’s severed head, leaking blood on to the white cloth around it. The sign creaked in the wind as they approached. All three of them hesitated outside the door.

“Well, come on,” said Hermione, slightly nervously. Harry led the way inside.

It was not at all like the Three Broomsticks, whose large bar gave an impression of gleaming warmth and cleanliness. The Hog’s Head bar comprised one small, dingy and very dirty room that smelled strongly of something that might have been goats. The bay windows were so encrusted with grime that very little daylight could permeate the room, which was lit instead with the stubs of candles sitting on rough wooden tables. The floor seemed at first glance to be compressed earth, though as Harry stepped on to it he realized that there was stone beneath what seemed to be the accumulated filth of centuries.

Harry remembered Hagrid mentioning this pub in his first year: “Yeh get a lot o’ funny folk in the Hogs Head” he had said, explaining how he had won a dragon’s egg from a hooded stranger

there. At the time Harry had wondered why Hagrid had not found it odd that the stranger kept his face hidden throughout their encounter; now he saw that keeping your face hidden was something of a fashion in the Hog's Head. There was a man at the bar whose whole head was wrapped in dirty grey bandages, though he was still managing to gulp endless glasses of some smoking, fiery substance through a slit over his mouth; two figures shrouded in hoods sat at a table in one of the windows; Harry might have thought them Dementors if they had not been talking in strong Yorkshire accents, and in a shadowy corner beside the fireplace sat a witch with a thick, black veil that fell to her toes. They could just see the tip of her nose because it caused the veil to protrude slightly.

"I don't know about this, Hermione," Harry muttered, as they crossed to the bar. He was looking particularly at the heavily veiled witch. "Has it occurred to you Umbridge might be under that?"

Hermione cast an appraising eye over the veiled figure.

"Umbridge is shorter than that woman," she said quietly. "And anyway, even if Umbridge does come in here there's nothing she can do to stop us, Harry, because I've double- and triplechecked the school rules. We're not out of bounds; I specifically asked Professor Flitwick whether students were allowed to come in the Hog's Head, and he said yes, but he advised me strongly to bring our own glasses. And I've looked up everything I can think of about study groups and homework groups and they're definitely allowed. I just don't think it's a good idea if we parade what we're doing."

"No," said Harry dryly, "especially as it's not exactly a homework group you're planning, is it?"

The barman sidled towards them out of a back room. He was a grumpy-looking old man with a great deal of long grey hair and beard. He was tall and thin and looked vaguely familiar to Harry.

"What?" he grunted.

"Three Butterbeers, please," said Hermione.

The man reached beneath the counter and pulled up three very dusty, very dirty bottles, which he slammed on the bar.

"Six Sickles," he said.

"I'll get them," said Harry quickly, passing over the silver. The barman's eyes traveled over Harry, resting for a fraction of a second on his scar. Then he turned away and deposited Harry's money in an ancient wooden till whose drawer slid open automatically to receive it. Harry, Ron and Hermione retreated to the furthest table from the bar and sat down, looking around. The man in the dirty grey bandages rapped the counter with his knuckles and received another smoking drink from the barman.

"You know what?" Ron murmured, looking over at the bar with enthusiasm. "We could order anything we liked in here. I bet that bloke would sell us anything, he wouldn't care. I've always

wanted to try Firewhisky -”

“You - are - a -prefect,” snarled Hermione.

“Oh,” said Ron, the smile fading from his face. “Yeah…”

“So, who did you say is supposed to be meeting us?” Harry asked, wrenching open the rusty top of his Butterbeer and taking a swig.

“Just a couple of people,” Hermione repeated, checking her watch and looking anxiously towards the door. “I told them to be here about now and I’m sure they all know where it is - oh, look, this might be them now.”

The door of the pub had opened. A thick band of dusty sunlight split the room in two for a moment and then vanished, blocked by the incoming rush of a crowd of people.

First came Neville with Dean and Lavender, who were closely followed by Parvati and Padma Patil with (Harry’s stomach did a back-flip) Cho and one of her usually-giggling girlfriends, then (on her own and looking so dreamy she might have walked in by accident) Luna Lovegood; then Katie Bell, Alicia Spinnet and Angelina Johnson, Colin and Dennis Creevey, Ernie Macmillan, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Hannah Abbott, a Hufflepuff girl with a long plait down her back whose name Harry did not know; three Ravenclaw boys he was pretty sure were called Anthony Goldstein, Michael Corner and Terry Boot, Ginny, closely followed by a tall skinny blond boy with an upturned nose whom Harry recognized vaguely as being a member of the Hufflepuff Quidditch team and, bringing up the rear, Fred and George Weasley with their friend Lee Jordan, all three of whom were carrying large paper bags crammed with Zonko’s merchandise.

“A couple of people?” said Harry hoarsely to Hermione. “A couple of people?”

“Yes, well, the idea seemed quite popular,” said Hermione happily, “Ron, do you want to pull up some more chairs?”

The barman had frozen in the act of wiping out a glass with a rag so filthy it looked as though it had never been washed. Possibly, he had never seen his pub so full.

“Hi,” said Fred, reaching the bar first and counting his companions quickly, “could we have… twenty-five Butterbeers, please?”

The barman glared at him for a moment, then, throwing down his rag irritably as though he had been interrupted in something very important, he started passing up dusty Butterbeers from under the bar.

“Cheers,” said Fred, handing them out. “Cough up, everyone, I haven’t got enough gold for all of these…”

Harry watched numbly as the large chattering group took their beers from Fred and rummaged in

their robes to find coins. He could not imagine what all these people had turned up for until the horrible thought occurred to him that they might be expecting some kind of speech, at which he rounded on Hermione.

“What have you been telling people?” he said in a low voice. “What are they expecting?”

“I’ve told you, they just want to hear what you’ve got to say,” said Hermione soothingly; but Harry continued to look at her so furiously that she added quickly, “you don’t have to do anything yet, I’ll speak to them first.”

“Hi, Harry,” said Neville, beaming and taking a seat opposite him.

Harry tried to smile back, but did not speak; his mouth was exceptionally dry. Cho had just smiled at him and sat down on Ron’s right. Her friend, who had curly reddish-blonde hair, did not smile, but gave Harry a thoroughly mistrustful look which plainly told him that, given her way, she would not be here at all.

In twos and threes the new arrivals settled around Harry, Ron and Hermione, some looking rather excited, others curious, Luna Lovegood gazing dreamily into space. When everybody had pulled up a chair, the chatter died out. Every eye was upon Harry.

“Er,” said Hermione, her voice slightly higher than usual out of nerves. “Well - er - hi.”

The group focused its attention on her instead, though eyes continued to dart back regularly to Harry.

“Well… erm… well, you know why you’re here. Erm… well, Harry here had the idea - I mean” (Harry had thrown her a sharp look) “I had the idea - that it might be good if people who wanted to study Defense Against the Dark Arts - and I mean, really study it, you know, not the rubbish that Umbridge is doing with us -” (Hermione’s voice became suddenly much stronger and more confident) “- because nobody could call that Defense Against the Dark Arts -” (“Hear, hear,” said Anthony Goldstein, and Hermione looked heartened) “- Well, I thought it would be good if we, well, took matters into our own hands.”

She paused, looked sideways at Harry, and went on, “And by that I mean learning how to defend ourselves properly, not just in theory but doing the real spells -”

“You want to pass your Defense Against the Dark Arts OWL too, though, I bet?” said Michael Corner, who was watching her closely.

“Of course I do,” said Hermione at once. “But more than that, I want to be properly trained in defense because… because…” she took a great breath and finished, “because Lord Voldemort is back.”

The reaction was immediate and predictable. Cho’s friend shrieked and slopped Butterbeer down herself; Terry Boot gave a kind of involuntary twitch; Padma Patil shuddered, and Neville gave

an odd yelp that he managed to turn into a cough. All of them, however, looked fixedly, even eagerly, at Harry.

“Well… that’s the plan, anyway” said Hermione. “If you want to join us, we need to decide how we’re going to -”

“Where’s the proof You-Know-Who’s back?” said the blond Hufflepuff player in a rather aggressive voice.

“Well, Dumbledore believes it -” Hermione began.

“You mean, Dumbledore believes him,” said the blond boy, nodding at Harry.

“Who are you?” said Ron, rather rudely.

“Zacharias Smith,” said the boy, “and I think we’ve got the right to know exactly what makes him say You-Know-Who’s back.”

“Look,” said Hermione, intervening swiftly, “that’s really not what this meeting was supposed to be about -”

“It’s okay, Hermione,” said Harry.

It had just dawned on him why there were so many people there. He thought Hermione should have seen this coming. Some of these people - maybe even most of them - had turned up in the hopes of hearing Harry’s story firsthand.

“What makes me say You-Know-Who’s back?” he repeated, looking Zacharias straight in the face. “I saw him. But Dumbledore told the whole school what happened last year, and if you didn’t believe him, you won’t believe me, and I’m not wasting an afternoon trying to convince anyone.”

The whole group seemed to have held its breath while Harry spoke. Harry had the impression that even the barman was listening. He was wiping the same glass with the filthy rag, making it steadily dirtier.

Zacharias said dismissively, “All Dumbledore told us last year was that Cedric Diggory got killed by You-Know-Who and that you brought Diggory’s body back to Hogwarts. He didn’t give us details, he didn’t tell us exactly how Diggory got murdered, I think we’d all like to know -”

“If you’ve come to hear exactly what it looks like when Voldemort murders someone I can’t help you,” Harry said. His temper, always so close to the surface these days, was rising again. He did not take his eyes from Zacharias Smith’s aggressive face, and was determined not to look at Cho. “I don’t want to talk about Cedric Diggory, all right? So if that’s what you’re here for, you might as well clear out.”

He cast an angry look in Hermione's direction. This was, he felt, all her fault; she had decided to display him like some sort of freak and of course they had all turned up to see just how wild his story was. But none of them left their seats, not even Zacharias Smith, though he continued to gaze intently at Harry.

"So," said Hermione, her voice very high-pitched again. "So… like I was saying… if you want to learn some defense, then we need to work out how we're going to do it, how often we're going to meet and where we're going to -"

"Is it true," interrupted the girl with the long plait down her back, looking at Harry, "that you can produce a Patronus?"

There was a murmur of interest around the group at this.

"Yeah," said Harry slightly defensively.

"A corporeal Patronus?"

The phrase stirred something in Harry's memory.

"Er - you don't know Madam Bones, do you?" he asked.

The girl smiled.

"She's my auntie," she said. "I'm Susan Bones. She told me about your hearing. So - is it really true? You make a stag Patronus?"

"Yes," said Harry.

"Blimey, Harry!" said Lee, looking deeply impressed. "I never knew that!"

"Mum told Ron not to spread it around," said Fred, grinning at Harry. "She said you got enough attention as it was."

"She's not wrong," mumbled Harry, and a couple of people laughed.

The veiled witch sitting alone shifted very slightly in her seat.

"And did you kill a Basilisk with that sword in Dumbledore's office?" demanded Terry Boot. "That's what one of the portraits on the wall told me when I was in there last year…"

"Er - yeah, I did, yeah," said Harry.

Justin Finch-Fletchley whistled; the Creevey brothers exchanged awestruck looks and Lavender Brown said "Wow!" softly. Harry was feeling slightly hot around the collar now; he was determinedly looking anywhere but at Cho.

“And in our first year,” said Neville to the group at large, “he saved that Sorcerous Stone -”
“Sorcerer’s,” hissed Hermione.

“Yes, that - from You-Know-Who,” finished Neville.

Hannah Abbott’s eyes were as round as Galleons.

“And that’s not to mention,” said Cho (Harry’s eyes snapped across to her; she was looking at him, smiling; his stomach did another somersault) “all the tasks he had to get through in the Triwizard Tournament last year - getting past dragons and merpeople and Acromantula and things…”

There was a murmur of impressed agreement around the table. Harry’s insides were squirming. He was trying to arrange his face so that he did not look too pleased with himself. The fact that Cho had just praised him made it much, much harder for him to say the thing he had sworn to himself he would tell them.

“Look,” he said, and everyone fell silent at once, “ I… I don’t want to sound like I’m trying to be modest or anything, but… I had a lot of help with all that stuff…”

“Not with the dragon, you didn’t,” said Michael Corner at once. “That was a seriously cool bit of flying…”

“Yeah, well -” said Harry, feeling it would be churlish to disagree.

“And nobody helped you get rid of those Dementors this summer,” said Susan Bones.

“No,” said Harry, “no, okay, I know I did bits of it without help, but the point I’m trying to make is -”

“Are you trying to weasel out of showing us any of this stuff?” said Zacharias Smith.

“Here’s an idea,” said Ron loudly, before Harry could speak, “why don’t you shut your mouth?”

Perhaps the word ‘weasel’ had affected Ron particularly strongly. In any case, he was now looking at Zacharias as though he would like nothing better than to thump him. Zacharias flushed.

“Well, we’ve all turned up to learn from him and now he’s telling us he can’t really do any of it,” he said.

“That’s not what he said,” snarled Fred.

“Would you like us to clean out your ears for you?” enquired George, pulling a long and lethal looking metal instrument from inside one of the Zonko’s bags.

“Or any part of your body, really, we’re not fussy where we stick this,” said Fred.

“Yes, well,” said Hermione hastily, “moving on… the point is, are we agreed we want to take lessons from Harry?”

There was a murmur of general agreement. Zacharias folded his arms and said nothing, though perhaps this was because he was too busy keeping an eye on the instrument in Fred’s hand.

“Right,” said Hermione, looking relieved that something had at last been settled. “Well, then, the next question is how often we do it. I really don’t think there’s any point in meeting less than once a week -”

“Hang on,” said Angelina, “we need to make sure this doesn’t clash with our Quidditch practice.”

“No,” said Cho, “nor with ours.”

“Nor ours,” added Zacharias Smith.

“I’m sure we can find a night that suits everyone,” aid Hermione, slightly impatiently, “but you know, this is rather important, we’re talking about learning to defend ourselves against V-Voldemort’s Death Eaters -”

“Well said!” barked Ernie Macmillan, who Harry had been expecting to speak long before this. “Personally I think this is really important, possibly more important than anything else we’ll do this year, even with our OWLs coming up!”

He looked around impressively, as though waiting for people to cry “Surely not!” When nobody spoke, he went on, “I, personally am at a loss to see why the Ministry has foisted such a useless teacher on us at this critical period. Obviously, they are in denial about the return of You-Know-Who, but to give us a teacher who is trying to actively prevent us from using defensive spells -”

“We think the reason Umbridge doesn’t want us trained in Defense Against the Dark Arts,” said Hermione, ”is that she’s got some… some mad idea that Dumbledore could use the students in the school as a kind of private army. She thinks he’d mobilize us against the Ministry.”

Nearly everybody looked stunned at this news; everybody except Luna Lovegood, who piped up,

“Well, that makes sense. After all, Cornelius Fudge has got his own private army.”

“What?” said Harry, completely thrown by this unexpected piece of information.

“Yes, he’s got an army of Heliopaths,” said Luna so lemnly.

“No, he hasn’t,” snapped Hermione.

“Yes, he has,” said Luna.

“What are Heliopaths?” asked Neville, looking blank.

“They’re spirits of fire,” said Luna, her protuberant eyes widening so that she looked madder than ever, “great tall flaming creatures that gallop across the ground burning everything in front of -”

“They don’t exist, Neville,” said Hermione tartly.

“Oh, yes, they do!” said Luna angrily.

“I’m sorry, but where’s the proof of that?” snapped Hermione.

“There are plenty of eye-witness accounts. Just because you’re so narrow-minded you need to have everything shoved under your nose before you -”

“Hem, hem,” said Ginny, in such a good imitation of Professor Umbridge that several people looked around in alarm and then laughed. “Weren’t we trying to decide how often we’re going to meet and have defense lessons?”

“Yes,” said Hermione at once, “yes, we were, you’re right, Ginny.”

“Well, once a week sounds cool,” said Lee Jordan.

“As long as -” began Angelina.

“Yes, yes, we know about the Quidditch,” said Hermione in a tense voice. “Well, the other thing to decide is where we’re going to meet…”

This was rather more difficult; the whole group fell silent.

“Library?” suggested Katie Bell after a few moments.

“I can’t see Madam Pince being too chuffed with us doing jinxes in the library,” said Harry.

“Maybe an unused classroom?” said Dean.

“Yeah,” said Ron, “McGonagall might let us have hers, she did when Harry was practicing for the Triwizard.”

But Harry was pretty certain that McGonagall would not be so accommodating this time. For all that Hermione had said about study and homework groups being allowed, he had the distinct feeling that this one might be considered a lot more rebellious.

“Right, well, we’ll try to find somewhere,” said Hermione. “We’ll send a message round to

everybody when we’ve got a time and a place for the first meeting.”

She rummaged in her bag and produced parchment and a quill, then hesitated, rather as though she was steeling herself to say something.

“I - I think everybody should write their name down, just so we know who was here. But I also think,” she took a deep breath, “that we all ought to agree not to shout about what we’re doing. So if you sign, you’re agreeing not to tell Umbridge or anybody else what we’re up to.”

Fred reached out for the parchment and cheerfully wrote his signature, but Harry noticed at once that several people looked less than happy at the prospect of putting their names on the list.

“Er…” said Zacharias slowly, not taking the parchment that George was trying to pass to him, “well… I’m sure Ernie will tell me when the meeting is.”

But Ernie was looking rather hesitant about signing, too. Hermione raised her eyebrows at him.

“I - well, we are prefects,” Ernie burst out. “And if this list was found… well, I mean to say… you said yourself, if Umbridge finds out -”

“You just said this group was the most important thing you’d do this year,” Harry reminded him.

“I - yes,” said Ernie, “yes, I do believe that, it ‘ s just -”

“Ernie, do you really think I’d leave that list lying around?” said Hermione testily.

“No. No, of course not,” said Ernie, looking slightly less anxious. “I - yes, of course I’ll sign.”

Nobody raised objections after Ernie, though Harry saw Cho’s friend give her a rather reproachful look before adding her own name. When the last person - Zacharias - had signed, Hermione took the parchment back and slipped it carefully into her bag. There was an odd feeling in the group now. It was as though they had just signed some kind of contract.

“Well, time’s ticking on,” said Fred briskly, getting to his feet. “George, Lee and I have got items of a sensitive nature to purchase, we’ll be seeing you all later.”

In twos and threes the rest of the group took their leave, too.

Cho made rather a business of fastening the catch on her bag before leaving, her long dark curtain of hair swinging forwards to hide her face, but her friend stood beside her, arms folded, clicking her tongue, so that Cho had little choice but to leave with her. As her friend ushered her through the door, Cho looked back and waved at Harry.

“Well, I think that went quite well,” said Hermione happily, as she, Harry and Ron walked out of the Hog’s Head into the bright sunlight a few moments later. Harry and Ron were clutching their bottles of Butterbeer.

“That Zacharias bloke’s a wart,” said Ron, who was glowering after the figure of Smith, just discernible in the distance.

“I don’t like him much, either,” admitted Hermione, “but he overheard me talking to Ernie and Hannah at the Hufflepuff table and he seemed really interested in coming, so what could I say? But the more people the better really - I mean, Michael Corner and his friends wouldn’t have come if he hadn’t been going out with Ginny -”

Ron, who had been draining the last few drops from his Butterbeer bottle, gagged and sprayed Butterbeer down his front.

“He’s WHAT?” spluttered Ron, outraged, his ears now resembling curls of raw beef. “She’s going out with - my sister’s going - what d’you mean, Michael Corner?”

“Well, that’s why he and his friends came, I think - well, they’re obviously interested in learning defense, but if Ginny hadn’t told Michael what was going on -”

“When did this - when did she -?”

“They met at the Yule Ball and got together at the end of last year,” said Hermione composedly. They had turned into the High Street and she paused outside Scrivenshaft’s Quill Shop, where there was a handsome display of pheasant feather quills in the window. “Hmm… I could do with a new quill.”

She turned into the shop. Harry and Ron followed her.

“Which one was Michael Corner?” Ron demanded furiously.

“The dark one,” said Hermione.

“I didn’t like him,” said Ron at once.

“Big surprise,” said Hermione under her breath.

“But,” said Ron, following Hermione along a row of quills in copper pots, “I thought Ginny fancied Harry!”

Hermione looked at him rather pityingly and shook her head.

“Ginny used to fancy Harry, but she gave up on him months ago. Not that she doesn’t like you, of course,” she added kindly to Harry while she examined a long black and gold quill.

Harry, whose head was still full of Cho’s parting wave, did not find this subject quite as interesting as Ron, who was positively quivering with indignation, but it did bring something home to him that until now he had not really registered.

“So that’s why she talks now?” he asked Hermione. “She never used to talk in front of me.”

“Exactly,” said Hermione. “Yes, I think I’ll have this one…”

She went up to the counter and handed over fifteen Sickles and two Knuts, with Ron still breathing down her neck.

“Ron,” she said severely as she turned and trod on his feet, “this is exactly why Ginny hasn’t told you she’s seeing Michael, she knew you’d take it badly. So don’t harp on about it, for heaven’s sake.”

“What d’you mean? Who’s taking anything badly? I’m not going to harp on about anything…” Ron continued to chunter under his breath all the way down the street.

Hermione rolled her eyes at Harry and then said in an undertone, while Ron was still muttering imprecations about Michael Corner, “And talking about Michael and Ginny… what about Cho and you?”

“What d’you mean?” said Harry quickly.

It was as though boiling water was rising rapidly inside him; a burning sensation that was causing his face to smart in the cold -had he been that obvious?

“Well,” said Hermione, smiling slightly, “she just couldn’t keep her eyes off you, could she?”

Harry had never before appreciated just how beautiful the village of Hogsmeade was.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Educational Decree Number Twenty-Four

Harry felt happier for the rest of the weekend than he had done all term. He and Ron spent much of Sunday catching up with all their homework again, and although this could hardly be called fun, the last burst of autumn sunshine persisted, so rather than sitting hunched over tables in the common room they took their work outside and lounged in the shade of a large beech tree on the edge of the lake. Hermione, who of course was up to date with all her work, brought more wool outside with her and bewitched her knitting needles so that they flashed and clicked in midair beside her, producing more hats and scarves.

Knowing they were doing something to resist Umbridge and the Ministry, and that he was a key part of the rebellion, gave Harry a feeling of immense satisfaction. He kept reliving Saturdays meeting in his mind: all those people, coming to him to learn Defense Against the Dark Arts… and the looks on their faces as they had heard some of the things he had done… and Cho praising his performance in the Triwizard Tournament – The knowledge that all those people did not think him a lying weirdo, but someone to be admired, buoyed him up so much that he was still cheerful on Monday morning, despite the imminent prospect of all his least favorite classes.

He and Ron headed downstairs from their dormitory, discussing Angelinas idea that they were to work on a new move called the Sloth Grip Roll during that night's Quidditch practice, and not until they were halfway across the sunlit common room did they notice the addition to the room that had already attracted the attention of a small group of people.

A large sign had been affixed to the Gryffindor noticeboard; so large it covered everything else on it - the lists of secondhand spellbooks for sale, the regular reminders of school rules from Argus Filch, the Quidditch team training timetable, the offers to barter certain Chocolate Frog Cards for others, the Weasleys' latest advertisement for testers, the dates of the Hogsmeade weekends and the lost and found notices. The new sign was printed in large black letters and there was a highly official-looking seal at the bottom beside a neat and curly signature.

BY ORDER OF THE HIGH INQUISITOR OF HOGWARTS

All student organizations, societies, teams, groups and clubs are henceforth disbanded.

An organization, society, team, group or club is hereby defined as a regular meeting of three or more students.

Permission to re-form may be sought from the High Inquisitor (Professor Umbridge).

No student organization, society, team, group or club may exist without the knowledge and approval of the High Inquisitor.

Any student found to have formed, or to belong to, an organization, society, team, group or club

that has not been approved by the High Inquisitor will be expelled.

The above is in accordance with Educational Decree Number Twenty-four.

Signed: Dolores Jane Umbridge, High Inquisitor

Harry and Ron read the notice over the heads of some anxious-looking second-years.

“Does this mean they’re going to shut down the Gobstones Club?” one of them asked his friend.

“I reckon you’ll be okay with Gobstones,” Ron said darkly, making the second-year jump. “I don’t think we’re going to be as lucky, though, do you?” he asked Harry as the second-years hurried away.

Harry was reading the notice through again. The happiness that had filled him since Saturday was gone. His insides were pulsing with rage.

“This isn’t a coincidence,” he said, his hands forming fists. “She knows.”

“She can’t,” said Ron at once.

“There were people listening in that pub. And let’s face it, we don’t know how many of the people who turned up we can trust… any of them could have run off and told Umbridge…”

And he had thought they believed him, thought they even admired him…

“Zacharias Smith!” said Ron at once, punching a fist into his hand. “Or - I thought that Michael Corner had a really shifty look, too -”

“I wonder if Hermione’s seen this yet?” Harry said, looking round at the door to the girls’ dormitories.

“Let’s go and tell her,” said Ron. He bounded forwards, pulled open the door and set off up the spiral staircase.

He was on the sixth stair when there was a loud, wailing, klaxon-like sound and the steps melted together to make a long, smooth stone slid. There was a brief moment when Ron tried to keep running, arms working madly like windmills, then he toppled over backwards and shot down the newly created slide, coming to rest on his back at Harry’s feet.

“Er - I don’t think we’re allowed in the girls’ dormitories,” said Harry, pulling Ron to his feet and trying not to laugh.

Two fourth-year girls came zooming gleefully down the stone slide.

“Oooh, who tried to get upstairs?” they giggled happily, leaping to their feet and ogling Harry

and Ron.

“Me,” said Ron, who was still rather disheveled. “ I didn’t realize that would happen. It’s not fair!” he added to Harry, as the girls headed off for the portrait hole, still giggling madly. “Hermione’s allowed in our dormitory, how come we’re not allowed -?”

“Well, it’s an old-fashioned rule,” said Hermione, who had just slid neatly on to a rug in front of them and was now getting to her feet, “but it says in Hogwarts A History, that the founders thought boys were less trustworthy than girls. Anyway, why were you trying to get in there?”

“To see you - look at this!” said Ron, dragging her over to the noticeboard.

Hermione’s eyes slid rapidly down the notice. Her expression became stony.

“Someone must have blabbed to her!” Ron said angrily.

“They can’t have done,” said Hermione in a low voice.

“You’re so naive,” said Ron, “you think just because you’re all honorable and trustworthy -”

“No, they can’t have done, because I put a jinx on that piece of parchment we all signed,” said Hermione grimly. “Believe me, if anyone’s run off and told Umbridge, we’ll know exactly who they are and they will really regret it.”

“What’ll happen to them?” said Ron eagerly.

“Well, put it this way” said Hermione, “it’ll make Eloise Midgeon’s acne look like a couple of cute freckles. Come on, let’s get down to breakfast and see what the others think… I wonder whether this has been put up in all the houses?”

It was immediately apparent on entering the Great Hall that Umbridge’s sign had not only appeared in Gryffindor Tower. There was a peculiar intensity about the chatter and an extra measure of movement in the Hall as people scurried up and down their tables conferring on what they had read. Harry, Ron and Hermione had barely taken their seats when Neville, Dean, Fred, George and Ginny descended upon them.

“Did you see it?”

“D’you reckon she knows?”

“What are we going to do?”

They were all looking at Harry. He glanced around to make sure there were no teachers near them.

“We’re going to do it anyway of course,” he said quietly.

“Knew you’d say that”‘ said George, beaming and thumping Harry on the arm.

“The prefects as well?” said Fred, looking quizzically at Ron and Hermione.

“Of course,” said Hermione coolly.

“Here come Ernie and Hannah Abbott,” said Ron, looking over his shoulder. “And those Ravenclaw blokes and Smith… and no one looks very spotty.”

Hermione looked alarmed.

“Nevermind spots, the idiots can’t come over here now, it’ll look really suspicious - sit down!” she mouthed to Ernie and Hannah, gesturing frantically to them to rejoin the Hufflepuff table.

“Later! We’ll - talk - to - you - later!”

“I’ll tell Michael,” said Ginny impatiently, swinging herself off her bench, “the fool, honestly…”

She hurried off towards the Ravenclaw table; Harry watched her go. Cho was sitting not far away, talking to the curly-haired friend she had brought along to the Hog’s Head. Would Umbridge’s notice scare her off meeting them again?

But the full repercussions of the sign were not felt until they were leaving the Great Hall for History of Magic.

“Harry! Ron!”

It was Angelina and she was hurrying towards them looking perfectly desperate.

“It’s okay,” said Harry quietly, when she was near enough to hear him. “We’re still going to -”

“You realize she’s including Quidditch in this?” Angelina said over him. “We have to go and ask permission to re-form the Gryffindor team!”

“What?” said Harry.

“No way,” said Ron, appalled.

“You read the sign, it mentions teams too! So listen, Harry… I am saying this for the last time… please, please don’t lose your temper with Umbridge again or she might not let us play any more!”

“Okay,okay,” said Harry, for Angelina looked as though she was on the verge of tears. “Don’t worry, I’ll behave myself…”

“Bet Umbridge is in History of Magic,” said Ron grimly, as they set off for Binns’s lesson. “She

hasn't inspected Binns yet… bet you anything she's there…"

But he was wrong; the only teacher present when they entered was Professor Binns, floating an inch or so above his chair as usual and preparing to continue his monotonous drone on giant wars. Harry did not even attempt to follow what he was saying today; he doodled idly on his parchment ignoring Hermione's frequent glares and nudges, until a particularly painful poke in the ribs made him look up angrily.

"What?"

She pointed at the window. Harry looked round. Hedwig was perched on the narrow window ledge, gazing through the thick glass at him, a letter tied to her leg. Harry could not understand it; they had just had breakfast, why on earth hadn't she delivered the letter then, as usual? Many of his classmates were pointing out Hedwig to each other, too.

"Oh, I've always loved that owl, she's so beautiful," Harry heard Lavender sigh to Parvati.

He glanced round at Professor Binns who continued to read his notes, serenely unaware that the class's attention was even less focused upon him than usual. Harry slipped quietly off his chair, crouched down and hurried along the row to the window, where he slid the catch and opened it very slowly.

He had expected Hedwig to hold out her leg so that he could remove the letter and then fly off to the Owlery but the moment the window was open wide enough she hopped inside, hooting dolefully. He closed the window with an anxious glance at Professor Binns, crouched low again and sped back to his seat with Hedwig on his shoulder. He regained his seat, transferred Hedwig to his lap and made to remove the letter tied to her leg.

Only then did he realize that Hedwig's feathers were oddly ruffled; some were bent the wrong way, and she was holding one of her wings at an odd angle.

"She's hurt!" Harry whispered, bending his head low over her. Hermione and Ron leaned in closer; Hermione even put down her quill. "Look - there's something wrong with her wing -"

Hedwig was quivering; when Harry made to touch the wing she gave a little jump, all her feathers on end as though she was inflating herself, and gazed at him reproachfully.

"Professor Binns," said Harry loudly, and everyone in the class turned to look at him. "I'm not feeling well."

Professor Binns raised his eyes from his notes, looking amazed, as always, to find the room in front of him full of people.

"Not feeling well?" he repeated hazily.

"Not at all well," said Harry firmly getting to his feet with Hedwig concealed behind his back. "I

think I need to go to the hospital wing."

"Yes," said Professor Binns, clearly very much wrong-footed. "Yes… yes, hospital wing… well, off you go, then, Perkins…"

Once outside the room, Harry returned Hedwig to his shoulder and hurried off up the corridor, pausing to think only when he was out of sight of Binns's door. His first choice of somebody to cure Hedwig would have been Hagrid, of course, but as he had no idea where Hagrid was his only remaining option was to find Professor Grubbly-Plank and hope she would help.

He peered out of a window at the blustery, overcast grounds. There was no sign of her anywhere near Hagrid's cabin; if she was not teaching, she was probably in the staff room. He set off downstairs, Hedwig hooting feebly as she swayed on his shoulder.

Two stone gargoyles flanked the staff-room door. As Harry approached, one of them croaked, "You should be in class, Sonny Jim."

"This is urgent," said Harry curtly.

"Ooooh, urgent, is it?" said the other gargoyle in a high-pitched voice. "Well, that's put us in our place, hasn't it?"

Harry knocked. He heard footsteps, then the door opened and he found himself face to face with Professor McGonagall.

"You haven't been given another detention!" she said at once, her square spectacles flashing alarmingly.

"No, Professor!" said Harry hastily.

"Well then, why are you out of class?"

"It's urgent, apparently," said the second gargoyle snidely.

"I'm looking for Professor Grubbly-Plank," Harry explained. "It's my owl, she's injured."

"Injured owl, did you say?"

Professor Grubbly-Plank appeared at Professor McGonagall's shoulder, smoking a pipe and holding a copy of the Daily Prophet.

"Yes," said Harry, lifting Hedwig carefully off his shoulder, "she turned up after the other post owls and her wing's all funny, look -"

Professor Grubbly-Plank stuck her pipe firmly between her teeth and took Hedwig from Harry while Professor McGonagall watched.

“Hmm,” said Professor Grubbly-Plank, her pipe waggling slightly as she talked. “Looks like something’s attacked her. Can’t think what would have done it, though. Thestrals will sometimes go for birds, of course, but Hagrid’s got the Hogwarts Thestrals well-trained not to touch owls.”

Harry neither knew nor cared what Thestrals were; he just wanted to know that Hedwig was going to be all right. Professor McGonagall, however, looked sharply at Harry and said, “Do you know how far this owl’s traveled, Potter?”

“Er,” said Harry. “From London, I think.”

He met her eyes briefly and knew, by the way her eyebrows had joined in the middle, that she understood ‘London’ to mean ‘number twelve, Grimmauld Place’.

Professor Grubbly-Plank pulled a monocle out of the inside of her robes and screwed it into her eye, to examine Hedwig’s wing closely. “I should be able to sort this out if you leave her with me, Potter,” she said, “she shouldn’t be flying long distances for a few days, in any case.”

“Er - right - thanks”‘ said Harry, just as the bell rang for break.

“No problem,” said Professor Grubbly-Plank gruffly, turning back into the staff room.

“Just a moment, Wilhelmina!” said Professor McGonagall. “Potters letter!”

“Oh yeah!” said Harry, who had momentarily forgotten the scroll tied to Hedwig’s leg. Professor Grubbly-Plank handed it over and then disappeared into the staff room carrying Hedwig, who was staring at Harry as though unable to believe he would give her away like this. Feeling slightly guilty, he turned to go, but Professor McGonagall called him back.

“Potter!”

“Yes, Professor?”

She glanced up and down the corridor; there were students coming from both directions.

“Bear in mind,” she said quickly and quietly, her eyes on the scroll in his hand, “that channels of communication in and out of Hogwarts may be being watched, won’t you?”

“I -” said Harry, but the flood of students rolling along the corridor was almost upon him.

Professor McGonagall gave him a curt nod and retreated into the staff room, leaving Harry to be swept out into the courtyard with the crowd. He spotted Ron and Hermione already standing in a sheltered corner, their cloak collars turned up against the wind. Harry slit open the scroll as he hurried towards them and found five words in Sirius’s handwriting:

Today, same time, same place.

“Is Hedwig okay?” asked Hermione anxiously, the moment he was within earshot.

“Where did you take her?” asked Ron.

“To Grubbly-Plank,” said Harry. “And I met McGonagall… listen…”

And he told them what Professor McGonagall had said. To his surprise, neither of the others looked shocked. On the contrary, they exchanged significant looks.

“What?” said Harry, looking from Ron to Hermione and back again.

“Well, I was just saying to Ron… what if someone had tried to intercept Hedwig? I mean, she’s never been hurt on a flight before, has she?”

“Who’s the letter from, anyway?” asked Ron, taking the note from Harry.

“Snuffles”‘ said Harry quietly.

“‘Same time, same place?’ Does he mean the fire in the common room?”

“Obviously,” said Hermione, also reading the note. She looked uneasy. “I just hope nobody else has read this…”

“But it was still sealed and everything,” said Harry, trying to convince himself as much as her.

“And nobody would understand what it meant if they didn’t know where we’d spoken to him before, would they?”

“I don’t know,” said Hermione anxiously, hitching h er bag back over her shoulder as the bell rang again, “it wouldn’t be exactly difficult to re-seal the scroll by magic… and if anyone’s watching the Floo Network… but I don’t really see how we can warn him not to come without that being intercepted, too!”

They trudged down the stone steps to the dungeons for Potions, all three of them lost in thought, but as they reached the bottom of the steps they were recalled to themselves by the voice of Draco Malfoy who was standing just outside Snape’s classroom door, waving around an official looking piece of parchment and talking much louder than was necessary so that they could hear every word.

“Yeah, Umbridge gave the Slytherin Quidditch team permission to continue playing straightaway, I went to ask her first thing this morning. Well, it was pretty much automatic, I mean, she knows my father really well, he’s always popping in and out of the Ministry… it’ll be interesting to see whether Gryffindor are allowed to keep playing, won’t it?”

“Don’t rise,” Hermione whispered imploringly to Harry and Ron, who were both watching Malfoy, faces set and fists clenched. “It’s what he wants.”

“I mean,” said Malfoy, raising his voice a little more, his grey eyes glittering malevolently in Harry and Ron’s direction, “if it’s a question of influence with the Ministry, I don’t think they’ve got much chance… from what my father says, they’ve been looking for an excuse to sack Arthur Weasley for years… and as for Potter… my father says it’s a matter of time before the Ministry has him carted off to St. Mungo’s… apparently they’ve got a special ward for people whose brains have been addled by magic.”

Malfoy made a grotesque face, his mouth sagging open and his eyes rolling. Crabbe and Goyle gave their usual grunts of laughter; Pansy Parkinson shrieked with glee.

Something collided hard with Harry’s shoulder, knocking him sideways. A split second later he realized that Neville had just charged past him, heading straight for Malfoy.

“Neville, no!”

Harry leapt forward and seized the back of Neville’s robes; Neville struggled frantically, his fists flailing, trying desperately to get at Malfoy who looked, for a moment, extremely shocked.

“Help me!” Harry flung at Ron, managing to get an arm around Neville’s neck and dragging him backwards, away from the Slytherins. Crabbe and Goyle were flexing their arms as they stepped in front of Malfoy, ready for the fight. Ron seized Neville’s arms, and together he and Harry succeeded in dragging Neville back into the Gryffindor line. Neville’s face was scarlet; the pressure Harry was exerting on his throat rendered him quite incomprehensible, but odd words spluttered from his mouth.

“Not… funny… don’t… Mungo’s… show… him…”

The dungeon door opened. Snape appeared there. His black eyes swept up the Gryffindor line to the point where Harry and Ron were wrestling with Neville.

“Fighting, Potter, Weasley, Longbottom?” Snape said in his cold, sneering voice. “Ten points from Gryffindor. Release Longbottom, Potter, or it will be detention. Inside, all of you.”

Harry let go of Neville, who stood panting and glaring at him.

“I had to stop you,” Harry gasped, picking up his bag. “Crabbe and Goyle would’ve torn you apart.”

Neville said nothing; he merely snatched up his own bag and stalked off into the dungeon.

“What in the name of Merlin,” said Ron slowly, as they followed Neville, “was that about?”

Harry did not answer. He knew exactly why the subject of people who were in St. Mungo’s because of magical damage to their brains was highly distressing to Neville, but he had sworn to Dumbledore that he would not tell anyone Neville’s secret. Even Neville did not know Harry knew.

Harry, Ron and Hermione took their usual seats at the back of the class, pulled out parchment, quills and their copies of One Thousand Magical Herb s and Fungi. The class around them was whispering about what Neville had just done, but when Snape closed the dungeon door with an echoing bang, everybody immediately fell silent.

“You will notice,” said Snape, in his low, sneering voice, “that we have a guest with us today.”

He gestured towards the dim corner of the dungeon and Harry saw Professor Umbridge sitting there, clipboard on her knee. He glanced sideways at Ron and Hermione, his eyebrows raised. Snape and Umbridge, the two teachers he hated most. It was hard to decide which one he wanted to triumph over the other.

“We are continuing with our Strengthening Solution today. You will find your mixtures as you left them last lesson; if correctly made they should have matured well over the weekend - instructions -” he waved his wand again “- on the board. Carry on.”

Professor Umbridge spent the first half hour of the lesson making notes in her corner. Harry was very interested in hearing her question Snape; so interested, that he was becoming careless with his potion again.

“Salamander blood, Harry!” Hermione moaned, grabbing his wrist to prevent him adding the wrong ingredient for the third time, “not pomegranate juice!”

“Right,” said Harry vaguely, putting down the bottle and continuing to watch the corner. Umbridge had just got to her feet. “Ha,” he said softly, as she strode between two lines of desks towards Snape, who was bending over Dean Thomas’s cauldron.

“Well, the class seem fairly advanced for their level,” she said briskly to Snape’s back. “Though I would question whether it is advisable to teach them a potion like the Strengthening Solution. I think the Ministry would prefer it if that was removed from the syllabus.”

Snape straightened up slowly and turned to look at her.

“Now… how long have you been teaching at Hogwarts?” she asked, her quill poised over her clipboard.

“Fourteen years,” Snape replied. His expression was unfathomable. Harry, watching him closely, added a few drops to his potion; it hissed menacingly and turned from turquoise to orange.

“You applied first for the Defense Against the Dark Arts post, I believe?” Professor Umbridge asked Snape.

“Yes,” said Snape quietly.

“But you were unsuccessful?”

Snape’s lip curled.

“Obviously”

Professor Umbridge scribbled on her clipboard.

“And you have applied regularly for the Defense Against the Dark Arts post since you first joined the school, I believe?”

“Yes,” said Snape quietly, barely moving his lips. He looked very angry.

“Do you have any idea why Dumbledore has consistently refused to appoint you?” asked Umbridge.

“I suggest you ask him,” said Snape jerkily.

“Oh, I shall,” said Professor Umbridge, with a sweet smile.

“I suppose this is relevant?” Snape asked, his black eyes narrowed.

“Oh yes,” said Professor Umbridge, “yes, the Ministry wants a thorough understanding of teachers - er - backgrounds.”

She turned away, walked over to Pansy Parkinson and began questioning her about the lessons. Snape looked round at Harry and their eyes met for a second. Harry hastily dropped his gaze to his potion, which was now congealing foully and giving off a strong smell of burned rubber.

“No marks again, then, Potter” said Snape maliciously, emptying Harry’s cauldron with a wave of his wand. “You will write me an essay on the correct composition of this potion, indicating how and why you went wrong, to be handed in next lesson, do you understand?”

“Yes,” said Harry furiously. Snape had already given them homework and he had Quidditch practice this evening; this would mean another couple of sleepless nights. It did not seem possible that he had awoken that morning feeling very happy. All he felt now was a fervent desire for this day to end.

“Maybe I’ll skive off Divination,” he said glumly, as they stood in the courtyard after lunch, the wind whipping at the hems of robes and brims of hats. “I’ll pretend to be ill and do Snape’s essay instead, then I won’t have to stay up half the night.”

“You can’t skive off Divination,” said Hermione severely.

“Hark who’s talking, you walked out of Divination, you hate Trelawney!” said Ron indignantly.

“I don’t hate her,” said Hermione loftily. “I just think she’s an absolutely appalling teacher and a real old fraud. But Harrys already missed History of Magic and I don’t think he ought to miss

anything else today!"

There was too much truth in this to ignore, so half an hour later Harry took his seat in the hot, overperfumed atmosphere of the Divination classroom, feeling angry at everybody. Professor Trelawney was yet again handing out copies of The Dream Oracle. Harry thought he'd surely be much better employed doing Snape's punishment essay than sitting here trying to find meaning in a lot of made-up dreams.

It seemed, however, that he was not the only person in Divination who was in a temper. Professor Trelawney slammed a copy of the Oracle down on the table between Harry and Ron and swept away, her lips pursed; she threw the next copy of the Oracle at Seamus and Dean, narrowly avoiding Seamus's head, and thrust the final one into Neville's chest with such force that he slipped off his pouffe.

"Well, carry on!" said Professor Trelawney loudly, her voice high-pitched and somewhat hysterical, "you know what to do! Or am I such a sub-standard teacher that you have never learned how to open a book?"

The class stared perplexedly at her, then at each other. Harry, however, thought he knew what was the matter. As Professor Trelawney flounced back to the high-backed teacher's chair, her magnified eyes full of angry tears, he leaned his head closer to Ron's and muttered, "I think she's got the results of her inspection back."

"Professor?" said Parvati Patil in a hushed voice (she and Lavender had always rather admired Professor Trelawney). "Professor, is there anything - er - wrong?"

"Wrong!" cried Professor Trelawney in a voice throbbing with emotion. "Certainly not! I have been insulted, certainly… insinuations have been made against me… unfounded accusations leveled… but no, there is nothing wrong, certainly not!"

She took a great shuddering breath and looked away from Parvati, angry tears spilling from under her glasses.

"I say nothing," she choked, "of sixteen years of devoted service… it has passed, apparently, unnoticed… but I shall not be insulted, no, I shall not!"

"But, Professor, who's insulting you?" asked Parvati timidly.

"The Establishment!" said Professor Trelawney, in a deep, dramatic, wavering voice. "Yes, those with eyes too clouded by the mundane to See as I See, to Know as I Know… of course, we Seers have always been feared, always persecuted… it is - alas -our fate."

She gulped, dabbed at her wet cheeks with the end of her shawl, then she pulled a small embroidered handkerchief from her sleeve, and blew her nose very hard with a sound like Peeves blowing a raspberry.

Ron sniggered. Lavender shot him a disgusted look.

“Professor,” said Parvati, “do you mean… is it something Professor Umbridge -?”

“Do not speak to me about that woman!” cried Professor Trelawney, leaping to her feet, her beads rattling and her spectacles flashing. “Kindly continue with your work!”

And she spent the rest of the lesson striding among them, tears still leaking from behind her glasses, muttering what sounded like threats under her breath.

“… may well choose to leave… the indignity of it… on probation… we shall see… how she dares…”

“You and Umbridge have got something in common,” Harry told Hermione quietly when they met again in Defense Against the Dark Arts. “She obviously reckons Trelawney’s an old fraud, too… looks like she’s put her on probation.”

Umbridge entered the room as he spoke, wearing her black velvet bow and an expression of great smugness.

“Good afternoon, class.”

“Good afternoon, Professor Umbridge,” they chanted dully.

“Wands away, please.”

But there was no answering flurry of movement this time; nobody had bothered to take out their wands.

“Please turn to page thirty-four of Defensive Magical Theory and read the third chapter, entitled ‘Case for Non-Offensive Responses to Magical Attack’. There will be -”

“- no need to talk,” Harry, Ron and Hermione said together, under their breaths.

“No Quidditch practice,” said Angelina in hollow tones when Harry, Ron and Hermione entered the common room after dinner that night.

“But I kept my temper!” said Harry, horrified. “I didn’t say anything to her, Angelina, I swear, I -”

“I know, I know,” said Angelina miserably. “She just said she needed a bit of time to consider.”

“Consider what?” said Ron angrily. “She’s given the Slytherins permission, why not us?”

But Harry could imagine how much Umbridge was enjoying holding the threat of no Gryffindor Quidditch team over their heads and could easily understand why she would not want to

relinquish that weapon over them too soon.

“Well,” said Hermione, “look on the bright side - at least now you’ll have time to do Snape’s essay!”

“That’s a bright side, is it?” snapped Harry, while Ron stared incredulously at Hermione. “No Quidditch practice, and extra Potions?”

Harry slumped down into a chair, dragged his Potions essay reluctantly from his bag and set to work. It was very hard to concentrate; even though he knew Sirius was not due in the fire until much later, he could not help glancing into the flames every few minutes just in case. There was also an incredible amount of noise in the room: Fred and George appeared finally to have perfected one type of Skiving Snackbox, which they were taking turns to demonstrate to a cheering and whooping crowd.

First, Fred would take a bite out of the orange end of a chew, at which he would vomit spectacularly into a bucket they had placed in front of them. Then he would force down the purple end of the chew, at which the vomiting would immediately cease. Lee Jordan, who was assisting the demonstration, was lazily Vanishing the vomit at regular intervals with the same Vanishing Spell Snape kept using on Harrys potions.

What with the regular sounds of retching, cheering and the sound of Fred and George taking advance orders from the crowd, Harry was finding it exceptionally difficult to focus on the correct method for Strengthening Solution. Hermione was not helping matters; the cheers and the sound of vomit hitting the bottom of Fred and George’s bucket were punctuated by her loud and disapproving sniffs, which Harry found, if anything, more distracting.

“Just go and stop them, then!” he said irritably, after crossing out the wrong weight of powdered griffin claw for the fourth time.

“I can’t, they’re not technically doing anything wrong,” said Hermione through gritted teeth. “They’re quite within their rights to eat the foul things themselves and I can’t find a rule that says the other idiots aren’t entitled to buy them, not unless they’re proven to be dangerous in some way and it doesn’t look as though they are.”

She, Harry and Ron watched George projectile-vomit into the bucket, gulp down the rest of the chew and straighten up, beaming with his arms wide to protracted applause.

“You know, I don’t get why Fred and George only got three OWLs each,” said Harry, watching as Fred, George and Lee collected gold from the eager crowd. “They really know their stuff.”

“Oh, they only know flashy stuff that’s of no real use to anyone,” said Hermione disparagingly.

“No real use?” said Ron in a strained voice. “Hermione, they’ve made about twenty-six Galleons already.”

It was a long while before the crowd around the Weasley twins dispersed, then Fred, Lee and George sat up counting their takings even longer, so it was well past midnight when Harry, Ron and Hermione finally had the common room to themselves. At long last, Fred had closed the doorway to the boys' dormitories behind him, rattling his box of Galleons ostentatiously so that Hermione scowled. Harry, who was making very little progress with his Potions essay, decided to give it up for the night. As he put his books away, Ron, who was dozing lightly in an armchair, gave a muffled grunt, awoke, and looked blearily into the fire.

"Sirius!" he said.

Harry whipped round. Siriuss untidy dark head was sitting in the fire again.

"Hi," he said, grinning.

"Hi," chorused Harry, Ron and Hermione, all three kneeling down on the hearthrug. Crookshanks purred loudly and approached the fire, trying, despite the heat, to put his face close to Sirius's.

"How're things?" said Sirius.

"Not that good," said Harry, as Hermione pulled Crookshanks back to stop him singeing his whiskers. "The Ministry's forced through another decree, which means we're not allowed to have Quidditch teams -"

"Or secret Defense Against the Dark Arts groups?" said Sirius.

There was a short pause.

"How did you know about that?" Harry demanded.

"You want to choose your meeting places more carefully," said Sirius, grinning still more broadly. "The Hog's Head, I ask you."

"Well, it was better than the Three Broomsticks!" said Hermione defensively. "That's always packed with people -"

"Which means you'd have been harder to overhear," said Sirius. "You've got a lot to learn, Hermione."

"Who overheard us?" Harry demanded.

"Mundungus, of course," said Sirius, and when they all looked puzzled he laughed. "He was the witch under the veil."

"That was Mundungus?" Harry said, stunned. "What was he doing in the Hog's Head?"

“What do you think he was doing?” said Sirius impatiently. “Keeping an eye on you, of course.”

“I’m still being followed?” asked Harry angrily.

“Yeah, you are,” said Sirius, “and just as well, isn’t it, if the first thing you’re going to do on your weekend off is organize an illegal defense group.”

But he looked neither angry nor worried. On the contrary, he was looking at Harry with distinct pride.

“Why was Dung hiding from us?” asked Ron, sounding disappointed. “We’d’ve liked to’ve seen him.”

“He was banned from the Hog’s Head twenty years ago,” said Sirius, “and that barman’s got a long memory. We lost Moody’s spare Invisibility Cloak when Sturgis was arrested, so Dung’s been dressing as a witch a lot lately… anyway… first of all, Ron - I’ve sworn to pass on a message from your mother.”

“Oh yeah?” said Ron, sounding apprehensive.

“She says on no account whatsoever are you to take part in an illegal secret Defense Against the Dark Arts group. She says you’ll be expelled for sure and your future will be ruined. She says there will be plenty of time to learn how to defend yourself later and that you are too young to be worrying about that right now. She also” (Sirius’s eyes turned to the other two) “advises Harry and Hermione not to proceed with the group, though she accepts that she has no authority over either of them and simply begs them to remember that she has their best interests at heart. She would have written all this to you, but if the owl had been intercepted you’d all have been in real trouble, and she can’t say it for herself because she’s on duty tonight.”

“On duty doing what?” said Ron quickly.

“Never you mind, just stuff for the Order,” said Sirius. “So it’s fallen to me to be the messenger and make sure you tell her I passed it all on, because I don’t think she trusts me to.”

There was another pause in which Crookshanks, mewing, attempted to paw Sirius’s head, and Ron fiddled with a hole in the hearthrug.

“So, you want me to say I’m not going to take part in the Defense group?” he muttered finally.

“Me? Certainly not!” said Sirius, looking surprised. “I think it’s an excellent idea!”

“You do?” said Harry, his heart lifting.

“Of course I do!” said Sirius. “D’you think your father and I would’ve lain down and taken orders from an old hag like Umbridge?”

“But - last term all you did was tell me to be careful and not take risks -”

“Last year, all the evidence was that someone inside Hogwarts was trying to kill you, Harry!” said Sirius impatiently. “This year, we know there’s someone outside Hogwarts who’d like to kill us all, so I think learning to defend yourselves properly is a very good idea!”

“And if we do get expelled?” Hermione asked, a quizzical look on her face.

“Hermione, this whole thing was your idea!” said Harry, staring at her.

“I know it was. I just wondered what Sirius thought,” she said, shrugging.

“Well, better expelled and able to defend yourselves than sitting safely in school without a clue,” said Sirius.

“Hear, hear,” said Harry and Ron enthusiastically.

“So,” said Sirius, “how are you organizing this group? Where are you meeting?”

“Well, that’s a bit of a problem now,” said Harry. “Dunno where we’re going to be able to go.”

“How about the Shrieking Shack?” suggested Sirius.

“Hey, that’s an idea!” said Ron excitedly, but Hermione made a skeptical noise and all three of them looked at her, Sirius’s head turning in the flames.

“Well, Sirius, it’s just that there were only four of you meeting in the Shrieking Shack when you were at school,” said Hermione, “and all of you could transform into animals and I suppose you could all have squeezed under a single Invisibility Cloak if you’d wanted to. But there are twenty-eight of us and none of us is an Animagus, so we wouldn’t need so much an Invisibility Cloak as an Invisibility Marquee -”

“Fair point,” said Sirius, looking slightly crestfallen. “Well, I’m sure you’ll come up with somewhere. There used to be a pretty roomy secret passageway behind that big mirror on the fourth floor, you might have enough space to practice jinxes in there.”

“Fred and George told me it’s blocked,” said Harry, shaking his head. “Caved in or something.”

“Oh…” said Sirius, frowning. “Well, I’ll have a think and get back to -”

He broke off. His face was suddenly tense, alarmed. He turned sideways, apparently looking into the solid brick wall of the fireplace.

“Sirius?” said Harry anxiously.

But he had vanished. Harry gaped at the flames for a moment, then turned to look at Ron and

Hermione.

“Why did he -?”

Hermione gave a horrified gasp and leapt to her feet, still staring at the fire.

A hand had appeared amongst the flames, groping as though to catch hold of something; a stubby, short-fingered hand covered in ugly old-fashioned rings.

The three of them ran for it. At the door of the boys’ dormitory Harry looked back. Umbridge’s hand was still making snatching movements amongst the flames, as though she knew exactly where Sirius’s hair had been moments before and was determined to seize it.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Dumbledore's Army

"Umbridge has been reading your mail, Harry. There's no other explanation."

"You think Umbridge attacked Hedwig?" he said, outraged.

"I'm almost certain of it," said Hermione grimly. "Watch your frog, it's escaping."

Harry pointed his wand at the bullfrog that had been hopping hopefully towards the other side of the table - "Accio!" - and it zoomed gloomily back into his hand.

Charms was always one of the best lessons in which to enjoy a private chat; there was generally so much movement and activity that the danger of being overheard was very slight. Today, with the room full of croaking bullfrogs and cawing ravens, and with a heavy downpour of rain clattering and pounding against the classroom windows, Harry, Ron and Hermione's whispered discussion about how Umbridge had nearly caught Sirius went quite unnoticed.

"I've been suspecting this ever since Filch accused you of ordering Dungbombs, because it seemed such a stupid lie," Hermione whispered. "I mean, once your letter had been read it would have been quite clear you weren't ordering them, so you wouldn't have been in trouble at all - it's a bit of a feeble joke, isn't it? But then I thought, what if somebody just wanted an excuse to read your mail? Well then, it would be a perfect way for Umbridge to manage it - tip off Filch, let him do the dirty work and confiscate the letter, then either find a way of stealing it from him or else demand to see it - I don't think Filch would object, when's he ever stuck up for a student's rights? Harry, you're squashing your frog."

Harry looked down; he was indeed squeezing his bullfrog so tightly its eyes were popping; he replaced it hastily upon the desk.

"It was a very, very close call last night," said Hermione. "I just wonder if Umbridge knows how close it was. Silencio."

The bullfrog on which she was practicing her Silencing Charm was struck dumb mid-croak and glared at her reproachfully.

"If she'd caught Snuffles -"

Harry finished the sentence for her.

"- He'd probably be back in Azkaban this morning." He waved his wand without really concentrating; his bullfrog swelled like a green balloon and emitted a high-pitched whistle.

"Silencio!" said Hermione hastily, pointing her wand at Harry's frog, which deflated silently

before them. “Well, he mustn’t do it again, that’s all. I just don’t know how we’re going to let him know. We can’t send him an owl.”

“I don’t reckon he’ll risk it again,” said Ron. “He’s not stupid, he knows she nearly got him. Silencio.”

The large and ugly raven in front of him let out a derisive caw.

“Silencio. SILENCIO!”

The raven cawed more loudly.

“Its the way you’re moving your wand,” said Hermione, watching Ron critically, “you don’t want to wave it, it’s more a sharp jab.”

“Ravens are harder than frogs,” said Ron through clenched teeth.

“Fine, let’s swap,” said Hermione, seizing Rons raven and replacing it with her own fat bullfrog. “Silencio!” The raven continued to open and close its sharp beak, but no sound came out.

“Very good, Miss Granger!” said Professor Flitwick’s squeaky little voice, making Harry, Ron and Hermione all jump. “Now, let me see you try, Mr. Weasley.”

“Wha—? Oh - oh, right,” said Ron, very flustered. “Er - silencio!”

He jabbed at the bullfrog so hard he poked it in the eye: the frog gave a deafening croak and leapt off the desk.

It came as no surprise to any of them that Harry and Ron were given additional practice of the Silencing Charm for homework.

They were allowed to remain inside over break due to the downpour outside. They found seats in a noisy and overcrowded classroom on the first floor in which Peeves was floating dreamily up near the chandelier, occasionally blowing an ink pellet at the top of somebody’s head. They had barely sat down when Angelina came struggling towards them through the groups of gossiping students.

“I’ve got permission!” she said. “To re-form the Quidditch team!”

“Excellent!” said Ron and Harry together.

“Yeah,” said Angelina, beaming. “I went to McGonagall and I think she might have appealed to Dumbledore. Anyway, Umbridge had to give in. Ha! So I want you down at the pitch at seven o’clock tonight, all right, because we’ve got to make up time. You realize we’re only three weeks away from our first match?”

She squeezed away from them, narrowly dodged an ink pellet from Peeves, which hit a nearby first-year instead, and vanished from sight.

Ron's smile slipped slightly as he looked out of the window, which was now opaque with hammering rain.

"Hope this clears up. What's up with you, Hermione?"

She, too, was gazing at the window, but not as though she really saw it. Her eyes were unfocused and there was a frown on her face.

"Just thinking…" she said, still frowning at the rain-washed window.

"About Siri— Snuffles?" said Harry.

"No… not exactly…" said Hermione slowly. "More… wondering… I suppose we're doing the right thing… I think… aren't we?"

Harry and Ron looked at each other.

"Well, that clears that up," said Ron. "It would've been really annoying if you hadn't explained yourself properly."

Hermione looked at him as though she had only just realized he was there.

"I was just wondering," she said, her voice stronger now, "whether we're doing the right thing, starting this Defense Against the Dark Arts group."

"What?" said Harry and Ron together.

"Hermione, it was your idea in the first place!" said Ron indignantly.

"I know," said Hermione, twisting her fingers together. "But after talking to Snuffles…"

"But he's all for it," said Harry.

"Yes," said Hermione, staring at the window again. "Yes, that's what made me think maybe it wasn't a good idea after all…"

Peeves floated over them on his stomach, peashooter at the ready; automatically all three of them lifted their bags to cover their heads until he had passed.

"Let's get this straight," said Harry angrily, as t hey put their bags back on the floor, "Sirius agrees with us, so you don't think we should do it any more?"

Hermione looked tense and rather miserable. Now staring at her own hands, she said, "Do you

honestly trust his judgment?”

“Yes, I do!” said Harry at once. “He’s always given us great advice!”

An ink pellet whizzed past them, striking Katie Bell squarely in the ear. Hermione watched Katie leap to her feet and start throwing things at Peeves; it was a few moments before Hermione spoke again and it sounded as though she was choosing her words very carefully.

“You don’t think he has become… sort of… reckless… since he’s been cooped up in Grimmauld Place? You don’t think he’s… kind of… living through us?”

“What d’you mean, ‘through us’?” Harry retorted.

“I mean… well, I think he’d love to be forming secret Defense societies right under the nose of someone from the Ministry… I think he’s really frustrated at how little he can do where he is… so I think he’s keen to kind of… egg us on.”

Ron looked utterly perplexed.

“Sirius is right,” he said, “you do sound just like my mother.”

Hermione bit her lip and did not answer. The bell rang just as Peeves swooped down on Katie and emptied an entire ink bottle over her head.

The weather did not improve as the day wore on, so that at seven o’clock that evening, when Harry and Ron went down to the Quidditch pitch for practice, they were soaked through within minutes, their feet slipping and sliding on the sodden grass. The sky was a deep, thundery grey and it was a relief to gain the warmth and light of the changing rooms, even if they knew the respite was only temporary. They found Fred and George debating whether to use one of their own Skiving Snackboxes to get out of flying.

“… but I bet she’d know what we’d done,” Fred said out of the corner of his mouth. “If only I hadn’t offered to sell her some Puking Pastilles yesterday.”

“We could try the Fever Fudge,” George muttered, “no one’s seen that yet -”

“Does it work?” enquired Ron hopefully, as the hammering of rain on the roof intensified and wind howled around the building.

“Well, yeah,” said Fred, “your temperature’ll go right up.”

“But you get these massive pus-filled boils, too,” said George, “and we haven’t worked out how to get rid of them yet.”

“I can’t see any boils,” said Ron, staring at the, twins.

“No, well, you wouldn’t,” said Fred darkly, “they’re not in a place we generally display to the public.”

“But they make sitting on a broom a right pain in the -”

“All right, everyone, listen up,” said Angelina loudly, emerging from the Captain’s office. “I know it’s not ideal weather, but there’s a chance we’ll be playing Slytherin in conditions like this so it’s a good idea to work out how we’re going to cope with them. Harry, didn’t you do something to your glasses to stop the rain fogging them up when we played Hufflepuff in that storm?’

“Hermione did it,” said Harry. He pulled out his wand, tapped his glasses and said, “Impervius!”

“I think we all ought to try that,” said Angelina. “If we could just keep the rain off our faces it would really help visibility - all together, come on - Impervius! okay. Let’s go.”

They all stowed their wands back in the inside pockets of their robes, shouldered their brooms and followed Angelina out of the changing rooms.

They squelched through the deepening mud to the middle of the pitch; visibility was still very poor even with the Impervius Charm; light was fading fast and curtains of rain were sweeping the grounds.

“All right, on my whistle,” shouted Angelina.

Harry kicked off from the ground, spraying mud in all directions, and shot upwards, the wind pulling him slightly off course.

He had no idea how he was going to see the Snitch in this weather; he was having enough difficulty seeing the one Bludger with which they were practicing; a minute into the practice it almost unseated him and he had to use the Sloth Grip Roll to avoid it. Unfortunately, Angelina did not see this. In fact, she did not appear to be able to see anything; none of them had a clue what the others were doing. The wind was picking up; even at a distance Harry could hear the swishing, pounding sounds of the rain pummeling the surface of the lake.

Angelina kept them at it for nearly an hour before conceding defeat. She led her sodden and disgruntled team back into the changing rooms, insisting that the practice had not been a waste of time, though without any real conviction in her voice. Fred and George were looking particularly annoyed; both were bandy-legged and winced with every movement. Harry could hear them complaining in low voices as he toweled his hair dry.

“I think a few of mine have ruptured,” said Fred in a hollow voice.

“Mine haven’t,” said George, through clenched teeth, “they’re throbbing like mad… feel bigger if anything.”

"OUCH!" said Harry.

He pressed the towel to his face, his eyes screwed tight with pain. The scar on his forehead had seared again, more painfully than it had in weeks.

"What's up?" said several voices.

Harry emerged from behind his towel; the changing room was blurred because he was not wearing his glasses, but he could still tell that everyone's face was turned towards him.

"Nothing," he muttered, "I - poked myself in the eye, that's all."

But he gave Ron a significant look and the two of them hung back as the rest of the team filed back outside, muffled in their cloaks, their hats pulled low over their ears.

"What happened?" said Ron, the moment Alicia had disappeared through the door. "Was it your scar?"

Harry nodded.

"But…" looking scared, Ron strode across to the window and stared out into the rain, "he - he can't be near us now, can he?"

"No," Harry muttered, sinking on to a bench and rubbing his forehead. "He's probably miles away. It hurt because… he's… angry."

Harry had not meant to say that at all, and heard the words as though a stranger had spoken them - yet knew at once that they were true. He did not know how he knew it, but he did; Voldemort, wherever he was, whatever he was doing, was in a towering temper.

"Did you see him?" said Ron, looking horrified. "Did you… get a vision, or something?"

Harry sat quite still, staring at his feet, allowing his mind and his memory to relax in the aftermath of the pain.

A confused tangle of shapes, a howling rush of voices…

"He wants something done, and it's not happening fast enough," he said.

Again, he felt surprised to hear the words coming out of his mouth, and yet was quite certain they were true.

"But… how do you know?" said Ron.

Harry shook his head and covered his eyes with his hands, pressing down upon them with his palms. Little stars erupted in them. He felt Ron sit down on the bench beside him and knew Ron

was staring at him.

“Is this what it was about last time?” said Ron in a hushed voice. “When your scar hurt in Umbridge’s office? You-Know-Who was angry?”

Harry shook his head.

“What is it, then?”

Harry was thinking himself back. He had been looking into Umbridge’s face… his scar had hurt… and he had had that odd feeling in his stomach… a strange, leaping feeling… a happy feeling… but of course, he had not recognized it for what it was, as he had been feeling so miserable himself…

“Last time, it was because he was pleased,” he said. “Really pleased. He thought… something good was going to happen. And the night before we came back to Hogwarts…” he thought back to the moment when his scar had hurt so badly in his and Ron’s bedroom in Grimmauld Place… “he was furious.”

He looked round at Ron, who was gaping at him.

“You could take over from Trelawney, mate,” he said in an awed voice.

“I’m not making prophecies,” said Harry.

“No, you know what you’re doing?” Ron said, sounding both scared and impressed. “Harry, you’re reading You-Know-Who’s mind!”

“No,” said Harry, shaking his head. “It’s more like… his mood, I suppose. I’m just getting flashes of what mood he’s in. Dumbledore said something like this was happening last year. He said that when Voldemort was near me, or when he was feeling hatred, I could tell. Well, now I’m feeling it when he’s pleased, too…”

There was a pause. The wind and rain lashed at the building.

“You’ve got to tell someone,” said Ron.

“I told Sirius last time.”

“Well, tell him about this time!”

“Can’t, can I?” said Harry grimly. “Umbridge is watching the owls and the fires, remember?”

“Well then, Dumbledore.”

“I’ve just told you, he already knows,” said Harry shortly, getting to his feet, taking his cloak off

his peg and swinging it around him. “There’s no point telling him again.”

Ron did up the fastening of his own cloak, watching Harry thoughtfully.

“Dumbledore’d want to know,” he said.

Harry shrugged.

“C’mon… we’ve still got Silencing Charms to practice.”

They hurried back through the dark grounds, sliding and stumbling up the muddy lawns, not talking. Harry was thinking hard. What was it that Voldemort wanted done that was not happening quickly enough?

“… he’s got other plans… plans he can put into operation very quietly indeed… stuff he can only get by stealth… like a weapon. Something he didn’t have last time.”

Harry had not thought about those words in weeks; he had been too absorbed in what was going on at Hogwarts, too busy dwelling on the ongoing battles with Umbridge, the injustice of all the Ministry interference… but now they came back to him and made him wonder… Voldemort’s anger would make sense if he was no nearer to laying hands on the weapon, whatever it was. Had the Order thwarted him, stopped him from seizing it? Where was it kept? Who had it now?

“Mimbulus mimbletonia,” said Ron’s voice and Harry came back to his senses just in time to clamber through the portrait hole into the common room.

It appeared that Hermione had gone to bed early, leaving Crookshanks curled in a nearby chair and an assortment of knobbly knitted elf hats lying on a table by the fire. Harry was rather grateful that she was not around, because he did not much want to discuss his scar hurting and have her urge him to go to Dumbledore, too. Ron kept throwing him anxious glances, but Harry pulled out his Charms books and set to work on finishing his essay, though he was only pretending to concentrate and by the time Ron said he was going up to bed, too, he had written hardly anything.

Midnight came and went while Harry was reading and rereading a passage about the uses of scurvy-grass, lovage and sneezewort and not taking in a word of it.

These plants are most efficacious in the inflaming of the brain, and are therefore much used in Confusing and Befuddlement Draughts, where the wizard is desirous of producing hot-headedness and recklessness…

… Hermione said Sirius was becoming reckless cooped up in Grimmauld Place…

… most efficacious in the inflaming of the brain, and are therefore much used…

… the Daily Prophet would think his brain was inflamed if they found out that he knew what

Voldemort was feeling…

… therefore much used in Confusing and Befuddlement Draughts…

… confusing was the word, all right; why did he know what Voldemort was feeling? What was this weird connection between them, which Dumbledore had never been able to explain satisfactorily?

… where the wizard is desirous…

… how Harry would like to sleep…

… producing hot-headedness…

… it was warm and comfortable in his armchair before the fire, with the rain still beating heavily on the windowpanes, Crookshanks purring, and the crackling of the flames…

The book slipped from Harry's slack grip and landed with a dull thud on the hearthrug. His head rolled sideways…

He was walking once more along a windowless corridor, his footsteps echoing in the silence. As the door at the end of the passage loomed larger, his heart beat fast with excitement… if he could only open it… enter beyond…

He stretched out his hand… his fingertips were inches from it…

"Harry Potter, sir!"

He awoke with a start. The candles had all been extinguished in the common room, but there was something moving close by.

"Whozair?" said Harry, sitting upright in his chair. The fire was almost out, the room very dark.

"Dobby has your owl, sir!" said a squeaky voice.

"Dobby?" said Harry thickly, peering through the gloom towards the source of the voice.

Dobby the house-elf was standing beside the table on which Hermione had left half a dozen of her knitted hats. His large, pointed ears were now sticking out from beneath what looked like all the hats Hermione had ever knitted; he was wearing one on top of the other, so that his head seemed elongated by two or three feet, and on the very topmost bobble sat Hedwig, hooting serenely and obviously cured.

"Dobby volunteered to return Harry Potter's owl," said the elf squeakily, with a look of positive adoration on his face, "Professor Grubbly-Plank says she is all well now, sir." He sank into a deep bow so that his pencil-like nose brushed the threadbare surface of the hearthrug and

Hedwig gave an indignant hoot and fluttered on to the arm of Harry's chair.

"Thanks, Dobby!" said Harry, stroking Hedwig's head and blinking hard, trying to rid himself of the image of the door in his dream… it had been very vivid. Surveying Dobby more closely, he noticed that the elf was also wearing several scarves and innumerable socks, so that his feet looked far too big for his body.

"Er… have you been taking all the clothes Hermione's been leaving out?"

"Oh, no, sir," said Dobby happily. "Dobby has been taking some for Winky, too, sir."

"Yeah, how is Winky?" asked Harry.

Dobby's ears drooped slightly.

"Winky is still drinking lots, sir," he said sadly, his enormous round green eyes, large as tennis balls, downcast. "She still does not care for clothes, Harry Potter. Nor do the other house-elves. None of them will clean Gryffindor Tower any more, not with the hats and socks hidden everywhere, they finds them insulting, sir. Dobby does it all himself, sir, but Dobby does not mind, sir, for he always hopes to meet Harry Potter and tonight, sir, he has got his wish!" Dobby sank into a deep bow again. "But Harry Potter does not seem happy," Dobby went on, straightening up again and looking timidly at Harry. "Dobby heard him muttering in his sleep. Was Harry Potter having bad dreams?"

"Not really bad," said Harry, yawning and rubbing his eyes. "I've had worse."

The elf surveyed Harry out of his vast, orb-like eyes. Then he said very seriously, his ears drooping, "Dobby wishes he could help Harry Potter, for Harry Potter set Dobby free and Dobby is much, much happier now."

Harry smiled.

"You can't help me, Dobby, but thanks for the offer."

He bent and picked up his Potions book. He'd have to try to finish the essay tomorrow. He closed the book and as he did so the firelight illuminated the thin white scars on the back of his hand - the result of his detentions with Umbridge…

"Wait a moment - there is something you can do for me, Dobby," said Harry slowly.

The elf looked round, beaming.

"Name it, Harry Potter, sir!"

"I need to find a place where twenty-eight people can practice Defense Against the Dark Arts without being discovered by any of the teachers. Especially," Harry clenched his hand on the

book, so that the scars shone pearly white, “Professor Umbridge.”

He expected the elf’s smile to vanish, his ears to droop; he expected him to say it was impossible, or else that he would try to find somewhere, but his hopes were not high. What he had not expected was for Dobby to give a little skip, his ears waggling cheerfully, and clap his hands together.

“Dobby knows the perfect place, sir!” he said happily. “Dobby heard tell of it from the other house-elves when he came to Hogwarts, sir. It is known by us as the Come and Go Room, sir, or else as the Room of Requirement!”

“Why?” said Harry curiously.

“Because it is a room that a person can only enter,” said Dobby seriously, “when they have real need of it. Sometimes it is there, and sometimes it is not, but when it appears, it is always equipped for the seeker’s needs. Dobby has used it, sir,” said the elf, dropping his voice and looking guilty, “when Winky has been very drunk; he has hidden her in the Room of Requirement and he has found antidotes to Butterbeer there, and a nice elf-sized bed to settle her on while she sleeps it off, sir… and Dobby knows Mr. Filch has found extra cleaning materials there when he has run short, sir, and -”

“And if you really needed a bathroom,” said Harry, suddenly remembering something Dumbledore had said at the Yule Ball the previous Christmas, “would it fill itself with chamber pots?”

“Dobby expects so, sir,” said Dobby, nodding earnestly. “It is a most amazing room, sir.”

“How many people know about it?” said Harry, sitting up straighter in his chair.

“Very few, sir. Mostly people stumbles across it when they needs it, sir, but often they never finds it again, for they do not know that it is always there waiting to be called into service, sir.”

“It sounds brilliant,” said Harry, his heart racing. “It sounds perfect, Dobby. When can you show me where it is?”

“Any time, Harry Potter, sir,” said Dobby, looking delighted at Harrys enthusiasm. “We could go now, if you like!”

For a moment Harry was tempted to go with Dobby. He was halfway out of his seat, intending to hurry upstairs for his Invisibility Cloak when, not for the first time, a voice very much like Hermione’s whispered in his ear: reckless. It was, after all, very late, he was exhausted, and had Snape’s essay to finish.

“Not tonight, Dobby,” said Harry reluctantly, sinking back into his chair. “This is really important… I don’t want to blow it, it’ll need proper planning. Listen, can you just tell me exactly where this Room of Requirement is, and how to get in there?”

Their robes billowed and swirled around them as they splashed across the flooded vegetable patch to double Herbology, where they could hardly hear what Professor Sprout was saying over the hammering of raindrops hard as hailstones on the greenhouse roof. The afternoons Care of Magical Creatures lesson was to be relocated from the storm-swept grounds to a free classroom on the ground floor and, to their intense relief, Angelina had sought out her team at lunch to tell them that Quidditch practice was cancelled.

“Good,” said Harry quietly, when she told him, “because we’ve found somewhere to have our first Defense meeting. Tonight, eight o’clock, seventh floor opposite that tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy being clubbed by those trolls. Can you tell Katie and Alicia?”

She looked slightly taken aback but promised to tell the others. Harry returned hungrily to his sausages and mash. When he looked up to take a drink of pumpkin juice, he found Hermione watching him.

“What?” he said thickly.

“Well… it’s just that Dobby’s plans aren’t always that safe. Don’t you remember when he lost you all the bones in your arm?”

“This room isn’t just some mad idea of Dobby’s; Dumbledore knows about it, too, he mentioned it to me at the Yule Ball.”

Hermione’s expression cleared.

“Dumbledore told you about it?”

“Just in passing,” said Harry, shrugging.

“Oh, well, that’s all right then,” said Hermione briskly and raised no more objections.

Together with Ron they had spent most of the day seeking out those people who had signed their names to the list in the Hog’s Head and telling them where to meet that evening. Somewhat to Harry’s disappointment, it was Ginny who managed to find Cho Chang and her friend first; however, by the end of dinner he was confident that the news had been passed to every one of the twenty-five people who had turned up in the Hog’s Head.

At half past seven Harry, Ron and Hermione left the Gryffindor common room, Harry clutching a certain piece of aged parchment in his hand. Fifth-years were allowed to be out in the corridors until nine o’clock, but all three of them kept looking around nervously as they made their way along the seventh floor.

“Hold it,” Harry warned, unfolding the piece of parchment at the top of the last staircase, tapping it with his wand and muttering, “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.”

A map of Hogwarts appeared on the blank surface of the parchment. Tiny black moving dots,

labeled with names, showed where various people were.

“Filch is on the second floor,” said Harry, holding the map close to his eyes, “and Mrs. Norris is on the fourth.”

“And Umbridge?” said Hermione anxiously.

“In her office,” said Harry, pointing. “Okay, lets go.”

They hurried along the corridor to the place Dobby had described to Harry, a stretch of blank wall opposite an enormous tapestry depicting Barnabas the Barmy’s foolish attempt to train trolls for the ballet.

“Okay,” said Harry quietly, while a moth-eaten troll paused in his relentless clubbing of the would be ballet teacher to watch them. “Dobby said to walk past this bit of wall three times, concentrating hard on what we need.”

They did so, turning sharply at the window just beyond the blank stretch of wall, then at the man-sized vase on its other side. Ron had screwed up his eyes in concentration; Hermione was whispering something under her breath; Harry’s fists were clenched as he stared ahead of him.

We need somewhere to learn to fight… he thought. *Just give us a place to practice… somewhere they can’t find us…*

“Harry!” said Hermione sharply, as they wheeled around after their third walk past.

A highly polished door had appeared in the wall. Ron was staring at it, looking slightly wary. Harry reached out, seized the brass handle, pulled open the door and led the way into a spacious room lit with flickering torches like those that illuminated the dungeons eight floors below.

The walls were lined with wooden bookcases and instead of chairs there were large silk cushions on the floor. A set of shelves at the far end of the room carried a range of instruments such as Sneakoscopes, Secrecy Sensors and a large, cracked Foe-Glass that Harry was sure had hung, the previous year, in the fake Moodys office.

“These will be good when we’re practicing Stunning, “ said Ron enthusiastically, prodding one of the cushions with his foot.

“And just look at these books!” said Hermione excitedly, running a finger along the spines of the large leather-bound tomes. “A Compendium of Common Curses and their Counter-Actions… The Dark Arts Outsmarted… Self-Defensive Spellwork… wow…” She looked around at Harry, her face glowing, and he saw that the presence of hundreds of books had finally convinced Hermione that what they were doing was right. “Harry, this is wonderful, there’s everything we need here!”

And without further ado she slid ‘Jinxes for the Jinxed’ from its shelf, sank on to the nearest

cushion and began to read.

There was a gentle knock on the door. Harry looked round. Ginny, Neville, Lavender, Parvati and Dean had arrived.

“Whoa,” said Dean, staring around, impressed. “What is this place?”

Harry began to explain, but before he had finished more people had arrived and he had to start all over again. By the time eight o’clock arrived, every cushion was occupied. Harry moved across to the door and turned the key protruding from the lock; it clicked in a satisfyingly loud way and everybody fell silent, looking at him. Hermione carefully marked her page of ‘Jinxes for the Jinxed’ and set the book aside.

“Well,” said Harry, slightly nervously. “This is the place we’ve found for practice sessions, and you’ve - er - obviously found it okay.”

“It’s fantastic!” said Cho, and several people murmured their agreement.

“It’s bizarre,” said Fred, frowning around at it. “We once hid from Filch in here, remember, George? But it was just a broom cupboard then.”

“Hey, Harry, what’s this stuff?” asked Dean from the rear of the room, indicating the Sneakoscopes and the Foe-Glass.

“Dark detectors,” said Harry, stepping between the cushions to reach them. “Basically they all show when Dark wizards or enemies are around, but you don’t want to rely on them too much, they can be fooled…”

He gazed for a moment into the cracked Foe-Glass; shadowy figures were moving around inside it, though none was recognizable. He turned his back on it.

“Well, I’ve been thinking about the sort of stuff we ought to do first and - er -” He noticed a raised hand. “What, Hermione?”

“I think we ought to elect a leader,” said Hermione.

“Harry’s leader,” said Cho at once, looking at Hermione as though she were mad.

Harrys stomach did yet another back-flip.

“Yes, but I think we ought to vote on it properly,” said Hermione, unperturbed. “It makes it formal and it gives him authority. So - everyone who thinks Harry ought to be our leader?”

Everybody put up their hand, even Zacharias Smith, though he did it very half-heartedly.

“Er - right, thanks,” said Harry, who could feel his face burning. “And -what, Hermione?”

“I also think we ought to have a name,” she said brightly, her hand still in the air. “It would promote a feeling of team spirit and unity, don’t you think?”

“Can we be the Anti-Umbridge League?” said Angelina hopefully.

“Or the Ministry of Magic are Morons Group?” suggested Fred.

“I was thinking,” said Hermione, frowning at Fred, “more of a name that didn’t tell everyone what we were up to, so we can refer to it safely outside meetings.”

“The Defense Association?” said Cho. “The D.A. for short, so nobody knows what we’re talking about?”

“Yeah, the D.A.’s good,” said Ginny. “Only let’s make it stand for Dumbledores Army, because that’s the Ministry’s worst fear, isn’t it?”

There was a good deal of appreciative murmuring and laughter at this.

“All in favor of the D.A.?” said Hermione bossily, kneeling up on her cushion to count. “That’s a majority - motion passed!”

She pinned the piece of parchment with all of their signatures on it on to the wall and wrote across the top in large letters:

“Right,” said Harry, when she had sat down again, “shall we get practicing then? I was thinking, the first thing we should do is Expelliarmus, you know, the Disarming Charm. I know it’s pretty basic but I’ve found it really useful -”

“Oh, please,” said Zacharias Smith, rolling his eye s and folding his arms. “I don’t think Expelliarmus is exactly going to help us against You-Know-Who, do you?”

“I’ve used it against him,” said Harry quietly. “It saved my life in June.”

Smith opened his mouth stupidly. The rest of the room was very quiet.

“But if you think it’s beneath you, you can leave,” Harry said.

Smith did not move. Nor did anybody else.

“Okay,” said Harry, his mouth slightly drier than usual with all these eyes upon him, “I reckon we should all divide into pairs and practice.”

It felt very odd to be issuing instructions, but not nearly as odd as seeing them followed. Everybody got to their feet at once and divided up. Predictably, Neville was left partnerless.

“You can practice with me,” Harry told him. “Right-on the count of three, then-one, two, three-”

The room was suddenly full of shouts of Expelliarmus. Wands flew in all directions; missed spells hit books on shelves and sent them flying into the air. Harry was too quick for Neville, whose wand went spinning out of his hand, hit the ceiling in a shower of sparks and landed with a clatter on top of a bookshelf, from which Harry retrieved it with a Summoning Charm. Glancing around, he thought he had been right to suggest they practice the basics first; there was a lot of shoddy spellwork going on; many people were not succeeding in Disarming their opponents at all, but merely causing them to jump backwards a few paces or wince as their feeble spell whooshed over them.

“Expelliarmus!” said Neville, and Harry, caught unawares, felt his wand fly out of his hand.

“I DID IT!” said Neville gleefully. “I’ve never done it before - I DID IT!”

“Good one!” said Harry encouragingly, deciding not to point out that in a real duel Nevilles opponent was unlikely to be staring in the opposite direction with his wand held loosely at his side. “Listen, Neville, can you take it in turns to practice with Ron and Hermione for a couple of minutes so I can walk around and see how the rest are doing?”

Harry moved off into the middle of the room. Something very odd was happening to Zacharias Smith. Every time he opened his mouth to disarm Anthony Goldstein, his own wand would fly out of his hand, yet Anthony did not seem to be making a sound. Harry did not have to look far to solve the mystery: Fred and George were several feet from Smith and taking it in turns to point their wands at his back.

“Sorry, Harry” said George hastily, when Harry caught his eye. “Couldn’t resist.”

Harry walked around the other pairs, trying to correct those who were doing the spell wrong. Ginny was teamed with Michael Corner; she was doing very well, whereas Michael was either very bad or unwilling to jinx her. Ernie Macmillan was flourishing his wand unnecessarily, giving his partner time to get in under his guard; the Creevey brothers were enthusiastic but erratic and mainly responsible for all the books leaping off the shelves around them; Luna Lovegood was similarly patchy, occasionally sending Justin Finch-Fletchley’s wand spinning out of his hand, at other times merely causing his hair to stand on end.

“Okay, stop!” Harry shouted. “Stop! STOP!”

I need a whistle, he thought, and immediately spotted one lying on top of the nearest row of books. He caught it up and blew hard. Everyone lowered their wands.

“That wasn’t bad,” said Harry, “but there’s definite room for improvement.” Zacharias Smith glared at him. “Let’s try again.”

He moved off around the room again, stopping here and there to make suggestions. Slowly, the general performance improved.

He avoided going near Cho and her friend for a while, but after walking twice around every other

pair in the room felt he could not ignore them any longer.

“Oh no,” said Cho rather wildly as he approached. “Expelliarmious! I mean, Expellimellius!! I - oh, sorry, Marietta!”

Her curly-haired friend’s sleeve had caught fire; Marietta extinguished it with her own wand and glared at Harry as though it was his fault.

“You made me nervous, I was doing all right before then!” Cho told Harry ruefully.

“That was quite good,” Harry lied, but when she raised her eyebrows he said, “Well, no, it was lousy, but I know you can do it properly, I was watching from over there.”

She laughed. Her friend Marietta looked at them rather sourly and turned away.

“Don’t mind her,” Cho muttered. “She doesn’t really want to be here but I made her come with me. Her parents have forbidden her to do anything that might upset Umbridge. You see - her mum works for the Ministry.”

“What about your parents?” asked Harry.

“Well, they’ve forbidden me to get on the wrong side of Umbridge, too,” said Cho, drawing herself up proudly. “But if they think I’m not going to fight You-Know-Who after what happened to Cedric -”

She broke off, looking rather confused, and an awkward silence fell between them; Terry Boot’s wand went whizzing past Harry’s ear and hit Alicia Spinnet hard on the nose.

“Well, my dad is very supportive of any anti-Ministry action!” said Luna Lovegood proudly from just behind Harry; evidently she had been eavesdropping on his conversation while Justin Finch-Fletchley attempted to disentangle himself from the robes that had flown up over his head. “He’s always saying he’d believe anything of Fudge; I mean, the number of goblins Fudge has had assassinated! And of course he uses the Department of Mysteries to develop terrible poisons, which he secretly feeds to anybody who disagrees with him. And then there’s his Umgubular Slashkilter —”

“Don’t ask,” Harry muttered to Cho as she opened her mouth, looking puzzled. She giggled.

“Hey, Harry,” Hermione called from the other end of the room, “have you checked the time?”

He looked down at his watch and was shocked to see it was already ten past nine, which meant they needed to get back to their common rooms immediately or risk being caught and punished by Filch for being out of bounds. He blew his whistle; everybody stopped shouting

“Expelliarmus” and the last couple of wands clattered to the floor.

“Well, that was pretty good,” said Harry, “but we’ve overrun, we’d better leave it here. Same time, same place next week?”

“Sooner!’ said Dean Thomas eagerly and many people nodded in agreement.

Angelina, however, said quickly. “The Quidditch season’s about to start, we need team practices too!”

“Let’s say next Wednesday night, then,” said Harry, “we can decide on additional meetings then. Come on, we’d better get going.”

He pulled out the Marauder’s Map again and checked it carefully for signs of teachers on the seventh floor. He let them all leave in threes and fours, watching their tiny dots anxiously to see that they returned safely to their dormitories: the Hufflepuffs to the basement corridor that also led to the kitchens; the Ravenclaws to a tower on the west side of the castle, and the Gryffindors along the corridor to the Fat Lady’s portrait.

“That was really, really good, Harry” said Hermione, when finally it was just her, Harry and Ron who were left.

“Yeah, it was!” said Ron enthusiastically, as they slipped out of the door and watched it melt back into stone behind them. “Did you see me disarm Hermione, Harry?”

“Only once,” said Hermione, stung. “I got you loads more than you got me -”

“I did not only get you once, I got you at least three times -”

“Well, if you’re counting the one where you tripped over your own feet and knocked the wand out of my hand -”

They argued all the way back to the common room, but Harry was not listening to them. He had one eye on the Marauder’s Map, but he was also thinking of Cho saying he made her nervous.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Lion and the Serpent

Harry felt as though he were carrying some kind of talisman inside his chest over the following two weeks, a glowing secret that supported him through Umbridge’s classes and even made it possible for him to smile blandly as he looked into her horrible bulging eyes. He and the D.A. were resisting her under her very nose, doing the very thing she and the Ministry most feared, and whenever he was supposed to be reading Wilbert Slinkhard’s book during her lessons he dwelled instead on satisfying memories of their most recent meetings, remembering how Neville had successfully disarmed Hermione, how Colin Creevey had mastered the Impediment Jinx after three meetings’ hard effort, how Parvati Patil had produced such a good Reductor Curse that she had reduced the table carrying all the Sneakoscopes to dust.

He was finding it almost impossible to fix a regular night of the week for the D.A. meetings, as they had to accommodate three separate team’s Quidditch practices, which were often rearranged due to bad weather conditions; but Harry was not sorry about this; he had a feeling that it was probably better to keep the timing of their meetings unpredictable. If anyone was watching them, it would be hard to make out a pattern.

Hermione soon devised a very clever method of communicating the time and date of the next meeting to all the members in case they needed to change it at short notice, because it would look suspicious if people from different Houses were seen crossing the Great Hall to talk to each other too often. She gave each of the members of the D.A. a fake Galleon (Ron became very excited when he first saw the basket and was convinced she was actually giving out gold).

“You see the numerals around the edge of the coins?” Hermione said, holding one up for examination at the end of their fourth meeting. The coin gleamed fat and yellow in the light from the torches. “On real Galleons that’s just a serial number referring to the goblin who cast the coin. On these fake coins, though, the numbers will change to reflect the time and date of the next meeting. The coins will grow hot when the date changes, so if you’re carrying them in a pocket you’ll be able to feel them. We take one each, and when Harry sets the date of the next meeting he’ll change the numbers on his coin, and because I’ve put a Protean Charm on them, they’ll all change to mimic his.”

A blank silence greeted Hermione’s words. She looked around at all the faces upturned to her, rather disconcerted.

“Well - I thought it was a good idea,” she said uncertainly, “I mean, even if Umbridge asked us to turn out our pockets, there’s nothing fishy about carrying a Galleon, is there? But… well, if you don’t want to use them -”

“You can do a Protean Charm?” said Terry Boot.

“Yes,” said Hermione.

“But that’s… that’s NEWT standard, that is,” he said weakly.

“Oh,” said Hermione, trying to look modest. “Oh… well… yes, I suppose it is.”

“How come you’re not in Ravenclaw?” he demanded, staring at Hermione with something close to wonder. “With brains like yours?”

“Well, the Sorting Hat did seriously consider putting me in Ravenclaw during my Sorting,” said Hermione brightly, “but it decided on Gryffindor in the end. So, does that mean we’re using the Galleons?”

There was a murmur of assent and everybody moved forwards to collect one from the basket. Harry looked sideways at Hermione.

“You know what these remind me of?”

“No, what’s that?”

“The Death Eaters’ scars. Voldemort touches one of them, and all their scars burn, and they know they’ve got to join him.”

“Well… yes,” said Hermione quietly, “that is where I got the idea but you’ll notice I decided to engrave the date on bits of metal rather than on our members’ skin.”

“Yeah… I prefer your way,” said Harry, grinning, as he slipped his Galleon into his pocket. “I suppose the only danger with these is that we might accidentally spend them.”

“Fat chance,” said Ron, who was examining his own fake Galleon with a slightly mournful air, “I haven’t got any real Galleons to confuse it with.”

As the first Quidditch match of the season, Gryffindor versus Slytherin, drew nearer, their D.A. meetings were put on hold because Angelina insisted on almost daily practices. The fact that the Quidditch Cup had not been held for so long added considerably to the interest and excitement surrounding the forthcoming game; the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs were taking a lively interest in the outcome, for they, of course, would be playing both teams over the coming year; and the Heads of House of the competing teams, though they attempted to disguise it under a decent pretence of sportsmanship, were determined to see their own side victorious. Harry realized how much Professor McGonagall cared about beating Slytherin when she abstained from giving them homework in the week leading up to the match.

“I think you’ve got enough to be getting on with at the moment,” she said loftily. Nobody could quite believe their ears until she looked directly at Harry and Ron and said grimly, “I’ve become accustomed to seeing the Quidditch Cup in my study, boys, and I really don’t want to have to hand it over to Professor Snape, so use the extra time to practice, won’t you?”

Snape was no less obviously partisan; he had booked the Quidditch pitch for Slytherin practice

so often that the Gryffindors had difficulty getting on it to play. He was also turning a deaf ear to the many reports of Slytherin attempts to hex Gryffindor players in the corridors. When Alicia Spinnet turned up in the hospital wing with her eyebrows growing so thick and fast they obscured her vision and obstructed her mouth, Snape insisted that she must have attempted a Hair-thickening Charm on herself and refused to listen to the fourteen eye-witnesses who insisted they had seen the Slytherin Keeper, Miles Bletchley, hit her from behind with a jinx while she worked in the library.

Harry felt optimistic about Gryffindor's chances; they had, after all, never lost to Malfoy's team. Admittedly, Ron was still not performing to Wood's standard, but he was working extremely hard to improve. His greatest weakness was a tendency to lose confidence after he'd made a blunder; if he let in one goal he became flustered and was therefore likely to miss more. On the other hand, Harry had seen Ron make some truly spectacular saves when he was on form; during one memorable practice he had hung one-handed from his broom and kicked the Quaffle so hard away from the goal hoop that it soared the length of the pitch and through the center hoop at the other end; the rest of the team felt this save compared favorably with one made recently by Barry Ryan, the Irish International Keeper, against Poland's top Chaser, Ladislaw Zamojski. Even Fred had said that Ron might yet make him and George proud, and that they were seriously considering admitting he was related to them, something they assured him they had been trying to deny for four years.

The only thing really worrying Harry was how much Ron was allowing the tactics of the Slytherin team to upset him before they even got on to the pitch. Harry, of course, had endured their snide comments for over four years, so whispers of, "Hey, Potty, I heard Warrington's sworn to knock you off your broom on Saturday", far from chilling his blood, made him laugh. "Warrington's aim's so pathetic I'd be more worried if he was aiming for the person next to me," he retorted, which made Ron and Hermione laugh and wiped the smirk off Pansy Parkinsons face.

But Ron had never endured a relentless campaign of insults, jeers and intimidation. When Slytherins, some of them seventh-years and considerably larger than he was, muttered as they passed in the corridors, "Got your bed booked in the hospital wing, Weasley?" he didn't laugh, but turned a delicate shade of green. When Draco Malfoy imitated Ron dropping the Quaffle (which he did whenever they came within sight of each other), Ron's ears glowed red and his hands shook so badly that he was likely to drop whatever he was holding at the time, too.

October extinguished itself in a rush of howling winds and driving rain and November arrived, cold as frozen iron, with hard frosts every morning and icy draughts that bit at exposed hands and faces. The skies and the ceiling of the Great Hall turned a pale, pearly grey, the mountains around Hogwarts were snowcapped, and the temperature in the castle dropped so low that many students wore their thick protective dragon skin gloves in the corridors between lessons.

The morning of the match dawned bright and cold. When Harry awoke he looked round at Ron's bed and saw him sitting bolt upright, his arms around his knees, staring fixedly into space.

"You all right?" said Harry.

Ron nodded but did not speak. Harry was reminded forcibly of the time Ron had accidentally put a Slug-vomiting Charm on himself; he looked just as pale and sweaty as he had done then, not to mention as reluctant to open his mouth.

“You just need some breakfast,” Harry said bracingly. “C’mon.”

The Great Hall was filling up fast when they arrived, the talk louder and the mood more exuberant than usual. As they passed the Slytherin table there was an upsurge of noise. Harry looked round and saw that, in addition to the usual green and silver scarves and hats, every one of them was wearing a silver badge in the shape of what seemed to be a crown. For some reason many of them waved at Ron, laughing uproariously. Harry tried to see what was written on the badges as he walked by, but he was too concerned to get Ron past their table quickly to linger long enough to read them.

They received a rousing welcome at the Gryffindor table, where everyone was wearing red and gold, but far from raising Ron’s spirits the cheers seemed to sap the last of his morale; he collapsed on to the nearest bench looking as though he were facing his final meal.

“I must’ve been mental to do this,” he said in a croaky whisper. “Mental.”

“Don’t be thick,” said Harry firmly, passing him a choice of cereals, “you’re going to be fine. It’s normal to be nervous.”

“I’m rubbish,” croaked Ron. “I’m lousy. I can’t play to save my life. What was I thinking?”

“Get a grip,” said Harry sternly. “Look at that save you made with your foot the other day, even Fred and George said it was brilliant.”

Ron turned a tortured face to Harry.

“That was an accident,” he whispered miserably. “I didn’t mean to do it - I slipped off my broom when none of you were looking and when I was trying to get back on I kicked the Quaffle by accident.”

“Well,” said Harry, recovering quickly from this unpleasant surprise, “a few more accidents like that and the game’s in the bag, isn’t it?”

Hermione and Ginny sat down opposite them wearing red and gold scarves, gloves and rosettes.

“How’re you feeling?” Ginny asked Ron, who was now staring into the dregs of milk at the bottom of his empty cereal bowl as though seriously considering attempting to drown himself in them.

“He’s just nervous,” said Harry.

“Well, that’s a good sign, I never feel you perform as well in exams if you’re not a bit nervous,”

said Hermione heartily.

“Hello,” said a vague and dreamy voice from behind them. Harry looked up: Luna Lovegood had drifted over from the Ravenclaw table. Many people were staring at her and a few were openly laughing and pointing; she had managed to procure a hat shaped like a life-size lion’s head, which was perched precariously on her head.

“I’m supporting Gryffindor,” said Luna, pointing un necessarily at her hat. “Look what it does…”

She reached up and tapped the hat with her wand. It opened its mouth wide and gave an extremely realiztic roar that made everyone in the vicinity jump.

“It’s good, isn’t it?” said Luna happily. “I wanted to have it chewing up a serpent to represent Slytherin, you know, but there wasn’t time. Anyway… good luck, Ronald!”

She drifted away. They had not quite recovered from the shock of Luna’s hat before Angelina came hurrying towards them, accompanied by Katie and Alicia, whose eyebrows had mercifully been returned to normal by Madam Pomfrey.

“When you’re ready” she said, “we’re going to go straight down to the pitch, check out conditions and change.”

“We’ll be there in a bit,” Harry assured her. “Ron’s just got to have some breakfast.”

It became clear after ten minutes, however, that Ron was not capable of eating anything more and Harry thought it best to get him down to the changing rooms. As they rose from the table, Hermione got up, too, and taking Harry’s arm she drew him to one side.

“Don’t let Ron see what’s on those Slytherins’ badges,” she whispered urgently.

Harry looked questioningly at her, but she shook her head warningly; Ron had just ambled over to them, looking lost and desperate.

“Good luck, Ron,” said Hermione, standing on tiptoe and kissing him on the cheek. “And you, Harry -”

Ron seemed to come to himself slightly as they walked back across the Great Hall. He touched the spot on his face where Hermione had kissed him, looking puzzled, as though he was not quite sure what had just happened. He seemed too distracted to notice much around him, but Harry cast a curious glance at the crown-shaped badges as they passed the Slytherin table, and this time he made out the words etched on to them:

Weasley Is Our King

With an unpleasant feeling that this could mean nothing good, he hurried Ron across the

Entrance Hall, down the stone steps and out into the icy air.

The frosty grass crunched under their feet as they hurried down the sloping lawns towards the stadium. There was no wind at all and the sky was a uniform pearly white, which meant that visibility would be good without the drawback of direct sunlight in the eyes. Harry pointed out these encouraging factors to Ron as they walked, but he was not sure that Ron was listening. Angelina had changed already and was talking to the rest of the team when they entered. Harry and Ron pulled on their robes (Ron attempted to do his up back-to-front for several minutes before Alicia took pity on him and went to help), then sat down to listen to the pre-match talk while the babble of voices outside grew steadily louder as the crowd came pouring out of the castle towards the pitch.

"Okay, I've only just found out the final line-up for Slytherin," said Angelina, consulting a piece of parchment. "Last year's Beaters, Derrick and Bole, have left, but it looks as though Montague's replaced them with the usual gorillas, rather than anyone who can fly particularly well. They're two blokes called Crabbe and goyle, I don't know much about them-"

"We do," said Harry and Ron together.

"Well, they don't look bright enough to tell one end of a broom from the other," said Angelina, pocketing her parchment, "but then I was always surprised Derrick and Bole managed to find their way on to the pitch without signposts."

"Crabbe and Goyle are in the same mould," Harry assured her.

They could hear hundreds of footsteps mounting the banked benches of the spectators' stands. Some people were singing, though Harry could not make out the words. He was starting to feel nervous, but he knew his butterflies were as nothing compared to Ron's, who was clutching his stomach and staring straight ahead again, his jaw set and his complexion pale grey.

"It's time," said Angelina in a hushed voice, looking at her watch. "C'mon everyone… good luck."

The team rose, shouldered their brooms and marched in single file out of the changing room and into the dazzling sunlight. A roar of sound greeted them in which Harry could still hear singing, though it was muffled by the cheers and whistles.

The Slytherin team was standing waiting for them. They, too, were wearing those silver crownshaped badges. The new Captain, Montague, was built along the same lines as Dudley Dursley, with massive forearms like hairy hams. Behind him lurked Crabbe and Goyle, almost as large, blinking stupidly in the sunlight, swinging their new Beaters' bats. Malfoy stood to one side, the sunlight gleaming on his white-blond head. He caught Harry's eye and smirked, tapping the crown-shaped badge on his chest.

"Captains, shake hands," ordered the referee Madam Hooch, as Angelina and Montague reached each other. Harry could tell that Montague was trying to crush Angelina's fingers, though she did

not wince. “Mount your brooms…”

Madam Hooch placed her whistle in her mouth and blew.

The balls were released and the fourteen players shot upwards. Out of the corner of his eye Harry saw Ron streak off towards the goal hoops. Harry zoomed higher, dodging a Bludger, and set off on a wide lap of the pitch, gazing around for a glint of gold; on the other side of the stadium, Draco Malfoy was doing exactly the same.

“And it’s Johnson - Johnson with the Quaffle, what a player that girl is, I’ve been saying it for years but she still won’t go out with me -”

“JORDAN!” yelled Professor McGonagall.

“- just a fun fact, Professor, adds a bit of interest - and she’s ducked Warrington, she’s passed Montague, she’s — ouch - been hit from behind by a Bludger from Crabbe… Montague catches the Quaffle, Montague heading back up the pitch and - nice Bludger there from George Weasley, that’s a Bludger to the head for Montague, he drops the Quaffle, caught by Katie Bell, Katie Bell of Gryffindor reverse-passes to Alicia Spinnet and Spinnet’s away -”

Lee Jordan’s commentary rang through the stadium and Harry listened as hard as he could through the wind whistling in his ears and the din of the crowd, all yelling and booing and singing.

“- dodges Warrington, avoids a Bludger - close call, Alicia - and the crowd are loving this, just listen to them, what’s that they’re singing?”

And as Lee paused to listen, the song rose loud and clear from the sea of green and silver in the Slytherin section of the stands:

“Weasley cannot save a thing, He cannot block a single ring, That’s why Slytherins all sing: Weasley is our King.”

“Weasley was born in a bin He always lets the Quaffle in Weasley will make sure we win Weasley is our King.”

“—and Alicia passes back to Angelina!” Lee shouted, and as Harry swerved, his insides boiling at what he had just heard, he knew Lee was trying to drown out the words of the song. “Come on now, Angelina — looks like she’s got just the Keeper to beat! - SHE SHOOTS - SHE - aaaah…”

Bletchley, the Slytherin Keeper, had saved the goal; he threw the Quaffle to Warrington who sped off with it, zig-zagging in between Alicia and Katie; the singing from below grew louder and louder as he drew nearer and nearer Ron.

“Weasley is our King, Weasley is our King, He always lets the Quaffle in Weasley is our King.”

Harry could not help himself: abandoning his search for the Snitch, he wheeled around to watch Ron, a lone figure at the far end of the pitch, hovering before the three goal hoops while the massive Warrington pelted towards him.

“- and it’s Warrington with the Quaffle, Warrington heading for goal, he’s out of Bludger range with just the Keeper ahead -”

A great swell of song rose from the Slytherin stands below:

“Weasley cannot save a thing, He cannot block a single ring…”

“- so it’s the first test for new Gryffindor Keeper Weasley, brother of Beaters Fred and George, and a promising new talent on the team - come on, Ron!”

But the scream of delight came from the Slytherins’ end: Ron had dived wildly, his arms wide, and the Quaffle had soared between them straight through Ron’s central hoop.

“Slytherin score!” came Lee’s voice amid the cheering and booing from the crowds below, “so that’s ten-nil to Slytherin - bad luck, Ron.”

The Slytherins sang even louder:

“WEASLEY WAS BORN IN A BIN, HE ALWAYS LETS THE QUAFFLE IN…”

“- and Gryffindor back in possession and it’s Katie Bell tanking up the pitch -” cried Lee valiantly, though the singing was now so deafening that he could hardly make himself heard above it.

“WEASLEY WILL MAKE SURE WE WIN WEASLEY IS OUR KING…”

“Harry, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” screamed Angelina, soaring past him to keep up with Katie. “GET GOING!”

Harry realized he had been stationary in midair for over a minute, watching the progress of the match without sparing a thought for the whereabouts of the Snitch; horrified, he went into a dive and started circling the pitch again, staring around, trying to ignore the chorus now thundering through the stadium:

“WEASLEY IS OUR KING, WEASLEY IS OUR KING…”

There was no sign of the Snitch anywhere he looked; Malfoy was still circling the stadium just as he was. They passed one another midway around the pitch, going in opposite directions, and Harry heard Malfoy singing loudly:

“WEASLEY WAS BORN IN A BIN…”

“—and it’s Warrington again,” bellowed Lee, “who passes to Pucey, Pucey’s off past Spinnet, come on now, Angelina, you can take him - turns out you can’t - but nice Bludger from Fred Weasley, I mean, George Weasley, oh, who cares, one of them, anyway, and Warrington drops the Quaffle and Katie Bell — er - drops it, too - so that’s Montague with the Quaffle, Slytherin Captain Montague takes the Quaffle and he’s off up the pitch, come on now, Gryffindor, block him!”

Harry zoomed around the end of the stadium behind the Slytherin goal hoops, willing himself not to look at what was going on at Ron’s end. As he sped past the Slytherin Keeper, he heard Bletchley singing along with the crowd below:

“WEASLEY CANNOT SAVE A THING…”

“- and Pucey’s dodged Alicia again and he’s heading straight for goal, stop it, Ron!”

Harry did not have to look to see what had happened: there was a terrible groan from the Gryffindor end, coupled with fresh screams and applause from the Slytherins. Looking down, Harry saw the pug-faced Pansy Parkinson right at the front of the stands, her back to the pitch as she conducted the Slytherin supporters who were roaring:

“THAT’S WHY SLYTHERINS ALL SING WEASLEY ISOUR KING.”

But twenty-nil was nothing, there was still time for Gryffindor to catch up or catch the Snitch. A few goals and they would be in the lead as usual, Harry assured himself, bobbing and weaving through the other players in pursuit of something shiny that turned out to be Montague’s watchstrap.

But Ron let in two more goals. There was an edge of panic in Harry’s desire to find the Snitch now. If he could just get it soon and finish the game quickly.

“- and Katie Bell of Gryffindor dodges Pucey, ducks Montague, nice swerve, Katie, and she throws to Johnson, Angelina Johnson takes the Quaffle, she’s past Warrington, she’s heading for goal, come on now, Angelina - GRYFFINDOR SCORE! It’s forty-ten, forty-ten to Slytherin and Pucey has the Quaffle”

Harry could hear Luna’s ludicrous lion hat roaring amidst the Gryffindor cheers and felt heartened; only thirty points in it, that was nothing, they could pull back easily. Harry ducked a Bludger that Crabbe had sent rocketing in his direction and resumed his frantic scouring of the pitch for the Snitch, keeping one eye on Malfoy in case he showed signs of having spotted it, but Malfoy, like him, was continuing to soar around the stadium, searching fruitlessly…

“— Pucey throws to Warrington, Warrington to Montague, Montague back to Pucey -Johnson intervenes, Johnson takes the Quaffle, Johnson to Bell, this looks good - I mean bad - Bells hit by a Bludger from Goyle of Slytherin and it’s Pucey in possession”

“WEASLEY WAS BORN IN A BIN, HE ALWAYS LETS THE QUAFFLE IN”

"WEASLEY WILL MAKE SURE WE WIN"

But Harry had seen it at last: the tiny fluttering Golden Snitch was hovering feet from the ground at the Slytherin end of the pitch.

He dived…

In a matter of seconds, Malfoy was streaking out of the sky on Harry's left, a green and silver blur lying flat on his broom…

The Snitch skirted the foot of one of the goal hoops and scooted off towards the other side of the stands; its change of direction suited Malfoy, who was nearer; Harry pulled his Firebolt around, he and Malfoy were now neck and neck…

Feet from the ground, Harry lifted his right hand from his broom, stretching towards the Snitch… to his right, Malfoy's arm extended too, was reaching, groping…

It was over in two breathless, desperate, windswept seconds - Harry's fingers closed around the tiny, struggling ball - Malfoy's fingernails scrabbled the back of Harrys hand hopelessly - Harry pulled his broom upwards, holding the struggling ball in his hand and the Gryffindor spectators screamed their approval…

They were saved, it did not matter that Ron had let in those goals, nobody would remember as long as Gryffindor had won -

WHAM.

A Bludger hit Harry squarely in the small of the back and he flew forwards off his broom. Luckily he was only five or six feet above the ground, having dived so low to catch the Snitch, but he was winded all the same as he landed flat on his back on the frozen pitch. He heard Madam Hooch's shrill whistle, an uproar in the stands compounded of catcalls, angry yells and jeering, a thud, then Angelinas frantic voice.

"Are you all right?"

"Course I am," said Harry grimly, taking her hand and allowing her to pull him to his feet. Madam Hooch was zooming towards one of the Slytherin players above him, though he could not see who it was from this angle.

"It was that thug Crabbe," said Angelina angrily, "he whacked the Bludger at you the moment he saw you'd got the Snitch - but we won, Harry, we won!"

Harry heard a snort from behind him and turned around, still holding the Snitch tightly in his hand: Draco Malfoy had landed close by. White-faced with fury, he was still managing to sneer.

"Saved Weasley's neck, haven't you?" he said to Harry. "I've never seen a worse Keeper… but

then he was born in a bin… did you like my lyrics, Potter?”

Harry didn’t answer. He turned away to meet the rest of the team who were now landing one by one, yelling and punching the air in triumph; all except Ron, who had dismounted from his broom over by the goalposts and seemed to be making his way slowly back to the changing rooms alone.

“We wanted to write another couple of verses!” Malfoy called, as Katie and Alicia hugged Harry. “But we couldn’t find rhymes for fat and ugly - we wanted to sing about his mother, see-”

“Talk about sour grapes,” said Angelina, casting Malfoy a disgusted look.

“- we couldn’t fit in useless loser either - for his father, you know -”

Fred and George had realized what Malfoy was talking about. Halfway through shaking Harry’s hand, they stiffened, looking round at Malfoy.

“Leave it!” said Angelina at once, taking Fred by the arm. “Leave it, Fred, let him yell, he’s just sore he lost, the jumped-up little -”

“- but you like the Weasleys, don’t you, Potter?” said Malfoy, sneering. “Spend holidays there and everything, don’t you? Can’t see how you stand the stink, but I suppose when you’ve been dragged up by Muggles, even the Weasleys’ hovel smells okay -”

Harry grabbed hold of George. Meanwhile, it was taking the combined efforts of Angelina, Alicia and Katie to stop Fred leaping on Malfoy, who was laughing openly. Harry looked around for Madam Hooch, but she was still berating Crabbe for his illegal Sludger attack.

“Or perhaps,” said Malfoy, leering as he backed away, “you can remember what your mother’s house stank like, Potter, and Weasleys pigsty reminds you of it —”

Harry was not aware of releasing George, all he knew was that a second later both of them were sprinting towards Malfoy. He had completely forgotten that all the teachers were watching: all he wanted to do was cause Malfoy as much pain as possible; with no time to draw out his wand, he merely drew back the fist clutching the Snitch and sank it as hard as he could into Malfoys stomach -

“Harry! HARRY! GEORGE! NO”

He could hear girls’ voices screaming, Malfoy yelling, George swearing, a whistle blowing and the bellowing of the crowd around him, but he did not care. Not until somebody in the vicinity yelled “Impedimenta!” and he was knocked over backwards by the force of the spell, did he abandon the attempt to punch every inch of Malfoy he could reach.

“What do you think you’re doing?” screamed Madam Hooch, as Harry leapt to his feet. It seemed to have been her who had hit him with the Impediment Jinx; she was holding her whistle

in one hand and a wand in the other; her broom lay abandoned several feet away. Malfoy was curled up on the ground, whimpering and moaning, his nose bloody; George was sporting a swollen lip; Fred was still being forcibly restrained by the three Chasers, and Crabbe was cackling in the background. “I’ve never seen behavior like it - back up to the castle, both of you, and straight to your Head of House’s office! Go! Now.”

Harry and George turned on their heels and marched off the pitch, both panting, neither saying a word to the other. The howling and jeering of the crowd grew fainter and fainter until they reached the Entrance Hall, where they could hear nothing except the sound of their own footsteps. Harry became aware that something was still struggling in his right hand, the knuckles of which he had bruised against Malfoy’s jaw. Looking down, he saw the Snitch’s silver wings protruding from between his fingers, struggling for release.

They had barely reached the door of Professor McGonagall’s office when she came marching along the corridor behind them. She was wearing a Gryffindor scarf, but tore it from her throat with shaking hands as she strode towards them, looking livid.

“In!” she said furiously, pointing to the door. Harry and George entered. She strode around behind her desk and faced them, quivering with rage as she threw the Gryffindor scarf aside on to the floor.

“Well?” she said. “I have never seen such a disgraceful exhibition. Two on one! Explain yourselves!”

“Malfoy provoked us,” said Harry stiffly.

“Provoked you?” shouted Professor McGonagall, slamming a fist on to her desk so that her tartan tin slid sideways off it and burst open, littering the floor with Ginger Newts. “He’d just lost, hadn’t he? Of course he wanted to provoke you! But what on earth he can have said that justified what you two —”

“He insulted my parents,” snarled George. “And Harry’s mother.”

“But instead of leaving it to Madam Hooch to sort out, you two decided to give an exhibition of Muggle dueling, did you?” bellowed Professor McGonagall. “Have you any idea what you’ve - ?”

“Hem, hem.”

Harry and George both wheeled round. Dolores Umbridge was standing in the doorway wrapped in a green tweed cloak that greatly enhanced her resemblance to a giant toad, and was smiling in the horrible, sickly, ominous way that Harry had come to associate with imminent misery.

“May I help, Professor McGonagall?” asked Professor Umbridge in her most poisonously sweet voice.

Blood rushed into Professor McGonagall's face.

"Help?" she repeated, in a constricted voice. "What do you mean, help?"

Professor Umbridge moved forwards into the office, still smiling her sickly smile.

"Why, I thought you might be grateful for a little extra authority"

Harry would not have been surprised to see sparks fly from Professor McGonagall's nostrils.

"You thought wrong," she said, turning her back on Umbridge.

"Now, you two had better listen closely. I do not care what provocation Malfoy offered you, I do not care if he insulted every family member you possess, your behavior was disgusting and I am giving each of you a week's worth of detentions! Do not look at me like that, Potter, you deserve it! And if either of you ever -"

"Hem, hem."

Professor McGonagall closed her eyes as though praying for patience as she turned her face towards Professor Umbridge again.

"Yes?"

"I think they deserve rather more than detentions," said Umbridge, smiling still more broadly. Professor McGonagall's eyes flew open.

"But unfortunately" she said, with an attempt at a reciprocal smile that made her look as though she had lockjaw, "it is what I think that counts, as they are in my House, Dolores."

"Well, actually, Minerva," simpered Professor Umbridge, "I think you'll find that what I think does count. Now, where is it? Cornelius just sent it… I mean," she gave a false little laugh as she rummaged in her handbag, "the Minister just sent it… ah yes…"

She had pulled out a piece of parchment which she now unfurled, clearing her throat fussily before starting to read what it said.

"Hem, hem… 'Educational Decree Number Twenty-five'."

"Not another one!" exclaimed Professor McGonagall violently.

"Well, yes," said Umbridge, still smiling. "As a matter of fact, Minerva, it was you who made me see that we needed a further amendment… you remember how you overrode me, when I was unwilling to allow the Gryffindor Quidditch team to re-form? How you took the case to Dumbledore, who insisted that the team be allowed to play? Well, now, I couldn't have that. I contacted the Minister at once, and he quite agreed with me that the High Inquisitor has to have

the power to strip pupils of privileges, or she - that is to say, I - would have less authority than common teachers! And you see now, don't you, Minerva, how right I was in attempting to stop the Gryffindor team re-forming? Dreadful tempers… anyway, I was reading out our amendment… hem, hem… 'High Inquisitor will henceforth have supreme authority over all punishments, sanctions and removal of privileges pertaining to the students of Hogwarts, and the power to alter such punishments, sanctions and removals of privileges as may have been ordered by other staff members. Signed, Cornelius Fudge, Minister for Magic, Order of Merlin First Class, etc., etc.'"

She rolled up the parchment and put it back into her handbag, still smiling.

"So… I really think I will have to ban these two from playing Quidditch ever again," she said, looking from Harry to George and back again.

Harry felt the Snitch fluttering madly in his hand.

"Ban us?" he said, and his voice sounded strangely distant. "From playing… ever again?"

"Yes, Mr. Potter, I think a lifelong ban ought to do the trick," said Umbridge, her smile widening still further as she watched him struggle to comprehend what she had said. "You and Mr. Weasley here. And I think, to be safe, this young man's twin ought to be stopped, too - if his teammates had not restrained him, I feel sure he would have attacked young Mr. Malfoy as well. I will want their broomsticks confiscated, of course; I shall keep them safely in my office, to make sure there is no infringement of my ban. But I am not unreasonable, Professor McGonagall," she continued, turning back to Professor McGonagall who was now standing as still as though carved from ice, staring at her. "The rest of the team can continue playing, I saw no signs of violence from any of them. Well… good afternoon to you."

And with a look of the utmost satisfaction, Umbridge left the room, leaving a horrified silence in her wake.

"Banned," said Angelina in a hollow voice, late that evening in the common room. "Banned. No Seeker and no Beaters… what on earth are we going to do?"

It did not feel as though they had won the match at all. Everywhere Harry looked there were disconsolate and angry faces; the team themselves were slumped around the fire, all apart from Ron, who had not been seen since the end of the match.

"It's just so unfair," said Alicia numbly. "I mean, what about Crabbe and that Bludger he hit after the whistle had been blown? Has she banned him?"

"No," said Ginny miserably; she and Hermione were sitting on either side of Harry. "He just got lines, I heard Montague laughing about it at dinner."

"And banning Fred when he didn't even do anything!" said Alicia furiously, pummeling her knee with her fist.

“It’s not my fault I didn’t,” said Fred, with a very ugly look on his face, “I would’ve pounded the little scumbag to a pulp if you three hadn’t been holding me back.”

Harry stared miserably at the dark window. Snow was falling. The Snitch he had caught earlier was now zooming around and around the common room; people were watching its progress as though hypnotized and Crookshanks was leaping from chair to chair, trying to catch it.

“I’m going to bed,” said Angelina, getting slowly t o her feet. “Maybe this will all turn out to have been a bad dream… maybe I’ll wake up tomorrow and find we haven’t played yet…”

She was soon followed by Alicia and Katie. Fred and George sloped off to bed some time later, glowering at everyone they passed, and Ginny went not long after that. Only Harry and Hermione were left beside the fire.

“Have you seen Ron?” Hermione asked in a low voice.

Harry shook his head.

“I think he’s avoiding us,” said Hermione. “Where d o you think he -?”

But at that precise moment, there was a creaking sound behind them as the Fat Lady swung forwards and Ron came clambering through the portrait hole. He was very pale indeed and there was snow in his hair. When he saw Harry and Hermione, he stopped dead in his tracks.

“Where have you been?” said Hermione anxiously, springing up.

“Walking,” Ron mumbled. He was still wearing his Quidditch things.

“You look frozen,” said Hermione. “Come and sit down!”

Ron walked to the fireside and sank into the chair furthest from Harry’s, not looking at him. The stolen Snitch zoomed over their heads.

“I’m sorry,” Ron mumbled, looking at his feet.

“What for?” said Harry.

“For thinking I can play Quidditch,” said Ron. “I’m going to resign first thing tomorrow.”

“If you resign,” said Harry testily, “there’ll only be three players left on the team.” And when Ron looked puzzled, he said, “I’ve been given a lifetime ban. So’ve Fred and George.”

“What?” Ron yelped.

Hermione told him the full story; Harry could not bear to tell it again. When she had finished, Ron looked more anguished than ever.

“This is all my fault -”

“You didn’t make me punch Malfoy,” said Harry angrily.

“- if I wasn’t so terrible at Quidditch -”

“- it’s got nothing to do with that.”

“- it was that song that wound me up -”

“- it would’ve wound anyone up.”

Hermione got up and walked to the window, away from the argument, watching the snow swirling down against the pane.

“Look, drop it, will you!” Harry burst out. “It’s bad enough, without you blaming yourself for everything!”

Ron said nothing but sat gazing miserably at the damp hem of his robes. After a while he said in a dull voice, “This is the worst I’ve ever felt in my life.”

“Join the club,” said Harry bitterly.

“Well,” said Hermione, her voice trembling slightly. “I can think of one thing that might cheer you both up.”

“Oh yeah?” said Harry skeptically.

“Yeah,” said Hermione, turning away from the pitch-black, snow-flecked window, a broad smile spreading across her face. “Hagrids back.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Hagrid’s Tale

Harry sprinted up to the boys’ dormitories to fetch the Invisibility Cloak and the Marauder’s Map from his trunk; he was so quick that he and Ron were ready to leave at least five minutes before Hermione hurried back down from the girls’ dormitories, wearing scarf, gloves and one of her own knobbly elf hats.

“Well, it’s cold out there!” she said defensively, as Ron clicked his tongue impatiently.

They crept through the portrait hole and covered themselves hastily in the Cloak - Ron had grown so much he now needed to crouch to prevent his feet showing - then, moving slowly and cautiously, they proceeded down the many staircases, pausing at intervals to check on the map for signs of Filch or Mrs. Norris. They were lucky; they saw nobody but Nearly Headless Nick, who was gliding along absent-mindedly humming something that sounded horribly like *Weasley is our King.* They crept across the Entrance Hall and out into the silent, snowy grounds. With a great leap of his heart, Harry saw little golden squares of light ahead and smoke coiling up from Hagrid’s chimney. He set off at a quick march, the other two jostling and bumping along behind him. They crunched excitedly through the thickening snow until at last they reached the wooden front door. When Harry raised his fist and knocked three times, a dog started barking frantically inside.

“Hagrid, its us!” Harry called through the keyhole.

“Shoulda known!” said a gruff voice.

They beamed at each other under the Cloak; they could tell by Hagrid’s voice that he was pleased. “Bin home three seconds… out the way, Fang… out the way, yeh dozy dog…”

The bolt was drawn back, the door creaked open and Hagrid’s head appeared in the gap.

Hermione screamed.

“Merlin’s beard, keep it down!” said Hagrid hastily, staring wildly over their heads. “Under that Cloak, are yeh? Well, get in, get in!”

“I’m sorry!” Hermione gasped, as the three of them squeezed past Hagrid into the house and pulled the Cloak off themselves so he could see them. “I just - oh, Hagrid!”

“It’s nuthin’, it’s nuthin’!” said Hagrid hastily, shutting the door behind them and hurrying to close all the curtains, but Hermione continued to gaze up at him in horror.

Hagrid’s hair was matted with congealed blood and his left eye had been reduced to a puffy slit amid a mass of purple and black bruising. There were many cuts on his face and hands, some of

them still bleeding, and he was moving gingerly, which made Harry suspect broken ribs. It was obvious that he had only just got home; a thick black traveling cloak lay over the back of a chair and a haversack large enough to carry several small children leaned against the wall inside the door. Hagrid himself, twice the size of a normal man, was now limping over to the fire and placing a copper kettle over it.

“What happened to you?” Harry demanded, while Fang danced around them all, trying to lick their faces.

“Told yeh, nuthin’,” said Hagrid firmly. “Want a cuppa?”

“Come off it,” said Ron, “you’re in a right state!”

“I’m tellin’ yeh, I’m fine,” said Hagrid, straightening up and turning to beam at them all, but wincing. “Blimey, it’s good ter see yeh three again - had good summers, did yeh?”

“Hagrid, you’ve been attacked!” said Ron.

“Fer the las’ time, it’s nuthin’!” said Hagrid firmly.

“Would you say it was nothing if one of us turned up with a pound of mince instead of a face?” Ron demanded.

“You ought to go and see Madam Pomfrey, Hagrid,” said Hermione anxiously, “some of those cuts look nasty.”

“I’m dealin’ with it, all righ’?” said Hagrid repressively.

He walked across to the enormous wooden table that stood in the middle of his cabin and twitched aside a tea towel that had been lying on it. Underneath was a raw, bloody, green-tinged steak slightly larger than the average car tire.

“You’re not going to eat that, are you, Hagrid?” said Ron, leaning in for a closer look. “It looks poisonous.”

“It’s s’posed ter look like that, it’s dragon meat,” Hagrid said. “An’ I didn’ get it ter eat.”

He picked up the steak and slapped it over the left side of his face. Greenish blood trickled down into his beard as he gave a soft moan of satisfaction.

“Tha’s better. It helps with the stingin’, yeh know.”

“So, are you going to tell us what’s happened to you?” Harry asked.

“Can’t, Harry. Top secret. More’n me job’s worth ter tell yeh that.”

“Did the giants beat you up, Hagrid?” asked Hermione quietly.

Hagrid’s fingers slipped on the dragon steak and it slid squelchily on to his chest.

“Giants?” said Hagrid, catching the steak before it reached his belt and slapping it back over his face, “who said anythin’ abou’ giants? Who yeh bin talkin’ to? Who’s told yeh what I’ve - who’s said I’ve bin - eh?”

“We guessed,” said Hermione apologetically.

“Oh, yeh did, did yeh?” said Hagrid, surveying her sternly with the eye that was not hidden by the steak.

“It was kind of… obvious,” said Ron. Harry nodded.

Hagrid glared at them, then snorted, threw the steak back on to the table and strode over to the kettle, which was now whistling.

“Never known kids like you three fer knowin’ more’n yeh oughta,” he muttered, splashing boiling water into three of his bucket-shaped mugs. “An’ I’m not complimentin’ yeh, neither. Nosy, some’d call it. Interferin’.”

But his beard twitched.

“So you have been to look for giants?” said Harry, grinning as he sat down at the table.
Hagrid set tea in front of each of them, sat down, picked up his steak again and slapped it back over his face.

“Yeah, all righ’,” he grunted, “I have.”

“And you found them?” said Hermione in a hushed voice.

“Well, they’re not that difficult ter find, ter be honest,” said Hagrid. “Pretty big, see.”

“Where are they?” said Ron.

“Mountains,” said Hagrid unhelpfully.

“So why don’t Muggles -?”

“They do,” said Hagrid darkly. “On’y their deaths are always put down ter mountaineerin’ accidents, aren’ they?”

He adjusted the steak a little so that it covered the worst of the bruising.

“Come on, Hagrid, tell us what you’ve been up to!” said Ron. “Tell us about being attacked by the giants and Harry can tell you about being attacked by the Dementors -”

Hagrid choked in his mug and dropped his steak at the same time; a large quantity of spit, tea and dragon blood was sprayed over the table as Hagrid coughed and spluttered and the steak slid, with a soft splat, on to the floor.

“Whadda yeh mean, attacked by Dementors?” growled Hagrid.

“Didn’t you know?” Hermione asked him, wide-eyed.

“I don’ know anythin’ that’s bin happenin’ since I left. I was on a secret mission, wasn’ I, didn’ wan’ owls followin’ me all over the place - ruddy Dementors! Yeh’re not serious?”

“Yeah, I am, they turned up in Little Whinging and attacked my cousin and me, and then the Ministry of Magic expelled me -”

“WHAT?”

“- and I had to go to a hearing and everything, but tell us about the giants first.”

“You were expelled!”

“Tell us about your summer and I’ll tell you about mine.”

Hagrid glared at him through his one open eye. Harry looked right back, an expression of innocent determination on his face.

“Oh, all righ’,” Hagrid said in a resigned voice.

He bent down and tugged the dragon steak out of Fang’s mouth.

“Oh, Hagrid, don’t, it’s not hygien—” Hermione began, but Hagrid had already slapped the meat back over his swollen eye.

He took another fortifying gulp of tea, then said, “Well, we set off righ’ after term ended -”

“Madame Maxime went with you, then?” Hermione interjected.

“Yeah, tha’s righ’,” said Hagrid, and a softened expression appeared on the few inches of face that were not obscured by beard or green steak. “Yeah, it was jus’ the pair of us. An’ I’ll tell yeh this, she’s not afraid of roughin’ it, Olympe. Yeh know, she’s a fine, well-dressed woman, an’ knowin’ where we was goin’ I wondered ‘ow she’d feel abou’ clamberin’ over boulders an’ sleepin’ in caves an’ tha’, bu’ she never complained once.”

“You knew where you were going?” Harry repeated. “You knew where the giants were?”

“Well, Dumbledore knew, an’ he told us,” said Hagrid.

“Are they hidden?” asked Ron. “Is it a secret, where they are?”

“Not really” said Hagrid, shaking his shaggy head. “It’s jus’ that mos’ wizards aren’ bothered where they are,’s long as it’s a good long way away. But where they are’s very difficult ter get ter, fer humans anyway, so we needed Dumbledore’s instructions. Took us abou’ a month ter get there -”

“A month?” said Ron, as though he had never heard o f a journey lasting such a ridiculously long time. “But - why couldn’t you just grab a Portkey or something?”

There was an odd expression in Hagrid’s unobscured eye as he surveyed Ron; it was almost pitying.

“We’re bein’ watched, Ron,” he said gruffly.

“What d’you mean?”

“Yeh don’ understand,” said Hagrid. “The Ministry’s keepin’ an eye on Dumbledore an’ anyone they reckon’s in league with ‘im, an’ -”

“We know about that,” said Harry quickly keen to hear the rest of Hagrid’s story, “we know about the Ministry watching Dumbledore -”

“So you couldn’t use magic to get there?” asked Ron, looking thunderstruck, “you had to act like Muggles all the way?”

“Well, not exactly all the way” said Hagrid cagily. “We jus’ had ter be careful, ‘cause Olympe an’ me, we stick out a bit —”

Ron made a stifled noise somewhere between a snort and a sniff and hastily took a gulp of tea.

“- so we’re not hard ter follow. We was pretendin’ we was goin’ on holiday together, so we got inter France an’ we made like we was headin’ fer where Olympes school is, ‘cause we knew we was bein’ tailed by someone from the Ministry. We had to go slow, ‘cause I’m not really s’posed ter use magic an’ we knew the Ministry’d be lookin’ fer a reason ter run us in. But we managed ter give the berk tailin’ us the slip round abou’ Dee-John —”

“Ooooh, Dijon?” said Hermione excitedly. “I’ve been there on holiday, did you see -?”

She fell silent at the look on Ron’s face.

“We chanced a bit o’ magic after that an’ it wasn’ a bad journey. Ran inter a couple o’ mad trolls on the Polish border an’ I had a sligh’ disagreement with a vampire in a pub in Minsk, bu’ apart from tha’ couldn’t’a bin smoother.

“An’ then we reached the place, an’ we started trekkin’ up through the mountains, lookin’ fer signs of ‘em…

“We had ter lay off the magic once we got near ‘em. Partly ‘cause they don’ like wizards an’ we didn’ want ter put their backs up too soon, an’ partly ‘cause Dumbledore had warned us You-Know-Who was bound ter be after the giants an’ all. Said it was odds on he’d sent a messenger off ter them already. Told us ter be very careful of drawin’ attention ter ourselves as we got nearer in case there was Death Eaters around.”

Hagrid paused for a long draught of tea.

“Go on!” said Harry urgently.

“Found ‘em,” said Hagrid baldly. “Went over a ridge one nigh’ an’ there they was, spread ou’ underneath us. Little fires burnin’ below an’ huge shadows… it was like watchin’ bits o’ the mountain movin’.”

“How big are they?” asked Ron in a hushed voice.

“Bout twenty feet,” said Hagrid casually. “Some o’ the bigger ones mighta bin twenty-five.”

“And how many were there?” asked Harry.

“I reckon abou’ seventy or eighty,” said Hagrid.

“Is that all?” said Hermione.

“Yep,” said Hagrid sadly, “eighty left, an’ there was loads once, musta bin a hundred diff’rent tribes from all over the world. Bu’ they’ve bin dyin’ out fer ages. Wizards killed a few, o’ course, bu’ mostly they killed each other, an’ now they’re dyin’ out faster than ever. They’re not made ter live bunched up together like tha’. Dumbledore says it’s our fault, it was the wizards who forced ‘em to go an’ made ‘em live a good long way from us an’ they had no choice bu’ ter stick together fer their own protection.”

“So,” said Harry, “you saw them and then what?”

“Well, we waited till morning, didn’ want ter go sneakin’ up on ‘em in the dark, fer our own safety,” said Hagrid. “Bout three in the mornin’ they fell asleep jus’ where they was sittin’. We didn’ dare sleep. Fer one thing, we wanted ter make sure none of ‘em woke up an’ came up where we were, an’ fer another, the snorin’ was unbelievable. Caused an avalanche near mornin’.

“Anyway, once it was light we wen’ down ter see ‘em.”

“Just like that?” said Ron, looking awestruck. “You just walked right into a giant camp?”

“Well, Dumbledore’d told us how ter do it,” said Hagrid. “Give the Gurg gifts, show some respect, yeh know.”

“Give the what gifts?” asked Harry.

“Oh, the Gurg - means the chief.”

“How could you tell which one was the Gurg?” asked Ron.

Hagrid grunted in amusement.

“No problem,” he said. “He was the biggest, the ugliest an’ the laziest. Sittin’ there waitin’ ter be brought food by the others. Dead goats an’ such like. Name o’ Karkus. I’d put him at twenty-two, twenty-three feet an’ the weight o’ a couple o’ bull elephants. Skin like rhino hide an’ all.”

“And you just walked up to him?” said Hermione breathlessly.

“Well… down ter him, where he was lyin’ in the valley. They was in this dip between four pretty high mountains, see, beside a mountain lake, an’ Karkus was lyin’ by the lake roarin’ at the others ter feed him an’ his wife. Olympe an’ I went down the mountainside -”

“But didn’t they try and kill you when they saw you?” asked Ron incredulously.

“It was def’nitely on some o’ their minds,” said Ha grid, shrugging, “but we did what Dumbledore told us ter do, which was ter hold our gift up high an’ keep our eyes on the Gurg an’ ignore the others. So tha’s what we did. An’ the rest of ‘em went quiet an’ watched us pass an’ we got right up ter Karkus’s feet an’ we bowed an’ put our present down in front o’ him.”

“What do you give a giant?” asked Ron eagerly. “Food?”

“Nah, he can get food all righ’ fer himself,” said Hagrid. “We took him magic. Giants like magic, jus’ don’ like us usin’ it against ‘em. Anyway, that firs’ day we gave ‘im a branch o’ Gubraithian fire.”

Hermione said, “Wow!” softly, but Harry and Ron both frowned in puzzlement.

“A branch of -?”

“Everlasting fire,” said Hermione irritably, “you ought to know that by now. Professor Flitwick’s mentioned it at least twice in class!”

“Well, anyway,” said Hagrid quickly, intervening before Ron could answer back, “Dumbledore’d bewitched this branch to burn fer evermore, which isn’ somethin’ any wizard could do, an’ so I lies it down in the snow by Karkus’s feet and says, ‘A gift to the Gurg of the giants from Albus Dumbledore, who sends his respectful greetings.’”

“And what did Karkus say?” asked Harry eagerly.

“Nothin’,” said Hagrid. “Didn’ speak English.”

“You’re kidding!”

“Didn’ matter,” said Hagrid imperturbably, “Dumbledore had warned us tha’ migh’ happen. Karkus knew enough to yell fer a couple o’ giants who knew our lingo an’ they translated fer us.”

“And did he like the present?” asked Ron.

“Oh yeah, it went down a storm once they understood what it was,” said Hagrid, turning his dragon steak over to press the cooler side to his swollen eye. “Very pleased. So then I said, Dumbledore asks the Gurg to speak with his messenger when he returns tomorrow with another gift.”

“Why couldn’t you speak to them that day?” asked Hermione.

“Dumbledore wanted us ter take it very slow,” said Hagrid. “Let ‘em see we kept our promises. We’ll come back tomorrow with another present, an’ then we do come back with another present - gives a good impression, see? An’ gives them time ter test out the firs’ present an’ find out it’s a good one, an’ get ‘em eager fer more. In any case, giants like Karkus - overload ‘em with information an’ they’ll kill yeh jus’ to simplify things. So we bowed outta the way an’ went off an’ found ourselves a nice little cave ter spend that night in an’ the followin’ mornin’ we went back an’ this time we found Karkus sittin’ up waitin’ fer us lookin’ all eager.”

“And you talked to him?”

“Oh yeah. Firs’ we presented him with a nice battle helmet -goblin-made an’ indestructible, yeh know - an’ then we sat down an’ we talked.”

“What did he say?”

“Not much,” said Hagrid. “Listened mostly. Bu’ there were good signs. He’d heard o’ Dumbledore, heard he’d argued against the killin’ o’ the last giants in Britain. Karkus seemed ter be quite int’rested in what Dumbledore had ter say. An’ a few o’ the others, ‘specially the ones who had some English, they gathered round an’ listened too. We were hopeful when we left that day. Promised ter come back next mornin’ with another present…

“Bu’ that night it all wen’ wrong.”

“What d’you mean?” said Ron quickly.

“Well, like I say, they’re not meant ter live together, giants,” said Hagrid sadly. “Not in big groups like that. They can’ help themselves, they half kill each other every few weeks. The men

fight each other an’ the women fight each other; the remnants of the old tribes fight each other, an’ that’s even without squabbles over food an’ the best fires an’ sleepin’ spots. Yeh’d think, seein’ as how their whole race is abou’ finished, they’d lay off each other, bu’…”

Hagrid sighed deeply.

“That night a fight broke out, we saw it from the mouth of our cave, lookin’ down on the valley. Went on fer hours, yeh wouldn’ believe the noise. An’ when the sun came up the snow was scarlet an’ his head was lyin’ at the bottom o’ the lake.”

“Whose head?” gasped Hermione.

“Karkus’s,” said Hagrid heavily. “There was a new Gurg, Golgomath.” He sighed deeply.

“Well, we hadn’ bargained on a new Gurg two days after we’d made friendly contact with the firs’ one, an’ we had a funny feelin’ Golgomath wouldn’ be so keen ter listen to us, bu’ we had ter try.”

“You went to speak to him?” asked Ron incredulously. “After you’d watched him rip off another giant’s head?”

“Course we did,” said Hagrid, “we hadn’ gone all that way ter give up after two days! We wen’ down with the next present we’d meant ter give ter Karkus.

“I knew it was no go before I’d opened me mouth. He was sitting there wearin’ Karkus’s helmet, leerin’ at us as we got nearer. He’s massive, one o’ the biggest ones there. Black hair an’ matchin’ teeth an’ a necklace o’ bones. Human-lookin’ bones, some of ‘em. Well, I gave it a go - held out a great roll o’ dragon skin - an’ said, ‘gift fer the Gurg of the giants —’ Nex’ thing I knew, I was hangin’ upside-down in the air by me feet, two of his mates had grabbed me.”

Hermione clapped her hands to her mouth.

“How did you get out of that?” asked Harry.

“Wouldn’ta done if Olympe hadn’ bin there,” said Hagrid. “She pulled out her wand an’ did some o’ the fastes’ spellwork I’ve ever seen. Ruddy marvellous. Hit the two holdin’ me right in the eyes with Conjunctivitus Curses an’ they dropped me straightaway - bu’ we were in trouble then, ‘cause we’d used magic against ‘em, an’ that’s what giants hate abou’ wizards. We had ter leg it an’ we knew there was no way we was going ter be able ter march inter the camp again.”

“Blimey, Hagrid,” said Ron quietly.

“So, how come it’s taken you so long to get home if you were only there for three days?” asked Hermione.

“We didn’ leave after three days!” said Hagrid, looking outraged. “Dumbledore was relyin’ on

us!”

“But you’ve just said there was no way you could go back!”

“Not by daylight we couldn’, no. We just had ter rethink a bit. Spent a couple o’ days lyin’ low up in the cave an’ watchin’. An’ wha’ we saw wasn’ good.”

“Did he rip off more heads?” asked Hermione, sounding squeamish.

“No,” said Hagrid, “I wish he had.”

“What d’you mean?”

“I mean we soon found out he didn’ object ter all wizards - just us.”

“Death Eaters?” said Harry quickly.

“Yep,” said Hagrid darkly. “Couple of ‘em were visitin’ him ev’ry day, bringin’ gifts ter the Gurg, an’ he wasn’ dangling them upside-down.”

“How d’you know they were Death Eaters?” said Ron.

“Because I recognized one of ‘em,” Hagrid growled. “Macnair, remember him? Bloke they sent ter kill Buckbeak? Maniac, he is. Likes killin’ as much as Golgomath; no wonder they were gettin’ on so well.”

“So Macnairs persuaded the giants to join You-Know-Who?” said Hermione desperately.

“Hold yer Hippogriffs, I haven’ finished me story yet!” said Hagrid indignantly, who, considering he had not wanted to tell them anything in the first place, now seemed to be rather enjoying himself. “Me an’ Olympe talked it over an’ we agreed, jus’ ‘cause the Gurg looked like favorin’ You-Know-Who didn’ mean all of ‘em would. We had ter try an’ persuade some o’ the others, the ones who hadn’ wanted Golgomath as Gurg.”

“How could you tell which ones they were?” asked Ron.

“Well, they were the ones bein’ beaten to a pulp, weren’ they?” said Hagrid patiently. “The ones with any sense were keepin’ outta Golgomath’s way, hidin’ out in caves roun’ the gully jus’ like we were. So we decided we’d go pokin’ round the caves by night an’ see if we couldn’ persuade a few o’ them.”

“You went poking around dark caves looking for giants?” said Ron, with awed respect in his voice.

“Well, it wasn’ the giants who worried us most,” said Hagrid. “We were more concerned abou’ the Death Eaters. Dumbledore had told us before we wen’ not ter tangle with ‘em if we could

avoid it, an’ the trouble was they knew we was around — ‘spect Golgomath told ‘em abou’ us. At night, when the giants were sleepin’ an’ we wanted ter be creepin’ inter the caves, Macnair an’ the other one were sneakin’ round the mountains lookin’ fer us. I was hard put to stop Olympe jumpin’ out at ‘em,” said Hagrid, the corners of his mouth lifting his wild beard, “she was rarin’ ter attack ‘em… she’s somethin’ when she’s roused, Olympe… fiery, yeh know… ‘spect it’s the French in her…”

Hagrid gazed misty-eyed into the fire. Harry allowed him thirty seconds of reminiscence before clearing his throat loudly.

“So, what happened? Did you ever get near any of the other giants?”

“What? Oh… oh, yeah, we did. Yeah, on the third night after Karkus was killed we crept outta the cave we’d bin hidin’ in an’ headed back down inter the gully, keepin’ our eyes skinned fer the Death Eaters. Got inside a few o’ the caves, no go - then, in abou’ the sixth one, we found three giants hidin’.”

“Cave must’ve been cramped,” said Ron.

“Wasn’ room ter swing a Kneazle,” said Hagrid.

“Didn’t they attack you when they saw you?” asked Hermione.

“Probably woulda done if they’d bin in any condition,” said Hagrid, “but they was badly hurt, all three o’ them; Golgomath’s lot had beaten ‘em unconscious; they’d woken up an’ crawled inter the nearest shelter they could find. Anyway, one o’ them had a bit of English an’ ‘e translated fer the others, an’ what we had ter say didn’ seem ter go down too badly. So we kep’ goin’ back, visitin’ the wounded… I reckon we had abou’ six or seven o’ them convinced at one poin’.”

“Six or seven?” said Ron eagerly. “Well that’s not bad - are they going to come over here and start fighting You-Know-Who with us?”

But Hermione said, “What do you mean ‘one point’, Hagrid?”

Hagrid looked at her sadly.

“Golgomath’s lot raided the caves. The ones tha’ survived didn’ wan’ no more ter to do with us after that.”

“So… so there aren’t any giants coming?” said Ron, looking disappointed.

“Nope,” said Hagrid, heaving a deep sigh as he turned over his steak and applied the cooler side to his face, “but we did wha’ we meant ter do, we g ave ‘em Dumbledore’s message an’ some o’ them heard it an’ I spect some o’ them’ll remember it. Jus’ maybe, them that don’ want ter stay around Golgomath’ll move outta the mountains, an’ there’s gotta be a chance they’ll remember Dumbledore’s friendly to ‘em… could be they’ll come.”

Snow was filling up the window now. Harry became aware that the knees of his robes were soaked through: Fang was drooling with his head in Harry’s lap.

“Hagrid?” said Hermione quietly after a while.

“Mmm?”

“Did you… was there any sign of… did you hear anything about your… your… mother while you were there?”

Hagrid’s unobscured eye rested upon her and Hermione looked rather scared.

“I’m sorry… I… forget it -”

“Dead,” Hagrid grunted. “Died years ago. They told me.”

“Oh… I’m… I’m really sorry” said Hermione in a very small voice. Hagrid shrugged his massive shoulders.

“No need,” he said shortly. “Can’t remember her much. Wasn’ a great mother.”

They were silent again. Hermione glanced nervously at Harry and Ron, plainly wanting them to speak.

“But you still haven’t explained how you got in this state, Hagrid,” Ron said, gesturing towards Hagrid’s bloodstained face.

“Or why you’re back so late,” said Harry. “Sirius says Madame Maxime got back ages ago -”

“Who attacked you?” said Ron.

“I haven’ bin attacked!” said Hagrid emphatically. “I -”

But the rest of his words were drowned in a sudden outbreak of rapping on the door. Hermione gasped; her mug slipped through her fingers and smashed on the floor; Fang yelped. All four of them stared at the window beside the doorway. The shadow of somebody small and squat rippled across the thin curtain.

“It’s her!” Ron whispered.

“Get under here!” Harry said quickly; seizing the Invisibility Cloak, he whirled it over himself and Hermione while Ron tore around the table and dived under the Cloak as well. Huddled together, they backed away into a corner. Fang was barking madly at the door. Hagrid looked thoroughly confused.

“Hagrid, hide our mugs!”

Hagrid seized Harry and Ron's mugs and shoved them under the cushion in Fang's basket. Fang was now leaping up at the door; Hagrid pushed him out of the way with his foot and pulled it open.

Professor Umbridge was standing in the doorway wearing her green tweed cloak and a matching hat with earflaps. Lips pursed, she leaned back so as to see Hagrid's face; she barely reached his navel.

"So," she said slowly and loudly, as though speaking to somebody deaf. "You're Hagrid, are you?"

Without waiting for an answer she strolled into the room, her bulging eyes rolling in every direction.

"Get away," she snapped, waving her handbag at Fang, who had bounded up to her and was attempting to lick her face.

"Er - I don' want ter be rude," said Hagrid, staring at her, "but who the ruddy hell are you?"

"My name is Dolores Umbridge."

Her eyes were sweeping the cabin. Twice they stared directly into the corner where Harry stood, sandwiched between Ron and Hermione.

"Dolores Umbridge?" Hagrid said, sounding thoroughly confused. "I thought you were one o' them Ministry - don' you work with Fudge?"

"I was Senior Undersecretary to the Minister, yes," said Umbridge, now pacing around the cabin, taking in every tiny detail within, from the haversack against the wall to the abandoned traveling cloak. "I am now the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher -"

"Tha's brave of yeh," said Hagrid, "there's not many'd take tha' job any more."

"- and Hogwarts High Inquisitor," said Umbridge, giving no sign that she had heard him.

"Wha's that?" said Hagrid, frowning.

"Precisely what I was going to ask," said Umbridge, pointing at the broken shards of china on the floor that had been Hermione's mug.

"Oh," said Hagrid, with a most unhelpful glance towards the corner where Harry, Ron and Hermione stood hidden, "oh, tha' was… was Fang. He broke a mug. So I had ter use this one instead."

Hagrid pointed to the mug from which he had been drinking, one hand still clamped over the dragon steak pressed to his eye. Umbridge stood facing him now, taking in every detail of his

appearance instead of the cabin's.

"I heard voices," she said quietly.

"I was talkin' ter Fang," said Hagrid stoutly.

"And was he talking back to you?"

"Well… in a manner o' speakin'," said Hagrid, looking uncomfortable. "I sometimes say Fang's near enough human -"

"There are three sets of footprints in the snow leading from the castle doors to your cabin," said Umbridge sleekly.

Hermione gasped; Harry clapped a hand over her mouth. Luckily, Fang was sniffing loudly around the hem of Professor Umbridge's robes and she did not appear to have heard.

"Well, I on'y jus' got back," said Hagrid, waving an enormous hand at the haversack. "Maybe someone came ter call earlier an' I missed 'em."

"There are no footsteps leading away from your cabin door."

"Well, I… I don' know why that'd be…" said Hagrid, tugging nervously at his beard and again glancing towards the corner where Harry, Ron and Hermione stood, as though asking for help.

"Erm…"

Umbridge wheeled round and strode the length of the cabin, looking around carefully. She bent and peered under the bed. She opened Hagrid's cupboards. She passed within two inches of where Harry, Ron and Hermione stood pressed against the wall; Harry actually pulled in his stomach as she walked by. After looking carefully inside the enormous cauldron Hagrid used for cooking, she wheeled round again and said, "What has happened to you? How did you sustain those injuries?"

Hagrid hastily removed the dragon steak from his face, which in Harrys opinion was a mistake, because the black and purple bruising all around his eye was now clearly visible, not to mention the large amount of fresh and congealed blood on his face. "Oh, I… had a bit of an accident," he said lamely.

"What sort of accident?"

"I - I tripped."

"You tripped," she repeated coolly.

"Yeah, tha's right. Over… over a friend's broomstick. I don' fly, meself. Well, look at the size o'

me, I don' reckon there's a broomstick that'd hold me. Friend o' mine breeds Abraxan horses, I dunno if you've ever seen 'em, big beasts, winged, yeh know, I've had a bit of a ride on one o' them an' it was -"

"Where have you been?" asked Umbridge, cutting coolly through Hagrid's babbling.

"Where've I -?"

"Been, yes," she said. "Term started two months ago. Another teacher has had to cover your classes. None of your colleagues has been able to give me any information as to your whereabouts. You left no address. Where have you been?"

There was a pause in which Hagrid stared at her with his newly uncovered eye. Harry could almost hear his brain working furiously.

"I - I've been away for me health," he said.

"For your health," repeated Professor Umbridge. Her eyes traveled over Hagrid's discolored and swollen face; dragon blood dripped gently and silently on to his waistcoat. "I see."

"Yeah," said Hagrid, "bit o' - o' fresh air, yeh know -"

"Yes, as gamekeeper fresh air must be so difficult to come by," said Umbridge sweetly. The small patch of Hagrid's face that was not black or purple, flushed.

"Well — change o' scene, yeh know –"

"Mountain scenery?" said Umbridge swiftly.

She knows, Harry thought desperately.

"Mountains?" Hagrid repeated, clearly thinking fast. "Nope, South o' France fer me. Bit o' sun an'… an' sea."

"Really?" said Umbridge. "You don't have much of a tan."

"Yeah… well… sensitive skin," said Hagrid, attempting an ingratiating smile. Harry noticed that two of his teeth had been knocked out. Umbridge looked at him coldly; his smile faltered. Then she hoisted her handbag a little higher into the crook of her arm and said, "I shall, of course, be informing the Minister of your late return."

"Righ'," said Hagrid, nodding.

"You ought to know, too, that as High Inquisitor it is my unfortunate but necessary duty to inspect my fellow teachers. So I daresay we shall meet again soon enough."

She turned sharply and marched back to the door.

“You’re inspectin’ us?” Hagrid repeated blankly, looking after her.

“Oh, yes,” said Umbridge softly, looking back at him with her hand on the door handle. “The Ministry is determined to weed out unsatisfactory teachers, Hagrid. Goodnight.”

She left, closing the door behind her with a snap. Harry made to pull off the Invisibility Cloak but Hermione seized his wrist.

“Not yet,” she breathed in his ear. “She might not be gone yet.”

Hagrid seemed to be thinking the same way; he stumped across the room and pulled back the curtain an inch or so.

“She’s goin’ back ter the castle,” he said in a low voice. “Blimey… inspectin’ people, is she?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, pulling off the Cloak. “Trelawney’s on probation already…”

“Um… what sort of thing are you planning to do with us in class, Hagrid?” asked Hermione.

“Oh, don’ you worry abou’ that, I’ve got a great load o’ lessons planned,” said Hagrid enthusiastically, scooping up his dragon steak from the table and slapping it over his eye again. “I’ve bin keepin’ a couple o’ creatures saved fer yer OWL year; you wait, they’re somethin’ really special.”

“Erm… special in what way?” asked Hermione tentatively.

“I’m not sayin’,” said Hagrid happily. “I don’ wan t ter spoil the surprise.”

“Look, Hagrid,” said Hermione urgently, dropping all pretence, “Professor Umbridge won’t be at all happy if you bring anything to class that’s too dangerous.”

“Dangerous?” said Hagrid, looking genially bemused. “Don’ be silly, I wouldn’ give yeh anythin’ dangerous! I mean, all righ’, they can look after themselves -”

“Hagrid, you’ve got to pass Umbridge’s inspection, and to do that it would really be better if she saw you teaching us how to look after Porlocks, how to tell the difference between Knarls and hedgehogs, stuff like that!” said Hermione earnestly.

“But tha’s not very interestin’, Hermione,” said Hagrid. “The stuff I’ve got’s much more impressive. I’ve bin bringin’ ‘em on fer years, I reckon I’ve got the on’y domestic herd in Britain.”

“Hagrid… please…” said Hermione, a note of real desperation in her voice. “Umbridge is looking for any excuse to get rid of teachers she thinks are too close to Dumbledore. Please, Hagrid, teach us something dull that’s bound to come up in our OWL.”

But Hagrid merely yawned widely and cast a one-eyed look of longing towards the vast bed in the corner.

“Lis’en, it’s bin a long day an’ it’s late,” he said, patting Hermione gently on the shoulder, so that her knees gave way and hit the floor with a thud. “Oh - sorry -” He pulled her back up by the neck of her robes. “Look, don’ you go worryin’ abou’ me, I promise yeh I’ve got really good stuff planned fer yer lessons now I’m back… now you lot had better get back up to the castle, an’ don’ forget ter wipe yer footprints out behind yeh!”

“I dunno if you got through to him,” said Ron a sho rt while later when, having checked that the coast was clear, they walked back up to the castle through the thickening snow, leaving no trace behind them due to the Obliteration Charm Hermione was performing as they went.

“Then I’ll go back again tomorrow,” said Hermione determinedly. “I’ll plan his lessons for him if I have to. I don’t care if she throws out Trelawney but she’s not getting rid of Hagrid!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Eye of the Snake

Hermione ploughed her way back to Hagrid's cabin through two feet of snow on Sunday morning. Harry and Ron wanted to go with her, but their mountain of homework had reached an alarming height again, so they remained grudgingly in the common room, trying to ignore the gleeful shouts drifting up from the grounds outside, where students were enjoying themselves skating on the frozen lake, tobogganing and, worst of all, bewitching snowballs to zoom up to Gryffindor Tower and rap hard on the windows.

"Oy!" bellowed Ron, finally losing patience and sticking his head out of the window, "I am a prefect and if one more snowball hits this window - OUCH!"

He withdrew his head sharply, his face covered in snow.

"It's Fred and George," he said bitterly, slamming the window behind him. "Gits…"

Hermione returned from Hagrid's just before lunch, shivering slightly, her robes damp to the knees.

"So?" said Ron, looking up when she entered. "Got all his lessons planned for him?"

"Well, I tried," she said dully, sinking into a chair beside Harry. She pulled out her wand and gave it a complicated little wave so that hot air streamed out of the tip; she then pointed this at her robes, which began to steam as they dried out. "He wasn't even there when I arrived, I was knocking for at least half an hour. And then he came stumping out of the Forest -"

Harry groaned. The Forbidden Forest was teeming with the kind of creatures most likely to get Hagrid the sack. "What's he keeping in there? Did he say?" he asked.

"No," said Hermione miserably. "He says he wants them to be a surprise. I tried to explain about Umbridge, but he just doesn't get it. He kept saying nobody in their right mind would rather study Knarls than Chimaeras - oh, I don't think he's got a Chimaera," she added at the appalled look on Harry and Ron's faces, "but that's not for lack of trying, from what he said about how hard it is to get eggs. I don't know how many times I told him he'd be better off following Grubbly-Plank's plan, I honestly don't think he listened to half of what I said. He's in a bit of a funny mood, you know. He still won't say how he got all those injuries."

Hagrid's reappearance at the staff table at breakfast next day was not greeted by enthusiasm from all students. Some, like Fred, George and Lee, roared with delight and sprinted up the aisle between the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tables to wring Hagrid's enormous hand; others, like Parvati and Lavender, exchanged gloomy looks and shook their heads. Harry knew that many of them preferred Professor Grubbly-Plank's lessons, and the worst of it was that a very small, unbiased part of him knew that they had good reason: Grubbly-Plank's idea of an interesting

class was not one where there was a risk that somebody might have their head ripped off.

It was with a certain amount of apprehension that Harry, Ron and Hermione headed down to Hagrid's on Tuesday, heavily muffled against the cold. Harry was worried, not only about what Hagrid might have decided to teach them, but also about how the rest of the class, particularly Malfoy and his cronies, would behave if Umbridge was watching them.

However, the High Inquisitor was nowhere to be seen as they struggled through the snow towards Hagrid, who stood waiting for them on the edge of the Forest. He did not present a reassuring sight; the bruises that had been purple on Saturday night were now tinged with green and yellow and some of his cuts still seemed to be bleeding. Harry could not understand this: had Hagrid perhaps been attacked by some creature whose venom prevented the wounds it inflicted from healing? As though to complete the ominous picture, Hagrid was carrying what looked like half a dead cow over his shoulder.

"We're workin' in here today!" Hagrid called happily to the approaching students, jerking his head back at the dark trees behind him. "Bit more sheltered! Anyway, they prefer the dark."

"What prefers the dark?" Harry heard Malfoy say sharply to Crabbe and Goyle, a trace of panic in his voice. "What did he say prefers the dark - did you hear?"

Harry remembered the only other occasion on which Malfoy had entered the Forest before now; he had not been very brave then, either. He smiled to himself; after the Quidditch match anything that caused Malfoy discomfort was all right with him.

"Ready?" said Hagrid cheerfully, looking around at the class. "Right, well, I've bin savin' a trip inter the Forest fer yer fifth year. Thought we'd go an' see these creatures in their natural habitat. Now, what we're studyin' today is pretty rare, I reckon I'm probably the on'y person in Britain who's managed ter train 'em."

"And you're sure they're trained, are you?" said Malfoy, the panic in his voice even more pronounced. "Only it wouldn't be the first time you'd brought wild stuff to class, would it?"

The Slytherins murmured agreement and a few Gryffindors looked as though they thought Malfoy had a fair point, too.

"Course they're trained," said Hagrid, scowling and hoisting the dead cow a little higher on his shoulder.

"So what happened to your face, then?" demanded Malfoy.

"Mind yer own business!" said Hagrid, angrily. "Now, if yeh've finished askin' stupid questions, follow me!"

He turned and strode straight into the Forest. Nobody seemed much disposed to follow. Harry glanced at Ron and Hermione, who sighed but nodded, and the three of them set off after Hagrid,

leading the rest of the class.

They walked for about ten minutes until they reached a place where the trees stood so closely together that it was as dark as twilight and there was no snow at all on the ground. With a grunt, Hagrid deposited his half a cow on the ground, stepped back and turned to face his class, most of whom were creeping from tree to tree towards him, peering around nervously as though expecting to be set upon at any moment.

“Gather roun’, gather roun’,” Hagrid encouraged. “Now, they’ll be attracted by the smell o’ the meat but I’m goin’ ter give ‘em a call anyway, ‘cause they’ll like ter know it’s me.”

He turned, shook his shaggy head to get the hair out of his face and gave an odd, shrieking cry that echoed through the dark trees like the call of some monstrous bird. Nobody laughed: most of them looked too scared to make a sound.

Hagrid gave the shrieking cry again. A minute passed in which the class continued to peer nervously over their shoulders and around trees for a first glimpse of whatever it was that was coming. And then, as Hagrid shook his hair back for a third time and expanded his enormous chest, Harry nudged Ron and pointed into the black space between two gnarled yew trees.

A pair of blank, white, shining eyes were growing larger through the gloom and a moment later the dragonish face, neck and then skeletal body of a great, black, winged horse emerged from the darkness. It surveyed the class for a few seconds, swishing its long black tail, then bowed its head and began to tear flesh from the dead cow with its pointed fangs.

A great wave of relief broke over Harry. Here at last was proof that he had not imagined these creatures, that they were real: Hagrid knew about them too. He looked eagerly at Ron, but Ron was still staring around into the trees and after a few seconds he whispered, “Why doesn’t Hagrid call again?”

Most of the rest of the class were wearing expressions as confused and nervously expectant as Ron’s and were still gazing everywhere but at the horse standing feet from them. There were only two other people who seemed to be able to see them: a stringy Slytherin boy standing just behind Goyle was watching the horse eating with an expression of great distaste on his face; and Neville, whose eyes were following the swishing progress of the long black tail.

“Oh, an’ here comes another one!” said Hagrid proudly, as a second black horse appeared out of the dark trees, folded its leathery wings closer to its body and dipped its head to gorge on the meat. “Now… put yer hands up, who can see ‘em?”

Immensely pleased to feel that he was at last going to understand the mystery of these horses, Harry raised his hand. Hagrid nodded at him.

“Yeah… yeah, I knew you’d be able ter, Harry,” he said seriously. “An’ you too, Neville, eh? An’ -”

“Excuse me,” said Malfoy in a sneering voice, “but what exactly are we supposed to be seeing?”

For an answer, Hagrid pointed at the cow carcass on the ground. The whole class stared at it for a few seconds, then several people gasped and Parvati squealed. Harry understood why: bits of flesh stripping themselves away from the bones and vanishing into thin air had to look very odd indeed.

“What’s doing it?” Parvati demanded in a terrified voice, retreating behind the nearest tree.

“What’s eating it?”

“Thestrals,” said Hagrid proudly and Hermione gave a soft “Oh!” of comprehension at Harry’s shoulder. “Hogwarts has got a whole herd of ‘em in here. Now, who knows -?”

“But they’re really, really unlucky!” interrupted Parvati, looking alarmed. “They’re supposed to bring all sorts of horrible misfortune on people who see them. Professor Trelawney told me once -”

“No, no, no,” said Hagrid, chuckling, “tha’s jus’ superstition, that is, they aren’ unlucky, they’re dead clever an’ useful! Course, this lot don’ get a lot o’ work, it’s mainly jus’ pullin’ the school carriages unless Dumbledore’s takin’ a long journey an’ don’ want ter Apparate - an’ here’s another couple, look -”

Two more horses came quietly out of the trees, one of them passing very close to Parvati, who shivered and pressed herself closer to the tree, saying, “I think I felt something, I think it’s near me!”

“Don’ worry, it won’ hurt yen,” said Hagrid patiently. “Righ’, now, who can tell me why some o’ yeh can see ‘em an’ some can’t?”

Hermione raised her hand.

“Go on then,” said Hagrid, beaming at her.

“The only people who can see Thestrals,” she said, “are people who have seen death.”

“Tha’s exactly right,” said Hagrid solemnly, “ten points ter Gryffindor. Now, Thestrals -”

“Hem, hem.”

Professor Umbridge had arrived. She was standing a few feet away from Harry, wearing her green hat and cloak again, her clipboard at the ready. Hagrid, who had never heard Umbridge’s fake cough before, was gazing in some concern at the closest Thestral, evidently under the impression that it had made the sound.

“Hem, hem.”

“Oh, hello!” Hagrid said, smiling, having located the source of the noise.

“You received the note I sent to your cabin this morning?” said Umbridge, in the same loud, slow voice she had used with him earlier, as though she were addressing somebody both foreign and very slow. “Telling you that I would be inspecting y our lesson?”

“Oh, yeah,” said Hagrid brightly. “Glad yeh found the place all righ’! Well, as you can see - or, I dunno - can you? We’re doin’ Thestrals today -”

“I’m sorry?” said Professor Umbridge loudly, cupping her hand around her ear and frowning. “What did you say?”

Hagrid looked a little confused.

“Er - Thestrals!” he said loudly. “Big - er - winged horses, yeh know!”

He flapped his gigantic arms hopefully. Professor Umbridge raised her eyebrows at him and muttered as she made a note on her clipboard: “Has… to… resort… to… crude… sign… language.”

“Well… anyway…” said Hagrid, turning back to the class and looking slightly flustered, “erm… what was I sayin’?”

“Appears… to… have… poor… short… term… memory,” muttered Umbridge, loudly enough for everyone to hear her. Draco Malfoy looked as though Christmas had come a month early; Hermione, on the other hand, had turned scarlet with suppressed rage.

“Oh, yeah,” said Hagrid, throwing an uneasy glance at Umbridge’s clipboard, but ploughing on valiantly. “Yeah, I was gonna tell yeh how come we got a herd. Yeah, so, we started off with a male an’ five females. This one,” he patted the fir st horse to have appeared, “name o’ Tenebrus, he’s my special favorite, firs’ one born here in the Forest -”

“Are you aware,” Umbridge said loudly, interrupting him, “that the Ministry of Magic has classified Thestrals as ‘dangerous’?”

Harry’s heart sank like a stone, but Hagrid merely chuckled.

“Thestrals aren’ dangerous! All righ’, they might take a bite outta yeh if yeh really annoy them -”

“Shows… signs… of… pleasure… at… idea… of… violence,” muttered Umbridge, scribbling on her clipboard again.

“No - come on!” said Hagrid, looking a little anxious now. “I mean, a dog’ll bite if yeh bait it, won’ it - but Thestrals have jus’ got a bad reputation because o’ the death thing - people used ter think they were bad omens, didn’ they? Jus’ didn’ understand, did they?”

Umbridge did not answer; she finished writing her last note, then looked up at Hagrid and said, again very loudly and slowly, “Please continue teaching as usual. I am going to walk,” she mimed walking (Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson were having silent fits of laughter) “among the students” (she pointed around at individual members of the class) “and ask them questions.” She pointed at her mouth to indicate talking.

Hagrid stared at her, clearly at a complete loss to understand why she was acting as though he did not understand normal English. Hermione had tears of fury in her eyes now.

“You hag, you evil hag!” she whispered, as Umbridge walked towards Pansy Parkinson. “I know what you’re doing, you awful, twisted, vicious -”

“Erm… anyway,” said Hagrid, clearly struggling to regain the flow of his lesson, “so - Thestrals. Yeah. Well, there’s loads o’ good stuff abou’ them…”

“Do you find,” said Professor Umbridge in a ringing voice to Pansy Parkinson, “that you are able to understand Professor Hagrid when he talks?”

Just like Hermione, Pansy had tears in her eyes, but these were tears of laughter; indeed, her answer was almost incoherent because she was trying to suppress her giggles.

“No… because… well… it sounds… like grunting a lot of the time.”

Umbridge scribbled on her clipboard. The few unbruised bits of Hagrid’s face flushed, but he tried to act as though he had not heard Pansy’s answer.

“Er… yeah… good stuff abou’ Thestrals. Well, once they’re tamed, like this lot, yeh’ll never be lost again. ‘Mazin’ sense o’ direction, jus’ tell ‘em where yeh want ter go -”

“Assuming they can understand you, of course,” said Malfoy loudly, and Pansy Parkinson collapsed in a fit of renewed giggles. Professor Umbridge smiled indulgently at them and then turned to Neville.

“You can see the Thestrals, Longbottom, can you?” she said.

Neville nodded.

“Who did you see die?” she asked, her tone indifferent.

“My… my grandad,” said Neville.

“And what do you think of them?” she said, waving her stubby hand at the horses, who by now had stripped a great deal of the carcass down to bone.

“Erm,” said Neville nervously, with a glance at Hagrid. “Well, they’re… er… okay…”

“Students… are… too… intimidated… to… admit… they… are… frightened,” muttered Umbridge, making another note on her clipboard.

“No!” said Neville, looking upset. “No, I’m not scared of them!”

“It’s quite all right,” said Umbridge, patting Neville on the shoulder with what she evidently intended to be an understanding smile, though it looked more like a leer to Harry. “Well, Hagrid,” she turned to look up at him again, speaking once more in that loud, slow voice, “I think I’ve got enough to be getting along with. You will receive” (she mimed taking something from the air in front of her) “the results of your inspection” (she pointed at the clipboard) “in ten days’ time.” She held up ten stubby little fingers, then, her smile wider and more toadlike than ever before beneath her green hat, she bustled from their midst, leaving Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson in fits of laughter, Hermione actually shaking with fury and Neville looking confused and upset.

“That foul, lying, twisting old gargoyle!” stormed Hermione half an hour later, as they made their way back up to the castle through the channels they had made earlier in the snow. “You see what she’s up to? It’s her thing about half-breeds all over again - she’s trying to make out Hagrid’s some kind of dimwitted troll, just because he had a giantess for a mother - and oh, it’s not fair, that really wasn’t a bad lesson at all - I mean, all right, if it had been Blast-Ended Skrewts again, but Thestrals are fine - in fact, for Hagrid, they’re really good!”

“Umbridge said they’re dangerous,” said Ron.

“Well, it’s like Hagrid said, they can look after themselves,” said Hermione impatiently, “and I suppose a teacher like Grubbly-Plank wouldn’t usually show them to us before NEWT level, but, well, they are very interesting, aren’t they? The way some people can see them and some can’t! I wish I could.”

“Do you?” Harry asked her quietly.

She looked suddenly horrorstruck.

“Oh, Harry - I’m sorry - no, of course I don’t - that was a really stupid thing to say.”

“It’s okay,” he said quickly, “don’t worry”

“I’m surprised so many people could see them,” said Ron. “Three in a class -”

“Yeah, Weasley, we were just wondering,” said a malicious voice. Unheard by any of them in the muffling snow, Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle were walking along right behind them. “D’you reckon if you saw someone snuff it you’d be able to see the Quaffle better?”

He, Crabbe and Goyle roared with laughter as they pushed past on their way to the castle, then broke into a chorus of “Weasley is our King”. Ron’s ears turned scarlet.

“Ignore them, just ignore them,” intoned Hermione, pulling out her wand and performing the charm to produce hot air again, so that she could melt them an easier path through the untouched snow between them and the greenhouses.

December arrived, bringing with it more snow and a positive avalanche of homework for the fifth-years. Ron and Hermione’s prefect duties also became more and more onerous as Christmas approached. They were called upon to supervise the decoration of the castle (“You try putting up tinsel when Peeves has got the other end and is trying to strangle you with it,” said Ron), to watch over first- and second-years spending their break-times inside because of the bitter cold (“And they’re cheeky little snot-rags, you know, we definitely weren’t that rude when we were in first year,” said Ron) and to patrol the corridors in shifts with Argus Filch, who suspected that the holiday spirit might show itself in an outbreak of wizard duels (“He’s got dung for brains, that one,” said Ron furiously). They were so busy that Hermione had even stopped knitting elf hats and was fretting that she was down to her last three.

“All those poor elves I haven’t set free yet, having to stay here over Christmas because there aren’t enough hats!”

Harry, who had not had the heart to tell her that Dobby was taking everything she made, bent lower over his History of Magic essay. In any case, he did not want to think about Christmas. For the first time in his school career, he very much wanted to spend the holidays away from Hogwarts. Between his Quidditch ban and worry about whether or not Hagrid was going to be put on probation, he felt highly resentful towards the place at the moment. The only thing he really looked forward to were the D.A. meetings, and they would have to stop over the holidays, as nearly everybody in the D.A. would be spending the time with their families. Hermione was going skiing with her parents, something that greatly amused Ron, who had never heard of Muggles strapping narrow strips of wood on to their feet to slide down mountains. Ron was going home to The Burrow. Harry endured several days of envy before Ron said, in response to Harry asking him how he was going to get home for Christmas: “But you’re coming too! Didn’t I say? Mum wrote and told me to invite you weeks ago!”

Hermione rolled her eyes, but Harry’s spirits soared: the thought of Christmas at The Burrow was truly wonderful, though slightly marred by Harry’s guilty feeling that he would not be able to spend the holiday with Sirius. He wondered whether he could possibly persuade Mrs. Weasley to invite his godfather for the festivities. Even though he doubted whether Dumbledore would permit Sirius to leave Grimmauld Place anyway, he could not help but think Mrs. Weasley might not want him; they were so often at loggerheads. Sirius had not contacted Harry at all since his last appearance in the fire, and although Harry knew that with Umbridge on constant watch it would be unwise to attempt to contact him, he did not like to think of Sirius alone in his mother’s old house, perhaps pulling a lonely cracker with Kreacher.

Harry arrived early in the Room of Requirement for the last D.A. meeting before the holidays andwas very glad he had, because when the lamps burst into light he saw that Dobby had taken it upon himself to decorate the place for Christmas. He could tell the elf had done it, because nobody else would have strung a hundred golden baubles from the ceiling, each showing a picture of Harry’s face and bearing the legend: *HAVE A VERY HARRY CHRISTMAS!*

Harry had only just managed to get the last of them down before the door creaked open and Luna Love good entered, looking as dreamy as always.

“Hello,” she said vaguely, looking around at what remained of the decorations. “These are nice, did you put them up?”

“No,” said Harry, “it was Dobby the house-elf.”

“Mistletoe,” said Luna dreamily, pointing at a large clump of white berries placed almost over Harry’s head. He jumped out from under it. “Good thinking,” said Luna very seriously. “It’s often infested with Nargles.”

Harry was saved the necessity of asking what Nargles were by the arrival of Angelina, Katie and Alicia. All three of them were breathless and looked very cold.

“Well,” said Angelina dully, pulling off her cloak and throwing it into a corner, “we’ve finally replaced you.”

“Replaced me?” said Harry blankly.

“You and Fred and George,” she said impatiently. “We’ve got another Seeker!”

“Who?” said Harry quickly.

“Ginny Weasley,” said Katie.

Harry gaped at her.

“Yeah, I know,” said Angelina, pulling out her wand and flexing her arm, “but she’s pretty good, actually. Nothing on you, of course,” she said, throwing him a very dirty look, “but as we can’t have you…”

Harry bit back the retort he was longing to utter: did she imagine for a second that he did not regret his expulsion from the team a hundred times more than she did?

“And what about the Beaters?” he asked, trying to keep his voice even.

“Andrew Kirke,” said Alicia without enthusiasm, “and Jack Sloper. Neither of them are brilliant, but compared to the rest of the idiots who turned up…”

The arrival of Ron, Hermione and Neville brought this depressing discussion to an end, and within five minutes the room was full enough to prevent Harry seeing Angelina’s burning, reproachful looks.

“Okay,” he said, calling them all to order. “I thought this evening we should just go over the things we’ve done so far, because it’s the last meeting before the holidays and there’s no point starting anything new right before a three-week break -”

“We’re not doing anything new?” said Zacharias Smith, in a disgruntled whisper loud enough to carry through the room. “If I’d known that, I wouldn’t have come.”

“We’re all really sorry Harry didn’t tell you, then,” said Fred loudly.

Several people sniggered. Harry saw Cho laughing and felt the familiar swooping sensation in his stomach, as though he had missed a step going downstairs.

“- we can practice in pairs,” said Harry. “We’ll start with the Impediment Jinx, for ten minutes, then we can get out the cushions and try Stunning again.”

They all divided up obediently; Harry partnered Neville as usual. The room was soon full of intermittent cries of “Impedimenta!” People froze f or a minute or so, during which their partner would stare aimlessly around the room watching other pairs at work, then would unfreeze and take their turn at the jinx.

Neville had improved beyond all recognition. After a while, when Harry had unfrozen three times in a row, he had Neville join Ron and Hermione again so that he could walk around the room and watch the others. When he passed Cho she beamed at him; he resisted the temptation to walk past her several more times.

After ten minutes on the Impediment Jinx, they laid out cushions all over the floor and started practicing Stunning again. Space was really too confined to allow them all to work this spell at once; half the group observed the others for a while, then swapped over.

Harry felt himself positively swelling with pride as he watched them all. True, Neville did Stun Padma Patil rather than Dean, at whom he had been aiming, but it was a much closer miss than usual, and everybody else had made enormous progress.

At the end of an hour, Harry called a halt.

“You’re getting really good,” he said, beaming around at them. “When we get back from the holidays we can start doing some of the big stuff - maybe even Patronuses.”

There was a murmur of excitement. The room began to clear in the usual twos and threes; most people wished Harry a “Happy Christmas” as they went. Feeling cheerful, he collected up the cushions with Ron and Hermione and stacked them neatly away. Ron and Hermione left before he did; he hung back a little, because Cho was still there and he was hoping to receive a “Merry Christmas” from her.

“No, you go on,” he heard her say to her friend Marietta and his heart gave a jolt that seemed to take it into the region of his Adam’s apple.

He pretended to be straightening the cushion pile. He was quite sure they were alone now and waited for her to speak. Instead, he heard a hearty sniff.

He turned and saw Cho standing in the middle of the room, tears pouring down her face.

“Wha—?”

He didn’t know what to do. She was simply standing there, crying silently.

“What’s up?” he said, feebly.

She shook her head and wiped her eyes on her sleeve.

“I’m - sorry,” she said thickly. “I suppose… it’s just… learning all this stuff… it just makes me… wonder whether… if he’d known it all… he’d still be alive.”

Harry’s heart sank right back past its usual spot and settled somewhere around his navel. He ought to have known. She wanted to talk about Cedric.

“He did know this stuff,” Harry said heavily. “He was really good at it, or he could never have got to the middle of that maze. But if Voldemort really wants to kill you, you don’t stand a chance.”

She hiccoughed at the sound of Voldemort’s name, but stared at Harry without flinching.

“You survived when you were just a baby,” she said quietly.

“Yeah, well,” said Harry wearily, moving towards the door, “I dunno why nor does anyone else, so it’s nothing to be proud of.”

“Oh, don’t go!” said Cho, sounding tearful again. “I’m really sorry to get all upset like this… I didn’t mean to…”

She hiccoughed again. She was very pretty even when her eyes were red and puffy. Harry felt thoroughly miserable. He’d have been so pleased with just a “Merry Christmas”.

“I know it must be horrible for you,” she said, mop ping her eyes on her sleeve again. “Me mentioning Cedric, when you saw him die… I suppose you just want to forget about it?”

Harry did not say anything to this; it was quite true, but he felt heartless saying it.

“You’re a r-really good teacher, you know,” said Cho, with a watery smile. “I’ve never been able to Stun anything before.”

“Thanks,” said Harry awkwardly.

They looked at each other for a long moment. Harry felt a burning desire to run from the room and, at the same time, a complete inability to move his feet.

“Mistletoe,” said Cho quietly, pointing at the ceiling over his head.

“Yeah,” said Harry. His mouth was very dry. “It’s probably full of Nargles, though.”

“What are Nargles?”

“No idea,” said Harry. She had moved closer. His brain seemed to have been Stunned. “You’d have to ask Loony. Luna, I mean.”

Cho made a funny noise halfway between a sob and a laugh. She was even nearer to him now.

He could have counted the freckles on her nose.

“I really like you, Harry.”

He could not think. A tingling sensation was spreading through him, paralysing his arms, legs and brain.

She was much too close. He could see every tear clinging to her eyelashes…

He returned to the common room half an hour later to find Hermione and Ron in the best seats by the fire; nearly everybody else had gone to bed. Hermione was writing a very long letter; she had already filled half a roll of parchment, which was dangling from the edge of the table. Ron was lying on the hearthrug, trying to finish his Transfiguration homework.

“What kept you?” he asked, as Harry sank into the armchair next to Hermione’s.

Harry didn’t answer. He was in a state of shock. Half of him wanted to tell Ron and Hermione what had just happened, but the other half wanted to take the secret with him to the grave.

“Are you all right, Harry?” Hermione asked, peering at him over the tip of her quill.

Harry gave a half-hearted shrug. In truth, he didn’t know whether he was all right or not.

“What’s up?” said Ron, hoisting himself up on his elbow to get a clearer view of Harry. “What’s happened?”

Harry didn’t quite know how to set about telling them, and still wasn’t sure whether he wanted to. Just as he had decided not to say anything, Hermione took matters out of his hands.

“Is it Cho?” she asked in a businesslike way. “Did she corner you after the meeting?”

Numbly surprised, Harry nodded. Ron sniggered, breaking off when Hermione caught his eye.

“So - er - what did she want?” he asked in a mock casual voice.

“She -” Harry began, rather hoarsely; he cleared his throat and tried again. “She - er -”

“Did you kiss?” asked Hermione briskly.

Ron sat up so fast he sent his ink bottle flying all over the rug. Disregarding this completely, he stared avidly at Harry.

“Well?” he demanded.

Harry looked from Ron’s expression of mingled curiosity and hilarity to Hermione’s slight frown, and nodded.

“HA!”

Ron made a triumphant gesture with his fist and went into a raucous peal of laughter that made several timid-looking second-years over beside the window jump. A reluctant grin spread over Harry’s face as he watched Ron rolling around on the hearthrug.

Hermione gave Ron a look of deep disgust and returned to her letter.

“Well?” Ron said finally, looking up at Harry. “How was it?”

Harry considered for a moment.

“Wet,” he said truthfully.

Ron made a noise that might have indicated jubilation or disgust, it was hard to tell.

“Because she was crying,” Harry continued heavily.

“Oh,” said Ron, his smile fading slightly. “Are you that bad at kissing?”

“Dunno,” said Harry, who hadn’t considered this, and immediately felt rather worried. “Maybe I am.”

“Of course you’re not,” said Hermione absently, still scribbling away at her letter.

“How do you know?” said Ron very sharply.

“Because Cho spends half her time crying these days,” said Hermione vaguely. “She does it at mealtimes, in the loos, all over the place.”

“You’d think a bit of kissing would cheer her up,” said Ron, grinning.

“Ron,” said Hermione in a dignified voice, dipping the point of her quill into her inkpot, “you are the most insensitive wart I have ever had the misfortune to meet.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” said Ron indignantly. “What sort of person cries while someone’s kissing them?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, slightly desperately, “who does?”

Hermione looked at the pair of them with an almost pitying expression on her face.

“Don’t you understand how Cho’s feeling at the moment?” she asked.

“No,” said Harry and Ron together.

Hermione sighed and laid down her quill.

“Well, obviously, she’s feeling very sad, because of Cedric dying. Then I expect she’s feeling confused because she liked Cedric and now she likes Harry, and she can’t work out who she likes best. Then she’ll be feeling guilty, thinking it’s an insult to Cedric’s memory to be kissing Harry at all, and she’ll be worrying about what everyone else might say about her if she starts going out with Harry. And she probably can’t work out what her feelings towards Harry are, anyway, because he was the one who was with Cedric when Cedric died, so that’s all very mixed up and painful. Oh, and she’s afraid she’s going to be thrown off the Ravenclaw Quidditch team because she’s been flying so badly.”

A slightly stunned silence greeted the end of this speech, then Ron said, “One person can’t feel all that at once, they’d explode.”

“Just because you’ve got the emotional range of a teaspoon doesn’t mean we all have,” said Hermione nastily picking up her quill again.

“She was the one who started it,” said Harry. “I wouldn’t’ve - she just sort of came at me - and next thing she’s crying all over me - I didn’t know what to do —”

“Don’t blame you, mate,” said Ron, looking alarmed at the very thought.

“You just had to be nice to her,” said Hermione, looking up anxiously. “You were, weren’t you?”

“Well,” said Harry, an unpleasant heat creeping up his face, “I sort of - patted her on the back a bit.”

Hermione looked as though she was restraining herself from rolling her eyes with extreme difficulty.

“Well, I suppose it could have been worse,” she said. “Are you going to see her again?”

“I’ll have to, won’t I?” said Harry. “We’ve got D.A. meetings, haven’t we?”

“You know what I mean,” said Hermione impatiently.

Harry said nothing. Hermione’s words opened up a whole new vista of frightening possibilities. He tried to imagine going somewhere with Cho — Hogsmeade, perhaps - and being alone with her for hours at a time. Of course, she would have been expecting him to ask her out after what had just happened… the thought made his stomach clench painfully.

“Oh well,” said Hermione distantly, buried in her letter once more, “you’ll have plenty of opportunities to ask her.”

“What if he doesn’t want to ask her?” said Ron, who had been watching Harry with an unusually shrewd expression on his face.

“Don’t be silly,” said Hermione vaguely, “Harry’s liked her for ages, haven’t you, Harry?”

He did not answer. Yes, he had liked Cho for ages, but whenever he had imagined a scene involving the two of them it had always featured a Cho who was enjoying herself, as opposed to a Cho who was sobbing uncontrollably into his shoulder.

“Who’re you writing the novel to, anyway?” Ron asked Hermione, trying to read the bit of parchment now trailing on the floor. Hermione hitched it up out of sight.

“Viktor.”

“Krum?”

“How many other Viktors do we know?”

Ron said nothing, but looked disgruntled. They sat in silence for another twenty minutes, Ron finishing his Transfiguration essay with many snorts of impatience and crossings-out, Hermione writing steadily to the very end of the parchment, rolling it up carefully and sealing it, and Harry staring into the fire, wishing more than anything that Sirius’s head would appear there and give him some advice about girls. But the fire merely crackled lower and lower, until the red-hot embers crumbled into ash and, looking around, Harry saw that they were, yet again, the last ones in the common room.

“Well, night,” said Hermione, yawning widely as she set off up the girls’ staircase.

“What does she see in Krum?” Ron demanded, as he and Harry climbed the boys’ stairs.

“Well,” said Harry, considering the matter, “I s’pose he’s older, isn’t he… and he’s an international Quidditch player…”

“Yeah, but apart from that,” said Ron, sounding aggravated. “I mean, he’s a grouchy git, isn’t

he?”

“Bit grouchy, yeah,” said Harry, whose thoughts were still on Cho.

They pulled off their robes and put on pajamass in silence; Dean, Seamus and Neville were already asleep. Harry put his glasses on his bedside table and got into bed but did not pull the hangings closed around his four-poster; instead, he stared at the patch of starry sky visible through the window next to Neville’s bed. If he had known, this time last night, that in twenty-four hours’ time he would have kissed Cho Chang…

“Night,” grunted Ron, from somewhere to his right.

“Night,” said Harry.

Maybe next time… if there was a next time… she’d be a bit happier. He ought to have asked her out; she had probably been expecting it and was now really angry with him… or was she lying in bed, still crying about Cedric? He did not know what to think. Hermione’s explanation had made it all seem more complicated rather than easier to understand.

That’s what they should teach us here, he thought, turning over on to his side, *how girls’ brains work… it’d be more useful than Divination, anyway…*

Neville snuffled in his sleep. An owl hooted somewhere out in the night.

Harry dreamed he was back in the D.A. room. Cho was accusing him of luring her there under false pretences; she said he had promised her a hundred and fifty Chocolate Frog Cards if she showed up. Harry protested… Cho shouted, “Cedric gave me loads of Chocolate Frog Cards, look!” And she pulled out fistfuls of Cards from in side her robes and threw them into the air. Then she turned into Hermione, who said, “You did promise her, you know, Harry… I think you’d better give her something else instead… how about your Firebolt?” And Harry was protesting that he could not give Cho his Firebolt, because Umbridge had it, and anyway the whole thing was ridiculous, he’d only come to the D.A. room to put up some Christmas baubles shaped like Dobby’s head…

The dream changed…

His body felt smooth, powerful and flexible. He was gliding between shining metal bars, across dark, cold stone… he was flat against the floor, sliding along on his belly… it was dark, yet he could see objects around him shimmering in strange, vibrant colors… he was turning his head… at first glance the corridor was empty… but no… a man was sitting on the floor ahead, his chin drooping on to his chest, his outline gleaming in the dark…

Harry put out his tongue… he tasted the man’s scent on the air… he was alive but drowsy… sitting in front of a door at the end of the corridor…

Harry longed to bite the man… but he must master the impulse… he had more important work to

do…

But the man was stirring… a silver Cloak fell from his legs as he jumped to his feet; and Harry saw his vibrant, blurred outline towering above him, saw a wand withdrawn from a belt… he had no choice… he reared high from the floor and struck once, twice, three times, plunging his fangs deeply into the man's flesh, feeling his ribs splinter beneath his jaws, feeling the warm gush of blood…

The man was yelling in pain… then he fell silent… he slumped backwards against the wall… blood was splattering on to the floor…

His forehead hurt terribly… it was aching fit to burst…

"Harry! HARRY!"

He opened his eyes. Every inch of his body was covered in icy sweat; his bed covers were twisted all around him like a strait-jacket; he felt as though a white-hot poker were being applied to his forehead.

"Harry!"

Ron was standing over him looking extremely frightened. There were more figures at the foot of Harry's bed. He clutched his head in his hands; the pain was blinding him… he rolled right over and vomited over the edge of the mattress.

"He's really ill," said a scared voice. "Should we call someone?"

"Harry!Harry!"

He had to tell Ron, it was very important that he tell him… taking great gulps of air, Harry pushed himself up in bed, willing himself not to throw up again, the pain half-blinding him.

"Your dad," he panted, his chest heaving. "Your dad's… been attacked…"

"What?" said Ron uncomprehendingly.

"Your dad! He's been bitten, it's serious, there was blood everywhere…"

"I'm going for help," said the same scared voice, and Harry heard footsteps running out of the dormitory.

"Harry, mate," said Ron uncertainly, "you… you were just dreaming…"

"No!" said Harry furiously; it was crucial that Ron understand. "It wasn't a dream… not an ordinary dream… I was there, I saw it… I did it…"

He could hear Seamus and Dean muttering but did not care. The pain in his forehead was subsiding slightly, though he was still sweating and shivering feverishly. He retched again and Ron leapt backwards out of the way.

“Harry, you’re not well,” he said shakily. “Neville’s gone for help.”

“I’m fine!” Harry choked, wiping his mouth on his p yjamas and shaking uncontrollably. “There’s nothing wrong with me, it’s your dad you’ve got to worry about - we need to find out where he is - he’s bleeding like mad - I was - it was a huge snake.”

He tried to get out of bed but Ron pushed him back into it; Dean and Seamus were still whispering somewhere nearby. Whether one minute passed or ten, Harry did not know; he simply sat there shaking, feeling the pain recede very slowly from his scar… then there were hurried footsteps coming up the stairs and he heard Neville’s voice again.

“Over here, Professor.”

Professor McGonagall came hurrying into the dormitory in her tartan dressing gown, her glasses perched lopsidedly on the bridge of her bony nose.

“What is it, Potter? Where does it hurt?”

He had never been so pleased to see her; it was a member of the Order of the Phoenix he needed now, not someone fussing over him and prescribing useless potions.

“It’s Ron’s dad,” he said, sitting up again. “He’s been attacked by a snake and it’s serious, I saw it happen.”

“What do you mean, you saw it happen?” said Professor McGonagall, her dark eyebrows contracting.

“I don’t know… I was asleep and then I was there…”

“You mean you dreamed this?”

“No!” said Harry angrily; would none of them understand? “I was having a dream at first about something completely different, something stupid… and then this interrupted it. It was real, I didn’t imagine it. Mr. Weasley was asleep on the floor and he was attacked by a gigantic snake, there was a load of blood, he collapsed, someone’s got to find out where he is…”

Professor McGonagall was gazing at him through her lopsided spectacles as though horrified at what she was seeing.

“I’m not lying and I’m not mad!” Harry told her, his voice rising to a shout. “I tell you, I saw it happen!”

“I believe you, Potter,” said Professor McGonagall curtly. “Put on your dressing gown - we’re going to see the Headmaster.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

St. Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries

Harry was so relieved she was taking him seriously that he did not hesitate, but jumped out of bed at once, pulled on his dressing gown and pushed his glasses back on to his nose.

“Weasley, you ought to come too,” said Professor McGonagall.

They followed Professor McGonagall past the silent figures of Neville, Dean and Seamus, out of the dormitory, down the spiral stairs into the common room, through the portrait hole and off along the Fat Lady’s moonlit corridor. Harry felt as though the panic inside him might spill over at any moment; he wanted to run, to yell for Dumbledore; Mr. Weasley was bleeding as they walked along so sedately, and what if those fangs (Harry tried hard not to think ‘my fangs’) had been poisonous? They passed Mrs Norris, who turned her lamplike eyes upon them and hissed faintly, but Professor McGonagall said, “Shoo!” Mrs Norris slunk away into the shadows, and in a few minutes they had reached the stone gargoyle guarding the entrance to Dumbledore’s office.

“Fizzing Whizzbee,” said Professor McGonagall.

The gargoyle sprang to life and leapt aside; the wall behind it split in two to reveal a stone staircase that was moving continually upwards like a spiral escalator. The three of them stepped on to the moving stairs; the wall closed behind them with a thud and they were moving upwards in tight circles until they reached the highly polished oak door with the brass knocker shaped like a griffin.

Though it was now well past midnight there were voices coming from inside the room, a positive babble of them. It sounded as though Dumbledore was entertaining at least a dozen people.

Professor McGonagall rapped three times with the griffin knocker and the voices ceased abruptly as though someone had switched them all off. The door opened of its own accord and Professor McGonagall led Harry and Ron inside.

The room was in half-darkness; the strange silver instruments standing on tables were silent and still rather than whirring and emitting puffs of smoke as they usually did; the portraits of old headmasters and headmistresses covering the walls were all snoozing in their frames. Behind the door, a magnificent red and gold bird the size of a swan dozed on its perch with its head under its wing.

“Oh, it’s you, Professor McGonagall… and… ah.”

Dumbledore was sitting in a high-backed chair behind his desk; he leaned forward into the pool of candlelight illuminating the papers laid out before him. He was wearing a magnificently embroidered purple and gold dressing gown over a snowy white nightshirt, but seemed wideawake, his penetrating light blue eyes fixed intently upon Professor McGonagall.

“Professor Dumbledore, Potter has had a… well, a nightmare,” said Professor McGonagall. “He says…”

“It wasn’t a nightmare,” said Harry quickly.

Professor McGonagall looked round at Harry, frowning slightly.

“Very well, then, Potter, you tell the Headmaster about it.”

“I… well, I was asleep…” said Harry and, even in his terror and his desperation to make Dumbledore understand, he felt slightly irritated that the Headmaster was not looking at him, but examining his own interlocked fingers. “But it wasn’t an ordinary dream… it was real… I saw it happen…” He took a deep breath, “Ron’s dad - Mr. Weasley - has been attacked by a giant snake.”

The words seemed to reverberate in the air after he had said them, sounding slightly ridiculous, even comic. There was a pause in which Dumbledore leaned back and stared meditatively at the ceiling. Ron looked from Harry to Dumbledore, white-faced and shocked.

“How did you see this?” Dumbledore asked quietly, still not looking at Harry.

“Well… I don’t know,” said Harry, rather angrily - what did it matter? “Inside my head, I suppose -”

“You misunderstand me,” said Dumbledore, still in the same calm tone. “I mean… can you remember — er - where you were positioned as you watched this attack happen? Were you perhaps standing beside the victim, or else looking down on the scene from above?”

This was such a curious question that Harry gaped at Dumbledore; it was almost as though he knew…

“I was the snake,” he said. “I saw it all from the snake’s point of view.”

Nobody else spoke for a moment, then Dumbledore, now looking at Ron who was still wheyfaced, asked in a new and sharper voice, “Is Arthur seriously injured?”

“Yes,” said Harry emphatically - why were they all so slow on the uptake, did they not realize how much a person bled when fangs that long pierced their side? And why could Dumbledore not do him the courtesy of looking at him?

But Dumbledore stood up, so quickly it made Harry jump, and addressed one of the old portraits hanging very near the ceiling. “Everard?” he said sharply. “And you too, Dilys!”

A sallow-faced wizard with a short black bangs and an elderly witch with long silver ringlets in the frame beside him, both of whom seemed to have been in the deepest of sleeps, opened their eyes immediately.

“You were listening?” said Dumbledore.

The wizard nodded; the witch said, “Naturally.”

“The man has red hair and glasses,” said Dumbledore. “Everard, you will need to raise the alarm, make sure he is found by the right people -”

Both nodded and moved sideways out of their frames, but instead of emerging in neighboring pictures (as usually happened at Hogwarts) neither reappeared. One frame now contained nothing but a backdrop of dark curtain, the other a handsome leather armchair. Harry noticed that many of the other headmasters and mistresses on the walls, though snoring and drooling most convincingly, kept sneaking peeks at him from under their eyelids, and he suddenly understood who had been talking when they had knocked.

“Everard and Dilys were two of Hogwarts’s most celebrated Heads,” Dumbledore said, now sweeping around Harry, Ron and Professor McGonagall to approach the magnificent sleeping bird on his perch beside the door. “Their renown is such that both have portraits hanging in other important wizarding institutions. As they are free to move between their own portraits, they can tell us what may be happening elsewhere…”

“But Mr. Weasley could be anywhere!” said Harry.

“Please sit down, all three of you,” said Dumbledore, as though Harry had not spoken, “Everard and Dilys may not be back for several minutes. Professor McGonagall, if you could draw up extra chairs.”

Professor McGonagall pulled her wand from the pocket of her dressing gown and waved it; three chairs appeared out of thin air, straight-backed and wooden, quite unlike the comfortable chintz armchairs that Dumbledore had conjured up at Harry’s hearing. Harry sat down, watching Dumbledore over his shoulder. Dumbledore was now stroking Fawkes’s plumed golden head with one finger. The phoenix awoke immediately. He stretched his beautiful head high and observed Dumbledore through bright, dark eyes.

“We will need,” Dumbledore said very quietly to the bird, “a warning.”

There was a flash of fire and the phoenix had gone.

Dumbledore now swooped down upon one of the fragile silver instruments whose function Harry had never known, carried it over to his desk, sat down facing them again and tapped it gently with the tip of his wand.

The instrument tinkled into life at once with rhythmic clinking noises. Tiny puffs of pale green smoke issued from the minuscule silver tube at the top. Dumbledore watched the smoke closely, his brow furrowed. After a few seconds, the tiny puffs became a steady stream of smoke that thickened and coiled in the air… a serpent’s head grew out of the end of it, opening its mouth wide. Harry wondered whether the instrument was confirming his story: he looked eagerly at

Dumbledore for a sign that he was right, but Dumbledore did not look up.

“Naturally, naturally,” murmured Dumbledore apparently to himself, still observing the stream of smoke without the slightest sign of surprise. “But in essence divided?”

Harry could make neither head nor tail of this question. The smoke serpent, however, split itself instantly into two snakes, both coiling and undulating in the dark air. With a look of grim satisfaction, Dumbledore gave the instrument another gentle tap with his wand: the clinking noise slowed and died and the smoke serpents grew faint, became a formless haze and vanished.

Dumbledore replaced the instrument on its spindly little table. Harry saw many of the old headmasters in the portraits follow him with their eyes, then, realizing that Harry was watching them, hastily pretend to be sleeping again. Harry wanted to ask what the strange silver instrument was for, but before he could do so, there was a shout from the top of the wall to their right; the wizard called Everard had reappeared in his portrait, panting slightly.

“Dumbledore!”

“What news?” said Dumbledore at once.

“I yelled until someone came running,” said the wizard, who was mopping his brow on the curtain behind him, “said I’d heard something moving downstairs - they weren’t sure whether to believe me but went down to check - you know there are no portraits down there to watch from. Anyway, they carried him up a few minutes later. He doesn’t look good, he’s covered in blood, I ran along to Elfrida Cragg’s portrait to get a good view as they left -”

“Good,” said Dumbledore as Ron made a convulsive movement. “I take it Dilys will have seen him arrive, then -”

And moments later, the silver-ringleted witch had reappeared in her picture, too; she sank, coughing, into her armchair and said, “Yes, they’ve taken him to St. Mungo’s, Dumbledore… they carried him past my portrait… he looks bad…”

“Thank you,” said Dumbledore. He looked round at Professor McGonagall.

“Minerva, I need you to go and wake the other Weasley children.”

“Of course…”

Professor McGonagall got up and moved swiftly to the door. Harry cast a sideways glance at Ron, who was looking terrified.

“And Dumbledore - what about Molly?” said Professor McGonagall, pausing at the door.

“That will be a job for Fawkes when he has finished keeping a lookout for anybody approaching,”

said Dumbledore. “But she may already know… that excellent clock of hers…”

Harry knew Dumbledore was referring to the clock that told, not the time, but the whereabouts and conditions of the various Weasley family members, and with a pang he thought that Mr. Weasley’s hand must, even now, be pointing atmortal peril. But it was very late. Mrs. Weasley was probably asleep, not watching the clock. Harry felt cold as he remembered Mrs. Weasley’s Boggart turning into Mr. Weasley’s lifeless body, his glasses askew, blood running down his face… but Mr. Weasley wasn’t going to die… he couldn’t…

Dumbledore was now rummaging in a cupboard behind Harry and Ron. He emerged from it carrying a blackened old kettle, which he placed carefully on his desk. He raised his wand and murmured, “Portus!” For a moment the kettle trembled, glowing with an odd blue light; then it quivered to rest, as solidly black as ever.

Dumbledore marched over to another portrait, this time of a clever-looking wizard with a pointed beard, who had been painted wearing the Slytherin colors of green and silver and was apparently sleeping so deeply that he could not hear Dumbledore’s voice when he attempted to rouse him.

“Phineas. Phineas.”

The subjects of the portraits lining the room were no longer pretending to be asleep; they were shifting around in their frames, the better to watch what was happening. When the clever-looking wizard continued to feign sleep, some of them shouted his name, too.

“Phineas! Phineas! PHINEAS!”

He could not pretend any longer; he gave a theatrical jerk and opened his eyes wide.

“Did someone call?”

“I need you to visit your other portrait again, Phineas,” said Dumbledore. “I’ve got another message.”

“Visit my other portrait?” said Phineas in a reedy voice, giving a long, fake yawn (his eyes traveling around the room and focusing on Harry). “Oh, no, Dumbledore, I am too tired tonight.”

Something about Phineas’s voice was familiar to Harry, where had he heard it before? But before he could think, the portraits on the surrounding walls broke into a storm of protest.

“Insubordination, sir!” roared a corpulent, red-nosed wizard, brandishing his fists. “Dereliction of duty!”

“We are honor-bound to give service to the present Headmaster of Hogwarts!” cried a fraillooking old wizard whom Harry recognized as Dumbledore’s predecessor, Armando Dippet. “Shame on you, Phineas!”

“Shall I persuade him, Dumbledore?” called a gimlet-eyed witch, raising an unusually thick wand that looked not unlike a birch rod.

“Oh, very well,” said the wizard called Phineas, eyeing the wand with mild apprehension, “though he may well have destroyed my picture by now, he’s done away with most of the family -”

“Sirius knows not to destroy your portrait,” said Dumbledore, and Harry realized immediately where he had heard Phineas’s voice before: issuing from the apparently empty frame in his bedroom in Grimmauld Place. “You are to give him the message that Arthur Weasley has been gravely injured and that his wife, children and Harry Potter will be arriving at his house shortly. Do you understand?”

“Arthur Weasley, injured, wife and children and Harry Potter coming to stay,” repeated Phineas in a bored voice. “Yes, yes… very well.”

He sloped away into the frame of the portrait and disappeared from view at the very moment the study door opened again. Fred, George and Ginny were ushered inside by Professor McGonagall, all three of them looking dishevelled and shocked, still in their night things.

“Harry - what’s going on?” asked Ginny, who looked frightened. “Professor McGonagall says you saw Dad get hurt -”

“Your father has been injured in the course of his work for the Order of the Phoenix,” said Dumbledore, before Harry could speak. “He has been taken to St. Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. I am sending you back to Sirius’s house, which is much more convenient for the hospital than The Burrow. You will meet your mother there.”

“How’re we going?” asked Fred, looking shaken. “Floo powder?”

“No,” said Dumbledore, “Floo powder is not safe at the moment, the Network is being watched. You will be taking a Portkey.” He indicated the old kettle lying innocently on his desk. “We are just waiting for Phineas Nigellus to report back… I want to be sure that the coast is clear before sending you -”

There was a flash of flame in the very middle of the office, leaving behind a single golden feather that floated gently to the floor.

“It is Fawkes’s warning,” said Dumbledore, catching the feather as it fell. “Professor Umbridge must know you’re out of your beds… Minerva, go and head her off - tell her any story -”

Professor McGonagall was gone in a swish of tartan.

“He says he’ll be delighted,” said a bored voice behind Dumbledore; the wizard called Phineas had reappeared in front of his Slytherin banner. “My great-great-grandson has always had an odd taste in house-guests.”

“Come here, then,” Dumbledore said to Harry and the Weasleys. “And quickly, before anyone else joins us.”

Harry and the others gathered around Dumbledore’s desk.

“You have all used a Portkey before?” asked Dumbledore, and they nodded, each reaching out to touch some part of the blackened kettle. “Good. On the count of three, then… one… two…”

It happened in a fraction of a second: in the infinitesimal pause before Dumbledore said “three”, Harry looked up at him - they were very close together - and Dumbledore’s clear blue gaze moved from the Portkey to Harry’s face.

At once, Harry’s scar burned white-hot, as though the old wound had burst open again - and unbidden, unwanted, but terrifyingly strong, there rose within Harry a hatred so powerful he felt, for that instant, he would like nothing better than to strike - to bite - to sink his fangs into the man before him —

“… three.”

Harry felt a powerful jerk behind his navel, the ground vanished from beneath his feet, his hand was glued to the kettle; he was banging into the others as they all sped forwards in a swirl of colors and a rush of wind, the kettle pulling them onwards… until his feet hit the ground so hard his knees buckled, the kettle clattered to the ground, and somewhere close at hand a voice said:

“Back again, the blood-traitor brats. Is it true their father’s dying?”

“OUT!” roared a second voice.

Harry scrambled to his feet and looked around; they had arrived in the gloomy basement kitchen of number twelve, Grimmauld Place. The only sources of light were the fire and one guttering candle, which illuminated the remains of a solitary supper. Kreacher was disappearing through the door to the hall, looking back at them malevolently as he hitched up his loincloth; Sirius was hurrying towards them all, looking anxious. He was unshaven and still in his day clothes; there was also a slightly Mundungus-like whiff of stale drink about him.

“What’s going on?” he said, stretching out a hand to help Ginny up. “Phineas Nigellus said Arthur’s been badly injured —”

“Ask Harry,” said Fred.

“Yeah, I want to hear this for myself,” said George.

The twins and Ginny were staring at him. Kreacher’s footsteps had stopped on the stairs outside.

“It was -” Harry began; this was even worse than telling McGonagall and Dumbledore. “I had a - a kind of – vision.”

And he told them all that he had seen, though he altered the story so that it sounded as though he had watched from the sidelines as the snake attacked, rather than from behind the snake’s own eyes. Ron, who was still very white, gave him a fleeting look, but did not speak. When Harry had finished, Fred, George and Ginny continued to stare at him for a moment. Harry did not know whether he was imagining it or not, but he fancied there was something accusatory in their looks. Well, if they were going to blame him just for seeing the attack, he was glad he had not told them that he had been inside the snake at the time.

“Is Mum here?” said Fred, turning to Sirius.

“She probably doesn’t even know what’s happened yet,” said Sirius. “The important thing was to get you away before Umbridge could interfere. I expect Dumbledores letting Molly know now.”

“We’ve got to go to St. Mungo’s,” said Ginny urgently. She looked around at her brothers; they were of course still in their pajamass. “Sirius, can you lend us cloaks or anything?”

“Hang on, you can’t go tearing off to St. Mungo’s!” said Sirius.

“Course we can go to St. Mungo’s if we want,” said Fred, with a mulish expression. “He’s our dad!”

“And how are you going to explain how you knew Arthur was attacked before the hospital even let his wife know?”

“What does that matter?” said George hotly.

“It matters because we don’t want to draw attention to the fact that Harry is having visions of things that are happening hundreds of miles away!” said Sirius angrily. “Have you any idea what the Ministry would make of that information?”

Fred and George looked as though they could not care less what the Ministry made of anything. Ron was still ashen-faced and silent.

Ginny said, “Somebody else could have told us… we could have heard it somewhere other than Harry.”

“Like who?” said Sirius impatiently. “Listen, your dad’s been hurt while on duty for the Order and the circumstances are fishy enough without his children knowing about it seconds after it happened, you could seriously damage the Order’s -”

“We don’t care about the dumb Order!” shouted Fred.

“It’s our dad dying we’re talking about!” yelled George.

“Your father knew what he was getting into and he won’t thank you for messing things up for the Order!” said Sirius, equally angry. “This is how it is - this is why you’re not in the Order - you don’t understand - there are things worth dying for!”

“Easy for you to say, stuck here!” bellowed Fred. “I don’t see you risking your neck!”

The little color remaining in Sirius’s face drained from it. He looked for a moment as though he would quite like to hit Fred, but when he spoke, it was in a voice of determined calm.

“I know it’s hard, but we’ve all got to act as though we don’t know anything yet. We’ve got to stay put, at least until we hear from your mother, all right?”

Fred and George still looked mutinous. Ginny, however, took a few steps over to the nearest chair and sank into it. Harry looked at Ron, who made a funny movement somewhere between a nod and a shrug, and they sat down too. The twins glared at Sirius for another minute, then took seats either side of Ginny.

“That’s right,” said Sirius encouragingly, “come on, let’s all… let’s all have a drink while we’re waiting. Accio Butterbeer!”

He raised his wand as he spoke and half a dozen bottles came flying towards them out of the pantry, skidded along the table, scattering the debris of Sinus’s meal, and stopped neatly in front of the six of them. They all drank, and for a while the only sounds were those of the crackling of the kitchen fire and the soft thud of their bottles on the table.

Harry was only drinking to have something to do with his hands. His stomach was full of horrible hot, bubbling guilt. They would not be here if it were not for him; they would all still be asleep in bed. And it was no good telling himself that by raising the alarm he had ensured that Mr. Weasley was found, because there was also the in escapable business of it being he who had attacked Mr. Weasley in the first place.

Don’t be stupid, you haven’t got fangs, he told himself, trying to keep calm, though the hand on his Butterbeer bottle was shaking, *you were lying in bed, you weren’t attacking anyone…*

But then, what just happened in Dumbledore’s office? he asked himself. *I felt like I wanted to attack Dumbledore, too…*

He put the bottle down a little harder than he meant to, and it slopped over on to the table. No one took any notice. Then a burst of fire in midair illuminated the dirty plates in front of them and, as they gave cries of shock, a scroll of parchment fell with a thud on to the table, accompanied by a single golden phoenix tail feather.

“Fawkes!” said Sirius at once, snatching up the parchment. “That’s not Dumbledore’s writing - it must be a message from your mother - here -”

He thrust the letter into George’s hand, who ripped it open and read aloud: *“Dad is still alive. I*

am setting out for St. Mungo's now. Stay where you are. I will send news as soon as I can. Mum."

George looked around the table.

"Still alive…" he said slowly. "But that makes it sound…"

He did not need to finish the sentence. It sounded to Harry, too, as though Mr. Weasley was hovering somewhere between life and death. Still exceptionally pale, Ron stared at the back of his mothers letter as though it might speak words of comfort to him. Fred pulled the parchment out of George's hands and read it for himself, then looked up at Harry, who felt his hand shaking on his Butterbeer bottle again and clenched it more tightly to stop the trembling.

If Harry had ever sat through a longer night than this one, he could not remember it. Sirius suggested once, without any real conviction, that they all go to bed, but the Weasleys' looks of disgust were answer enough. They mostly sat in silence around the table, watching the candle wick sinking lower and lower into liquid wax, occasionally raising a bottle to their lips, speaking only to check the time, to wonder aloud what was happening, and to reassure each other that if there was bad news, they would know straightaway, for Mrs. Weasley must long since have arrived at St. Mungo's.

Fred fell into a doze, his head lolling sideways on to his shoulder. Ginny was curled like a cat on her chair, but her eyes were open; Harry could see them reflecting the firelight. Ron was sitting with his head in his hands, whether awake or asleep it was impossible to tell. Harry and Sirius looked at each other every so often, intruders upon the family grief, waiting… waiting…

At ten past five in the morning by Ron's watch, the kitchen door swung open and Mrs. Weasley entered the kitchen. She was extremely pale, but when they all turned to look at her, Fred, Ron and Harry half rising from their chairs, she gave a wan smile.

"He's going to be all right," she said, her voice weak with tiredness. "He's sleeping. We can all go and see him later. Bill's sitting with him now; he's going to take the morning off work."

Fred fell back into his chair with his hands over his face. George and Ginny got up, walked swiftly over to their mother and hugged her. Ron gave a very shaky laugh and downed the rest of his Butterbeer in one.

"Breakfast!" said Sirius loudly and joyfully, jumping to his feet. "Where's that accursed house-elf? Kreacher! KREACHER!"

But Kreacher did not answer the summons.

"Oh, forget it, then," muttered Sirius, counting the people in front of him. "So, it's breakfast for - let's see - seven… bacon and eggs, I think, and some tea, and toast -"

Harry hurried over to the stove to help. He did not want to intrude on the Weasleys' happiness

and he dreaded the moment when Mrs. Weasley would ask him to recount his vision. However, he had barely taken plates from the dresser when Mrs. Weasley lifted them out of his hands and pulled him into a hug.

“I don’t know what would have happened if it hadn’t been for you, Harry,” she said in a muffled voice. “They might not have found Arthur for hours, and then it would have been too late, but thanks to you he’s alive and Dumbledore’s been able to think up a good cover story for Arthur being where he was, you’ve no idea what trouble he would have been in otherwise, look at poor Sturgis…”

Harry could hardly bear her gratitude, but fortunately she soon released him to turn to Sirius and thank him for looking after her children through the night. Sirius said he was very pleased to have been able to help, and hoped they would all stay with him as long as Mr. Weasley was in hospital.

“Oh, Sirius, I’m so grateful… they think he’ll be there a little while and it would be wonderful to be nearer… of course, that might mean we’re here for Christmas.”

“The more the merrier!” said Sirius with such obvious sincerity that Mrs. Weasley beamed at him, threw on an apron and began to help with breakfast.

“Sirius,” Harry muttered, unable to stand it a moment longer. “Can I have a quick word? Er - now?”

He walked into the dark pantry and Sirius followed. Without preamble, Harry told his godfather every detail of the vision he had had, including the fact that he himself had been the snake who had attacked Mr. Weasley.

When he paused for breath, Sirius said, “Did you tell Dumbledore this?”

“Yes,” said Harry impatiently, “but he didn’t tell me what it meant. Well, he doesn’t tell me anything any more.”

“I’m sure he would have told you if it was anything to worry about,” said Sirius steadily.

“But that’s not all,” said Harry, in a voice only a little above a whisper. “Sirius, I… I think I’m going mad. Back in Dumbledore’s office, just before we took the Portkey… for a couple of seconds there I thought I was a snake, I felt like one - my scar really hurt when I was looking at Dumbledore - Sirius, I wanted to attack him!”

He could only see a sliver of Siriuss face; the rest was in darkness.

“It must have been the aftermath of the vision, that’s all,” said Sirius. “You were still thinking of the dream or whatever it was and –”

“It wasn’t that,” said Harry, shaking his head, “it was like something rose up inside me, like

there's a snake inside me."

"You need to sleep," said Sirius firmly. "You're going to have breakfast, then go upstairs to bed, and after lunch you can go and see Arthur with the others. You're in shock, Harry; you're blaming yourself for something you only witnessed, and it's lucky you did witness it or Arthur might have died. Just stop worrying."

He clapped Harry on the shoulder and left the pantry, leaving Harry standing alone in the dark.

Everyone but Harry spent the rest of the morning sleeping. He went up to the bedroom he and Ron had shared over the last few weeks of summer, but while Ron crawled into bed and was asleep within minutes, Harry sat fully clothed, hunched against the cold metal bars of the bedstead, keeping himself deliberately uncomfortable, determined not to fall into a doze, terrified that he might become the serpent again in his sleep and wake to find that he had attacked Ron, or else slithered through the house after one of the others…

When Ron woke up, Harry pretended to have enjoyed a refreshing nap too. Their trunks arrived from Hogwarts while they were eating lunch, so they could dress as Muggles for the trip to St Mungo's. Everybody except Harry was riotously happy and talkative as they changed out of their robes into jeans and sweatshirts. When Tonks and Mad-Eye turned up to escort them across London, they greeted them gleefully, laughing at the bowler hat Mad-Eye was wearing at an angle to conceal his magical eye and assuring him, truthfully, that Tonks, whose hair was short and bright pink again, would attract far less attention on the Underground.

Tonks was very interested in Harry's vision of the attack on Mr. Weasley, something Harry was not remotely interested in discussing.

"There isn't any Seer blood in your family, is there?" she enquired curiously, as they sat side by side on a train rattling towards the heart of the city.

"No," said Harry, thinking of Professor Trelawney and feeling insulted.

"No," said Tonks musingly, "no, I suppose it's not really prophecy you're doing, is it? I mean, you're not seeing the future, you're seeing the present… it's odd, isn't it? Useful, though…"

Harry didn't answer; fortunately, they got out at the next stop, a station in the very heart of London, and in the bustle of leaving the train he was able to allow Fred and George to get between himself and Tonks, who was leading the way. They all followed her up the escalator, Moody clunking along at the back of the group, his bowler tilted low and one gnarled hand stuck in between the buttons of his coat, clutching his wand. Harry thought he sensed the concealed eye staring hard at him. Trying to avoid any more questions about his dream, he asked Mad-Eye where St. Mungo's was hidden.

"Not far from here," grunted Moody as they stepped out into the wintry air on a broad store-lined street packed with Christmas shoppers. He pushed Harry a little ahead of him and stumped along just behind; Harry knew the eye was rolling in all directions under the tilted hat. "Wasn't easy to

find a good location for a hospital. Nowhere in Diagon Alley was big enough and we couldn't have it underground like the Ministry - wouldn't be healthy. In the end they managed to get hold of a building up here. Theory was, sick wizards could come and go and just blend in with the crowd."

He seized Harry's shoulder to prevent them being separated by a gaggle of shoppers plainly intent on nothing but making it into a nearby shop full of electrical gadgets.

"Here we go," said Moody a moment later.

They had arrived outside a large, old-fashioned, red-brick department store called Purge & Dowse Ltd. The place had a shabby, miserable air; the window displays consisted of a few chipped dummies with their wigs askew, standing at random and modelling fashions at least ten years out of date. Large signs on all the dusty doors read: "Closed for Refurbishment". Harry distinctly heard a large woman laden with plastic shopping bags say to her friend as they passed, "It'snever open, that place…"

"Right," said Tonks, beckoning them towards a window displaying nothing but a particularly ugly female dummy. Its false eyelashes were hanging off and it was modelling a green nylon pinafore dress. "Everybody ready?"

They nodded, clustering around her. Moody gave Harry another shove between the shoulder blades to urge him forward and Tonks leaned close to the glass, looking up at the very ugly dummy, her breath steaming up the glass. "Wotcher… We're here to see Arthur Weasley."

Harry thought how absurd it was for Tonks to expect the dummy to hear her talking so quietly through a sheet of glass, with buses rumbling along behind her and all the racket of a street full of shoppers. Then he reminded himself that dummies couldn't hear anyway. Next second, his mouth opened in shock as the dummy gave a tiny nod and beckoned with its jointed finger, and Tonks had seized Ginny and Mrs. Weasley by the elbows, stepped right through the glass and vanished.

Fred, George and Ron stepped after them. Harry glanced around at the jostling crowd; not one of them seemed to have a glance to spare for window displays as ugly as those of Purge & Dowse Ltd; nor did any of them seem to have noticed that six people had just melted into thin air in front of them.

"C'mon," growled Moody, giving Harry yet another poke in the back, and together they stepped forward through what felt like a sheet of cool water, emerging quite warm and dry on the other side.

There was no sign of the ugly dummy or the space where she had stood. They were in what seemed to be a crowded reception area where rows of witches and wizards sat upon rickety wooden chairs, some looking perfectly normal and perusing out-of-date copies of WitchWeekly, others sporting gruesome disfigurements such as elephant trunks or extra hands sticking out of

their chests. The room was scarcely less quiet than the street outside, for many of the patients were making very peculiar noises: a sweaty-faced witch in the center of the front row, who was fanning herself vigorously with a copy of the Daily Prophet, kept letting off a high-pitched whistle as steam came pouring out of her mouth; a grubby-looking warlock in the corner clanged like a bell every time he moved and, with each clang, his head vibrated horribly so that he had to seize himself by the ears to hold it steady.

Witches and wizards in lime-green robes were walking up and down the rows, asking questions and making notes on clipboards like Umbridge's. Harry noticed the emblem embroidered on their chests: a wand and bone, crossed.

"Are they doctors?" he asked Ron quietly.

"Doctors?" said Ron, looking startled. "Those Muggle nutters that cut people up? Nah, they're Healers."

"Over here!" called Mrs. Weasley above the renewed c langing of the warlock in the corner, and they followed her to the queue in front of a plump blonde witch seated at a desk marked Enquiries. The wall behind her was covered in notices and posters saying things like: *A CLEAN CAULDRON KEEPS POTIONS FROM BECOMING POISONS* and *ANTIDOTES ARE ANTI-DON'TS UNLESS APPROVED BY A QUALIFIED HEALER*. There was also a large portrait of a witch with long silver ringlets which was labelled:

Dilys Derwent

St. Mungo's Healer 1722-

Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry 1741-

Dilys was eyeing the Weasley party closely as though counting them; when Harry caught her eye she gave a tiny wink, walked sideways out of her portrait and vanished.

Meanwhile, at the front of the queue, a young wizard was performing an odd on-the-spot jig and trying, in between yelps of pain, to explain his predicament to the witch behind the desk.

"It's these - ouch - shoes my brother gave me - ow- they're eating my - OUCH - feet - look at them, there must be some kind of - AARGH - jinx on them and I can't - AAAAARGH - get them off." He hopped from one foot to the other as though dancing on hot coals.

"The shoes don't prevent you reading, do they?" said the blonde witch, irritably pointing at a large sign to the left of her desk. "You want Spell Damage, fourth floor. Just like it says on the floor guide. Next!"

As the wizard hobbled and pranced sideways out of the way, the Weasley party moved forward a few steps and Harry read the floor guide:

ARTEFACT ACCIDENTS… Ground floor

Cauldron explosion, wand backfiring, broom crashes, etc.

CREATURE-INDUCED INJURIES… First floor

Bites, stings, burns, embedded spines, etc.

MAGICAL BUGS… Second floor

Contagious maladies, e.g. dragon pox, vanishing sickness, scrojungulus, etc.

POTION AND PLANT POISONING… Third floor

Rashes,regurgitation (uncontrollable), etc.

SPELL DAMAGE… Fourth floor

Unliftable jinxes, hexes, and incorrectly applied charms, etc.

VISITORS' TEAROOM AND HOSPITAL SHOP… Fifth floor

IF YOU ARE UNSURE WHERE TO GO, INCAPABLE OF NORMAL SPEECH OR UNABLE TO REMEMBER WHY YOU ARE HERE, OUR WELCOME WITCH WILL BE PLEASED TO HELP.

A very old, stooped wizard with a hearing trumpet had shuffled to the front of the queue now.

"I'm here to see Broderick Bode!" he wheezed.

"Ward forty-nine, but I'm afraid you're wasting your time," said the witch dismissively. "He's completely addled, you know - still thinks he's a teapot. Next!"

A harassed-looking wizard was holding his small daughter tightly by the ankle while she flapped around his head using the immensely large, feathery wings that had sprouted right out through the back of her romper suit.

"Fourth floor," said the witch, in a bored voice, without asking, and the man disappeared through the double doors beside the desk, holding his daughter like an oddly shaped balloon. "Next!"

Mrs. Weasley moved forward to the desk.

"Hello," she said, "my husband, Arthur Weasley, was supposed to be moved to a different ward this morning, could you tell us -?"

"Arthur Weasley?" said the witch, running her finger down a long list in front of her. "Yes, first

floor, second door on the right, Dai Llewellyn Ward."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Weasley. "Come on, you lot."

They followed her through the double doors and along the narrow corridor beyond, which was lined with more portraits of famous Healers and lit by crystal bubbles full of candles that floated up on the ceiling, looking like giant soapsuds. More witches and wizards in lime-green robes walked in and out of the doors they passed; a foul-smelling yellow gas wafted into the passageway as they passed one door, and every now and then they heard distant wailing. They climbed a flight of stairs and entered the Creature-Induced Injuries corridor, where the second door on the right bore the words: *Dangerous' Dai Llewellyn Ward:* Serious Bites. Underneath this was a card in a brass holder on which had been handwritten:Healer-in-Charge: *Hippocrates Smethwyck. Trainee Healer:* Augustus Pye.

"We'll wait outside, Molly," Tonks said. "Arthur won't want too many visitors at once… it ought to be just the family first."

Mad-Eye growled his approval of this idea and set himself with his back against the corridor wall, his magical eye spinning in all directions. Harry drew back, too, but Mrs. Weasley reached out a hand and pushed him through the door, saying, "Don't be silly, Harry, Arthur wants to thank you."

The ward was small and rather dingy, as the only window was narrow and set high in the wall facing the door. Most of the light came from more shining crystal bubbles clustered in the middle of the ceiling. The walls were of panelled oak and there was a portrait of a rather vicious-looking wizard on the wall, captioned: *Urquhart Rackharrow, 1612—1697, Inventor of the Entrail-expelling Curse.*

There were only three patients. Mr. Weasley was occupying the bed at the far end of the ward beside the tiny window. Harry was pleased and relieved to see that he was propped up on several pillows and reading the Daily Prophet by the solitary ray of sunlight falling on to his bed. He looked up as they walked towards him and, seeing who it was, beamed.

"Hello!" he called, throwing the Prophet aside. "Bill just left, Molly, had to get back to work, but he says he'll drop in on you later."

"How are you, Arthur?" asked Mrs. Weasley, bending down to kiss his cheek and looking anxiously into his face. "You're still looking a bit peaky."

"I feel absolutely fine," said Mr. Weasley brightly, holding out his good arm to give Ginny a hug.

"If they could only take the bandages off, I'd be f it to go home."

"Why can't they take them off, Dad?" asked Fred.

“Well, I start bleeding like mad every time they try,” said Mr. Weasley cheerfully, reaching across for his wand, which lay on his bedside cabinet, and waving it so that six extra chairs appeared at his bedside to seat them all. “It seems there was some rather unusual kind of poison in that snake’s fangs that keeps wounds open. They’re sure they’ll find an antidote, though; they say they’ve had much worse cases than mine, and in the meantime I just have to keep taking a Blood-Replenishing Potion every hour. But that fellow over there,” he said, dropping his voice and nodding towards the bed opposite in which a man lay looking green and sickly and staring at the ceiling. “Bitten by a werewolf, poor chap. No cure at all.”

“A werewolf?” whispered Mrs. Weasley, looking alarmed. “Is he safe in a public ward? Shouldn’t he be in a private room?”

“It’s two weeks till full moon,” Mr. Weasley reminded her quietly. “They’ve been talking to him this morning, the Healers, you know, trying to persuade him he’ll be able to lead an almost normal life. I said to him - didn’t mention names, of course - but I said I knew a werewolf personally, very nice man, who finds the condition quite easy to manage.”

“What did he say?” asked George.

“Said he’d give me another bite if I didn’t shut up,” said Mr. Weasley sadly. “And that woman over there,” he indicated the only other occupied bed, which was right beside the door, “won’t tell the Healers what bit her, which makes us all think it must have been something she was handling illegally. Whatever it was took a real chunk out of her leg,very nasty smell when they take off the dressings.”

“So, you going to tell us what happened, Dad?” asked Fred, pulling his chair closer to the bed.

“Well, you already know, don’t you?” said Mr. Weasley, with a significant smile at Harry. “It’s very simple - I’d had a very long day, dozed off, got sneaked up on and bitten.”

“Is it in the Prophet, you being attacked?” asked Fred, indicating the newspaper Mr. Weasley had cast aside.

“No, of course not,” said Mr. Weasley, with a slightly bitter smile, “the Ministry wouldn’t want everyone to know a dirty great serpent got —”

“Arthur!” Mrs. Weasley warned him.

“- got - er - me,” Mr. Weasley said hastily, though Harry was quite sure that was not what he had meant to say.

“So where were you when it happened, Dad?” asked George.

“That’s my business,” said Mr. Weasley, though with a small smile. He snatched up the Daily Prophe, shook it open again and said, “I was just reading about Willy Widdershins’s arrest when you arrived. You know Willy turned out to be behind those regurgitating toilets back in the

summer? One of his jinxes backfired, the toilet exploded and they found him lying unconscious in the wreckage covered from head to foot in -”

“When you say you were ‘on duty’,” Fred interrupted in a low voice, “what were you doing?”

“You heard your father,” whispered Mrs. Weasley, “we are not discussing this here! Go on about Willy Widdershins, Arthur.”

“Well, don’t ask me how, but he actually got off the toilet charge,” said Mr. Weasley grimly. “I can only suppose gold changed hands -”

“You were guarding it, weren’t you?” said George quietly. “The weapon? The thing You-Know-Who’s after?”

“George, be quiet!” snapped Mrs. Weasley.

“Anyway,” said Mr. Weasley, in a raised voice, “this time Willy’s been caught selling biting doorknobs to Muggles and I don’t think he’ll be able to worm his way out of it because, according to this article, two Muggles have lost fingers and are now in St. Mungo’s for emergency bone re-growth and memory modification. Just think of it, Muggles in St. Mungo’s! I wonder which ward they’re in?”

And he looked eagerly around as though hoping to see a signpost.

“Didn’t you say You-Know-Who’s got a snake, Harry?” asked Fred, looking at his father for a reaction. “A massive one? You saw it the night he returned, didn’t you?”

“That’s enough,” said Mrs. Weasley crossly. “Mad-Eye and Tonks are outside, Arthur, they want to come and see you. And you lot can wait outside,” she added to her children and Harry. “You can come and say goodbye afterwards. Go on.”

They trooped back into the corridor. Mad-Eye and Tonks went in and closed the door of the ward behind them. Fred raised his eyebrows.

“Fine,” he said coolly, rummaging in his pockets, “be like that. Don’t tell us anything.”

“Looking for these?” said George, holding out what looked like a tangle of flesh-colored string.

“You read my mind,” said Fred, grinning. “Let’s see if St. Mungo’s puts Imperturbable Charms on its ward doors, shall we?”

He and George disentangled the string and separated five Extendable Ears from each other. Fred and George handed them around. Harry hesitated to take one.

“Go on, Harry, take it! You saved Dad’s life. If anyone’s got the right to eavesdrop on him, it’s you.”

Grinning in spite of himself, Harry took the end of the string and inserted it into his ear as the twins had done.

“Okay, go!” Fred whispered.

The flesh-colored strings wriggled like long skinny worms and snaked under the door. At first, Harry could hear nothing, then he jumped as he heard Tonks whispering as clearly as though she were standing right beside him.

“… they searched the whole area but couldn’t find the snake anywhere. It just seems to have vanished after it attacked you, Arthur… but You-Know-Who can’t have expected a snake to get in, can he?”

“I reckon he sent it as a lookout,” growled Moody, “cause he’s not had any luck so far, has he? No, I reckon he’s trying to get a clearer picture of what he’s facing and if Arthur hadn’t been there the beast would’ve had a lot more time to look around. So, Potter says he saw it all happen?”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Weasley. She sounded rather uneasy. “You know, Dumbledore seems almost to have been waiting for Harry to see something like this.”

“Yeah, well,” said Moody, “there’s something funny about the Potter kid, we all know that.”

“Dumbledore seemed worried about Harry when I spoke to him this morning,” whispered Mrs Weasley.

“Course he’s worried,” growled Moody. “The boy’s seeing things from inside You-Know-Who’s snake. Obviously, Potter doesn’t realize what that means, but if You-Know-Who’s possessing him —”

Harry pulled the Extendable Ear out of his own, his heart hammering very fast and heat rushing up his face. He looked around at the others. They were all staring at him, the strings still trailing from their ears, looking suddenly fearful.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Christmas on the Closed Ward

Was this why Dumbledore would no longer meet Harry's eyes? Did he expect to see Voldemort staring out of them, afraid, perhaps, that their vivid green might turn suddenly to scarlet, with catlike slits for pupils? Harry remembered how the snakelike face of Voldemort had once forced itself out of the back of Professor Quirrell's head and ran his hand over the back of his own, wondering what it would feel like if Voldemort burst out of his skull.

He felt dirty, contaminated, as though he were carrying some deadly germ, unworthy to sit on the Underground train back from the hospital with innocent, clean people whose minds and bodies were free of the taint of Voldemort… he had not merely seen the snake, he hadbeen the snake, he knew it now…

A truly terrible thought then occurred to him, a memory bobbing to the surface of his mind, one that made his insides writhe and squirm like serpents.

What's he after, apart from followers?

Stuff he can only get by stealth… like a weapon. Something he didn't have last time.

I'm the weapon, Harry thought, and it was as though poison were pumping through his veins, chilling him, bringing him out in a sweat as he swayed with the train through the dark tunnel. I'm the one Voldemorts trying to use, that's why they've got guards around me everywhere I go, it's not for my protection, it's for other people's, only it's not working, they can't have someone on me all the time at Hogwarts… I did attack Mr. Weasley last night, it was me. Voldemort made me do it and he could be inside me, listening to my thoughts right now –

"Are you all right, Harry, dear?" whispered Mrs. Wea sley leaning across Ginny to speak to him as the train rattled along through its dark tunnel. "You don't look very well. Are you feeling sick?"

They were all watching him. He shook his head violently and stared up at an advertisement for home insurance.

"Harry, dear, are you sure you're all right?" said Mrs. Weasley in a worried voice, as they walked around the unkempt patch of grass in the middle of Grimmauld Place. "You look ever so pale… are you sure you slept this morning? You go upstairs to bed right now and you can have a couple of hours of sleep before dinner, all right?"

He nodded; here was a ready-made excuse not to talk to any of the others, which was precisely what he wanted, so when she opened the front door he hurried straight past the troll's-leg umbrella stand, up the stairs and into his and Ron's bedroom.

Here, he began to pace up and down, past the two beds and Phineas Nigellus's empty picture frame, his brain teeming and seething with questions and ever more dreadful ideas.

How had he become a snake? Perhaps he was an Animagus… no, he couldn't be, he would know… perhapsVoldemort was an Animagus… yes, thought Harry, that would fit, he would turn into a snake of course… and when he's possessing me, then we both transform… that still doesn't explain how I got to London and back to my bed in the space of about five minutes… but then Voldemort's about the most powerful wizard in the world, apart from Dumbledore, it's probably no problem at all to him to transport people like that.

And then, with a terrible stab of panic, he thought,but this is insane - *if Voldemort's possessing me, I'm giving him a clear view into the Headquarter s of the Order of the Phoenix right now! He'll know who's in the Order and where Sirius is… and I've heard loads of stuff I shouldn't have, everything Sirius told me the first night I was here…*

There was only one thing for it: he would have to leave Grimmauld Place straightaway. He would spend Christmas at Hogwarts without the others, which would keep them safe over the holidays at least… but no, that wouldn't do, there were still plenty of people at Hogwarts to maim and injure. What if it was Seamus, Dean or Neville next time? He stopped his pacing and stood staring at Phineas Nigellus's empty frame. A leaden sensation was settling in the pit of his stomach. He had no alternative: he was going to have to return to Privet Drive, cut himself off from other wizards entirely.

Well, if he had to do it, he thought, there was no point hanging around. Trying with all his might not to think how the Dursleys were going to react when they found him on their doorstep six months earlier than they had expected, he strode over to his trunk, slammed the lid shut and locked it, then glanced around automatically for Hedwig before remembering that she was still at Hogwarts - well, her cage would be one less thing to carry - he seized one end of his trunk and had dragged it halfway towards the door when a snide voice said, "Running away, are we?"

He looked around. Phineas Nigellus had appeared on the canvas of his portrait and was leaning against the frame, watching Harry with an amused expression on his face.

"Not running away, no," said Harry shortly, dragging his trunk a few more feet across the room.

"I thought," said Phineas Nigellus, stroking his pointed beard, "that to belong in Gryffindor house you were supposed to be brave! It looks to me as though you would have been better off in my own house. We Slytherins are brave, yes, but not stupid. For instance, given the choice, we will always choose to save our own necks."

"It's not my own neck I'm saving," said Harry tersely, tugging the trunk over a patch of particularly uneven, moth-eaten carpet right in front of the door.

"Oh, I see," said Phineas Nigellus, still stroking his beard, "this is no cowardly flight - you are being noble."

Harry ignored him. His hand was on the doorknob when Phineas Nigellus said lazily, “I have a message for you from Albus Dumbledore.”

Harry span round.

“What is it?”

“‘Stay where you are.’”

“I haven’t moved!” said Harry, his hand still upon the doorknob. “So what’s the message?”

“I have just given it to you, dolt,” said Phineas Ni gellus smoothly. “Dumbledore says, ‘Stay where you are.’”

“Why?” said Harry eagerly, dropping the end of his trunk. “Why does he want me to stay? What else did he say?”

“Nothing whatsoever,” said Phineas Nigellus, raising a thin black eyebrow as though he found Harry impertinent.

Harry’s temper rose to the surface like a snake rearing from long grass. He was exhausted, he was confused beyond measure, he had experienced terror, relief, then terror again in the last twelve hours, and still Dumbledore did not want to talk to him!

“So that’s it, is it?” he said loudly. “‘Stay where you a re’! That’s all anyone could tell me after I got attacked by those Dementors, too! Just stay put while the grown-ups sort it out, Harry! We won’t bother telling you anything, though, because your tiny little brain might not be able to cope with it!”

“You know,” said Phineas Nigellus, even more loudly than Harry “this is precisely why I loathed being a teacher! Young people are so infernally convinced that they are absolutely right about everything. Has it not occurred to you, my poor puffed-up popinjay, that there might be an excellent reason why the Headmaster of Hogwarts is not confiding every tiny detail of his plans to you? Have you never paused, while feeling hard-done-by, to note that following Dumbledores orders has never yet led you into harm? No. No, like all young people, you are quite sure that you alone feel and think, you alone recognize danger, you alone are the only one clever enough to realize what the Dark Lord may be planning -”

“He is planning something to do with me, then?” said Harry swiftly.

“Did I say that?” said Phineas Nigellus, idly examining his silk gloves. “Now, if you will excuse me, I have better things to do than listen to adolescent agonising… good-day to you.”

And he strolled to the edge of his frame and out of sight.

“Fine, go then!” Harry bellowed at the empty frame. “And tell Dumbledore thanks for nothing!”

The empty canvas remained silent. Fuming, Harry dragged his trunk back to the foot of his bed, then threw himself face down on the moth-eaten covers, his eyes shut, his body heavy and aching.

He felt as though he had journeyed for miles and miles… it seemed impossible that less than twenty-four hours ago Cho Chang had been approaching him under the mistletoe… he was so tired… he was scared to sleep… yet he did not know how long he could fight it… Dumbledore had told him to stay… that must mean he was allowed to sleep… but he was scared… what if it happened again?

He was sinking into shadows…

It was as though a film in his head had been waiting to start. He was walking down a deserted corridor towards a plain black door, past rough stone walls, torches, and an open doorway on to a flight of stone steps leading downstairs on the left…

He reached the black door but could not open it… he stood gazing at it, desperate for entry… something he wanted with all his heart lay beyond… a prize beyond his dreams… if only his scar would stop prickling… then he would be able to think more clearly…

“Harry,” said Ron’s voice, from far, far away, “Mum says dinner’s ready, but she’ll save you something if you want to stay in bed.”

Harry opened his eyes, but Ron had already left the room.

He doesn’t want to be on his own with me, Harry thought. *Not after what he heard Moody say.*

He supposed none of them would want him there any more, now that they knew what was inside him.

He would not go down to dinner; he would not inflict his company on them. He turned over on to his other side and, after a while, dropped back off to sleep. He woke much later, in the early hours of the morning, his insides aching with hunger and Ron snoring in the next bed. Squinting around the room, he saw the dark outline of Phineas Nigellus standing again in his portrait and it occurred to Harry that Dumbledore had probably sent Phineas Nigellus to watch over him, in case he attacked somebody else.

The feeling of being unclean intensified. He half-wished he had not obeyed Dumbledore… if this was how life was going to be for him in Grimmauld Place from now on, maybe he would be better off in Privet Drive after all.

Everybody else spent the following morning putting up Christmas decorations. Harry could not remember Sirius ever being in such a good mood; he was actually singing carols, apparently delighted that he was to have company over Christmas. Harry could hear his voice echoing up through the floor in the cold drawing room where he was sitting alone, watching the sky growing whiter outside the windows, threatening snow, all the time feeling a savage pleasure that he was

giving the others the opportunity to keep talking about him, as they were bound to be doing. When he heard Mrs. Weasley calling his name softly u p the stairs around lunchtime, he retreated further upstairs and ignored her.

Around six o'clock in the evening the doorbell rang and Mrs. Black started screaming again. Assuming that Mundungus or some other Order member had come to call, Harry merely settled himself more comfortably against the wall of Buckbeak's room where he was hiding, trying to ignore how hungry he felt as he fed dead rats to the Hippogriff. It came as a slight shock when somebody hammered hard on the door a few minutes later.

"I know you're in there," said Hermione's voice. "Will you please come out? I want to talk to you."

"What are you doing here?" Harry asked her, pulling open the door as Buckbeak resumed his scratching at the straw-strewn floor for any fragments of rat he may have dropped. "I thought you were skiing with your mum and dad?"

"Well, to tell the truth, skiing's not really my thing," said Hermione. "So, I've come here for Christmas." There was snow in her hair and her face was pink with cold. "But don't tell Ron. I told him it's really good because he kept laughing so much. Mum and Dad are a bit disappointed, but I've told them that everyone who is serious about the exams is staying at Hogwarts to study. They want me to do well, they'll understand. Anyway," she said briskly, "let's go to your bedroom, Ron's mum has lit a fire in there and she's sent up sandwiches."

Harry followed her back to the second floor. When he entered the bedroom, he was rather surprised to see both Ron and Ginny waiting for them, sitting on Ron's bed.

"I came on the Knight Bus," said Hermione airily, pulling off her jacket before Harry had time to speak. "Dumbledore told me what had happened first thing this morning, but I had to wait for term to end officially before setting off. Umbridge is already livid that you lot disappeared right under her nose, even though Dumbledore told her Mr. Weasley was in St. Mungo's and he'd given you all permission to visit. So…"

She sat down next to Ginny, and the two girls and Ron all looked up at Harry.

"How're you feeling?" asked Hermione.

"Fine," said Harry stiffly.

"Oh, don't lie, Harry," she said impatiently. "Ron and Ginny say you've been hiding from everyone since you got back from St. Mungo's."

"They do, do they?" said Harry, glaring at Ron and Ginny. Ron looked down at his feet but Ginny seemed quite unabashed.

"Well, you have!" she said. "And you won't look at any of us!"

“It’s you lot who won’t look at me!” said Harry ang rily.

“Maybe you’re taking it in turns to look, and keep missing each other,” suggested Hermione, the corners of her mouth twitching.

“Very funny,” snapped Harry, turning away.

“Oh, stop feeling all misunderstood,” said Hermione sharply. “Look, the others have told me what you overheard last night on the Extendable Ears -”

“Yeah?” growled Harry, his hands deep in his pockets as he watched the snow now falling thickly outside. “All been talking about me, have you? Well, I’m getting used to it.”

“We wanted to talk to you, Harry,” said Ginny, “but as you’ve been hiding ever since we got back -”

“I didn’t want anyone to talk to me,” said Harry, w ho was feeling more and more nettled.

“Well, that was a bit stupid of you,” said Ginny angrily, “seeing as you don’t know anyone but me who’s been possessed by You-Know-Who, and I can tell you how it feels.”

Harry remained quite still as the impact of these words hit him. Then he wheeled round.

“I forgot,” he said.

“Lucky you,” said Ginny coolly.

“I’m sorry” Harry said, and he meant it. “So… so, do you think I’m being possessed, then?”

“Well, can you remember everything you’ve been doing?” Ginny asked. “Are there big blank periods where you don’t know what you’ve been up to?”

Harry racked his brains.

“No,” he said.

“Then You-Know-Who hasn’t ever possessed you,” said Ginny simply. “When he did it to me, I couldn’t remember what I’d been doing for hours at a time. I’d find myself somewhere and not know how I got there.”

Harry hardly dared believe her, yet his heart was lightening almost in spite of himself.

“That dream I had about your dad and the snake, though —”

“Harry you’ve had these dreams before,” Hermione said. “You had flashes of what Voldemort was up to last year.”

“This was different,” said Harry, shaking his head. “I was inside that snake. It was like I was the snake… what if Voldemort somehow transported me to London —?”

“One day,” said Hermione, sounding thoroughly exasperated, “you’ll read Hogwarts: A History, and perhaps it will remind you that you can’t Apparate or Disapparate inside Hogwarts. Even Voldemort couldn’t just make you fly out of your dormitory, Harry.”

“You didn’t leave your bed, mate,” said Ron. “I saw you thrashing around in your sleep for at least a minute before we could wake you up.”

Harry started pacing up and down the room again, thinking. What they were all saying was not only comforting, it made sense… without really thinking, he took a sandwich from the plate on the bed and crammed it hungrily into his mouth.

I’m not the weapon after all, thought Harry. His heart swelled with happiness and relief, and he felt like joining in as they heard Sirius tramping past their door towards Buckbeak’s room, singing “God Rest Ye, Merry Hippogriffs” at the top of his voice.

How could he have dreamed of returning to Privet Drive for Christmas? Sirius’s delight at having the house full again, and especially at having Harry back, was infectious. He was no longer their sullen host of the summer; now he seemed determined that everyone should enjoy themselves as much, if not more than they would have done at Hogwarts, and he worked tirelessly in the run-up to Christmas Day, cleaning and decorating with their help, so that by the time they all went to bed on Christmas Eve the house was barely recognisable. The tarnished chandeliers were no longer hung with cobwebs but with garlands of holly and gold and silver streamers; magical snow glittered in heaps over the threadbare carpets; a great Christmas tree, obtained by Mundungus and decorated with live fairies, blocked Sirius’s family tree from view, and even the stuffed elf-heads on the hall wall wore Father Christmas hats and beards.

Harry awoke on Christmas morning to find a stack of presents at the foot of his bed and Ron already halfway through opening his own, rather larger, pile.

“Good haul this year,” he informed Harry through a cloud of paper. “Thanks for the Broom Compass, it’s excellent; beats Hermiones - she got me a homework planner–”

Harry sorted through his presents and found one with Hermiones handwriting on it. She had given him, too, a book that resembled a diary except that it said things like “*Do it today or later you'll pay!” every* time he opend a page.

Sirius and Lupin had given Harry a set of excellent books entitled *Practical Defensive Magic and its Use Against the Dark Arts,* which had superb, moving color illustrations of all the counterjinxes and hexes it described. Harry flicked through the first volume eagerly; he could see it was going to be highly useful in his plans for the D.A.. Hagrid had sent a furry brown wallet that had fangs, which were presumably supposed to be an anti-theft device, but unfortunately prevented Harry putting any money in without getting his fingers ripped off. Tonks’s present was a small, working model of a Firebolt, which Harry watched fly around the room, wishing he still

had his full-size version; Ron had given him an enormous box of Every-Flavour Beans, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley the usual hand-knitted jumper and some mince pies, and Dobby a truly dreadful painting that Harry suspected had been done by the elf himself. He had just turned it upsidedown to see whether it looked better that way when, with a loudcrack, Fred and George Apparated at the foot of his bed.

“Merry Christmas,” said George. “Don’t go downstairs for a bit.”

“Why not?” said Ron.

“Mum’s crying again,” said Fred heavily. “Percy sent back his Christmas jumper.”

“Without a note,” added George. “Hasn’t asked how Dad is or visited him or anything.”

“We tried to comfort her,” said Fred, moving around the bed to look at Harry’s portrait. “Told her Percy’s nothing more than a humungous pile of rat droppings.”

“Didn’t work,” said George, helping himself to a Chocolate Frog. “So Lupin took over. Best let him cheer her up before we go down for breakfast, I reckon.”

“What’s that supposed to be, anyway?” asked Fred, squinting at Dobby’s painting. “Looks like a gibbon with two black eyes.”

“It’s Harry!” said George, pointing at the back of the picture, “says so on the back!”

“Good likeness,” said Fred, grinning. Harry threw his new homework diary at him; it hit the wall opposite and fell to the floor where it said happily: *“If you’ve dotted the ‘i’s and crossed the ‘t’s then you may do whatever you please!”*

They got up and dressed. They could hear the various inhabitants of the house calling “Merry Christmas” to one another. On their way downstairs they met Hermione.

“Thanks for the book, Harry” she said happily. “I’ve been wanting that New Theory of Numerology for ages! And that perfume’s really unusual, Ron.”

“No problem,” said Ron. “Who’s that for, anyway?” he added, nodding at the neatly wrapped present she was carrying.

“Kreacher,” said Hermione brightly.

“It had better not be clothes!” Ron warned her. “You know what Sirius said: Kreacher knows too much, we can’t set him free!”

“It isn’t clothes,” said Hermione, “although if I had my way I’d certainly give him something to wear other than that filthy old rag. No, it’s a patchwork quilt, I thought it would brighten up his bedroom.”

“What bedroom?” said Harry, dropping his voice to a whisper as they were passing the portrait of Sirius’s mother.

“Well, Sirius says it’s not so much a bedroom, more a kind of -den,” said Hermione. “Apparently he sleeps under the boiler in that cupboard off the kitchen.”

Mrs. Weasley was the only person in the basement when they arrived there. She was standing at the stove and sounded as though she had a bad head cold as she wished them “Merry Christmas,” and they all averted their eyes.

“So, is this Kreacher’s bedroom?” said Ron, strolling over to a dingy door in the corner opposite the pantry. Harry had never seen it open.

“Yes,” said Hermione, now sounding a little nervous. “Er… I think we’d better knock.”

Ron rapped on the door with his knuckles but there was no reply.

“He must be sneaking around upstairs,” he said, and without further ado pulled open the door.

“Urgh!”

Harry peered inside. Most of the cupboard was taken up with a very large and old-fashioned boiler, but in the foot’s space underneath the pipes Kreacher had made himself something that looked like a nest. A jumble of assorted rags and smelly old blankets were piled on the floor and the small dent in the middle of it showed where Kreacher curled up to sleep every night. Here and there among the material were stale bread crusts and mouldy old bits of cheese. In a far corner glinted small objects and coins that Harry guessed Kreacher had saved, magpie-like, from Sirius’s purge of the house, and he had also managed to retrieve the silver-framed family photographs that Sirius had thrown away over the summer. Their glass might be shattered, but still the little black-and-white people inside them peered up at him haughtily, including - he felt a little jolt in his stomach - the dark, heavy-lidded woman whose trial he had witnessed in Dumbledore’s Pensieve: Bellatrix Lestrange. By the looks of it, hers was Kreacher’s favorite photograph; he had placed it to the fore of all the others and had mended the glass clumsily with Spellotape.

“I think I’ll just leave his present here,” said Hermione, laying the package neatly in the middle of the depression in the rags and blankets and closing the door quietly. “He’ll find it later, that’ll be fine.”

“Come to think of it,” said Sirius, emerging from the pantry carrying a large turkey as they closed the cupboard door, “has anyone actually seen Kreacher lately?”

“I haven’t seen him since the night we came back here,” said Harry. “You were ordering him out of the kitchen.”

“Yeah…” said Sirius, frowning. “You know, I think that’s the last time I saw him, too… he must

be hiding upstairs somewhere."

"He couldn't have left, could he?" said Harry. "I mean, when you said 'out', maybe he thought you meant get out of the house?"

"No, no, house-elves can't leave unless they're given clothes. They're tied to their family's house," said Sirius.

"They can leave the house if they really want to," Harry contradicted him. "Dobby did, he left the Malfoys' to give me warnings two years ago. He had to punish himself afterwards, but he still managed it."

Sirius looked slightly disconcerted for a moment, then said, "I'll look for him later, I expect I'll find him upstairs crying his eyes out over my mother's old bloomers or something. Of course, he might have crawled into the airing cupboard and died… but I mustn't get my hopes up."

Fred, George and Ron laughed; Hermione, however, looked reproachful.

Once they had eaten their Christmas lunch, the Weasleys, Harry and Hermione were planning to pay Mr. Weasley another visit, escorted by Mad-Eye and Lupin. Mundungus turned up in time for Christmas pudding and trifle, having managed to 'borrow' a car for the occasion, as the Underground did not run on Christmas Day. The car, which Harry doubted very much had been taken with the knowledge or consent of it's owner, had had a similar Enlarging Spell put upon it as the Weasley's old Ford Anglia; although normally proportioned outside, ten people with Mundungus driving were able to fit into it quite comfortably. Mrs. Weasley hesitated before getting inside - Harry knew her disapproval of Mundungus was battling with her dislike of traveling without magic - but, finally, the cold outside and her children's pleading triumphed, and she settled herself into the back seat between Fred and Bill with good grace.

The journey to St. Mungo's was quite quick as there was very little traffic on the roads. A small trickle of witches and wizards was creeping furtively up the otherwise deserted street to visit the hospital. Harry and the others got out of the car, and Mundungus drove off around the corner to wait for them. They strolled casually towards the window where the dummy in green nylon stood, then, one by one, stepped through the glass.

The reception area looked pleasantly festive: the crystal orbs that illuminated St. Mungo's had been colored red and gold to become gigantic, glowing Christmas baubles; holly hung around every doorway; and shining white Christmas trees covered in magical snow and icicles glittered in every corner, each one topped with a gleaming gold star. It was less crowded than the last time they had been there, although halfway across the room Harry found himself shunted aside by a witch with a walnut jammed up her left nostril.

"Family argument, eh?" smirked the blonde witch behind the desk. "You're the third I've seen today… Spell Damage, fourth floor."

They found Mr. Weasley propped up in bed with the remains of his turkey dinner on a tray on his

lap and a rather sheepish expression on his face.

“Everything all right, Arthur?” asked Mrs. Weasley, after they had all greeted Mr. Weasley and handed over their presents.

“Fine, fine,” said Mr. Weasley, a little too heartily. “You — er — haven’t seen Healer Smethwyck, have you?”

“No,” said Mrs. Weasley suspiciously, “why?”

“Nothing, nothing,” said Mr. Weasley airily, starting to unwrap his pile of gifts. “Well, everyone had a good day? What did you all get for Christmas? Oh, Harry - this is absolutely wonderful!” For he had just opened Harry’s gift of fuse-wire and screwdrivers.

Mrs. Weasley did not seem entirely satisfied with Mr. Weasley’s answer. As her husband leaned over to shake Harry’s hand, she peered at the bandaging under his nightshirt.

“Arthur,” she said, with a snap in her voice like a mousetrap, “you’ve had your bandages changed. Why have you had your bandages changed a day early, Arthur? They told me they wouldn’t need doing until tomorrow.”

“What?” said Mr. Weasley, looking rather frightened and pulling the bed covers higher up his chest. “No, no - it’s nothing - it’s -I-”

He seemed to deflate under Mrs. Weasley’s piercing gaze.

“Well - now don’t get upset, Molly, but Augustus Pye had an idea… he’s the Trainee Healer, you know, lovely young chap and very interested in… um… complementary medicine… I mean, some of these old Muggle remedies… well, they’re called stitches, Molly, and they work very well on - on Muggle wounds -”

Mrs. Weasley let out an ominous noise somewhere between a shriek and a snarl. Lupin strolled away from the bed and over to the werewolf, who had no visitors and was looking rather wistfully at the crowd around Mr. Weasley; Bill muttered something about getting himself a cup of tea and Fred and George leapt up to accompany him, grinning.

“Do you mean to tell me,” said Mrs. Weasley, her voice growing louder with every word and apparently unaware that her fellow visitors were scurrying for cover, “that you have been messing about with Muggle remedies?”

“Not messing about, Molly, dear,” said Mr. Weasley imploringly, “it was just - just something Pye and I thought we’d try - only, most unfortunately — well, with these particular kinds of wounds - it doesn’t seem to work as well as we’d hoped -”

“Meaning?”

“Well… well, I don’t know whether you know what - what stitches are?”

“It sounds as though you’ve been trying to sew your skin back together,” said Mrs. Weasley with a snort of mirthless laughter, “but even you, Arthur, wouldn’t be that stupid —”

“I fancy a cup of tea, too,” said Harry, jumping to his feet.

Hermione, Ron and Ginny almost sprinted to the door with him. As it swung closed behind them, they heard Mrs. Weasley shriek, “WHAT DO YOU MEAN, TH AT’S THE GENERAL IDEA?”

“Typical Dad,” said Ginny, shaking her head as they set off up the corridor. “Stitches… I ask you…”

“Well, you know, they do work well on non-magical wounds,” said Hermione fairly. “I suppose something in that snake’s venom dissolves them or something. I wonder where the tearoom is?”

“Fifth floor,” said Harry, remembering the sign over the welcome witch’s desk.

They walked along the corridor, through a set of double doors and found a rickety staircase lined with more portraits of brutal-looking Healers. As they climbed it, the various Healers called out to them, diagnosing odd complaints and suggesting horrible remedies. Ron was seriously affronted when a medieval wizard called out that he clearly had a bad case of spattergroit.

“And what’s that supposed to be?” he asked angrily, as the Healer pursued him through six more portraits, shoving the occupants out of the way.

“Tis a most grievous affliction of the skin, young master, that will leave you pockmarked and more gruesome even than you are now -”

“Watch who you’re calling gruesome!” said Ron, his ears turning red.

“- the only remedy is to take the liver of a toad, bind it tight about your throat, stand naked at the full moon in a barrel of eels’ eyes -”

“I have not got spattergroit!”

“But the unsightly blemishes upon your visage, young master -”

“They’re freckles!” said Ron furiously. “Now get back in your own picture and leave me alone!“

He rounded on the others, who were all keeping determinedly straight faces.

“What floor’s this?”

“I think it’s the fifth,” said Hermione.

“Nah, it’s the fourth,” said Harry, “one more —”

But as he stepped on to the landing he came to an abrupt halt, staring at the small window set into the double doors that marked the start of a corridor signposted SPELL DAMAGE. A man was peering out at them all with his nose pressed against the glass. He had wavy blond hair, bright blue eyes and a broad vacant smile that revealed dazzlingly white teeth.

“Blimey!” said Ron, also staring at the man.

“Oh, my goodness,” said Hermione suddenly, sounding breathless. “Professor Lockhart!”

Their ex-Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher pushed open the doors and moved towards them, wearing a long lilac dressing gown.

“Well, hello there!” he said. “I expect you’d like my autograph, would you?”

“Hasn’t changed much, has he?” Harry muttered to Ginny, who grinned.

“Er — how are you, Professor?” said Ron, sounding slightly guilty. It had been Ron’s malfunctioning wand that had damaged Professor Lockhart’s memory so badly that he had landed in St. Mungo’s in the first place, though as Lockhart had been attempting to permanently wipe Harry and Ron’s memories at the time, Harrys sympathy was limited.

“I’m very well indeed, thank you!” said Lockhart exuberantly, pulling a rather battered peacockfeather quill from his pocket. “Now, how many autographs would you like? I can do joined-up writing now, you know!”

“Er - we don’t want any at the moment, thanks,” said Ron, raising his eyebrows at Harry, who asked, “Professor, should you be wandering around the corridors? Shouldn’t you be in a ward?”

The smile faded slowly from Lockhart’s face. For a few moments he gazed intently at Harry, then he said, “Haven’t we met?”

“Er… yeah, we have,” said Harry. “You used to teach us at Hogwarts, remember?”

“Teach?” repeated Lockhart, looking faintly unsettled. “Me? Did I?”

And then the smile reappeared upon his face so suddenly it was rather alarming.

“Taught you everything you know, I expect, did I? Well, how about those autographs, then? Shall we say a round dozen, you can give them to all your little friends then and nobody will be left out!”

But just then a head poked out of a door at the far end of the corridor and a voice called,

“Gilderoy, you naughty boy, where have you wandered off to?”

A motherly-looking Healer wearing a tinsel wreath in her hair came bustling up the corridor, smiling warmly at Harry and the others.

“Oh, Gilderoy, you’ve got visitors! How lovely, and on Christmas Day, too! Do you know, he never gets visitors, poor lamb, and I can’t think why, he’s such a sweetie, aren’t you?”

“We’re doing autographs!” Gilderoy told the Healer with another glittering smile. “They want loads of them, won’t take no for an answer! I just hope we’ve got enough photographs!”

“Listen to him,” said the Healer, taking Lockhart’s arm and beaming fondly at him as though he were a precocious two-year-old. “He was rather well known a few years ago; we very much hope that this liking for giving autographs is a sign that his memory might be starting to come back. Will you step this way? He’s in a closed ward, you know, he must have slipped out while I was bringing in the Christmas presents, the door’s usually kept locked… not that he’s dangerous! But,” she lowered her voice to a whisper, “he’s a bit of a danger to himself, bless him… doesn’t know who he is, you see, wanders off and can’t remember how to get back… it is nice of you to have come to see him.”

“Er,” said Ron, gesturing uselessly at the floor above, “actually, we were just — er -”

But the Healer was smiling expectantly at them, and Ron’s feeble mutter of “going to have a cup of tea” trailed away into nothingness. They looked at each other helplessly, then followed Lockhart and his Healer along the corridor.

“Let’s not stay long,” Ron said quietly.

The Healer pointed her wand at the door of the Janus Thickey Ward and muttered, “Alohomora.” The door swung open and she led the way inside, keeping a firm grasp on Gilderoys arm until she had settled him into an armchair beside his bed.

“This is our long-term residents’ ward,” she informed Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny in a low voice. “For permanent spell damage, you know. Of course, with intensive remedial potions and charms and a bit of luck, we can produce some improvement. Gilderoy does seem to be getting back some sense of himself; and we’ve seen a real improvement in Mr. Bode, he seems to be regaining th e power of speech very well, though he isn’t speaking any language we recognize yet. Well, I must finish giving out the Christmas presents, I’ll leave you all to chat.”

Harry looked around. The ward bore unmistakable signs of being a permanent home to its residents. They had many more personal effects around their beds than in Mr. Weasley’s ward; the wall around Gilderoy’s headboard, for instance, was papered with pictures of himself, all beaming toothily and waving at the new arrivals. He had autographed many of them to himself in disjointed, childish writing. The moment he had been deposited in his chair by the Healer, Gilderoy pulled a fresh stack of photographs towards him, seized a quill and started signing them all feverishly.

“You can put them in envelopes,” he said to Ginny, throwing the signed pictures into her lap one

by one as he finished them. “I am not forgotten, you know, no, I still receive a very great deal of fan mail… Gladys Gudgeon writes weekly… I just wish I knew why.” He paused, looking faintly puzzled, then beamed again and returned to his signing with renewed vigour. “I suspect it is simply my good looks…”

A sallow-skinned, mournful-looking wizard lay in the bed opposite staring at the ceiling; he was mumbling to himself and seemed quite unaware of anything around him. Two beds along was a woman whose entire head was covered in fur; Harry remembered something similar happening to Hermione during their second year, although fortunately the damage, in her case, had not been permanent. At the far end of the ward flowery curtains had been drawn around two beds to give the occupants and their visitors some privacy.

“Here you are, Agnes,” said the Healer brightly to the furry-faced woman, handing her a small pile of Christmas presents. “See, not forgotten, are you? And your son’s sent an owl to say he’s visiting tonight, so that’s nice, isn’t it?”

Agnes gave several loud barks.

“And look, Broderick, you’ve been sent a potted plant and a lovely calendar with a different fancy Hippogriff for each month; they’ll brighten things up, won’t they?” said the Healer, bustling along to the mumbling man, setting a rather ugly plant with long, swaying tentacles on the bedside cabinet and fixing the calendar to the wall with her wand. “And - oh, Mrs. Longbottom, are you leaving already?”

Harry’s head span round. The curtains had been drawn back from the two beds at the end of the ward and two visitors were walking back down the aisle between the beds: a formidable-looking old witch wearing a long green dress, a moth-eaten fox fur and a pointed hat decorated with what was unmistakeably a stuffed vulture and, trailing behind her looking thoroughly depressed - Neville.

With a sudden rush of understanding, Harry realized who the people in the end beds must be. He cast around wildly for some means of distracting the others so that Neville could leave the ward unnoticed and unquestioned, but Ron had also looked up at the sound of the name “Longbottom”, and before Harry could stop him had called out, “Neville!”

Neville jumped and cowered as though a bullet had narrowly missed him.

“It’s us, Neville!” said Ron brightly, getting to h i s feet. “Have you seen -? Lockhart’s here! Who’ve you been visiting?”

“Friends of yours, Neville, dear?” said Neville’s grandmother graciously, bearing down upon them all.

Neville looked as though he would rather be anywhere in the world but here. A dull purple flush was creeping up his plump face and he was not making eye contact with any of them.

“Ah, yes,” said his grandmother, looking closely at Harry and sticking out a shrivelled, clawlike hand for him to shake. “Yes, yes, I know who you are, of course. Neville speaks most highly of you.”

“Er - thanks,” said Harry, shaking hands. Neville did not look at him, but surveyed his own feet, the color deepening in his face all the while.

“And you two are clearly Weasleys,” Mrs. Longbottom continued, proffering her hand regally to Ron and Ginny in turn. “Yes, I know your parents — not well, of course — but fine people, fine people… and you must be Hermione Granger?”

Hermione looked rather startled that Mrs. Longbottom knew her name, but shook hands all the same.

“Yes, Neville’s told me all about you. Helped him out of a few sticky spots, haven’t you? He’s a good boy,” she said, casting a sternly appraising look down her rather bony nose at Neville, “but he hasn’t got his father’s talent, I’m afraid to say.” And she jerked her head in the direction of the two beds at the end of the ward, so that the stuffed vulture on her hat trembled alarmingly.

“What?” said Ron, looking amazed. (Harry wanted to stamp on Ron’s foot, but that sort of thing is much harder to bring off unnoticed when you’re wearing jeans rather than robes.) “Is that your dad down the end, Neville?”

“What’s this?” said Mrs. Longbottom sharply. “Haven’t you told your friends about your parents, Neville?”

Neville took a deep breath, looked up at the ceiling and shook his head. Harry could not remember ever feeling sorrier for anyone, but he could not think of any way of helping Neville out of the situation.

“Well, it’s nothing to be ashamed of!” said Mrs. Longbottom angrily. “You should be proud, Neville, proud! They didn’t give their health and their sanity so their only son would be ashamed of them, you know!”

“I’m not ashamed,” said Neville, very faintly, still looking anywhere but at Harry and the others. Ron was now standing on tiptoe to look over at the inhabitants of the two beds.

“Well, you’ve got a funny way of showing it!” said Mrs. Longbottom. “My son and his wife,” she said, turning haughtily to Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny, “were tortured into insanity by You- Know-Who’s followers.”

Hermione and Ginny both clapped their hands over their mouths. Ron stopped craning his neck to catch a glimpse of Neville’s parents and looked mortified.

“They were Aurors, you know, and very well respected within the wizarding community” Mrs. Longbottom went on. “Highly gifted, the pair of them. I - yes, Alice dear, what is it?”

Neville's mother had come edging down the ward in her nightdress. She no longer had the plump, happy-looking face Harry had seen in Moody's old photograph of the original Order of the Phoenix. Her face was thin and worn now, her eyes seemed overlarge and her hair, which had turned white, was wispy and dead-looking. She did not seem to want to speak, or perhaps she was not able to, but she made timid motions towards Neville, holding something in her outstretched hand.

"Again?" said Mrs. Longbottom, sounding slightly weary. "Very well, Alice dear, very well - Neville, take it, whatever it is."

But Neville had already stretched out his hand, into which his mother dropped an empty Drooble's Best Blowing Gum wrapper.

"Very nice, dear," said Neville's grandmother in a falsely cheery voice, patting his mother on the shoulder.

But Neville said quietly, "Thanks, Mum."

His mother tottered away, back up the ward, humming to herself. Neville looked around at the others, his expression defiant, as though daring them to laugh, but Harry did not think he'd ever found anything less funny in his life.

"Well, we'd better get back," sighed Mrs Longbottom, drawing on long green gloves. "Very nice to have met you all. Neville, put that wrapper in the bin, she must have given you enough of them to paper your bedroom by now."

But as they left, Harry was sure he saw Neville slip the candy wrapper into his pocket.

The door closed behind them.

"I never knew," said Hermione, who looked tearful.

"Nor did I," said Ron rather hoarsely.

"Nor me," whispered Ginny.

They all looked at Harry.

"I did," he said glumly. "Dumbledore told me but I promised I wouldn't tell anyone… that's what Bellatrix Lestrange got sent to Azkaban for, using the Cruciatus Curse on Neville's parents until they lost their minds."

"Bellatrix Lestrange did that?" whispered Hermione, horrified. "That woman Kreacher's got a photo of in his den?"

There was a long silence, broken by Lockharts angry voice.

“Look, I didn’t learn joined-up writing for nothing, you know!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Occlumency

Kreacher, it transpired, had been lurking in the attic. Sirius said he had found him up there, covered in dust, no doubt looking for more relics of the Black family to hide in his cupboard. Though Sirius seemed satisfied with this story, it made Harry uneasy. Kreacher seemed to be in a better mood on his reappearance, his bitter muttering had subsided somewhat and he submitted to orders more docilely than usual, though once or twice Harry caught the house-elf staring at him avidly, but always looking quickly away whenever he saw that Harry had noticed.

Harry did not mention his vague suspicions to Sirius, whose cheerfulness was evaporating fast now that Christmas was over. As the date of their departure back to Hogwarts drew nearer, he became more and more prone to what Mrs. Weasley call ed 'fits of the sullens', in which he would become taciturn and grumpy, often withdrawing to Buckbeak's room for hours at a time. His gloom seeped through the house, oozing under doorways like some noxious gas, so that all of them became infected by it.

Harry didn't want to leave Sirius again with only Kreacher for company; in fact, for the first time in his life, he was not looking forward to returning to Hogwarts. Going back to school would mean placing himself once again under the tyranny of Dolores Umbridge, who had no doubt managed to force through another dozen decrees in their absence; there was no Quidditch to look forward to now that he had been banned; there was every likelihood that their burden of homework would increase as the exams drew even nearer; and Dumbledore remained as remote as ever. In fact, if it hadn't been for the D.A., Harry thought he might have begged Sirius to let him leave Hogwarts and remain in Grimmauld Place.

Then, on the very last day of the holidays, something happened that made Harry positively dread his return to school.

"Harry, dear," said Mrs. Weasley, poking her head in to his and Ron's bedroom, where the pair of them were playing wizard chess watched by Hermione, Ginny and Crookshanks, "could you come down to the kitchen? Professor Snape would like a word with you."

Harry did not immediately register what she had said; one of his castles was engaged in a violent tussle with a pawn of Rons and he was egging it on enthusiastically.

"Squash him - squash him, he's only a pawn, you idiot. Sorry, Mrs. Weasley, what did you say?"

"Professor Snape, dear. In the kitchen. He'd like a word."

Harry's mouth fell open in horror. He looked around at Ron, Hermione and Ginny, all of whom were gaping back at him. Crookshanks, whom Hermione had been restraining with difficulty for the past quarter of an hour, leapt gleefully on to the board and set the pieces running for cover, squealing at the top of their voices.

“Snape?” said Harry blankly.

“Professor Snape, dear,” said Mrs. Weasley reprovingly. “Now come on, quickly, he says he can’t stay long.”

“What’s he want with you?” said Ron, looking unnerved as Mrs. Weasley withdrew from the room. “You haven’t done anything, have you?”

“No!” said Harry indignantly, racking his brains to think what he could have done that would make Snape pursue him to Grimmauld Place. Had his last piece of homework perhaps earned a T?

A minute or two later, he pushed open the kitchen door to find Sirius and Snape both seated at the long kitchen table, glaring in opposite directions. The silence between them was heavy with mutual dislike. A letter lay open on the table in front of Sirius.

“Er,” said Harry, to announce his presence.

Snape looked around at him, his face framed between curtains of greasy black hair.

“Sit down, Potter.”

“You know,” said Sirius loudly, leaning back on his rear chair legs and speaking to the ceiling, “I think I’d prefer it if you didn’t give orders here, Snape. It’s my house, you see.”

An ugly flush suffused Snape’s pallid face. Harry sat down in a chair beside Sirius, facing Snape across the table.

“I was supposed to see you alone, Potter,” said Snape, the familiar sneer curling his mouth, “but Black -”

“I’m his godfather,” said Sirius, louder than ever.

“I am here on Dumbledore’s orders,” said Snape, whose voice, by contrast, was becoming more and more quietly waspish, “but by all means stay, Black, I know you like to feel… involved.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” said Sirius, letting his chair fall back on to all four legs with a loud bang.

“Merely that I am sure you must feel - ah - frustrated by the fact that you can do nothing useful,” Snape laid a delicate stress on the word, “for the Order.”

It was Sirius’s turn to flush. Snape’s lip curled in triumph as he turned to Harry.

“The Headmaster has sent me to tell you, Potter, that it is his wish for you to study Occlumency this term.”

“Study what?” said Harry blankly.

Snape’s sneer became more pronounced.

“Occlumency, Potter. The magical Defense of the mind against external penetration. An obscure branch of magic, but a highly useful one.”

Harry’s heart began to pump very fast indeed. Defense against external penetration? But he was not being possessed, they had all agreed on that…

“Why do I have to study Occlu — thing?” he blurted out.

“Because the Headmaster thinks it a good idea,” said Snape smoothly. “You will receive private lessons once a week, but you will not tell anybody what you are doing, least of all Dolores Umbridge. You understand?”

“Yes,” said Harry. “Who’s going to be teaching me?”

Snape raised an eyebrow.

“I am,” he said.

Harry had the horrible sensation that his insides were melting.

Extra lessons with Snape - what on earth had he done to deserve this? He looked quickly round at Sirius for support.

“Why can’t Dumbledore teach Harry?” asked Sirius aggressively. “Why you?”

“I suppose because it is a headmaster’s privilege to delegate less enjoyable tasks,” said Snape silkily. “I assure you I did not beg for the job.” He got to his feet. “I will expect you at six o’clock on Monday evening, Potter. My office. If anybody asks, you are taking remedial Potions. Nobody who has seen you in my classes could deny you need them.”

He turned to leave, his black traveling cloak billowing behind him.

“Wait a moment,” said Sirius, sitting up straighter in his chair.

Snape turned back to face them, sneering.

“I am in rather a hurry, Black. Unlike you, I do not have unlimited leisure time.”

“I’ll get to the point, then,” said Sirius, standing up. He was rather taller than Snape who, Harry noticed, balled his fist in the pocket of his cloak over what Harry was sure was the handle of his wand. “If I hear you’re using these Occlumency lessons to give Harry a hard time, you’ll have me to answer to.”

“How touching,” Snape sneered. “But surely you have noticed that Potter is very like his father?”

“Yes, I have,” said Sirius proudly.

“Well then, you’ll know he’s so arrogant that criticism simply bounces off him,” Snape said sleekly.

Sirius pushed his chair roughly aside and strode around the table towards Snape, pulling out his wand as he went. Snape whipped out his own. They were squaring up to each other, Sirius looking livid, Snape calculating, his eyes darting from Sirius’s wand-tip to his face.

“Sirius!” said Harry loudly, but Sirius appeared not to hear him.

“I’ve warned you, Snivellus,” said Sirius, his face barely a foot from Snape’s, “I don’t care if Dumbledore thinks you’ve reformed, I know better -”

“Oh, but why don’t you tell him so?” whispered Snape. “Or are you afraid he might not take very seriously the advice of a man who has been hiding inside his mother’s house for six months?”

“Tell me, how is Lucius Malfoy these days? I expect he’s delighted his lapdog’s working at Hogwarts, isn’t he?”

“Speaking of dogs,” said Snape softly, “did you know that Lucius Malfoy recognized you last time you risked a little jaunt outside? Clever idea, Black, getting yourself seen on a safe station platform… gave you a cast-iron excuse not to leave your hidey-hole in future, didn’t it?”

Sirius raised his wand.

“NO!” Harry yelled, vaulting over the table and trying to get in between them. “Sirius, don’t!”

“Are you calling me a coward?” roared Sirius, trying to push Harry out of the way, but Harry would not budge.

“Why, yes, I suppose I am,” said Snape.

“Harry - get - out - of - it!” snarled Sirius, pushing him aside with his free hand.

The kitchen door opened and the entire Weasley family, plus Hermione, came inside, all looking very happy, with Mr. Weasley walking proudly in thei r midst dressed in a pair of striped pajamass covered by a mackintosh.

“Cured!” he announced brightly to the kitchen at large. “Completely cured!”

He and all the other Weasleys froze on the threshold, gazing at the scene in front of them, which was also suspended in mid-action, both Sirius and Snape looking towards the door with their wands pointing into each other’s faces and Harry immobile between them, a hand stretched out

to each, trying to force them apart.

“Merlin’s beard,” said Mr. Weasley, the smile slidin g off his face, “what’s going on here?”

Both Sirius and Snape lowered their wands. Harry looked from one to the other. Each wore an expression of utmost contempt, yet the unexpected entrance of so many witnesses seemed to have brought them to their senses. Snape pocketed his wand, turned on his heel and swept back across the kitchen, passing the Weasleys without comment. At the door he looked back.

“Six o’clock, Monday evening, Potter.”

And he was gone. Sirius glared after him, his wand at his side.

“What’s been going on?” asked Mr. Weasley again.

“Nothing, Arthur,” said Sirius, who was breathing heavily as though he had just run a long distance. “Just a friendly little chat between two old school friends.” With what looked like an enormous effort, he smiled. “So… you’re cured? That’s great news, really great.”

“Yes, isn’t it?” said Mrs. Weasley, leading her husb and forward to a chair. “Healer Smethwyck worked his magic in the end, found an antidote to whatever that snake’s got in its fangs, and Arthur’s learned his lesson about dabbling in Muggle medicine, haven’t you, dear?” she added, rather menacingly.

“Yes, Molly, dear,” said Mr. Weasley meekly.

That night’s meal should have been a cheerful one, with Mr. Weasley back amongst them. Harry could tell Sirius was trying to make it so, yet when his godfather was not forcing himself to laugh loudly at Fred and George’s jokes or offering everyone more food, his face fell back into a moody, brooding expression. Harry was separated from him by Mundungus and Mad-Eye, who had dropped in to offer Mr. Weasley their congratulations. He wanted to talk to Sirius, to tell him he shouldn’t listen to a word Snape said, that Snape was goading him deliberately and that the rest of them didn’t think Sirius was a coward for doing as Dumbledore told him and remaining in Grimmauld Place. But he had no opportunity to do so, and, eyeing the ugly look on Sirius’s face, Harry wondered occasionally whether he would have dared to mention it even if he had the chance. Instead, he told Ron and Hermione under his voice about having to take Occlumency lessons with Snape.

“Dumbledore wants to stop you having those dreams about Voldemort,” said Hermione at once. “Well, you won’t be sorry not to have them any more, will you?”

“Extra lessons with Snape?” said Ron, sounding aghast. “I’d rather have the nightmares!”

They were to return to Hogwarts on the Knight Bus the following day, escorted once again by Tonks and Lupin, both of whom were eating breakfast in the kitchen when Harry, Ron and Hermione came down next morning. The adults seemed to have been mid-way through a

whispered conversation as Harry opened the door; all of them looked round hastily and fell silent.

After a hurried breakfast, they all pulled on jackets and scarves against the chilly grey January morning. Harry had an unpleasant constricted sensation in his chest; he did not want to say goodbye to Sirius. He had a bad feeling about this parting; he didn't know when they would next see each other and he felt it was incumbent upon him to say something to Sirius to stop him doing anything stupid - Harry was worried that Snape's accusation of cowardice had stung Sirius so badly he might even now be planning some foolhardy trip beyond Grimmauld Place. Before he could think of what to say, however, Sirius had beckoned him to his side.

“I want you to take this,” he said quietly, thrusting a badly wrapped package roughly the size of a paperback book into Harry's hands.

“What is it?” Harry asked.

“A way of letting me know if Snape's giving you a hard time. No, don't open it in here!” said Sirius, with a wary look at Mrs. Weasley, who was trying to persuade the twins to wear handknitted mittens. “I doubt Molly would approve - but I want you to use it if you need me, all right?”

“Okay,” said Harry, stowing the package away in the inside pocket of his jacket, but he knew he would never use whatever it was. It would not be he, Harry, who lured Sirius from his place of safety, no matter how foully Snape treated him in their forthcoming Occlumency classes.

“Let's go, then,” said Sirius, clapping Harry on the shoulder and smiling grimly, and before Harry could say anything else, they were heading upstairs, stopping before the heavily chained and bolted front door, surrounded by Weasleys.

“Goodbye, Harry, take care,” said Mrs. Weasley, hugg ing him.

“See you, Harry, and keep an eye out for snakes for me!” said Mr. Weasley genially, shaking his hand.

“Right - yeah,” said Harry distractedly; it was his last chance to tell Sirius to be careful; he turned, looked into his godfather's face: and opened his mouth to speak, but before he could do so Sirius was giving him a brief, one-armed hug, and saying gruffly, “Look after yourself, Harry.” Next moment, Harry found himself being shunted out into the icy winter air, with Tonks (today heavily disguised as a tall, tweedy woman with iron-grey hair) chivvying him down the steps.

The door of number twelve slammed shut behind them. They followed Lupin down the front steps. As he reached the pavement, Harry looked round. Number twelve was shrinking rapidly as those on either side of it stretched sideways, squeezing it out of sight. One blink later, it had gone.

“Come on, the quicker we get on the bus the better,” said Tonks, and Harry thought there was nervousness in the glance she threw around the square. Lupin flung out his right arm.

BANG.

A violently purple, triple-decker bus had appeared out of thin air in front of them, narrowly avoiding the nearest lamppost, which jumped backwards out of its way.

A thin, pimply, jug-eared youth in a purple uniform leapt down on to the pavement and said, “Welcome to the -”

“Yes, yes, we know, thank you,” said Tonks swiftly. “On, on, get on -”

And she shoved Harry forwards towards the steps, past the conductor, who goggled at Harry as he passed.

“Ere - it’s ‘Arry -!”

“If you shout his name I will curse you into oblivion,” muttered Tonks menacingly, now shunting

Ginny and Hermione forwards.

“I’ve always wanted to go on this thing,” said Ron happily, joining Harry on board and looking around.

It had been evening the last time Harry had traveled by Knight Bus and its three decks had been full of brass bedsteads. Now, in the early morning, it was crammed with an assortment of mismatched chairs grouped haphazardly around windows. Some of these appeared to have fallen over when the bus stopped abruptly in Grimmauld Place; a few witches and wizards were still getting to their feet, grumbling, and somebody’s shopping bag had slid the length of the bus: an unpleasant mixture of frogspawn, cockroaches and custard creams was scattered all over the floor.

“Looks like we’ll have to split up,” said Tonks briskly, looking around for empty chairs. “Fred, George and Ginny, if you just take those seats at the back… Remus can stay with you.”

She, Harry, Ron and Hermione proceeded up to the very top deck, where there were two unoccupied chairs at the very front of the bus and two at the back. Stan Shunpike, the conductor, followed Harry and Ron eagerly to the back. Heads turned as Harry passed and, when he sat down, he saw all the faces flick back to the front again.

As Harry and Ron handed Stan eleven Sickles each, the bus set off again, swaying ominously. It rumbled around Grimmauld Place, weaving on and off the pavement, then, with another tremendous BANG, they were all flung backwards; Ron’s chair toppled right over and Pigwidgeon, who had been on his lap, burst out of his cage and flew twittering wildly up to the

front of the bus where he fluttered down on to Hermione's shoulder instead. Harry, who had narrowly avoided falling by seizing a candle bracket, looked out of the window: they were now speeding down what appeared to be a motorway.

"Just outside Birmingham," said Stan happily, answe ring Harry's unasked question as Ron struggled up from the floor. "You keepin' well, then, 'Arry? I seen your name in the paper loads over the summer, but it weren't never nuffink very nice. I said to Ern, I said, 'e didn't seem like a nutter when we met 'im, just goes to show, dunnit?"

He handed over their tickets and continued to gaze, enthralled, at Harry. Apparently, Stan did not care how nutty somebody was, if they were famous enough to be in the paper. The Knight Bus swayed alarmingly, overtaking a line of cars on the inside. Looking towards the front of the bus, Harry saw Hermione cover her eyes with her hands, Pigwidgeon swaying happily on her shoulder.

BANG.

Chairs slid backwards again as the Knight Bus jumped from the Birmingham motorway to a quiet country lane full of hairpin bends. Hedgerows on either side of the road were leaping out of their way as they mounted the verges. From here they moved to a main street in the middle of a busy town, then to a viaduct surrounded by tall hills, then to a windswept road between high-rise flats, each time with a loud BANG.

"I've changed my mind," muttered Ron, picking himse lf up from the floor for the sixth time, "I never want to ride on this thing again."

"Listen, it's 'Ogwarts stop after this," said Stan brightly, swaying towards them. "That bossy woman up front 'oo got on with you, she's given us a little tip to move you up the queue. We're just gonna let Madam Marsh off first, though -" there was more retching from downstairs, followed by a horrible spattering sound "- she's not feeling 'er best."

A few minutes later, the Knight Bus screeched to a halt outside a small pub, which squeezed itself out of the way to avoid a collision. They could hear Stan ushering the unfortunate Madam Marsh out of the bus and the relieved murmurings of her fellow passengers on the second deck. The bus moved on again, gathering speed, until -

BANG.

They were rolling through a snowy Hogsmeade. Harry caught a glimpse of the Hog's Head down its side street, the severed boar's head sign creaking in the wintry wind. Flecks of snow hit the large window at the front of the bus. At last they rolled to a halt outside the gates to Hogwarts. Lupin and Tonks helped them off the bus with their luggage, then got off to say goodbye. Harry glanced up at the three decks of the Knight Bus and saw all the passengers staring down at them, noses flat against the windows.

"You'll be safe once you're in the grounds," said Tonks, casting a careful eye around at the

deserted road. “Have a good term, okay?”

“Look after yourselves,” said Lupin, shaking hands all round and reaching Harry last. “And listen…” he lowered his voice while the rest of the m exchanged last-minute goodbyes with Tonks, “Harry, I know you don’t like Snape, but he is a superb Occlumens and we all - Sirius included - want you to learn to protect yourself, so work hard, all right?”

“Yeah, all right,” said Harry heavily, looking up into Lupin’s prematurely lined face. “See you, then.”

The six of them struggled up the slippery drive towards the castle, dragging their trunks. Hermione was already talking about knitting a few elf hats before bedtime. Harry glanced back when they reached the oaken front doors; the Knight Bus had already gone and he half-wished, given what was coming the following evening, that he was still on board.

Harry spent most of the next day dreading the evening. His morning double-Potions lesson did nothing to dispel his trepidation, as Snape was as unpleasant as ever. His mood was further lowered by the D.A. members constantly approaching him in the corridors between classes, askinghopefully if there would be a meeting that night.

“I’ll let you know in the usual way when the next one is,” Harry said over and over again, “but I can’t do it tonight, I’ve got to go to - er - remedial Potions.”

“You take remedial Potions!” asked Zacharias Smith superciliously, having cornered Harry in the Entrance Hall after lunch. “Good Lord, you must be terrible. Snape doesn’t usually give extra lessons, does he?”

As Smith strode away in an annoyingly buoyant fashion, Ron glared after him.

“Shall I jinx him? I can still get him from here,” he said, raising his wand and taking aim between Smith’s shoulder blades.

“Forget it,” said Harry dismally. “It’s what everyone’s going to think, isn’t it? That I’m really stup —”

“Hi, Harry,” said a voice behind him. He turned round and found Cho standing there.

“Oh,” said Harry as his stomach leapt uncomfortably. “Hi.”

“We’ll be in the library, Harry,” said Hermione firmly as she seized Ron above the elbow and dragged him off towards the marble staircase.

“Had a good Christmas?” asked Cho.

“Yeah, not bad,” said Harry.

“Mine was pretty quiet,” said Cho. For some reason, she was looking rather embarrassed.

“Erm… there’s another Hogsmeade trip next month, did you see the notice?”

“What? Oh, no, I haven’t checked the noticeboard since I got back.”

“Yes, it’s on Valentine’s Day…”

“Right,” said Harry, wondering why she was telling him this. “Well, I suppose you want to -?”

“Only if you do,” she said eagerly.

Harry stared. He had been about to say, “I suppose you want to know when the next D.A. meetingis?” but her response did not seem to fit.

“I - er —” he said.

“Oh, it’s okay if you don’t,” she said, looking mortified. “Don’t worry. I - I’ll see you around.”

She walked away. Harry stood staring after her, his brain working frantically. Then something clunked into place.

“Cho! Hey - CHO!”

He ran after her, catching her halfway up the marble staircase.

“Er - d’you want to come into Hogsmeade with me on Valentine’s Day?”

“Oooh, yes!” she said, blushing crimson and beaming at him.

“Right… well… that’s settled then,” said Harry, and feeling that the day was not going to be a complete loss after all, he headed off to the library to pick up Ron and Hermione before their afternoon lessons, walking in a rather bouncy way himself.

By six o’clock that evening, however, even the glow of having successfully asked out Cho Chang could not lighten the ominous feelings that intensified with every step Harry took towards Snape’s office.

He paused outside the door when he reached it, wishing he were almost anywhere else, then, taking a deep breath, he knocked and entered.

The shadowy room was lined with shelves bearing hundreds of glass jars in which slimy bits of animals and plants were suspended in variously colored potions. In one corner stood the cupboard full of ingredients that Snape had once accused Harry - not without reason - of robbing. Harry’s attention was drawn towards the desk, however, where a shallow stone basin engraved with runes and symbols lay in a pool of candlelight. Harry recognized it at once - it was

Dumbledore’s Pensieve. Wondering what on earth it was doing there, he jumped when Snape’s cold voice came out of the shadows.

“Shut the door behind you, Potter.”

Harry did as he was told, with the horrible feeling that he was imprisoning himself. When he turned back into the room, Snape had moved into the light and was pointing silently at the chair opposite his desk. Harry sat down and so did Snape, his cold black eyes fixed unblinkingly upon Harry, dislike etched in every line of his face.

“Well, Potter, you know why you are here,” he said. “The Headmaster has asked me to teach you Occlumency. I can only hope that you prove more adept at it than at Potions.”

“Right,” said Harry tersely.

“This may not be an ordinary class, Potter,” said Snape, his eyes narrowed malevolently, “but I am still your teacher and you will therefore call me ‘sir’ or ‘professor’ at all times.”

“Yes… sir,” said Harry.

Snape continued to survey him through narrowed eyes for a moment, then said, “Now, Occlumency. As I told you back in your dear godfather’s kitchen, this branch of magic seals the mind against magical intrusion and influence.”

“And why does Professor Dumbledore think I need it, sir?” said Harry, looking directly into Snape’s eyes and wondering whether Snape would answer.

Snape looked back at him for a moment and then said contemptuously, “Surely even you could have worked that out by now, Potter? The Dark Lord is highly skilled at Legilimency -”

“What’s that? Sir?”

“It is the ability to extract feelings and memories from another persons mind -”

“He can read minds?” said Harry quickly, his worst fears confirmed.

“You have no subtlety, Potter,” said Snape, his dark eyes glittering. “You do not understand fine distinctions. It is one of the shortcomings that makes you such a lamentable potion-maker.”

Snape paused for a moment, apparently to savor the pleasure of insulting Harry, before continuing.

“Only Muggles talk of ‘mind-reading’. The mind is not a book, to be opened at will and examined at leisure. Thoughts are not etched on the inside of skulls, to be perused by any invader. The mind is a complex and many-layered thing, Potter - or at least, most minds are.” He smirked. “It is true, however, that those who have mastered Legilimency are able, under certain

conditions, to delve into the minds of their victims and to interpret their findings correctly. The Dark Lord, for instance, almost always knows when somebody is lying to him. Only those skilled at Occlumency are able to shut down those feelings and memories that contradict the lie, and so can utter falsehoods in his presence without detection.”

Whatever Snape said, Legilimency sounded like mind-reading to Harry, and he didn’t like the sound of it at all.

“So he could know what we’re thinking right now? Sir?”

“The Dark Lord is at a considerable distance and the walls and grounds of Hogwarts are guarded by many ancient spells and charms to ensure the bodily and mental safety of those who dwell within them,” said Snape. “Time and space matter in magic, Potter. Eye contact is often essential to Legilimency.”

“Well then, why do I have to learn Occlumency?”

Snape eyed Harry, tracing his mouth with one long, thin finger as he did so.

“The usual rules do not seem to apply with you, Potter. The curse that failed to kill you seems to have forged some kind of connection between you and the Dark Lord. The evidence suggests that at times, when your mind is most relaxed and vulnerable - when you are asleep, for instance - you are sharing the Dark Lord’s thoughts and emotions. The Headmaster thinks it inadvisable for this to continue. He wishes me to teach you how to close your mind to the Dark Lord.”

Harry’s heart was pumping fast again. None of this added up.

“But why does Professor Dumbledore want to stop it?” he asked abruptly. “I don’t like it much, but it’s been useful, hasn’t it? I mean… I saw that snake attack Mr. Weasley and if I hadn’t, Professor Dumbledore wouldn’t have been able to save him, would he? Sir?”

Snape stared at Harry for a few moments, still tracing his mouth with his finger. When he spoke again, it was slowly and deliberately, as though he weighed every word.

“It appears that the Dark Lord has been unaware of the connection between you and himself until very recently. Up till now it seems that you have been experiencing his emotions, and sharing his thoughts, without his being any the wiser. However, the vision you had shortly before Christmas -”

“The one with the snake and Mr. Weasley?”

“Do not interrupt me, Potter,” said Snape in a dangerous voice. “As I was saying, the vision you had shortly before Christmas represented such a powerful incursion upon the Dark Lord’s thoughts -”

“I saw inside the snake’s head, not his!”

“I thought I just told you not to interrupt me, Potter?”

But Harry did not care if Snape was angry; at last he seemed to be getting to the bottom of this business; he had moved forwards in his chair so that, without realizing it, he was perched on the very edge, tense as though poised for flight.

“How come I saw through the snakes eyes if it’s Voldemort’s thoughts I’m sharing?”

“Do not say the Dark Lord’s name!” spat Snape.

There was a nasty silence. They glared at each other across the Pensieve.

“Professor Dumbledore says his name,” said Harry quietly.

“Dumbledore is an extremely powerful wizard,” Snape muttered. “While he may feel secure enough to use the name… the rest of us…” He rubbed his left forearm, apparently unconsciously, on the spot where Harry knew the Dark Mark was burned into his skin.

“I just wanted to know,” Harry began again, forcing his voice back to politeness, “why -”

“You seem to have visited the snake’s mind because that was where the Dark Lord was at that particular moment,” snarled Snape. “He was possessing the snake at the time and so you dreamed you were inside it, too.”

“And Vol— he - realized I was there?”

“It seems so,” said Snape coolly.

“How do you know?” said Harry urgently. “Is this just Professor Dumbledore guessing, or -?”

“I told you,” said Snape, rigid in his chair, his eyes slits, “to call me ‘sir’.”

“Yes, sir,” said Harry impatiently, “but how do you know -?”

“It is enough that we know,” said Snape repressively. “The important point is that the Dark Lord is now aware that you are gaining access to his thoughts and feelings. He has also deduced that the process is likely to work in reverse; that is to say, he has realized that he might be able to access your thoughts and feelings in return -”

“And he might try and make me do things?” asked Harry. “Sir?” he added hurriedly.

“He might,” said Snape, sounding cold and unconcerned. “Which brings us back to Occlumency.”

Snape pulled out his wand from an inside pocket of his robes and Harry tensed in his chair, but Snape merely raised the wand to his temple and placed its tip into the greasy roots of his hair.

When he withdrew it, some silvery substance came away, stretching from temple to wand like a thick gossamer strand, which broke as he pulled the wand away from it and fell gracefully into the Pensieve, where it swirled silvery-white, neither gas nor liquid. Twice more, Snape raised the wand to his temple and deposited the silvery substance into the stone basin, then, without offering any explanation of his behavior, he picked up the Pensieve carefully, removed it to a shelf out of their way and returned to face Harry with his wand held at the ready.

“Stand up and take out your wand, Potter.”

Harry got to his feet, feeling nervous. They faced each other with the desk between them.

“You may use your wand to attempt to disarm me, or defend yourself in any other way you can think of,” said Snape.

“And what are you going to do?” Harry asked, eyeing Snape’s wand apprehensively.

“I am about to attempt to break into your mind,” said Snape softly. “We are going to see how well you resist. I have been told that you have already shown aptitude at resisting the Imperius Curse. You will find that similar powers are needed for this… brace yourself, now. Legilimens!”

Snape had struck before Harry was ready, before he had even begun to summon any force of resistance. The office swam in front of his eyes and vanished; image after image was racing through his mind like a flickering film so vivid it blinded him to his surroundings.

He was five, watching Dudley riding a new red bicycle, and his heart was bursting with jealousy… he was nine, and Ripper the bulldog was chasing him up a tree and the Dursleys were laughing below on the lawn… he was sitting under the Sorting Hat, and it was telling him he would do well in Slytherin… Hermione was lying in the hospital wing, her face covered with thick black hair… a hundred Dementors were closing in on him beside the dark lake… Cho Chang was drawing nearer to him under the mistletoe…

“No,” said a voice inside Harry’s head, as the memory of Cho drew nearer, “you’re not watching that, you’re not watching it, it’s private –“

He felt a sharp pain in his knee. Snape’s office had come back into view and he realized that he had fallen to the floor; one of his knees had collided painfully with the leg of Snape’s desk. He looked up at Snape, who had lowered his wand and was rubbing his wrist. There was an angry weal there, like a scorch mark.

“Did you mean to produce a Stinging Hex?” asked Snape coolly.

“No,” said Harry bitterly, getting up from the floor.

“I thought not,” said Snape, watching him closely. “You let me get in too far. You lost control.”

“Did you see everything I saw?” Harry asked, unsure whether he wanted to hear the answer.

“Flashes of it,” said Snape, his lip curling. “To whom did the dog belong?”

“My Aunt Marge,” Harry muttered, hating Snape.

“Well, for a first attempt that was not as poor as it might have been,” said Snape, raising his wand once more. “You managed to stop me eventually, though you wasted time and energy shouting. You must remain focused. Repel me with your brain and you will not need to resort to your wand.”

“I’m trying,” said Harry angrily, “but you’re not telling me how!”

“Manners, Potter,” said Snape dangerously. “Now, I want you to close your eyes.”

Harry threw him a filthy look before doing as he was told. He did not like the idea of standing there with his eyes shut while Snape faced him, carrying a wand.

“Clear your mind, Potter,” said Snape’s cold voice. “Let go of all emotion…”

But Harry’s anger at Snape continued to pound through his veins like venom. Let go of his anger? He could as easily detach his legs…

“You’re not doing it, Potter… you will need more discipline than this… focus, now…”

Harry tried to empty his mind, tried not to think, or remember, or feel…

“Let’s go again… on the count of three… one - two - three -Legilimens!”

A great black dragon was rearing in front of him… his father and mother were waving at him out of an enchanted mirror… Cedric Diggory was lying on the ground with blank eyes staring at him…

“NOOOOOOO!”

Harry was on his knees again, his face buried in his hands, his brain aching as though someone had been trying to pull it from his skull.

“Get up!” said Snape sharply. “Get up! You are not trying, you are making no effort. You are allowing me access to memories you fear, handing me weapons!”

Harry stood up again, his heart thumping wildly as though he had really just seen Cedric dead in the graveyard. Snape looked paler than usual, and angrier, though not nearly as angry as Harry was.

“I - am - making - an - effort,” he said through clenched teeth.

“I told you to empty yourself of emotion!”

“Yeah? Well, I’m finding that hard at the moment,” Harry snarled.

“Then you will find yourself easy prey for the Dark Lord!” said Snape savagely. “Fools who wear their hearts proudly on their sleeves, who cannot control their emotions, who wallow in sad memories and allow themselves to be provoked so easily - weak people, in other words - they stand no chance against his powers! He will penetrate your mind with absurd ease, Potter!”

“I am not weak,” said Harry in a low voice, fury now pumping through him so that he thought he might attack Snape in a moment.

“Then prove it! Master yourself!” spat Snape. “Control your anger, discipline your mind! We shall try again! Get ready, now! Legilimens!”

He was watching Uncle Vernon hammering the letterbox shut… a hundred Dementors were drifting across the lake in the grounds towards him… he was running along a windowless passage with Mr. Weasley… they were drawing nearer to the plain black door at the end of the corridor… Harry expected to go through it… but Mr. Weasley led him off to the left, down a flight of stone steps…

“I KNOW! I KNOW!”

He was on all fours again on Snape’s office floor, his scar was prickling unpleasantly, but the voice that had just issued from his mouth was triumphant. He pushed himself up again to find Snape staring at him, his wand raised. It looked as though, this time, Snape had lifted the spell before Harry had even tried to fight back.

“What happened then, Potter?” he asked, eyeing Harry intently.

“I saw - I remembered,” Harry panted. “I’ve just realized…”

“Realized what?” asked Snape sharply.

Harry did not answer at once; he was still savoring the moment of blinding realization as he rubbed his forehead…

He had been dreaming about a windowless corridor ending in a locked door for months, without once realizing that it was a real place. Now, seeing the memory again, he knew that all along he had been dreaming about the corridor down which he had run with Mr. Weasley on the twelfth of August as they hurried to the courtrooms in the Ministry; it was the corridor leading to the Department of Mysteries and Mr. Weasley had been there the night that he had been attacked by Voldemort’s snake.

He looked up at Snape.

“What’s in the Department of Mysteries?”

“What did you say?” Snape asked quietly and Harry saw, with deep satisfaction, that Snape was unnerved.

“I said, what’s in the Department of Mysteries, sir?” Harry said.

“And why,” said Snape slowly, “would you ask such a thing?”

“Because” said Harry, watching Snape’s face closely, “that corridor I’ve just seen - I’ve been dreaming about it for months — I’ve just recognized it - it leads to the Department of Mysteries… and I think Voldemort wants something from —”

”I have told you not to say the Dark Lord’s name!”

They glared at each other. Harrys scar seared again, but he did not care. Snape looked agitated; but when he spoke again he sounded as though he was trying to appear cool and unconcerned.

“There are many things in the Department of Mysteries, Potter, few of which you would understand and none of which concern you. Do I make myself plain?”

“Yes,” Harry said, still rubbing his prickling scar, which was becoming more painful.

“I want you back here same time on Wednesday. We will continue work then.”

“Fine,” said Harry. He was desperate to get out of Snape’s office and find Ron and Hermione.

“You are to rid your mind of all emotion every night before sleep; empty it, make it blank and calm, you understand?”

“Yes,” said Harry, who was barely listening.

“And be warned, Potter… I shall know if you have not practiced”

“Right,” Harry mumbled. He picked up his schoolbag, swung it over his shoulder and hurried towards the office door. As he opened it, he glanced back at Snape, who had his back to Harry and was scooping his own thoughts out of the Pensieve with the tip of his wand and replacing them carefully inside his own head. Harry left without another word, closing the door carefully behind him, his scar still throbbing painfully.

Harry found Ron and Hermione in the library, where they were working on Umbridge’s most recent ream of homework. Other students, nearly all of them fifth-years, sat at lamp-lit tables nearby, noses close to books, quills scratching feverishly, while the sky outside the mullioned windows grew steadily blacker. The only other sound was the slight squeaking of one of Madam Pince’s shoes, as the librarian prowled the aisles menacingly, breathing down the necks of those touching her precious books.

Harry felt shivery; his scar was still aching, he felt almost feverish.

When he sat down opposite Ron and Hermione, he caught sight of himself in the window opposite; he was very white and his scar seemed to be showing up more clearly than usual.

“How did it go?” Hermione whispered, and then, looking concerned. “Are you all right, Harry?”

“Yeah… fine… I dunno,” said Harry impatiently, wincing as pain shot through his scar again. “Listen… I’ve just realized something”

And he told them what he had just seen and deduced.

“So… so are you saying…” whispered Ron, as Madam Pince swept past, squeaking slightly, “that the weapon - the thing You-Know-Who’s after — is in the Ministry of Magic?”

“In the Department of Mysteries, it’s got to be,” H arry whispered. “I saw that door when your dad took me down to the courtrooms for my hearing and it’s definitely the same one he was guarding when the snake bit him.”

Hermione let out a long, slow sigh.

“Of course,” she breathed.

“Of course what?” said Ron rather impatiently.

“Ron, think about it… Sturgis Podmore was trying to get through a door at the Ministry of Magic… it must have been that one, it’s too much of a coincidence!”

“How come Sturgis was trying to break in when he’s on our side?” said Ron.

“Well, I don’t know,” Hermione admitted. “That is a bit odd…”

“So what’s in the Department of Mysteries?” Harry asked Ron. “Has your dad ever mentioned anything about it?”

“I know they call the people who work in there ‘Unspeakables’,”said Ron, frowning. “Because no one really seems to know what they do - weird place to have a weapon.”

“It’s not weird at all, it makes perfect sense,” said Hermione. “It will be something top secret that the Ministry has been developing, I expect… Harry, are you sure you’re all right?”

For Harry had just run both his hands hard over his forehead as though trying to iron it.

“Yeah… fine…” he said, lowering his hands, which we re trembling. “I just feel a bit… I don’t like Occlumency much.”

“I expect anyone would feel shaky if they’d had their mind attacked over and over again,” said Hermione sympathetically. “Look, let’s get back to the common room, we’ll be a bit more

comfortable there.”

But the common room was packed and full of shrieks of laughter and excitement; Fred and George were demonstrating their latest bit of joke shop merchandise.

“Headless Hats!” shouted George, as Fred waved a pointed hat decorated with a fluffy pink feather at the watching students. “Two Galleons each, watch Fred, now!”

Fred swept the hat on to his head, beaming. For a second he merely looked rather stupid; then both hat and head vanished.

Several girls screamed, but everyone else was roaring with laughter.

“And off again!” shouted George, and Fred’s hand groped for a moment in what seemed to be thin air over his shoulder; then his head reappeared as he swept the pink-feathered hat from it.

“How do those hats work, then?” said Hermione, distracted from her homework and watching Fred and George closely. “I mean, obviously it’s some kind of Invisibility Spell, but it’s rather clever to have extended the field of invisibility beyond the boundaries of the charmed object… I’d imagine the charm wouldn’t have a very long life though.”

Harry did not answer; he was feeling ill.

“I’m going to have to do this tomorrow,” he muttered, pushing the books he had just taken out of his bag back inside it.

“Well, write it in your homework planner then!” said Hermione encouragingly. “So you don’t forget!”

Harry and Ron exchanged looks as he reached into his bag, withdrew the planner and opened it tentatively.

“Don’t leave it till later, you big second-rater!” chided the book as Harry scribbled down Umbridge’s homework. Hermione beamed at it.

“I think I’ll go to bed,” said Harry, stuffing the homework planner back into his bag and making a mental note to drop it in the fire the first opportunity he got.

He walked across the common room, dodging George, who tried to put a Headless Hat on him, and reached the peace and cool of the stone staircase to the boys’ dormitories. He was feeling sick again, just as he had the night he had had the vision of the snake, but thought that if he could just lie down for a while he would be all right.

He opened the door of his dormitory and was one step inside it when he experienced pain so severe he thought that someone must have sliced into the top of his head. He did not know where he was, whether he was standing or lying down, he did not even know his own name.

Maniacal laughter was ringing in his ears… he was happier than he had been in a very long time… jubilant, ecstatic, triumphant… a wonderful, wonderful thing had happened…

“Harry? HARRY!”

Someone had hit him around the face. The insane laughter was punctuated with a cry of pain.

The happiness was draining out of him, but the laughter continued…

He opened his eyes and, as he did so, he became aware that the wild laughter was coming out of his own mouth. The moment he realized this, it died away; Harry lay panting on the floor, staring up at the ceiling, the scar on his forehead throbbing horribly. Ron was bending over him, looking very worried.

“What happened?” he said.

“I… dunno…” Harry gasped, sitting up again. “He’s really happy… really happy…”

“You-Know-Who is?”

“Something good’s happened,” mumbled Harry. He was shaking as badly as he had done after seeing the snake attack Mr. Weasley and felt very sick. “Something he’s been hoping for.”

The words came, just as they had back in the Gryffindor changing room, as though a stranger was speaking them through Harry’s mouth, yet he knew they were true. He took deep breaths, willing himself not to vomit all over Ron. He was very glad that Dean and Seamus were not here to watch this time.

“Hermione told me to come and check on you,” said Ron in a low voice, helping Harry to his feet. “She says your Defenses will be low at the moment, after Snape’s been fiddling around with your mind… still, I suppose it’ll help in the long run, won’t it?” He looked doubtfully at Harry as he helped him towards his bed. Harry nodded without any conviction and slumped back on his pillows, aching all over from having fallen to the floor so often that evening, his scar still prickling painfully. He could not help feeling that his first foray into Occlumency had weakened his mind’s resistance rather than strengthening it, and he wondered, with a feeling of great trepidation, what had happened to make Lord Voldemort the happiest he had been in fourteen years.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The Beetle at Bay

Harry's question was answered the very next morning. When Hermione's DailyProphet arrived she smoothed it out, gazed for a moment at the front page and gave a yelp that caused everyone in the vicinity to stare at her.

"What?" said Harry and Ron together.

For an answer she spread the newspaper on the table in front of them and pointed at ten blackand- white photographs that filled the whole of the front page, nine showing wizards' faces and the tenth, a witch's. Some of the people in the photographs were silently jeering; others were tapping their fingers on the frame of their pictures, looking insolent. Each picture was captioned with a name and the crime for which the person had been sent to Azkaban.

Antonin Dolohov, read the legend beneath a wizard with a long, pale, twisted face who was sneering up at Harry*, convicted of the brutal murders of Gideon and Fabian Prewett.*

Augustus Rookwood, said the caption beneath a pockmarked man with greasy hair who was leaning against the edge of his picture, looking bored, *convicted of leaking Ministry of Magic secrets to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.*

But Harry's eyes were drawn to the picture of the witch. Her face had leapt out at him the moment he had seen the page. She had long, dark hair that looked unkempt and straggly in the picture, though he had seen it sleek, thick and shining. She glared up at him through heavily lidded eyes, an arrogant, disdainful smile playing around her thin mouth. Like Sirius, she retained vestiges of great good looks, but something - perhaps Azkaban - had taken most of her beauty.

Bellatrix Lestrange, convicted of the torture and permanent incapacitation of Frank and Alice Longbottom.

Hermione nudged Harry and pointed at the headline over the pictures, which Harry, concentrating on Bellatrix, had not yet read.

MASS BREAKOUT FROM AZKABAN

MINISTRY FEARS BLACK IS 'RALLYING POINT' FOR OLD DEATH EATERS

"Black?" said Harry loudly. "Not -?"

"Shh!" whispered Hermione desperately. "Not so loud - just read it!"

The Ministry of Magic announced late last night that there has been a mass breakout from

Azkaban.

Speaking to reporters in his private office, Cornelius Fudge, Minister for Magic, confirmed that ten high-security prisoners escaped in the early hours of yesterday evening and that he has already informed the Muggle Prime Minister of the dangerous nature of these individuals.

"We find ourselves, most unfortunately, in the same position we were two and a half years ago when the murderer Sirius Black escaped," said Fudge last night. "Nor do we think the two breakouts are unrelated. An escape of this magnitude suggests outside help, and we must remember that Black, as the first person ever to break out of Azkaban, would be ideally placed to help others follow in his footsteps. We think it likely that these individuals, who include Black's cousin, Bellatrix Lestrange, have rallied around Black as their leader. We are, however, doing all we can to round up the criminals, and we beg the magical community to remain alert and cautious. On no account should any of these individuals be approached."

"There you are, Harry," said Ron, looking awestruck. "That's why he was happy last night."

"I don't believe this," snarled Harry, "Fudge is blaming the breakout on Sirius?"

"What other options does he have?" said Hermione bitterly. "He can hardly say, 'everyone, Dumbledore warned me this might happen, the Azkaban guards have joined Lord Voldemort' - stop whimpering, Ron - 'now Voldemort's worst supporters have broken out, too.' I mean, he's spent a good six months telling everyone you and Dumbledore are liars, hasn't he?"

Hermione ripped open the newspaper and began to read the report inside while Harry looked around the Great Hall. He could not understand why his fellow students were not looking scared or at least discussing the terrible piece of news on the front page, but very few of them took the newspaper every day like Hermione. There they all were, talking about homework and Quidditch and who knew what other rubbish, when outside these walls ten more Death Eaters had swollen Voldemort's ranks.

He glanced up at the staff table. It was a different story there: Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall were deep in conversation, both looking extremely grave. Professor Sprout had the Prophet propped against a bottle of ketchup and was reading the front page with such concentration that she was not noticing the gentle drip of egg yolk falling into her lap from her stationary spoon. Meanwhile, at the far end of the table, Professor Umbridge was tucking into a bowl of porridge. For once her pouchy toad's eyes were not sweeping the Great Hall looking for misbehaving students. She scowled as she gulped down her food and every now and then she shot a malevolent glance up the table to where Dumbledore and McGonagall were talking so intently.

"Oh my -" said Hermione wonderingly, still staring at the newspaper.

"What now?" said Harry quickly; he was feeling jumpy.

“It’s… horrible,” said Hermione, looking shaken. She fold ed back page ten of the newspaper and handed it to Harry and Ron.

TRAGIC DEMISE OF MINISTRY OF MAGIC WORKER

St. Mungo’s Hospital promised a full inquiry last night after Ministry of Magic worker Broderick Bode, 49, was discovered dead in his bed, strangled by a potted-plant. Healers called to the scene were unable to revive Mr. Bode, who had been injured in a workplace accident some weeks prior to his death.

Healer Miriam Strout, who was in charge of Mr. Bodes ward at the time of the incident, has been suspended on full pay and was unavailable for comment yesterday, but a spokeswizard for the hospital said in a statement:

“St. Mungo’s deeply regrets the death of Mr. Bode, whose health was improving steadily prior to this tragic accident.

“We have strict guidelines on the decorations permitted on our wards but it appears that Healer Strout, busy over the Christmas period, overlooked the dangers of the plant on Mr. Bode’s bedside table. As his speech and mobility improved, Healer Strout encouraged Mr. Bode to look after the plant himself, unaware that it was not an innocent Flitterbloom, but a cutting of Devil’s Snare which, when touched by the convalescent Mr. Bode, throttled him instantly.

“St. Mungo’s is as yet unable to account for the presence of the plant on the ward and asks any witch or wizard with information to come forward.”

“Bode…” said Ron. “Bode. It rings a bell…”

“We saw him,” Hermione whispered. “In St. Mungo’s, remember? He was in the bed opposite Lockhart’s, just lying there, staring at the ceiling. And we saw the Devil’s Snare arrive. She - the Healer - said it was a Christmas present.”

Harry looked back at the story. A feeling of horror was rising like bile in his throat.

“How come we didn’t recognize Devils Snare? We’ve seen it before… we could’ve stopped this from happening.”

“Who expects Devils Snare to turn up in a hospital disguised as a pot plant?” said Ron sharply. “It’s not our fault, whoever sent it to the bloke is to blame! They must be a real prat, why didn’t they check what they were buying?”

“Oh, come on, Ron!” said Hermione shakily. “I don’t think anyone could put Devils Snare in a pot and not realize it tries to kill whoever touches it? This - this was murder… a clever murder, as well… if the plant was sent anonymously, how’s anyone ever going to find out who did it?”

Harry was not thinking about Devil’s Snare. He was remembering taking the lift down to the

ninth level of the Ministry on the day of his hearing and the sallow-faced man who had got in on the. Atrium level.

“I met Bode,” he said slowly. “I saw him at the Ministry with your dad.”

Rons mouth fell open.

“I’ve heard Dad talk about him at home! He was an Unspeakable - he worked in the Department of Mysteries!”

They looked at each other for a moment, then Hermione pulled the newspaper back towards her, closed it, glared for a moment at the pictures of the ten escaped Death Eaters on the front, then leapt to her feet.

“Where are you going?” said Ron, startled.

“To send a letter,” said Hermione, swinging her bag on to her shoulder. “It… well, I don’t know whether… but it’s worth trying… and I’m the only one who can.”

“I hate it when she does that,” grumbled Ron, as he and Harry got up from the table and made their own, slower way out of the Great Hall. “Would it kill her to tell us what she’s up to for once? It’d take her about ten more seconds - hey, Hagrid!”

Hagrid was standing beside the doors into the Entrance Hall, waiting for a crowd of Ravenclaws to pass. He was still as heavily bruised as he had been on the day he had come back from his mission to the giants and there was a new cut right across the bridge of his nose.

“All righ’, you two?” he said, trying to muster a smile but managing only a kind of pained grimace.

“Are you okay, Hagrid?” asked Harry, following him as he lumbered after the Ravenclaws.

“Fine, fine,” said Hagrid with a feeble assumption of airiness; he waved a hand and narrowly missed concussing a frightened-looking Professor Vector, who was passing. “Jus’ busy, yeh know, usual stuff lessons ter prepare - couple o’ salamanders got scale rot - an’ I’m on probation,” he mumbled.

“You’re on probation?” said Ron very loudly, so that many of the passing students looked around curiously. “Sorry - I mean - you’re on probation?” he whispered.

“Yeah,” said Hagrid. “S’no more’n I expected, ter tell yeh the truth. Yeh migh’ not’ve picked up on it, bu’ that inspection didn’ go too well, yeh know… anyway,” he sighed deeply. “Bes’ go an’ rub a bit more chilli powder on them salamanders or their tails’ll be hangin’ off ‘em next. See yeh, Harry… Ron…”

He trudged away, out of the front doors and down the stone steps into the damp grounds. Harry

watched him go, wondering how much more bad news he could stand.

The fact that Hagrid was now on probation became common knowledge within the school over the next few days, but to Harry's indignation, hardly anybody appeared to be upset about it; indeed, some people, Draco Malfoy prominent among them, seemed positively gleeful. As for the freakish death of an obscure Department of Mysteries employee in St. Mungo's, Harry, Ron and Hermione seemed to be the only people who knew or cared. There was only one topic of conversation in the corridors now: the ten escaped Death Eaters, whose story had finally filtered through the school from those few people who read the newspapers. Rumors were flying that some of the convicts had been spotted in Hogsmeade, that they were supposed to be hiding out in the Shrieking Shack and that they were going to break into Hogwarts, just as Sirius Black had once done.

Those who came from wizarding families had grown up hearing the names of these Death Eaters spoken with almost as much fear as Voldemorts; the crimes they had committed during the days of Voldemort's reign of terror were legendary. There were relatives of their victims among the Hogwarts students, who now found themselves the unwilling objects of a gruesome sort of reflected fame as they walked the corridors: Susan Bones, whose uncle, aunt and cousins had all died at the hands of one of the ten, said miserably during Herbology that she now had a good idea what it felt like to be Harry.

"And I don't know how you stand it - it's horrible," she said bluntly, dumping far too much dragon manure on her tray of Screechsnap seedlings, causing them to wriggle and squeak in discomfort.

It was true that Harry was the subject of much renewed muttering and pointing in the corridors these days, yet he thought he detected a slight difference in the tone of the whisperers' voices. They sounded curious rather than hostile now, and once or twice he was sure he overheard snatches of conversation that suggested that the speakers were not satisfied with the Prophets version of how and why ten Death Eaters had managed to break out of the Azkaban fortress. In their confusion and fear, these doubters now seemed to be turning to the only other explanation available to them: the one that Harry and Dumbledore had been expounding since the previous year.

It was not only the students' mood that had changed. It was now quite common to come across two or three teachers conversing in low, urgent whispers in the corridors, breaking off their conversations the moment they saw students approaching.

"They obviously can't talk freely in the staff room any more," said Hermione in a low voice, as she, Harry and Ron passed Professors McGonagall, Flitwick and Sprout huddled together outside the Charms classroom one day. "Not with Umbridge there."

"Reckon they know anything new?" said Ron, gazing back over his shoulder at the three teachers.

"If they do, we're not going to hear about it, are we?" said Harry angrily. "Not after Decree…

what number are we on now?” For new notices had appeared on the house noticeboards the morning after news of the Azkaban breakout:

BY ORDER OF THE HIGH INQUISITOROF HOGWARTS

Teachers are hereby banned from giving students any information that is not strictly related to the subjects they are paid to teach.

The above is in accordance with Educational Decree Number Twenty-six.

Signed: Dolores Jane Umbridge, High Inquisitor

This latest Decree had been the subject of a great number of jokes among the students. Lee Jordan had pointed out to Umbridge that by the terms of the new rule she was not allowed to tell Fred and George off for playing Exploding Snap in the back of the class.

“Exploding Snap’s got nothing to do with Defense Against the Dark Arts, Professor! That’s not information relating to your subject!”

When Harry next saw Lee, the back of his hand was bleeding rather badly. Harry recommended essence of Murtlap.

Harry had thought the breakout from Azkaban might have humbled Umbridge a little, that she might have been abashed at the catastrophe that had occurred right under the nose of her beloved Fudge. It seemed, however, to have only intensified her furious desire to bring every aspect of life at Hogwarts under her personal control. She seemed determined at the very least to achieve a sacking before long, and the only question was whether it would be Professor Trelawney or Hagrid who went first.

Every single Divination and Care of Magical Creatures lesson was now conducted in the presence of Umbridge and her clipboard. She lurked by the fire in the heavily perfumed tower room, interrupting Professor Trelawney’s increasingly hysterical talks with difficult questions about ornithomancy and heptomology, insisting that she predicted students’ answers before they gave them and demanding that she demonstrate her skill at the crystal ball, the tea leaves and the rune stones in turn. Harry thought Professor Trelawney might soon crack under the strain. Several times he passed her in the corridors - in itself a very unusual occurrence as she generally remained in her tower room - muttering wildly to herself, wringing her hands and shooting terrified glances over her shoulder, and all the while giving off a powerful smell of cooking sherry. If he had not been so worried about Hagrid, he would have felt sorry for her - but if one of them was to be ousted from their job, there could be only one choice for Harry as to who should remain.

Unfortunately, Harry could not see that Hagrid was putting up a better show than Trelawney. Though he seemed to be following Hermione’s advice and had shown them nothing more frightening than a Crup — a creature indistinguishable from a Jack Russell terrier except for its forked tail - since before Christmas, he too seemed to have lost his nerve. He was oddly

distracted and jumpy during lessons, losing the thread of what he was saying to the class, answering questions wrongly, and all the time glancing anxiously at Umbridge. He was also more distant with Harry, Ron and Hermione than he had ever been before, and had expressly forbidden them to visit him after dark.

“If she catches yeh, it’ll be all of our necks on the line,” he told them flatly, and with no desire to do anything that might jeoparize his job further they abstained from walking down to his hut in the evenings.

It seemed to Harry that Umbridge was steadily depriving him of everything that made his life at Hogwarts worth living: visits to Hagrid’s house, letters from Sirius, his Firebolt and Quidditch. He took his revenge the only way he could - by redoubling his efforts for the D.A..

Harry was pleased to see that all of them, even Zacharias Smith, had been spurred on to work harder than ever by the news that ten more Death Eaters were now on the loose, but in nobody was this improvement more pronounced than in Neville. The news of his parents’ attackers’ escape had wrought a strange and even slightly alarming change in him. He had not once mentioned his meeting with Harry, Ron and Hermione on the closed ward in St. Mungo’s and, taking their lead from him, they had kept quiet about it too. Nor had he said anything on the subject of Bellatrix and her fellow torturers’ escape. In fact, Neville barely spoke during the D.A. meetings any more, but worked relentlessly on every new jinx and counter-curse Harry taught them, his plump face screwed up in concentration, apparently indifferent to injuries or accidents and working harder than anyone else in the room. He was improving so fast it was quite unnerving and when Harry taught them the Shield Charm - a means of deflecting minor jinxes so that they rebounded upon the attacker - only Hermione mastered the charm faster than Neville.

Harry would have given a great deal to be making as much progress at Occlumency as Neville was making during the D.A. meetings. Harry’s sessions with Snape, which had started badly enough, were not improving. On the contrary Harry felt he was getting worse with every lesson.

Before he had started studying Occlumency, his scar had prickled occasionally, usually during the night, or else following one of those strange flashes of Voldemort’s thoughts or mood that he experienced every now and then. Nowadays, however, his scar hardly ever stopped prickling, and he often felt lurches of annoyance or cheerfulness that were unrelated to what was happening to him at the time, which were always accompanied by a particularly painful twinge from his scar. He had the horrible impression that he was slowly turning into a kind of aerial that was tuned in to tiny fluctuations in Voldemorts mood, and he was sure he could date this increased sensitivity firmly from his first Occlumency lesson with Snape. What was more, he was now dreaming about walking down the corridor towards the entrance to the Department of Mysteries almost every night, dreams which always culminated in him standing longingly in front of the plain black door.

“Maybe it’s a bit like an illness,” said Hermione, looking concerned when Harry confided in her and Ron. “A fever or something. It has to get worse before it gets better.”

“The lessons with Snape are making it worse,” said Harry flatly. “I’m getting sick of my scar

hurting and I'm getting bored with walking down that corridor every night." He rubbed his forehead angrily. "I just wish the door would open, I'm sick of standing staring at it -"

"That's not funny," said Hermione sharply. "Dumbledore doesn't want you to have dreams about that corridor at all, or he wouldn't have asked Snape to teach you Occlumency. You're just going to have to work a bit harder in your lessons."

"I am working!" said Harry nettled. "You try it some time - Snape trying to get inside your head - it's not a bundle of laughs, you know!"

"Maybe…" said Ron slowly.

"Maybe what?" said Hermione, rather snappishly.

"Maybe it's not Harry's fault he can't close his mind," said Ron darkly.

"What do you mean?" said Hermione.

"Well, maybe Snape isn't really trying to help Harry…"

Harry and Hermione stared at him. Ron looked darkly and meaningfully from one to the other.

"Maybe," he said again, in a lower voice, "he's actually trying to open Harry's mind a bit wider… make it easier for You-Know —"

"Shut up, Ron," said Hermione angrily. "How many times have you suspected Snape, and when have you ever been right? Dumbledore trusts him, he works for the Order, that ought to be enough."

"He used to be a Death Eater," said Ron stubbornly. "And we've never seen proof that he really swapped sides."

"Dumbledore trusts him," Hermione repeated. "And if we can't trust Dumbledore, we can't trust anyone."

With so much to worry about and so much to do - startling amounts of homework that frequently kept the fifth-years working until past midnight, secret D.A. sessions and regular classes with Snape - January seemed to be passing alarmingly fast. Before Harry knew it, February had arrived, bringing with it wetter and warmer weather and the prospect of the second Hogsmeade visit of the year. Harry had had very little time to spare for conversations with Cho since they had agreed to visit the village together, but suddenly found himself facing a Valentine's Day spent entirely in her company.

On the morning of the fourteenth he dressed particularly carefully. He and Ron arrived at breakfast just in time for the arrival of the post owls. Hedwig was not there - not that Harry had expected her - but Hermione was tugging a letter from the beak of an unfamiliar brown owl as

they sat down.

“And about time! If it hadn’t come today…” she said, eagerly tearing open the envelope and pulling out a small piece of parchment. Her eyes sped from left to right as she read through the message and a grimly pleased expression spread across her face.

“Listen, Harry,” she said, looking up at him, “this is really important. Do you think you could meet me in the Three Broomsticks around midday?”

“Well… I dunno,” said Harry uncertainly. “Cho might be expecting me to spend the whole day with her. We never said what we were going to do.”

“Well, bring her along if you must,” said Hermione urgently. “But will you come?”

“Well… all right, but why?”

“I haven’t got time to tell you now, I’ve got to answer this quickly.”

And she hurried out of the Great Hall, the letter clutched in one hand and a piece of toast in the other.

“Are you coming?” Harry asked Ron, but he shook his head, looking glum.

“I can’t come into Hogsmeade at all; Angelina wants a full day’s training. Like it’s going to help; we’re the worst team I’ve ever seen. You should see Sloper and Kirke, they’re pathetic, even worse than I am.” He heaved a great sigh. “I dunno why Angelina won’t just let me resign.”

“It’s because you’re good when you’re on form, that’s why,” said Harry irritably.

He found it very hard to be sympathetic to Ron’s plight, when he himself would have given almost anything to be playing in the forthcoming match against Hufflepuff. Ron seemed to have noticed Harrys tone, because he did not mention Quidditch again during breakfast, and there was a slight frostiness in the way they said goodbye to each other shortly afterwards. Ron departed for the Quidditch pitch and Harry, after attempting to flatten his hair while staring at his reflection in the back of a teaspoon, proceeded alone to the Entrance Hall to meet Cho, feeling very apprehensive and wondering what on earth they were going to talk about.

She was waiting for him a little to the side of the oak front doors, looking very pretty with her hair tied back in a long pony-tail. Harry’s feet seemed to be too big for his body as he walked towards her and he was suddenly horribly aware of his arms and how stupid they must look swinging at his sides.

“Hi,” said Cho slightly breathlessly.

“Hi,” said Harry.

They stared at each other for a moment, then Harry said, “Well - er — shall we go, then?”

“Oh - yes…”

They joined the queue of people being signed out by Filch, occasionally catching each other’s eye and grinning shiftily, but not talking to each other. Harry was relieved when they reached the fresh air, finding it easier to walk along in silence than just stand about looking awkward. It was a fresh, breezy sort of a day and as they passed the Quidditch stadium Harry glimpsed Ron and Ginny skimming along over the stands and felt a horrible pang that he was not up there with them.

“You really miss it, don’t you?” said Cho.

He looked round and saw her watching him.

“Yeah,” sighed Harry. “I do.”

“Remember the first time we played against each other, in the third year?” she asked him.

“Yeah,” said Harry, grinning. “You kept blocking me.”

“And Wood told you not to be a gentleman and knock me off my broom if you had to,” said Cho, smiling reminiscently. “I heard he got taken on by Pride of Portree, is that right?”

“Nah, it was Puddlemere United; I saw him at the World Cup last year.”

“Oh, I saw you there, too, remember? We were on the same campsite. It was really good, wasn’t it?”

The subject of the Quidditch World Cup carried them all the way down the drive and out through the gates. Harry could hardly believe how easy it was to talk to her - no more difficult, in fact, than talking to Ron and Hermione - and he was just starting to feel confident and cheerful when a large gang of Slytherin girls passed them, including Pansy Parkinson.

“Potter and Chang!” screeched Pansy, to a chorus of snide giggles. “Urgh, Chang, I don’t think much of your taste… at least Diggory was good-looking!”

The girls sped up, talking and shrieking in a pointed fashion with many exaggerated glances back at Harry and Cho, leaving an embarrassed silence in their wake. Harry could think of nothing else to say about Quidditch, and Cho, slightly flushed, was watching her feet.

“So… where d’you want to go?” Harry asked as they entered Hogsmeade. The High Street was full of students ambling up and down, peering into the shop windows and messing about together on the pavements.

“Oh… I don’t mind,” said Cho, shrugging. “Urn… shall we just have a look in the shops or

something?”

They wandered towards Dervish and Banges. A large poster had been stuck up in the window and a few Hogsmeaders were looking at it. They moved aside when Harry and Cho approached and Harry found himself staring once more at the pictures of the ten escaped Death Eaters. The poster, *By Order of the Ministry of Magic*, offered a thousand-Galleon reward to any witch or wizard with information leading to the recapture of any of the convicts pictured.

“It’s funny, isn’t it,” said Cho in a low voice, gazing up at the pictures of the Death Eaters, “remember when that Sirius Black escaped, and there were Dementors all over Hogsmeade looking for him? And now ten Death Eaters are on the loose and there are no Dementors anywhere…”

“Yeah,” said Harry, tearing his eyes away from Bellatrix Lestrange’s face to glance up and down the High Street. “Yeah, that is weird.”

He wasn’t sorry that there were no Dementors nearby, but now he came to think of it, their absence was highly significant. They had not only let the Death Eaters escape, they weren’t bothering to look for them… it looked as though they really were outside Ministry control now. The ten escaped Death Eaters were staring out of every shop window he and Cho passed. It started to rain as they passed Scrivenshaft’s; cold, heavy drops of water kept hitting Harry’s face and the back of his neck.

“Um… d’you want to get a coffee?” said Cho tentatively, as the rain began to fall more heavily.

“Yeah, all right,” said Harry, looking around. “Where?”

“Oh, there’s a really nice place just up here; haven’t you ever been to Madam Puddifoot’s?” she said brightly, leading him up a side road and into a small teashop that Harry had never noticed before. It was a cramped, steamy little place where everything seemed to have been decorated with frills or bows. Harry was reminded unpleasantly of Umbridge’s office.

“Cute, isn’t it?” said Cho happily.

“Er… yeah,” said Harry untruthfully.

“Look, she’s decorated it for Valentine’s Day!” said Cho, indicating a number of golden cherubs that were hovering over each of the small, circular tables, occasionally throwing pink confetti over the occupants.

“Aaah…”

They sat down at the last remaining table, which was over by the steamy window. Roger Davies, the Ravenclaw Quidditch Captain was sitting about a foot and a half away with a pretty blonde girl. They were holding hands. The sight made Harry feel uncomfortable, particularly when, looking around the teashop, he saw that it was full of nothing but couples, all of them holding

hands. Perhaps Cho would expect him to hold her hand.

“What can I get you, m’dears?” said Madam Puddifoot, a very stout woman with a shiny black bun, squeezing between their table and Roger Davies’s with great difficulty.

“Two coffees, please,” said Cho.

In the time it took for their coffees to arrive, Roger Davies and his girlfriend had started kissing over their sugar bowl. Harry wished they wouldn’t; he felt that Davies was setting a standard with which Cho would soon expect him to compete. He felt his face growing hot and tried staring out of the window, but it was so steamed up he couldn’t see the street outside. To postpone the moment when he would have to look at Cho, he stared up at the ceiling as though examining the paintwork and received a handful of confetti in the face from their hovering cherub.

After a few more painful minutes, Cho mentioned Umbridge. Harry seized on the subject with relief and they passed a few happy moments abusing her, but the subject had already been so thoroughly canvassed during D.A. meetings it did not last very long. Silence fell again. Harry wasvery conscious of the slurping noises coming from the table next door and cast wildly around forsomething else to say.

“Er… listen, d’you want to come with me to the Three Broomsticks at lunchtime? I’m meeting Hermione Granger there.”

Cho raised her eyebrows.

“You’re meeting Hermione Granger? Today?”

“Yeah. Well, she asked me to, so I thought I would. D’you want to come with me? She said it wouldn’t matter if you did.”

“Oh… well… that was nice of her.”

But Cho did not sound as though she thought it was nice at all. On the contrary, her tone was cold and all of a sudden she looked rather forbidding.

A few more minutes passed in total silence, Harry drinking his coffee so fast that he would soon need a fresh cup. Beside them, Roger Davies and his girlfriend seemed glued together at the lips. Cho’s hand was lying on the table beside her coffee and Harry was feeling a mounting pressure to take hold of it. Just do it, he told himself, as a fount of mingled panic and excitement surged up inside his chest, just reach out and grab it. Amazing, how much more difficult it was to extend his arm twelve inches and touch her hand than it was to snatch a speeding Snitch from midair… But just as he moved his hand forwards, Cho took hers off the table. She was now watching Roger Davies kissing his girlfriend with a mildly interested expression.

“He asked me out, you know,” she said in a quiet voice. “A couple of weeks ago. Roger. I turned

him down, though.”

Harry, who had grabbed the sugar bowl to excuse his sudden lunging movement across the table, could not think why she was telling him this. If she wished she were sitting at the next table being heartily kissed by Roger Davies, why had she agreed to come out with him?

He said nothing. Their cherub threw another handful of confetti over them; some of it landed in the last cold dregs of coffee Harry had been about to drink.

“I came in here with Cedric last year,” said Cho.

In the second or so it took for him to take in what she had said, Harry’s insides had become glacial. He could not believe she wanted to talk about Cedric now, while kissing couples surrounded them and a cherub floated over their heads.

Cho’s voice was rather higher when she spoke again.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you for ages… did Cedric - did he - m - m - mention me at all before he died?”

This was the very last subject on earth Harry wanted to discuss, and least of all with Cho.

“Well - no -” he said quietly. “There - there wasn’t time for him to say anything. Erm… so… d’you… d’you get to see a lot of Quidditch in the holidays? You support the Tornados, right?”

His voice sounded falsely bright and cheery. To his horror, he saw that her eyes were swimming with tears again, just as they had been after the last D.A. meeting before Christmas.

“Look,” he said desperately, leaning in so that nob ody else could overhear, “let’s not talk about Cedric right now… let’s talk about something else.”

But this, apparently, was quite the wrong thing to say.

“I thought,” she said, tears spattering down on to the table, “I thought you’d u - u - understand! I need to talk about it! Surely you n - need to talk about it t - too! I mean, you saw it happen, d - didn’t you?”

Everything was going nightmarishly wrong; Roger Davies’s girlfriend had even unglued herself to look round at Cho crying.

“Well - I have talked about it,” Harry said in a whisper, “to Ron and Hermione, but -”

“Oh, you’ll talk to Hermione Granger!” she said shrilly, her face now shining with tears. Several more kissing couples broke apart to stare. “But you won’t talk to me! P - perhaps it would be best if we just… just p - paid and you went and met up with Hermione G - Granger, like you obviously want to!”

Harry stared at her, utterly bewildered, as she seized a frilly napkin and dabbed at her shining face with it.

“Cho?” he said weakly, wishing Roger would seize his girlfriend and start kissing her again to stop her goggling at him and Cho.

“Go on, leave!” she said, now crying into the napkin. “I don’t know why you asked me out in the first place if you’re going to make arrangements to meet other girls right after me… how many are you meeting after Hermione?”

“It’s not like that!” said Harry, and he was so relieved at finally understanding what she was annoyed about that he laughed, which he realized a split second too late was also a mistake.

Cho sprang to her feet. The whole tearoom was quiet and everybody was watching them now.

“I’ll see you around, Harry” she said dramatically, and hiccoughing slightly she dashed to the door, wrenched it open and hurried off into the pouring rain.

“Cho!” Harry called after her, but the door had already swung shut behind her with a tuneful tinkle.

There was total silence within the teashop. Every eye was on Harry. He threw a Galleon down on to the table, shook pink confetti out of his hair, and followed Cho out of the door.

It was raining hard now and she was nowhere to be seen. He simply did not understand what had happened; half an hour ago they had been getting along fine.

“Women!” he muttered angrily, sloshing down the rain-washed street with his hands in his pockets. “What did she want to talk about Cedric for, anyway? Why does she always want to drag up a subject that makes her act like a human hosepipe?”

He turned right and broke into a splashy run, and within minutes he was turning into the doorway of the Three Broomsticks. He knew he was too early to meet Hermione, but he thought it likely there would be someone in here with whom he could spend the intervening time. He shook his wet hair out of his eyes and looked around. Hagrid was sitting alone in a corner, looking morose.

“Hi, Hagrid!” he said, when he had squeezed through the crammed tables and pulled up a chair beside him.

Hagrid jumped and looked down at Harry as though he barely recognized him. Harry saw that he had two fresh cuts on his face and several new bruises.

“Oh, it’s yeh, Harry,” said Hagrid. “Yeh all right?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” lied Harry; but, next to this battered and mournful-looking Hagrid, he felt he didn’t really have much to complain about. “Er - are you okay?”

“Me?” said Hagrid. “Oh yeah, I’m grand, Harry, grand.”

He gazed into the depths of his pewter tankard, which was the size of a large bucket, and sighed. Harry didn’t know what to say to him. They sat side by side in silence for a moment. Then Hagrid said abruptly, “In the same boat, yeh an’ me, aren’ we, ‘Arry?”

“Er -” said Harry.

“Yeah… I’ve said it before… both outsiders, like,” said Hagrid, nodding wisely. “An’ both orphans. Yeah… both orphans.”

He took a great swig from his tankard.

“Makes a diff’rence, havin’ a decent family,” he said. “Me dad was decent. An’ your mum an’ dad were decent. If they’d lived, life woulda bin diff’rent, eh?”

“Yeah… I s’pose,” said Harry cautiously. Hagrid seemed to be in a very strange mood.

“Family,” said Hagrid gloomily. “Whatever yeh say, blood’s important…”

And he wiped a trickle of it out of his eye.

“Hagrid,” said Harry, unable to stop himself, “where are you getting all these injuries?”

“Eh?” said Hagrid, looking startled. “Wha’ injuries?”

“All those!” said Harry, pointing at Hagrid’s face.

“Oh… tha’s jus’ normal bumps an’ bruises, Harry,” said Hagrid dismissively, “I got a rough job.”

He drained his tankard, set it back on the table and got to his feet.

“I’ll be seein’ yeh, Harry… take care now.”

And he lumbered out of the pub looking wretched, and disappeared into the torrential rain. Harry watched him go, feeling miserable. Hagrid was unhappy and he was hiding something, but he seemed determined not to accept help. What was going on? But before Harry could think about it any further, he heard a voice calling his name.

“Harry! Harry, over here!”

Hermione was waving at him from the other side of the room. He got up and made his way towards her through the crowded pub. He was still a few tables away when he realized that Hermione was not alone. She was sitting at a table with the unlikeliest pair of drinking mates he could ever have imagined: Luna Lovegood and none other than Rita Skeeter, ex-journalist on

the Daily Prophet and one of Hermione's least favorite people in the world.

"You're early!" said Hermione, moving along to give him room to sit down. "I thought you were with Cho, I wasn't expecting you for another hour at least!"

"Cho?" said Rita at once, twisting round in her seat to stare avidly at Harry. "A girl?"

She snatched up her crocodile-skin handbag and groped within it.

"It's none of your business if Harry's been with a h undred girls," Hermione told Rita coolly. "So you can put that away right now."

Rita had been on the point of withdrawing an acid-green quill from her bag. Looking as though she had been forced to swallow Stinksap, she snapped her bag shut again.

"What are you up to?" Harry asked, sitting down and staring from Rita to Luna to Hermione.

"Little Miss Perfect was just about to tell me when you arrived," said Rita, taking a large slurp of her drink. "I suppose I'm allowed to talk to him, am I?" she shot at Hermione.

"Yes, I suppose you are," said Hermione coldly.

Unemployment did not suit Rita. The hair that had once been set in elaborate curls now hung lank and unkempt around her face. The scarlet paint on her two-inch talons was chipped and there were a couple of false jewels missing from her winged glasses. She took another great gulp of her drink and said out of the corner of her mouth, "Pretty girl, is she, Harry?"

"One more word about Harry's love life and the deal's off and that's a promise," said Hermione irritably.

"What deal?" said Rita, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand. "You haven't mentioned a deal yet, Miss Prissy, you just told me to turn up. Oh, one of these days…" She took a deep shuddering breath.

"Yes, yes, one of these days you'll write more horrible stories about Harry and me," said Hermione indifferently. "Find someone who cares, why don't you?"

"They've run plenty of horrible stories about Harry this year without my help," said Rita, shooting a sideways look at him over the top of her glass and adding in a rough whisper, "How has that made you feel, Harry? Betrayed? Distraught? Misunderstood?"

"He feels angry, of course," said Hermione in a hard, clear voice. "Because he's told the Minister for Magic the truth and the Minister's too much of an idiot to believe him."

"So you actually stick to it, do you, that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is back?" said Rita, lowering her glass and subjecting Harry to a piercing stare while her finger strayed longingly to

the clasp of the crocodile bag. “You stand by all this garbage Dumbledore’s been telling everybody about You-Know-Who returning and you being the sole witness?”

“I wasn’t the sole witness,” snarled Harry. “There were a dozen-odd Death Eaters there as well. Want their names?”

“I’d love them,” breathed Rita, now fumbling in her bag once more and gazing at him as though he was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. “A great bold headline: ‘PotterAccuses… ’ A sub-heading, ‘Harry Potter Names Death Eaters Still Among Us’. And then, beneath a nice big photograph of you, ‘Disturbed teenage survivor of You-Know-Who’sattack, Harry Potter, 15, caused outrage yesterday by accusing respectable and prominent members of the wizarding community of being Death Eaters… ’”

The Quick-Quotes Quill was actually in her hand and halfway to her mouth when the rapturous expression on her face died.

“But of course,” she said, lowering the quill and looking daggers at Hermione, “Little Miss Perfect wouldn’t want that story out there, would she?”

“As a matter of fact,” said Hermione sweetly, “that’s exactly what Little Miss Perfect does want.”

Rita stared at her. So did Harry. Luna, on the other hand, sang *Weasley is our King* dreamily under her breath and stirred her drink with a cocktail onion on a stick.

“You want me to report what he says about He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?”Rita asked Hermione in a hushed voice.

“Yes, I do,” said Hermione. “The true story. All the facts. Exactly as Harry reports them. He’ll give you all the details, he’ll tell you the names of the undiscovered Death Eaters he saw there, he’ll tell you what Voldemort looks like now - oh, get a grip on yourself,” she added contemptuously, throwing a napkin across the table, for, at the sound of Voldemort’s name, Rita had jumped so badly she had slopped half her glass of Firewhisky down herself.

Rita blotted the front of her grubby raincoat, still staring at Hermione. Then she said baldly, “The Prophet wouldn’t print it. In case you haven’t noticed, nobody believes his cock-and-bull story. Everyone thinks he’s delusional. Now, if you let me write the story from that angle -”

“We don’t need another story about how Harry’s lost his marbles!” said Hermione angrily. “We’ve had plenty of those already, thank you! I want him given the opportunity to tell the truth!”

“There’s no market for a story like that,” said Rita coldly.

“You mean the Prophet won’t print it because Fudge won’t let them,” said Hermione irritably.

Rita gave Hermione a long, hard look. Then, leaning forwards across the table towards her, she said in a businesslike tone, “All right, Fudge is leaning on the Prophet, but it comes to the same thing. They won’t print a story that shows Harry in a good light. Nobody wants to read it. It’s against the public mood. This last Azkaban breakout has got people quite worried enough. People just don’t want to believe You-Know-Whos back.”

“So the Daily Prophet exists to tell people what they want to hear, does it?” said Hermione scathingly.

Rita sat up straight again, her eyebrows raised, and drained her glass of Firewhisky.

“The Prophet exists to sell itself, you silly girl,” she said coldly.

“My dad thinks it’s an awful paper,” said Luna, chipping into the conversation unexpectedly. Sucking on her cocktail onion, she gazed at Rita with her enormous, protuberant, slightly mad eyes. “He publishes important stories he thinks the public needs to know. He doesn’t care about making money.”

Rita looked disparagingly at Luna.

“I’m guessing your father runs some stupid little village newsletter?” she said. “Probably, Twenty- Five Ways to Mingle With Muggles and the dates of the next Bring and Fly Sale?”

“No,” said Luna, dipping her onion back into her Gillywater, “he’s the editor of The Quibbler.”

Rita snorted so loudly that people at a nearby table looked round in alarm.

“‘Important stories he thinks the public needs to know’, eh? “ she said witheringly. “I could manure my garden with the contents of that rag.”

“Well, this is your chance to raise the tone of it a bit, isn’t it?” said Hermione pleasantly. “Luna says her father’s quite happy to take Harry’s interview. That’s who’ll be publishing it.”

Rita stared at them both for a moment, then let out a great whoop of laughter.

“The Quibbler!” she said, cackling. “You think people will take him seriously if he’s published in The Quibbler!”

“Some people won’t,” said Hermione in a level voice. “But the Daily Prophet’s version of the Azkaban breakout had some gaping holes in it. I think a lot of people will be wondering whether there isn’t a better explanation of what happened, and if there’s an alternative story available, even if it is published in a -” she glanced sideways at Luna, “in a - well, an unusual magazine - I think they might be rather keen to read it.”

Rita didn’t say anything for a while, but eyed Hermione shrewdly, her head a little to one side.

“All right, let’s say for a moment I’ll do it,” she said abruptly. “What kind of fee am I going to get?”

“I don’t think Daddy exactly pays people to write f or the magazine,” said Luna dreamily. “They do it because it’s an honor and, of course, to see their names in print.”

Rita Skeeter looked as though the taste of Stinksap was strong in her mouth again as she rounded on Hermione.

“I’m supposed to do this for free?”

“Well, yes,” said Hermione calmly, taking a sip of her drink. “Otherwise, as you very well know, I will inform the authorities that you are an unregistered Animagus. Of course, the Prophet might give you rather a lot for an insider’s account of life in Azkaban.”

Rita looked as though she would have liked nothing better than to seize the paper umbrella sticking out of Hermione’s drink and thrust it up her nose.

“I don’t suppose I’ve got any choice, have I?” said Rita, her voice shaking slightly. She opened her crocodile bag once more, withdrew a piece of parchment, and raised her Quick-Quotes Quill.

“Daddy will be pleased,” said Luna brightly. A muscle twitched in Rita’s jaw.

“Okay, Harry?” said Hermione, turning to him. “Ready to tell the public the truth?”

“I suppose,” said Harry, watching Rita balancing the Quick-Quotes Quill at the ready on the parchment between them.

“Fire away, then, Rita,” said Hermione serenely, fishing a cherry out from the bottom of her glass.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Seen and Unforeseen

Luna said vaguely that she did not know how soon Rita's interview with Harry would appear in The Quibbler, that her father was expecting a "'lovely long article on recent sightings of Crumple-Horned Snorkacks,'"- "and of course, that'll be a very important story, so Harrys might have to wait for the following issue," said Luna.

Harry had not found it an easy experience to talk about the night when Voldemort had returned. Rita had pressed him for every little detail and he had given her everything he could remember, knowing that this was his one big opportunity to tell the world the truth. He wondered how people would react to the story. He guessed that it would confirm a lot of people in the view that he was completely insane, not least because his story would be appearing alongside utter rubbish about Crumple-Horned Snorkacks. But the breakout of Bellatrix Lestrange and her fellow Death Eaters had given Harry a burning desire to dosomething, whether or not it worked…

"Can't wait to see what Umbridge thinks of you going public," said Dean, sounding awestruck at dinner on Monday night. Seamus was shoveling down large amounts of chicken and ham pie on Dean's other side, but Harry knew he was listening.

"It's the right thing to do, Harry," said Neville, who was sitting opposite him. He was rather pale, but went on in a low voice, "It must have been… tough… talking about it… was it?"

"Yeah," mumbled Harry, "but people have got to know what Voldemorts capable of, haven't they?"

"That's right," said Neville, nodding, "and his Death Eaters, too… people should know…"

Neville left his sentence hanging and returned to his baked potato. Seamus looked up, but when he caught Harrys eye he looked quickly back at his plate again. After a while, Dean, Seamus and Neville departed for the common room, leaving Harry and Hermione at the table waiting for Ron, who had not yet had dinner because of Quidditch practice.

Cho Chang walked into the Hall with her friend Marietta. Harry's stomach gave an unpleasant lurch, but she did not look over at the Gryffindor table, and sat down with her back to him.

"Oh, I forgot to ask you," said Hermione brightly, glancing over at the Ravenclaw table, "what happened on your date with Cho? How come you were back so early?"

"Er… well, it was…" said Harry, pulling a dish of rhubarb crumble towards him and helping himself to seconds, "a complete fiasco, now you mention it."

And he told her what had happened in Madam Puddifoot's teashop.

"… so then," he finished several minutes later, as the final bit of crumble disappeared, "she jumps up, right, and says, 'I'll see you around, Harry,' an d runs out of the place!" He put down his spoon and looked at Hermione. "I mean, what was all that about? What was going on?"

Hermione glanced over at the back of Cho's head and sighed.

"Oh, Harry" she said sadly. "Well, I'm sorry, but you were a bit tactless."

"Me, tactless?" said Harry, outraged. "One minute we were getting on fine, next minute she was telling me that Roger Davies asked her out and how she used to go and snog Cedric in that stupid teashop - how was I supposed to feel about that?"

"Well, you see," said Hermione, with the patient air of someone explaining that one plus one equals two to an over-emotional toddler, "you shouldn't have told her that you wanted to meet me halfway through your date."

"But, but," spluttered Harry, "but - you told me to meet you at twelve and to bring her along, how was I supposed to do that without telling her?"

"You should have told her differently," said Hermione, still with that maddeningly patient air. "You should have said it was really annoying, but I'd made you promise to come along to the Three Broomsticks, and you really didn't want to go, you'd much rather spend the whole day with her, but unfortunately you thought you really ought to meet me and would she please, please come along with you and hopefully you'd be able to get away more quickly. And it might have been a good idea to mention how ugly you think I am, too," Hermione added as an afterthought.

"But I don't think you're ugly," said Harry, bemused.

Hermione laughed.

"Harry you're worse than Ron… well, no, you're not, " she sighed, as Ron himself came stumping into the Hall splattered with mud and looking grumpy. "Look - you upset Cho when you said you were going to meet me, so she tried to make you jealous. It was her way of trying to find out how much you liked her."

"Is that what she was doing?" said Harry, as Ron dropped on to the bench opposite them and pulled every dish within reach towards him. "Well, wouldn't it have been easier if she'd just asked me whether I liked her better than you?"

"Girls don't often ask questions like that," said Hermione.

"Well, they should!" said Harry forcefully. "Then I could've just told her I fancy her, and she wouldn't have had to get herself all worked up again about Cedric dying!"

“I’m not saying what she did was sensible,” said Hermione, as Ginny joined them, just as muddy as Ron and looking equally disgruntled. “I’m just trying to make you see how she was feeling at the time.”

“You should write a book,” Ron told Hermione as he cut up his potatoes, “translating mad things girls do so boys can understand them.”

“Yeah,” said Harry fervently, looking over at the Ravenclaw table. Cho had just got up, and, still not looking at him, she left the Great Hall. Feeling rather depressed, he looked back at Ron and Ginny. “So, how was Quidditch practice?”

“It was a nightmare,” said Ron in a surly voice.

“Oh come on,” said Hermione, looking at Ginny, “I’m sure it wasn’t that -”

“Yes, it was,” said Ginny. “It was appalling. Angelina was nearly in tears by the end of it.”

Ron and Ginny went off for baths after dinner; Harry and Hermione returned to the busy Gryffindor common room and their usual pile of homework. Harry had been struggling with a new star-chart for Astronomy for half an hour when Fred and George turned up.

“Ron and Ginny not here?” asked Fred, looking around as he pulled up a chair, and when Harry shook his head, he said, “Good. We were watching their practice. They’re going to be slaughtered. They’re complete rubbish without us.”

“Come on, Ginny’s not bad,” said George fairly, sitting down next to Fred. “Actually, I dunno how she got so good, seeing how we never let her play with us.”

“She’s been breaking into your broom shed in the garden since the age of six and taking each of your brooms out in turn when you weren’t looking,” said Hermione from behind her tottering pile of Ancient Rune books.

“Oh,” said George, looking mildly impressed. “Well - that’d explain it.”

“Has Ron saved a goal yet?” asked Hermione, peering over the top of Magical Hieroglyphs and Logograms.

“Well, he can do it if he doesn’t think anyone’s watching him,” said Fred, rolling his eyes. “So all we have to do is ask the crowd to turn their backs and talk among themselves every time the Quaffle goes up his end on Saturday.”

He got up again and moved restlessly to the window, staring out across the dark grounds.

“You know, Quidditch was about the only thing in this place worth staying for.”

Hermione cast him a stern look.

"You've got exams coming!"

"Told you already, we're not fussed about NEWTs," said Fred. "The Snackboxes are ready to roll, we found out how to get rid of those boils, just a couple of drops of Murtlap essence sorts them, Lee put us on to it."

George yawned widely and looked out disconsolately at the cloudy night sky.

"I dunno if I even want to watch this match. If Zacharias Smith beats us I might have to kill myself."

"Kill him, more like," said Fred firmly.

"That's the trouble with Quidditch," said Hermione absent-mindedly, once again bent over her Runes translation, "it creates all this bad feeling and tension between the houses."

She looked up to find her copy of Spellman's Syllabary, and caught Fred, George and Harry all staring at her with expressions of mingled disgust and incredulity on their faces.

"Well, it does!" she said impatiently. "It's only a game, isn't it?"

"Hermione," said Harry, shaking his head, "you're good on feelings and stuff, but you just don't understand about Quidditch."

"Maybe not," she said darkly, returning to her translation, "but at least my happiness doesn't depend on Ron's goalkeeping ability."

And though Harry would rather have jumped off the Astronomy Tower than admit it to her, by the time he had watched the game the following Saturday he would have given any number of Galleons not to care about Quidditch either.

The very best thing you could say about the match was that it was short; the Gryffindor spectators had to endure only twenty-two minutes of agony. It was hard to say what the worst thing was: Harry thought it was a close-run contest between Ron's fourteenth failed save, Sloper missing the Bludger but hitting Angelina in the mouth with his bat, and Kirke shrieking and falling backwards off his broom when Zacharias Smith zoomed at him carrying the Quaffle. The miracle was that Gryffindor only lost by ten points: Ginny managed to snatch the Snitch from right under Hufflepuff Seeker Summerby's nose, so that the final score was two hundred and forty versus two hundred and thirty.

"Good catch," Harry told Ginny back in the common room, where the atmosphere resembled that of a particularly dismal funeral.

"I was lucky," she shrugged. "It wasn't a very fast Snitch and Summerby's got a cold, he sneezed and closed his eyes at exactly the wrong moment. Anyway, once you're back on the team -"

"Ginny, I've got a lifelong ban."

"You're banned as long as Umbridge is in the school," Ginny corrected him. "There's a difference. Anyway, once you're back, I think I'll try out for Chaser. Angelina and Alicia are both leaving next year and I prefer goal-scoring to Seeking anyway."

Harry looked over at Ron, who was hunched in a corner, staring at his knees, a bottle of Butterbeer clutched in his hand.

"Angelina still won't let him resign," Ginny said, as though reading Harry's mind. "She says she knows he's got it in him."

Harry liked Angelina for the faith she was showing in Ron, but at the same time thought it would really be kinder to let him leave the team. Ron had left the pitch to another booming chorus of *Weasley is our King* sung with great gusto by the Slytherins, who were now favorites to win the Quidditch Cup.

Fred and George wandered over.

"I haven't even got the heart to take the mickey out of him," said Fred, looking over at Ron's crumpled figure. "Mind you… when he missed the fourteenth -"

He made wild motions with his arms as though doing an upright doggy-paddle.

"- well, I'll save it for parties, eh?"

Ron dragged himself up to bed shortly after this. Out of respect for his feelings, Harry waited a while before going up to the dormitory himself, so that Ron could pretend to be asleep if he wanted to. Sure enough, when Harry finally entered the room Ron was snoring a little too loudly to be entirely plausible.

Harry got into bed, thinking about the match. It had been immensely frustrating watching from the sidelines. He was quite impressed by Ginny's performance but he knew if he had been playing he could have caught the Snitch sooner… there had been a moment when it had been fluttering near Kirke's ankle; if Ginny hadn't hesitated, she might have been able to scrape a win for Gryffindor.

Umbridge had been sitting a few rows below Harry and Hermione. Once or twice she had turned squatly in her seat to look at him, her wide toad's mouth stretched in what he thought had been a gloating smile. The memory of it made him feel hot with anger as he lay there in the dark. After a few minutes, however, he remembered that he was supposed to be emptying his mind of all emotion before he slept, as Snape kept instructing him at the end of every Occlumency lesson.

He tried for a moment or two, but the thought of Snape on top of memories of Umbridge merely increased his sense of grumbling resentment and he found himself focusing instead on how much he loathed the pair of them. Slowly, Ron's snores died away, to be replaced by the sound of

deep, slow breathing. It took Harry much longer to get to sleep; his body was tired, but it took his brain a long time to close down.

He dreamed that Neville and Professor Sprout were waltzing around the Room of Requirement while Professor McGonagall played the bagpipes. He watched them happily for a while, then decided to go and find the other members of the D.A..

But when he left the room he found himself facing, not the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy, but a torch burning in its bracket on a stone wall. He turned his head slowly to the left. There, at the far end of the windowless passage, was a plain, black door.

He walked towards it with a sense of mounting excitement. He had the strangest feeling that this time he was going to get lucky at last, and find the way to open it… he was feet from it, and saw with a leap of excitement that there was a glowing strip of faint blue light down the right-hand side… the door was ajar… he stretched out his hand to push it wide and -

Ron gave a loud, rasping, genuine snore and Harry awoke abruptly with his right hand stretched in front of him in the darkness, to open a door that was hundreds of miles away. He let it fall with a feeling of mingled disappointment and guilt. He knew he should not have seen the door, but at the same time felt so consumed with curiosity about what was behind it that he could not help feeling annoyed with Ron… if only he could have saved his snore for just another minute.

They entered the Great Hall for breakfast at exactly the same moment as the post owls on Monday morning. Hermione was not the only person eagerly awaiting her Daily Prophet: nearly everyone was eager for more news about the escaped Death Eaters, who, despite many reported sightings, had still not been caught. She gave the delivery owl a Knut and unfolded the newspaper eagerly while Harry helped himself to orange juice; as he had only received one note during the entire year, he was sure, when the first owl landed with a thud in front of him, that it had made a mistake.

“Who’re you after?” he asked it, languidly removing his orange juice from underneath its beak and leaning forwards to see the recipient’s name and address:

Harry Potter, Great Hall, Hogwarts School

Frowning, he made to take the letter from the owl, but before he could do so, three, four, five more owls had fluttered down beside it and were jockeying for position, treading in the butter and knocking over the salt as each one attempted to give him their letter first.

“What’s going on?” Ron asked in amazement, as the whole of Gryffindor table leaned forwards to watch and another seven owls landed amongst the first ones, screeching, hooting and flapping their wings.

“Harry!” said Hermione breathlessly, plunging her hands into the feathery mass and pulling out a screech owl bearing a long, cylindrical package. “I think I know what this means - open this one first!”

Harry ripped off the brown packaging. Out rolled a tightly furled copy of the March edition of The Quibbler. He unrolled it to see his own face grinning sheepishly at him from the front cover. In large red letters across this picture were the words:

SPEAKS OUT AT LAST: THE TRUTH ABOUT HE-WHO-MUST-NOT-BE-NAMED AND THE NIGHT I SAW HIM RETURN

"It's good, isn't it?" said Luna, who had drifted o ver to the Gryffindor table and now squeezed herself on to the bench between Fred and Ron. "It came out yesterday, I asked Dad to send you a free copy. I expect all these," she waved a hand at the assembled owls still scrabbling around on the table in front of Harry, "are letters from readers."

"That's what I thought," said Hermione eagerly. "Harry, d'you mind if we -?"

"Help yourself," said Harry, feeling slightly bemused.

Ron and Hermione both started ripping open envelopes.

"This one's from a bloke who thinks you're off your rocker," said Ron, glancing down his letter. "Ah well…"

"This woman recommends you try a good course of Shock Spells at St. Mungo's," said Hermione, looking disappointed and crumpling up a second.

"This one looks okay, though," said Harry slowly, scanning a long letter from a witch in Paisley. "Hey, she says she believes me!"

"This one's in two minds," said Fred, who had joined in the letter-opening with enthusiasm. "Says you don't come across as a mad person, but he really doesn't want to believe You-Know-Who's back so he doesn't know what to think now. Blimey, what a waste of parchment."

"Here's another one you've convinced, Harry!" said Hermione excitedly. "Having read your side of the story, I am forced to the conclusion that the Daily Prophet has treated you very unfairly… little though I want to think that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has returned, I am forced to accept that you are telling the truth… Oh, this is wonderful!"

"Another one who thinks you're barking," said Ron, throwing a crumpled letter over his shoulder "… but this one says you've got her converted and she now thinks you're a real hero - she's put in a photograph, too - wow!"

"What is going on here?" said a falsely sweet, girlish voice.

Harry looked up with his hands full of envelopes. Professor Umbridge was standing behind Fred and Luna, her bulging toad's eyes scanning the mess of owls and letters on the table in front of Harry. Behind her he saw many of the students watching them avidly.

“Why have you got all these letters, Mr. Potter?” she asked slowly.

“Is that a crime now?” said Fred loudly. “Getting mail?”

“Be careful, Mr. Weasley, or I shall have to put you in detention,” said Umbridge. “Well, Mr. Potter?”

Harry hesitated, but he did not see how he could keep what he had done quiet; it was surely only a matter of time before a copy of The Quibbler came to Umbridges attention.

“People have written to me because I gave an interview,” said Harry. “About what happened to me last June.”

For some reason he glanced up at the staff table as he said this. Harry had the strangest feeling that Dumbledore had been watching him a second before, but when he looked towards the Headmaster he seemed to be absorbed in conversation with Professor Flitwick.

“An interview?” repeated Umbridge, her voice thinner and higher than ever. “What do you mean?”

“I mean a reporter asked me questions and I answered them,” said Harry. “Here -”

And he threw the copy of The Quibbler to her. She caught it and stared down at the cover. Her pale, doughy face turned an ugly, patchy violet.

“When did you do this?” she asked, her voice trembling slightly.

“Last Hogsmeade weekend,” said Harry.

She looked up at him, incandescent with rage, the magazine shaking in her stubby fingers.

“There will be no more Hogsmeade trips for you, Mr. Potter,” she whispered. “How you dare… how you could…” She took a deep breath. “I have tried again and again to teach you not to tell lies. The message, apparently, has still not sunk in. Fifty points from Gryffindor and another week’s worth of detentions.”

She stalked away, clutching The Quibbler to her chest, the eyes of many students following her.

By mid-morning enormous signs had been put up all over the school, not just on house noticeboards, but in the corridors and classrooms too.

BY ORDER OF THE HIGH INQUISITOR OF HOGWARTS

Any student found in possession of the magazine The Quibbler will be expelled.

The above is in accordance with Educational Decree Number Twenty-seven.

Signed: Dolores Jane Umbridge, High Inquisitor

For some reason, every time Hermione caught sight of one of these signs she beamed with pleasure.

“What exactly are you so happy about?” Harry asked her.

“Oh, Harry, don’t you see?” Hermione breathed. “If she could have done one thing to make absolutely sure that every single person in this school will read your interview, it was banning it!”

And it seemed that Hermione was quite right. By the end of the day, though Harry had not seen so much as a corner of The Quibbler anywhere in the school, the whole place seemed to be quoting the interview to each other. Harry heard them whispering about it as they queued up outside classes, discussing it over lunch and in the back of lessons, while Hermione even reported that every occupant of the cubicles in the girls’ toilets had been talking about it when she nipped in there before Ancient Runes. “Then they spotted me, and obviously they know I know you, so they bombarded me with questions,” Hermione told Harry, her eyes shining, “and Harry, I think they believe you, I really do, I think you’ve finally got them convinced!”

Meanwhile, Professor Umbridge was stalking the school, stopping students at random and demanding that they turn out their books and pockets: Harry knew she was looking for copies of The Quibbler, but the students were several steps ahead of her. The pages carrying Harrys interview had been bewitched to resemble extracts from textbooks if anyone but themselves read it, or else wiped magically blank until they wanted to peruse it again. Soon it seemed that every single person in the school had read it.

The teachers were of course forbidden from mentioning the interview by Educational Decree Number Twenty-six, but they found ways to express their feelings about it all the same.

Professor Sprout awarded Gryffindor twenty points when Harry passed her a watering can; a beaming Professor Flitwick pressed a box of squeaking sugar mice on him at the end of Charms, said, “Shh!” and hurried away; and Professor Trelawney broke into hysterical sobs during Divination and announced to the startled class, and a very disapproving Umbridge, that Harry was not going to suffer an early death after all, but would live to a ripe old age, become Minister for Magic and have twelve children.

But what made Harry happiest was Cho catching up with him as he was hurrying along to Transfiguration the next day. Before he knew what had happened, her hand was in his and she was breathing in his ear, “I’m really, really sorry. That interview was so brave… it made me cry.”

He was sorry to hear she had shed even more tears over it, but very glad they were on speaking terms again, and even more pleased when she gave him a swift kiss on the cheek and hurried off again. And unbelievably, no sooner had he arrived outside Transfiguration than something just as good happened: Seamus stepped out of the queue to face him.

“I just wanted to say,” he mumbled, squinting at Harry’s left knee, “I believe you. And I’ve sent a copy of that magazine to me mam.”

If anything more was needed to complete Harry’s happiness, it was the reaction he got from Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle. He saw them with their heads together later that afternoon in the library; they were with a weedy-looking boy Hermione whispered was called Theodore Nott. They looked round at Harry as he browsed the shelves for the book he needed on Partial Vanishment: Goyle cracked his knuckles threateningly and Malfoy whispered something undoubtedly malevolent to Crabbe. Harry knew perfectly well why they were acting like this: he had named all of their fathers as Death Eaters.

“And the best bit,” whispered Hermione gleefully, as they left the library, “is they can’t contradict you, because they can’t admit they’ve read the article!”

To cap it all, Luna told him over dinner that no issue of The Quibbler had ever sold out faster.

“Dad’s reprinting!” she told Harry, her eyes popping excitedly. “He can’t believe it, he says people seem even more interested in this than the Crumple-Horned Snorkacks!”

Harry was a hero in the Gryffindor common room that night. Daringly, Fred and George had put an Enlargement Charm on the front cover of The Quibbler and hung it on the wall, so that Harry’s giant head gazed down upon the proceedings, occasionally saying things like ‘THE MINISTRY ARE MORONS’ and ‘EAT DUNG, UMBRIDGE’ in a booming voice. Hermione did not find this very amusing; she said it interfered with her concentration, and she ended up going to bed early out of irritation. Harry had to admit that the poster was not quite as funny after an hour or two, especially when the talking spell had started to wear off, so that it merely shouted disconnected words like ‘DUNG’ and ‘UMBRIDGE’ at more and more frequent intervals in a progressively higher voice. In fact, it started to make his head ache and his scar began prickling uncomfortably again. To disappointed moans from the many people who were sitting around him, asking him to relive his interview for the umpteenth time, he announced that he too needed an early night.

The dormitory was empty when he reached it. He rested his forehead for a moment against the cool glass of the window beside his bed; it felt soothing against his scar. Then he undressed and got into bed, wishing his headache would go away. He also felt slightly sick. He rolled over on to his side, closed his eyes, and fell asleep almost at once…

He was standing in a dark, curtained room lit by a single branch of candles. His hands were clenched on the back of a chair in front of him. They were long-fingered and white as though they had not seen sunlight for years and looked like large, pale spiders against the dark velvet of the chair.

Beyond the chair, in a pool of light cast upon the floor by the candles, knelt a man in black robes.

“I have been badly advised, it seems,” said Harry, in a high, cold voice that pulsed with anger.

“Master, I crave your pardon,” croaked the man kneeling on the floor. The back of his head glimmered in the candlelight. He seemed to be trembling.

“I do not blame you, Rookwood,” said Harry in that cold, cruel voice.

He relinquished his grip on the chair and walked around it, closer to the man cowering on the floor, until he stood directly over him in the darkness, looking down from a far greater height than usual.

“You are sure of your facts, Rookwood?” asked Harry.

“Yes, My Lord, yes… I used to work in the Department after - after all…”

“Avery told me Bode would be able to remove it.”

“Bode could never have taken it, Master… Bode would have known he could not… undoubtedly, that is why he fought so hard against Malfoy’s Imperius Curse…”

“Stand up, Rookwood,” whispered Harry.

The kneeling man almost fell over in his haste to obey. His face was pockmarked; the scars were thrown into relief by the candlelight. He remained a little stooped when standing, as though halfway through a bow, and he darted terrified looks up at Harry’s face.

“You have done well to tell me this,” said Harry. “Very well… I have wasted months on fruitless schemes, it seems… but no matter… we begin again, from now. You have Lord Voldemort’s gratitude, Rookwood…”

“My Lord… yes, My Lord,” gasped Rookwood, his voice hoarse with relief.

“I shall need your help. I shall need all the information you can give me.”

“Of course, My Lord, of course… anything…”

“Very well… you may go. Send Avery to me.”

Rookwood scurried backwards, bowing, and disappeared through a door.

Left alone in the dark room, Harry turned towards the wall. A cracked, age-spotted mirror hung on the wall in the shadows. Harry moved towards it. His reflection grew larger and clearer in the darkness… a face whiter than a skull… red eyes with slits for pupils…

“NOOOOOOOOO!”

“What?” yelled a voice nearby.

Harry flailed around madly, became entangled in the hangings and fell out of his bed. For a few seconds he did not know where he was; he was convinced he was about to see the white, skulllike face looming at him out of the dark again, then very near to him Ron's voice spoke.

"Will you stop acting like a maniac so I can get you out of here!"

Ron wrenched the hangings apart and Harry stared up at him in the moonlight, flat on his back, his scar searing with pain. Ron looked as though he had just been getting ready for bed; one arm was out of his robes.

"Has someone been attacked again?" asked Ron, pulling Harry roughly to his feet. "Is it Dad? Is it that snake?"

"No - everyone's fine -" gasped Harry, whose forehead felt as though it were on fire. "Well… Avery isn't… he's in trouble… he gave him the wrong information… Voldemort's really angry"

Harry groaned and sank, shaking, on to his bed, rubbing his scar.

"But Rookwood's going to help him now… he's on the right track again…"

"What are you talking about?" said Ron, sounding scared. "D'you mean… did you just see You-Know-Who?"

"I was You-Know-Who," said Harry, and he stretched out his hands in the darkness and held them up to his face, to check that they were no longer deathly white and long-fingered. "He was with Rookwood, he's one of the Death Eaters who escaped from Azkaban, remember? Rookwood's just told him Bode couldn't have done it."

"Done what?"

"Remove something… he said Bode would have known he couldn't have done it… Bode was under the Imperius Curse… I think he said Malfoy's dad put it on him."

"Bode was bewitched to remove something?" Ron said. "But -Harry, that's got to be -"

"The weapon," Harry finished the sentence for him. "I know"

The dormitory door opened; Dean and Seamus came in. Harry swung his legs back into bed. He did not want to look as though anything odd had just happened, seeing as Seamus had only just stopped thinking Harry was a nutter.

"Did you say," murmured Ron, putting his head close to Harry's on the pretence of helping himself to water from the jug on his bedside table, "that you were You-Know-Who?"

"Yeah," said Harry quietly.

Ron took an unnecessarily large gulp of water; Harry saw it spill over his chin on to his chest.

"Harry," he said, as Dean and Seamus clattered around noisily, pulling off their robes and talking, "you've got to tell -"

"I haven't got to tell anyone," said Harry shortly. "I wouldn't have seen it at all if I could do Occlumency. I'm supposed to have learned to shut this stuff out. That's what they want."

By 'they' he meant Dumbledore. He got back into bed and rolled over on to his side with his back to Ron and after a while he heard Ron's mattress creak as he, too, lay back down. Harry's scar began to burn; he bit hard on his pillow to stop himself making a noise. Somewhere, he knew, Avery was being punished.

Harry and Ron waited until break next morning to tell Hermione exactly what had happened; they wanted to be absolutely sure they could not be overheard. Standing in their usual corner of the cool and breezy courtyard, Harry told her every detail of the dream he could remember.

When he had finished, she said nothing at all for a few moments, but stared with a kind of painful intensity at Fred and George, who were both headless and selling their magical hats from under their cloaks on the other side of the yard.

"So that's why they killed him," she said quietly, withdrawing her gaze from Fred and George at last. "When Bode tried to steal this weapon, something funny happened to him. I think there must be defensive spells on it, or around it, to stop people touching it. That's why he was in St. Mungo's, his brain had gone all funny and he couldn't talk. But remember what the Healer told us? He was recovering. And they couldn't risk him getting better, could they? I mean, the shock of whatever happened when he touched that weapon probably made the Imperius Curse lift. Once he'd got his voice back, he'd explain what he'd been doing, wouldn't he? They would have known he'd been sent to steal the weapon. Of course, it would have been easy for Lucius Malfoy to put the curse on him. Never out of the Ministry, is he?"

"He was even hanging around that day I had my hearing," said Harry. "In the - hang on…" he said slowly. "He was in the Department of Mysteries corridor that day! Your dad said he was probably trying to sneak down and find out what happened in my hearing, but what if -"

"Sturgis!" gasped Hermione, looking thunderstruck.

"Sorry?" said Ron, looking bewildered.

"Sturgis Podmore -" said Hermione breathlessly, "arrested for trying to get through a door! Lucius Malfoy must have got him too! I bet he did it the day you saw him there, Harry. Sturgis had Moody's Invisibility Cloak, right? So, what if he was standing guard by the door, invisible, and Malfoy heard him move - or guessed someone was there - or just did the Imperius Curse on the off-chance there'd be a guard there? So, when Sturgis next had an opportunity - probably when it was his turn on guard duty again - he tried to get into the Department to steal the weapon for Voldemort - Ron, be quiet - but he got caught and sent to Azkaban…"

She gazed at Harry.

“And now Rookwood’s told Voldemort how to get the weapon?”

“I didn’t hear all the conversation, but that’s what it sounded like,” said Harry. “Rookwood used to work there… maybe Voldemort’ll send Rookwood to do it?”

Hermione nodded, apparently still lost in thought. Then, quite abruptly, she said, “But you shouldn’t have seen this at all, Harry.”

“What?” he said, taken aback.

“You’re supposed to be learning how to close your m ind to this sort of thing,” said Hermione, suddenly stern.

“I know I am,” said Harry. “But -”

“Well, I think we should just try and forget what you saw,” said Hermione firmly. “And you ought to put in a bit more effort on your Occlumency from now on.”

Harry was so angry with her he did not talk to her for the rest of the day, which proved to be another bad one. When people were not discussing the escaped Death Eaters in the corridors, they were laughing at Gryffindor’s abysmal performance in their match against Hufflepuff; the Slytherins were singing *Weasley is our King* so loudly and frequently that by sundown Filch had banned it from the corridors out of sheer irritation.

The week did not improve as it progressed. Harry received two more D’s in Potions; he was still on tenterhooks that Hagrid might get the sack; and he couldn’t stop himself dwelling on the dream in which he had been Voldemort - though he didn’t bring it up with Ron and Hermione again; he didn’t want another telling-off from Hermione. He wished very much that he could have talked to Sirius about it, but that was out of the question, so he tried to push the matter to the back of his mind.

Unfortunately, the back of his mind was no longer the secure place it had once been.

“Get up, Potter.”

A couple of weeks after his dream of Rookwood, Harry was to be found, yet again, kneeling on the floor of Snape’s office, trying to clear his head. He had just been forced, yet again, to relive a stream of very early memories he had not even realized he still had, most of them concerning humiliations Dudley and his gang had inflicted upon him in primary school.

“That last memory,” said Snape. “What was it?”

“I don’t know,” said Harry, getting wearily to his feet. He was finding it increasingly difficult to disentangle separate memories from the rush of images and sound that Snape kept calling forth.

“You mean the one where my cousin tried to make me stand in the toilet?”

“No,” said Snape softly. “I mean the one with a man kneeling in the middle of a darkened room…”

“It’s… nothing,” said Harry.

Snape’s dark eyes bored into Harry’s. Remembering what Snape had said about eye contact being crucial to Legilimency, Harry blinked and looked away.

“How do that man and that room come to be inside your head, Potter?” said Snape.

“It -” said Harry, looking everywhere but at Snape, “it was -just a dream I had.”

“A dream?” repeated Snape.

There was a pause during which Harry stared fixedly at a large dead frog suspended in a jar of purple liquid.

“You do know why we are here, don’t you, Potter?” said Snape, in a low, dangerous voice. “You do know why I am giving up my evenings to this tedious job?”

“Yes,” said Harry stiffly.

“Remind me why we are here, Potter.”

“So I can learn Occlumency,” said Harry, now glaring at a dead eel.

“Correct, Potter. And dim though you may be -” Harry looked back at Snape, hating him “- I would have thought that after over two months of lessons you might have made some progress. How many other dreams about the Dark Lord have you had?”

“Just that one,” lied Harry.

“Perhaps,” said Snape, his dark, cold eyes narrowin g slightly, “perhaps you actually enjoy having these visions and dreams, Potter. Maybe they make you feel special - important?”

“No, they don’t,” said Harry, his jaw set and his fingers clenched tightly around the handle of his wand.

“That is just as well, Potter,” said Snape coldly, “because you are neither special nor important, and it is not up to you to find out what the Dark Lord is saying to his Death Eaters.”

“No - that’s your job, isn’t it?” Harry shot at him.

He had not meant to say it; it had burst out of him in temper. For a long moment they stared at

each other, Harry convinced he had gone too far. But there was a curious, almost satisfied expression on Snape's face when he answered.

"Yes, Potter," he said, his eyes glinting. "That is my job. Now, if you are ready, we will start again."

He raised his wand: "One — two - three -Legilimens!"

A hundred Dementors were swooping towards Harry across the lake in the grounds… he screwed up his face in concentration… they were coming closer… he could see the dark holes beneath their hoods… yet he could also see Snape standing in front of him, his eyes fixed on Harry's face, muttering under his breath… and somehow, Snape was growing clearer, and the Dementors were growing fainter…

Harry raised his own wand.

"Protego!"

Snape staggered - his wand flew upwards, away from Harry - and suddenly Harry's mind was teeming with memories that were not his: a hook-nosed man was shouting at a cowering woman, while a small dark-haired boy cried in a corner… a greasy-haired teenager sat alone in a dark bedroom, pointing his wand at the ceiling, shooting down flies… a girl was laughing as a scrawny boy tried to mount a bucking broomstick -

"ENOUGH!"

Harry felt as though he had been pushed hard in the chest; he staggered several steps backwards, hit some of the shelves covering Snape's walls and heard something crack. Snape was shaking slightly, and was very white in the face.

The back of Harry's robes was damp. One of the jars behind him had broken when he fell against it; the pickled slimy thing within was swirling in its draining potion.

"Reparo," hissed Snape, and the jar sealed itself at once. "Well, Potter… that was certainly an improvement…" Panting slightly, Snape straightened the Pensieve in which he had again stored some of his thoughts before starting the lesson, almost as though he was checking they were still there. "I don't remember telling you to use a Shield Charm… but there is no doubt that it was effective…"

Harry did not speak; he felt that to say anything might be dangerous. He was sure he had just broken into Snape's memories, that he had just seen scenes from Snape's childhood. It was unnerving to think that the little boy who had been crying as he watched his parents shouting was actually standing in front of him with such loathing in his eyes.

"Let's try again, shall we?" said Snape.

Harry felt a thrill of dread; he was about to pay for what had just happened, he was sure of it. They moved back into position with the desk between them, Harry feeling he was going to find it much harder to empty his mind this time.

“On the count of three, then,” said Snape, raising his wand once more. “One - two -”
Harry did not have time to gather himself together and attempt to clear his mind before Snape cried, “Legilimens!”

He was hurtling along the corridor towards the Department of Mysteries, past the blank stone walls, past the torches - the plain black door was growing ever larger; he was moving so fast he was going to collide with it, he was feet from it and again he could see that chink of faint blue light - The door had flown open! He was through it at last, inside a black-walled, black-floored circular room lit with blue-flamed candles, and there were more doors all around him - he needed to go on - but which door ought he to take -?

“POTTER!”

Harry opened his eyes. He was flat on his back again with no memory of having gotten there; he was also panting as though he really had run the length of the Department of Mysteries corridor, really had sprinted through the black door and found the circular room.

“Explain yourself!” said Snape, who was standing over him, looking furious.

“I… dunno what happened,” said Harry truthfully, st anding up. There was a lump on the back of his head from where he had hit the ground and he felt feverish. “I’ve never seen that before. I mean, I told you, I’ve dreamed about the door… but it’s never opened before”

“You are not working hard enough!”

For some reason, Snape seemed even angrier than he had done two minutes before, when Harry had seen into his teacher’s memories.

“You are lazy and sloppy, Potter, it is small wonder that the Dark Lord -”

“Can you tell me something, sir?” said Harry, firing up again. “Why do you call Voldemort the Dark Lord? I’ve only ever heard Death Eaters call him that.”

Snape opened his mouth in a snarl - and a woman screamed from somewhere outside the room. Snapes head jerked upwards; he was gazing at the ceiling.

“What the -?” he muttered.

Harry could hear a muffled commotion coming from what he thought might be the Entrance Hall. Snape looked round at him, frowning.

“Did you see anything unusual on your way down here, Potter?”

Harry shook his head. Somewhere above them, the woman screamed again. Snape strode to his office door, his wand still held at the ready, and swept out of sight. Harry hesitated for a moment, then followed.

The screams were indeed coming from the Entrance Hall; they grew louder as Harry ran towards the stone steps leading up from the dungeons. When he reached the top he found the Entrance Hall packed; students had come flooding out of the Great Hall, where dinner was still in progress, to see what was going on; others had crammed themselves on to the marble staircase. Harry pushed forwards through a knot of tall Slytherins and saw that the onlookers had formed a great ring, some of them looking shocked, others even frightened. Professor McGonagall was directly opposite Harry on the other side of the Hall; she looked as though what she was watching made her feel faintly sick.

Professor Trelawney was standing in the middle of the Entrance Hall with her wand in one hand and an empty sherry bottle in the other, looking utterly mad. Her hair was sticking up on end, her glasses were lopsided so that one eye was magnified more than the other; her innumerable shawls and scarves were trailing haphazardly from her shoulders, giving the impression that she was falling apart at the seams. Two large trunks lay on the floor beside her, one of them upsidedown; it looked very much as though it had been thrown down the stairs after her. Professor Trelawney was staring, apparently terrified, at something Harry could not see but which seemed to be standing at the foot of the stairs.

“No!” she shrieked. “NO! This cannot be happening… it cannot… I refuse to accept it!”

“You didn’t realize this was coming?” said a high girlish voice, sounding callously amused, and Harry, moving slightly to his right, saw that Trelawney’s terrifying vision was nothing other than Professor Umbridge. “Incapable though you are of predicting even tomorrow’s weather, you must surely have realized that your pitiful performance during my inspections, and lack of any improvement, would make it inevitable that you would be sacked?”

“You c - can’t!” howled Professor Trelawney, tears streaming down her face from behind her enormous lenses, “you c - can’t sack me! I’ve b - been here sixteen years! H - Hogwarts is in - my h - home!”

“It was your home,” said Professor Umbridge, and Harry was revolted to see the enjoyment stretching her toadlike face as she watched Professor Trelawney sink, sobbing uncontrollably, on to one of her trunks, “until an hour ago, when the Minister of Magic countersigned your Order of Dismissal. Now kindly remove yourself from this Hall. You are embarrassing us.”

But she stood and watched, with an expression of gloating enjoyment, as Professor Trelawney shuddered and moaned, rocking backwards and forwards on her trunk in paroxysms of grief. Harry heard a muffled sob to his left and looked around. Lavender and Parvati were both crying quietly, their arms round each other. Then he heard footsteps. Professor McGonagall had broken away from the spectators, marched straight up to Professor Trelawney and was patting her firmly on the back while withdrawing a large handkerchief from within her robes.

“There, there, Sibyll… calm down… blow your nose on this… it’s not as bad as you think, now… you are not going to have to leave Hogwarts…”

“Oh really, Professor McGonagall?” said Umbridge in a deadly voice, taking a few steps forward. “And your authority for that statement is…?”

“That would be mine,” said a deep voice.

The oaken front doors had swung open. Students beside them scuttled out of the way as Dumbledore appeared in the entrance. What he had been doing out in the grounds Harry could not imagine, but there was something impressive about the sight of him framed in the doorway against an oddly misty night. Leaving the doors wide open behind him he strode forwards through the circle of onlookers towards Professor Trelawney, tear-stained and trembling, on her trunk, Professor McGonagall alongside her.

“Yours, Professor Dumbledore?” said Umbridge, with a singularly unpleasant little laugh. “I’m afraid you do not understand the position. I have here -” she pulled a parchment scroll from within her robes “-an Order of Dismissal signed by myself and the Minister for Magic. Under the terms of Educational Decree Number Twenty-three, the High Inquisitor of Hogwarts has the power to inspect, place upon probation and sack any teacher she - that is to say, I - feel is not performing to the standards required by the Ministry of Magic. I have decided that Professor Trelawney is not up to scratch. I have dismissed her.”

To Harry’s very great surprise, Dumbledore continued to smile. He looked down at Professor Trelawney, who was still sobbing and choking on her trunk, and said, “You are quite right, of course, Professor Umbridge. As High Inquisitor you have every right to dismiss my teachers. You do not, however, have the authority to send them away from the castle. I am afraid,” he went on, with a courteous little bow, “that the power to do that still resides with the Headmaster, and it is my wish that Professor Trelawney continue to live at Hogwarts.”

At this, Professor Trelawney gave a wild little laugh in which a hiccough was barely hidden.

“No - no, I’ll g - go, Dumbledore! I sh - shall - leave Hogwarts and s - seek my fortune elsewhere -”

“No,” said Dumbledore sharply. “It is my wish that you remain, Sibyll.”

He turned to Professor McGonagall.

“Might I ask you to escort Sibyll back upstairs, Professor McGonagall?”

“Of course,” said McGonagall. “Up you get, Sibyll…”

Professor Sprout came hurrying forwards out of the crowd and grabbed Professor Trelawney’s other arm. Together, they guided her past Umbridge and up the marble stairs. Professor Flitwick went scurrying after them, his wand held out before him; he squeaked “Locomotor trunks!” and

Professor Trelawney's luggage rose into the air and proceeded up the staircase after her, Professor Flitwick bringing up the rear.

Professor Umbridge was standing stock still, staring at Dumbledore, who continued to smile benignly.

“And what,” she said, in a whisper that carried all around the Entrance Hall, “are you going to do with her once I appoint a new Divination teacher who needs her lodgings?”

“Oh, that won't be a problem,” said Dumbledore pleasantly. “You see, I have already found us a new Divination teacher, and he will prefer lodgings on the ground floor.”

“You've found -?” said Umbridge shrilly. “You've found? Might I remind you, Dumbledore, that under Educational Decree Number Twenty-two -”

“The Ministry has the right to appoint a suitable candidate if -and only if- the Headmaster is unable to find one,” said Dumbledore. “And I am happy to say that on this occasion I have succeeded. May I introduce you?”

He turned to face the open front doors, through which night mist was now drifting. Harry heard hooves. There was a shocked murmur around the Hall and those nearest the doors hastily moved even further backwards, some of them tripping over in their haste to clear a path for the newcomer.

Through the mist came a face Harry had seen once before on a dark, dangerous night in the Forbidden Forest: white-blond hair and astonishingly blue eyes; the head and torso of a man joined to the palomino body of a horse.

“This is Firenze,” said Dumbledore happily to a thunderstruck Umbridge. “I think you'll find him suitable.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The Centaur and the Sneak

“I’ll bet you wish you hadn’t given up Divination now, don’t you, Hermione?” asked Parvati, smirking.

It was breakfast time, two days after the sacking of Professor Trelawney, and Parvati was curling her eyelashes around her wand and examining the effect in the back of her spoon. They were to have their first lesson with Firenze that morning.

“Not really” said Hermione indifferently, who was reading the Daily Prophet. “I’ve never really liked horses.”

She turned a page of the newspaper and scanned its columns.

“He’s not a horse, he’s a centaur!” said Lavender, sounding shocked.

“A gorgeous centaur…” sighed Parvati.

“Either way, he’s still got four legs,” said Hermione coolly. “Anyway I thought you two were all upset that Trelawney had gone?”

“We are!” Lavender assured her. “We went up to her office to see her; we took her some daffodils - not the honking ones that Sprout’s got, nice ones.”

“How is she?” asked Harry.

“Not very good, poor thing,” said Lavender sympathetically. “She was crying and saying she’d rather leave the castle forever than stay here where Umbridge is, and I don’t blame her, Umbridge was horrible to her, wasn’t she?”

“I’ve got a feeling Umbridge has only just started being horrible,” said Hermione darkly.

“Impossible,” said Ron, who was tucking into a large plate of eggs and bacon. “She can’t get any worse than she’s been already.”

“You mark my words, she’s going to want revenge on Dumbledore for appointing a new teacher without consulting her,” said Hermione, closing the newspaper. “Especially another part-human. You saw the look on her face when she saw Firenze.”

After breakfast Hermione departed for her Arithmancy class as Harry and Ron followed Parvati and Lavender into the Entrance Hall, heading for Divination.

“Aren’t we going up to North Tower?” asked Ron, looking puzzled, as Parvati bypassed the

marble staircase.

Parvati looked at him scornfully over her shoulder.

“How d’you expect Firenze to climb that ladder? We’re in classroom eleven now, it was on the noticeboard yesterday.”

Classroom eleven was on the ground floor along the corridor leading off the Entrance Hall from the opposite side to the Great Hall. Harry knew it was one of those classrooms that were never used regularly, and therefore had the slightly neglected feeling of a cupboard or storeroom. When he entered it right behind Ron, and found himself in the middle of a forest clearing, he was therefore momentarily stunned.

“What the -?”

The classroom floor had become springily mossy and trees were growing out of it; their leafy branches fanned across the ceiling and windows, so that the room was full of slanting shafts of soft, dappled, green light. The students who had already arrived were sitting on the earthy floor with their backs resting against tree trunks or boulders, arms wrapped around their knees or folded tightly across their chests, and all looking rather nervous. In the middle of the clearing, where there were no trees, stood Firenze.

“Harry Potter,” he said, holding out a hand when Harry entered.

“Er - hi,” said Harry, shaking hands with the centaur, who surveyed him unblinkingly through those astonishingly blue eyes but did not smile. “Er - good to see you.”

“And you,” said the centaur, inclining his white-blond head. “It was foretold that we would meet again.”

Harry noticed there was the shadow of a hoof-shaped bruise on Firenze’s chest. As he turned to join the rest of the class on the ground, he saw they were all looking at him in awe, apparently deeply impressed that he was on speaking terms with Firenze, whom they seemed to find intimidating.

When the door was closed and the last student had sat down on a tree stump beside the wastepaper basket, Firenze gestured around the room.

“Professor Dumbledore has kindly arranged this classroom for us,” said Firenze, when everyone had settled down, “in imitation of my natural habitat. I would have preferred to teach you in the Forbidden Forest, which was - until Monday - my home… but that is no longer possible.”

“Please - er - sir -” said Parvati breathlessly, raising her hand, “- why not? We’ve been in there with Hagrid, we’re not frightened!”

“It is not a question of your bravery,” said Firenze, “but of my position. I cannot return to the

Forest. My herd has banished me."

"Herd?" said Lavender in a confused voice, and Harry knew she was thinking of cows. "What - oh!" Comprehension dawned on her face. "There are more o f you!" she said, stunned.

"Did Hagrid breed you, like the Thestrals?" asked Dean eagerly.

Firenze turned his head very slowly to face Dean, who seemed to realize at once that he had said something very offensive.

"I didn't - I meant - sorry" he finished in a hushed voice.

"Centaurs are not the servants or playthings of humans," said Firenze quietly. There was a pause, then Parvati raised her hand again.

"Please, sir… why have the other centaurs banished you?"

"Because I have agreed to work for Professor Dumbledore," said Firenze. "They see this as a betrayal of our kind."

Harry remembered how, nearly four years ago, the centaur Bane had shouted at Firenze for allowing Harry to ride to safety on his back; he had called him a 'common mule'. He wondered whether it had been Bane who had kicked Firenze in the chest.

"Let us begin," said Firenze. He swished his long palomino tail, raised his hand towards the leafy canopy overhead, then lowered it slowly, and as he did so, the light in the room dimmed, so that they now seemed to be sitting in a forest clearing by twilight, and stars appeared on the ceiling.

There were oohs and gasps and Ron said audibly, "Blimey!"

"Lie back on the floor," said Firenze in his calm voice, "and observe the heavens. Here is written, for those who can see, the fortune of our races."

Harry stretched out on his back and gazed upwards at the ceiling. A twinkling red star winked at him from overhead.

"I know that you have learned the names of the planets and their moons in Astronomy," said Firenze's calm voice, "and that you have mapped the stars progress through the heavens. Centaurs have unraveled the mysteries of these movements over centuries. Our findings teach us that the future may be glimpsed in the sky above us -"

"Professor Trelawney did astrology with us!" said Parvati excitedly, raising her hand in front of her so that it stuck up in the air as she lay on her back. "Mars causes accidents and burns and things like that, and when it makes an angle to Saturn, like now -" she drew a right-angle in the air above her "- that means people need to be extra careful when handling hot things -"

“That,” said Firenze calmly, “is human nonsense.”

Parvati’s hand fell limply to her side.

“Trivial hurts, tiny human accidents,” said Firenze, as his hooves thudded over the mossy floor. “These are of no more significance than the scurryings of ants to the wide universe, and are unaffected by planetary movements.”

“Professor Trelawney -” began Parvati, in a hurt and indignant voice.

“- is a human,” said Firenze simply. “And is therefore blinkered and fettered by the limitations of your kind.”

Harry turned his head very slightly to look at Parvati. She looked very offended, as did several of the people surrounding her.

“Sibyll Trelawney may have Seen, I do not know,” continued Firenze, and Harry heard the swishing of his tail again as he walked up and down before them, “but she wastes her time, in the main, on the self-flattering nonsense humans call fortune-telling. I, however, am here to explain the wisdom of centaurs, which is impersonal and impartial. We watch the skies for the great tides of evil or change that are sometimes marked there. It may take ten years to be sure of what we are seeing.”

Firenze pointed to the red star directly above Harry.

“In the past decade, the indications have been that wizardkind is living through nothing more than a brief calm between two wars. Mars, bringer of battle, shines brightly above us, suggesting that the fight must soon break out again. How soon, centaurs may attempt to divine by the burning of certain herbs and leaves, by the observation of fume and flame…”

It was the most unusual lesson Harry had ever attended. They did indeed burn sage and mallowsweet there on the classroom floor, and Firenze told them to look for certain shapes and symbols in the pungent fumes, but he seemed perfectly unconcerned that not one of them could see any of the signs he described, telling them that humans were hardly ever good at this, that it took centaurs years and years to become competent, and finished by telling them that it was foolish to put too much faith in such things, anyway, because even centaurs sometimes read them wrongly. He was nothing like any human teacher Harry had ever had. His priority did not seem to be to teach them what he knew, but rather to impress upon them that nothing, not even centaurs’ knowledge, was foolproof.

“He’s not very definite on anything, is he?” said Ron in a low voice, as they put out their mallowsweet fire. “I mean, I could do with a few more details about this war we’re about to have, couldn’t you?”

The bell rang right outside the classroom door and everyone jumped; Harry had completely forgotten they were still inside the castle, and quite convinced that he was really in the Forest.

The class filed out, looking slightly perplexed.

Harry and Ron were on the point of following them when Firenze called, “Harry Potter, a word, please.”

Harry turned. The centaur advanced a little towards him. Ron hesitated.

“You may stay,” Firenze told him. “But close the door, please.” Ron hastened to obey.

“Harry Potter, you are a friend of Hagrid’s, are you not?” said the centaur.

“Yes,” said Harry.

“Then give him a warning from me. His attempt is not working. He would do better to abandon it.”

“His attempt is not working?” Harry repeated blankly.

“And he would do better to abandon it,” said Firenze, nodding. “I would warn Hagrid myself, but I am banished - it would be unwise for me to go too near the Forest now - Hagrid has troubles enough, without a centaurs’ battle.”

“But - what’s Hagrid attempting to do?” said Harry nervously.

Firenze surveyed Harry impassively.

“Hagrid has recently rendered me a great service,” said Firenze, “and he has long since earned my respect for the care he shows all living creatures. I shall not betray his secret. But he must be brought to his senses. The attempt is not working. Tell him, Harry Potter. Good-day to you.”

The happiness Harry had felt in the aftermath of The Quibbler interview had long since evaporated. As a dull March blurred into a squally April, his life seemed to have become one long series of worries and problems again.

Umbridge had continued attending all Care of Magical Creatures lessons, so it had been very difficult to deliver Firenzes warning to Hagrid. At last, Harry had managed it by pretending he’d lost his copy of Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them, and doubling back after class one day. When he’d repeated Firenzes words, Hagrid gazed at him for a moment through his puffy, blackened eyes, apparently taken aback. Then he seemed to pull himself together.

“Nice bloke, Firenze,” he said gruffly, “but he don’ know what he’s talkin’ abou’ on this. The attemp’s comin’ on fine.”

“Hagrid, what’re you up to?” asked Harry seriously. “Because you’ve got to be careful, Umbridge has already sacked Trelawney and, if you ask me, she’s on a roll. If you’re doing anything you shouldn’t be, you’ll be -”

“There’s things more importan’ than keepin’ a job,” said Hagrid, though his hands shook slightly as he said this and a basin full of Knarl droppings crashed to the floor. “Don’ worry abou’ me, Harry jus’ get along now, there’s a good lad.”

Harry had no choice but to leave Hagrid mopping up the dung all over his floor, but he felt thoroughly dispirited as he trudged back up to the castle.

Meanwhile, as the teachers and Hermione persisted in reminding them, the OWLs were drawing ever nearer. All the fifth-years were suffering from stress to some degree, but Hannah Abbott became the first to receive a Calming Draught from Madam Pomfrey after she burst into tears during Herbology and sobbed that she was too stupid to take exams and wanted to leave school now.

If it had not been for the D.A. lessons, Harry thought he would have been extremely unhappy. He sometimes felt he was living for the hours he spent in the Room of Requirement, working hard but thoroughly enjoying himself at the same time, swelling with pride as he looked around at his fellow D.A. members and saw how far they had come. Indeed, Harry sometimes wondered how Umbridge was going to react when all the members of the D.A. received ‘Outstanding’ in their Defense Against the Dark Arts OWLs.

They had finally started work on Patronuses, which everybody had been very keen to practice, though, as Harry kept reminding them, producing a Patronus in the middle of a brightly lit classroom when they were not under threat was very different from producing it when confronted by something like a Dementor.

“Oh, don’t be such a killjoy,” said Cho brightly, watching her silvery swan-shaped Patronus soar around the Room of Requirement during their last lesson before Easter. “They’re so pretty!”

“They’re not supposed to be pretty, they’re supposed to protect you,” said Harry patiently. “What we really need is a Boggart or something; that’s how I learned, I had to conjure a Patronus while the Boggart was pretending to be a Dementor -”

“But that would be really scary!” said Lavender, who was shooting puffs of silver vapour out of the end of her wand. “And I still -can’t - do it!” she added angrily.

Neville was having trouble, too. His face was screwed up in concentration, but only feeble wisps of silver smoke issued from his wand tip.

“You’ve got to think of something happy,” Harry reminded him.

“I’m trying,” said Neville miserably, who was trying so hard his round face was actually shining with sweat.

“Harry, I think I’m doing it”‘ yelled Seamus, who had been brought along to his first ever D.A. meeting by Dean. “Look - ah -it’s gone… but it was definitely something hairy, Harry!”

Hermione’s Patronus, a shining silver otter, was gamboling around her.

“They are sort of nice, aren’t they?” she said, looking at it fondly.

The door of the Room of Requirement opened, and closed. Harry looked round to see who had entered, but there did not seem to be anybody there. It was a few moments before he realized that the people close to the door had fallen silent. Next thing he knew, something was tugging at his robes somewhere near the knee. He looked down and saw, to his very great astonishment, Dobby the house-elf peering up at him from beneath his usual eight woolly hats.

“Hi, Dobby!” he said. “What are you - What’s wrong?”

The elf’s eyes were wide with terror and he was shaking. The members of the D.A. closest to Harry had fallen silent; everybody in the room was watching Dobby. The few Patronuses people had managed to conjure faded away into silver mist, leaving the room looking much darker than before.

“Harry Potter, sir…” squeaked the elf, trembling from head to foot, “Harry Potter, sir… Dobby has come to warn you… but the house-elves have been warned not to tell…”

He ran head-first at the wall. Harry, who had some experience of Dobbys habits of self punishment, made to seize him, but Dobby merely bounced off the stone, cushioned by his eight hats. Hermione and a few of the other girls let out squeaks of fear and sympathy.

“What’s happened, Dobby?” Harry asked, grabbing the elf’s tiny arm and holding him away from anything with which he might seek to hurt himself.

“Harry Potter… she… she…”

Dobby hit himself hard on the nose with his free fist. Harry seized that, too.

“Who’s ‘she’, Dobby?”

But he thought he knew; surely only one ‘she’ could induce such fear in Dobby? The elf looked up at him, slightly cross-eyed, and mouthed wordlessly.

“Umbridge?” asked Harry, horrified.

Dobby nodded, then tried to bang his head on Harry’s knees. Harry held him at arm’s length.

“What about her? Dobby - she hasn’t found out about this - about us - about the D.A.?”

He read the answer in the elf’s stricken face. His hands held fast by Harry, the elf tried to kick himself and fell to the floor.

“Is she coming?” Harry asked quietly.

Dobby let out a howl, and began beating his bare feet hard on the floor.

“Yes, Harry Potter, yes!”

Harry straightened up and looked around at the motionless, terrified people gazing at the thrashing elf.

“WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?” Harry bellowed. “RUN!”

They all pelted towards the exit at once, forming a scrum at the door, then people burst through. Harry could hear them sprinting along the corridors and hoped they had the sense not to try and make it all the way to their dormitories. It was only ten to nine; if they just took refuge in the library or the Owlery, which were both nearer -

“Harry, come on!” shrieked Hermione from the center of the knot of people now fighting to get out.

He scooped up Dobby, who was still attempting to do himself serious injury, and ran with the elf in his arms to join the back of the queue.

“Dobby - this is an order - get back down to the kitchen with the other elves and, if she asks you whether you warned me, lie and say no!” said Harry. “And I forbid you to hurt yourself!” he added, dropping the elf as he made it over the threshold at last and slammed the door behind him.

“Thank you, Harry Potter!” squeaked Dobby, and he streaked off. Harry glanced left and right, the others were all moving so fast he caught only glimpses of flying heels at either end of the corridor before they vanished; he started to run right; there was a boys’ bathroom up ahead, he could pretend he’d been in there all the time if he could just reach it -

“AAARGH!”

Something caught him around the ankles and he fell spectacularly, skidding along on his front for six feet before coming to a halt. Someone behind him was laughing. He rolled over on to his back and saw Malfoy concealed in a niche beneath an ugly dragon-shaped vase.

“Trip Jinx, Potter!” he said. “Hey Professor - PROFESSOR! I’ve got one!”

Umbridge came bustling round the far corner, breathless but wearing a delighted smile.

“It’s him!” she said jubilantly at the sight of Harry on the floor. “Excellent, Draco, excellent, oh, very good - fifty points to Slytherin! I’ll take him from here… stand up, Potter!”

Harry got to his feet, glaring at the pair of them. He had never seen Umbridge looking so happy. She seized his arm in a vice-like grip and turned, beaming broadly, to Malfoy.

“You hop along and see if you can round up any more of them, Draco,” she said. “Tell the others

to look in the library - anybody out of breath - check the bathrooms, Miss Parkinson can do the girls' ones - off you go - and you," she added in her softest, most dangerous voice, as Malfoy walked away, "you can come with me to the Headmasters office, Potter."

They were at the stone gargoyle within minutes. Harry wondered how many of the others had been caught. He thought of Ron - Mrs. Weasley would kill him - and of how Hermione would feel if she was expelled before she could take her OWLs. And it had been Seamus's very first meeting… and Neville had been getting so good…

"Fizzing Whizzbee," sang Umbridge; the stone gargoyle jumped aside, the wall behind split open, and they ascended the moving stone staircase. They reached the polished door with the griffin knocker, but Umbridge did not bother to knock, she strode straight inside, still holding tight to Harry.

The office was full of people. Dumbledore was sitting behind his desk, his expression serene, the tips of his long fingers together. Professor McGonagall stood rigidly beside him, her face extremely tense. Cornelius Fudge, Minister for Magic, was rocking backwards and forwards on his toes beside the fire, apparently immensely pleased with the situation; Kingsley Shacklebolt and a tough-looking wizard with very short wiry hair whom Harry did not recognize, were positioned on either side of the door like guards, and the freckled, bespectacled form of Percy Weasley hovered excitedly beside the wall, a quill and a heavy scroll of parchment in his hands, apparently poised to take notes.

The portraits of old headmasters and headmistresses were not shamming sleep tonight. All of them were alert and serious, watching what was happening below them. As Harry entered, a few flitted into neighboring frames and whispered urgently into their neighbor's ear.

Harry pulled himself free of Umbridge's grasp as the door swung shut behind them. Cornelius Fudge was glaring at him with a kind of vicious satisfaction on his face.

"Well," he said. "Well, well, well…"

Harry replied with the dirtiest look he could muster. His heart drummed madly inside him, but his brain was oddly cool and clear.

"He was heading back to Gryffindor Tower," said Umbridge. There was an indecent excitement in her voice, the same callous pleasure Harry had heard as she watched Professor Trelawney dissolving with misery in the Entrance Hall. "The Malfoy boy cornered him."

"Did he, did he?" said Fudge appreciatively. "I must remember to tell Lucius. Well, Potter… I expect you know why you are here?"

Harry fully intended to respond with a defiant 'yes': his mouth had opened and the word was half-formed when he caught sight of Dumbledore's face. Dumbledore was not looking directly at Harry - his eyes were fixed on a point just over his shoulder - but as Harry stared at him, he shook his head a fraction of an inch to each side.

Harry changed direction mid-word.

“Ye—no.”

“I beg your pardon?” said Fudge.

“No,” said Harry, firmly.

“You don’t know why you are here?”

“No, I don’t,” said Harry.

Fudge looked incredulously from Harry to Professor Umbridge. Harry took advantage of his momentary inattention to steal another quick look at Dumbledore, who gave the carpet the tiniest of nods and the shadow of a wink.

“So you have no idea,” said Fudge, in a voice positively sagging with sarcasm, “why Professor Umbridge has brought you to this office? You are not aware that you have broken any school rules?”

“School rules?” said Harry. “No.”

“Or Ministry Decrees?” amended Fudge angrily.

“Not that I’m aware of,” said Harry blandly.

His heart was still hammering very fast. It was almost worth telling these lies to watch Fudges blood pressure rising, but he could not see how on earth he would get away with them; if somebody had tipped off Umbridge about the D.A. then he, the leader, might as well be packing his trunk right now.

“So, it’s news to you, is it,” said Fudge, his voice now thick with anger, “that an illegal student organization has been discovered within this school?”

“Yes, it is,” said Harry, hoisting an unconvincing look of innocent surprise on to his face.

“I think, Minister,” said Umbridge silkily from beside him, “we might make better progress if I fetch our informant.”

“Yes, yes, do,” said Fudge, nodding, and he glanced maliciously at Dumbledore as Umbridge left the room. “There’s nothing like a good witness, is t here, Dumbledore?”

“Nothing at all, Cornelius,” said Dumbledore gravely, inclining his head.

There was a wait of several minutes, in which nobody looked at each other, then Harry heard the door open behind him. Umbridge moved past him into the room, gripping by the shoulder Cho’s

curly-haired friend, Marietta, who was hiding her face in her hands.

“Don’t be scared, dear, don’t be frightened,” said Professor Umbridge softly, patting her on the back, “it’s quite all right, now. You have done the right thing. The Minister is very pleased with you. He’ll be telling your mother what a good girl you’ve been.

“Marietta’s mother, Minister,” she added, looking up at Fudge, “is Madam Edgecombe from the Department of Magical Transportation, Floo Network office - she’s been helping us police the Hogwarts fires, you know.”

“Jolly good, jolly good!” said Fudge heartily. “Like mother, like daughter, eh? Well, come on, now, dear, look up, don’t be shy, let’s hear what you’ve got to - galloping gargoyles!”

As Marietta raised her head, Fudge leapt backwards in shock, nearly landing himself in the fire. He cursed, and stamped on the hem of his cloak which had started to smoke. Marietta gave a wail and pulled the neck of her robes right up to her eyes, but not before everyone had seen that her face was horribly disfigured by a series of close-set purple pustules that had spread across her nose and cheeks to form the word *SNEAK.*

“Never mind the spots now, dear,” said Umbridge impatiently, “just take your robes away from your mouth and tell the Minister -”

But Marietta gave another muffled wail and shook her head frantically.

“Oh, very well, you silly girl, I’ll tell him,” snapped Umbridge. She hitched her sickly smile back on to her face and said, “Well, Minister, Miss Edgecombe here came to my office shortly after dinner this evening and told me she had something she wanted to tell me. She said that if I proceeded to a secret room on the seventh floor, sometimes known as the Room of Requirement, I would find out something to my advantage. I questioned her a little further and she admitted that there was to be some kind of meeting there. Unfortunately, at that point this hex,” she waved impatiently at Marietta’s concealed face, “came into operation and upon catching sight of her face in my mirror the girl became too distressed to tell me any more.”

“Well, now,” said Fudge, fixing Marietta with what he evidently imagined was a kind and fatherly look, “it is very brave of you, my dear, coming to tell Professor Umbridge. You did exactly the right thing. Now, will you tell me what happened at this meeting? What was its purpose? Who was there?”

But Marietta would not speak; she merely shook her head again, her eyes wide and fearful.

“Haven’t we got a counter-jinx for this?” Fudge asked Umbridge impatiently, gesturing at Marietta’s face. “So she can speak freely?”

“I have not yet managed to find one,” Umbridge admitted grudgingly, and Harry felt a surge of pride in Hermione’s jinxing ability. “But it doesn’t matter if she won’t speak, I can take up the story from here.”

“You will remember, Minister, that I sent you a report back in October that Potter had met a number of fellow students in the Hog’s Head in Hogsmeade -”

“And what is your evidence for that?” cut in Professor McGonagall.

“I have testimony from Willy Widdershins, Minerva, who happened to be in the bar at the time. He was heavily bandaged, it is true, but his hearing was quite unimpaired,” said Umbridge smugly. “He heard every word Potter said and hastened straight to the school to report to me -”

“Oh, so that’s why he wasn’t prosecuted for setting up all those regurgitating toilets!” said Professor McGonagall, raising her eyebrows. “What an interesting insight into our justice system!”

“Blatant corruption!” roared the portrait of the corpulent, red-nosed wizard on the wall behind Dumbledore’s desk. “The Ministry did not cut deals with petty criminals in my day, no sir, they did not!”

“Thank you, Fortescue, that will do,” said Dumbledore softly.

“The purpose of Potter’s meeting with these students,” continued Professor Umbridge, “was to persuade them to join an illegal society, whose aim was to learn spells and curses the Ministry has decided are inappropriate for school-age -”

“I think you’ll find you’re wrong there, Dolores,” said Dumbledore quietly, peering at her over the half-moon spectacles perched halfway down his crooked nose.

Harry stared at him. He could not see how Dumbledore was going to talk him out of this one; if Willy Widdershins had indeed heard every word he had said in the Hog’s Head there was simply no escaping it.

“Oho!” said Fudge, bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet again. “Yes, do let’s hear the latest cock-and-bull story designed to pull Potter out of trouble! Go on, then, Dumbledore, go on - Willy Widdershins was lying, was he? Or was it Potters identical twin in the Hog’s Head that day? Or is there the usual simple explanation involving a reversal of time, a dead man coming back to life and a couple of invisible Dementors?”

Percy Weasley let out a hearty laugh.

“Oh, very good, Minister, very good!”

Harry could have kicked him. Then he saw, to his astonishment, that Dumbledore was smiling gently, too.

“Cornelius, I do not deny - and nor, I am sure, does Harry - that he was in the Hog’s Head that day, nor that he was trying to recruit students to a Defense Against the Dark Arts group. I am merely pointing out that Dolores is quite wrong to suggest that such a group was, at that time,

illegal. If you remember, the Ministry Decree banning all student societies was not put into effect until two days after Harrys Hogsmeade meeting, so he was not breaking any rules at all in the Hog’s Head.”

Percy looked as though he had been struck in the face by something very heavy. Fudge remained motionless in mid-bounce, his mouth hanging open.

Umbridge recovered first.

“That’s all very fine, Headmaster,” she said, smiling sweetly, “but we are now nearly six months on from the introduction of Educational Decree Number Twenty-four. If the first meeting was not illegal, all those that have happened since most certainly are.”

“Well,” said Dumbledore, surveying her with polite interest over the top of his interlocked fingers, “they certainly would be, if they had continued after the Decree came into effect. Do you have any evidence that any such meetings continued?”

As Dumbledore spoke, Harry heard a rustle behind him and rather thought Kingsley whispered something. He could have sworn, too, that he felt something brush against his side, a gentle something like a draught or bird wings, but looking down he saw nothing there.

“Evidence?” repeated Umbridge, with that horrible wide toad-like smile. “Have you not been listening, Dumbledore? Why do you think Miss Edgecombe is here?”

“Oh, can she tell us about six months’ worth of meetings?” said Dumbledore, raising his eyebrows. “I was under the impression that she was merely reporting a meeting tonight.”

“Miss Edgecombe,” said Umbridge at once, “tell us how long these meetings have been going on, dear. You can simply nod or shake your head, I’m sure that won’t make the spots worse. Have they been happening regularly over the last six months?”

Harry felt a horrible plummeting in his stomach. This was it, they had hit a dead end of solid evidence that not even Dumbledore would be able to shift aside.

“Just nod or shake your head, dear,” Umbridge said coaxingly to Marietta, “come on, now, that won’t re-activate the jinx.”

Everyone in the room was gazing at the top of Marietta’s face. Only her eyes were visible between the pulled-up robes and her curly fringe. Perhaps it was a trick of the firelight, but her eyes looked oddly blank. And then - to Harry’s utter amazement - Marietta shook her head.

Umbridge looked quickly at Fudge, then back at Marietta.

“I don’t think you understood the question, did you, dear? I’m asking whether you’ve been going to these meetings for the past six months? You have, haven’t you?”

Again, Marietta shook her head.

“What do you mean by shaking your head, dear?” said Umbridge in a testy voice.

“I would have thought her meaning was quite clear,” said Professor McGonagall harshly, “there have been no secret meetings for the past six months. Is that correct, Miss Edgecombe?”

Marietta nodded.

“But there was a meeting tonight!” said Umbridge furiously. “There was a meeting, Miss Edgecombe, you told me about it, in the Room of Requirement! And Potter was the leader, was he not, Potter organized it, Potter - why are you shaking your head, girl?”

“Well, usually when a person shakes their head,” said McGonagall coldly, “they mean ‘no’. So unless Miss Edgecombe is using a form of sign-language as yet unknown to humans -”

Professor Umbridge seized Marietta, pulled her round to face her and began shaking her very hard. A split second later Dumbledore was on his feet, his wand raised; Kingsley started forwards and Umbridge leapt back from Marietta, waving her hands in the air as though they had been burned.

“I cannot allow you to manhandle my students, Dolores,” said Dumbledore and, for the first time, he looked angry.

“You want to calm yourself, Madam Umbridge,” said Kingsley, in his deep, slow voice. “You don’t want to get yourself into trouble, now.”

“No,” said Umbridge breathlessly, glancing up at the towering figure of Kingsley. “I mean, yes - you’re right, Shacklebolt - I - I forgot myself.”

Marietta was standing exactly where Umbridge had released her. She seemed neither perturbed by Umbridge’s sudden attack, nor relieved by her release; she was still clutching her robe up to her oddly blank eyes and staring straight ahead of her.

A sudden suspicion, connected to Kingsley’s whisper and the thing he had felt shoot past him, sprang into Harry’s mind.

“Dolores,” said Fudge, with the air of trying to settle something once and for all, “the meeting tonight - the one we know definitely happened -”

“Yes,” said Umbridge, pulling herself together, “yes… well, Miss Edgecombe tipped me off and I proceeded at once to the seventh floor, accompanied by certain trustworthy students, so as to catch those in the meeting red-handed. It appears that they were forewarned of my arrival, however, because when we reached the seventh floor they were running in every direction. It does not matter, however. I have all their names here, Miss Parkinson ran into the Room of Requirement for me to see if they had left anything behind. We needed evidence and the room

provided."

And to Harry's horror, she withdrew from her pocket the list of names that had been pinned upon the Room of Requirement's wall and handed it to Fudge.

"The moment I saw Potter's name on the list, I knew what we were dealing with," she said softly.

"Excellent," said Fudge, a smile spreading across his face, "excellent, Dolores. And… by thunder…"

He looked up at Dumbledore, who was still standing beside Marietta, his wand held loosely in his hand.

"See what they've named themselves?" said Fudge quietly. "Dumbledore's Army."

Dumbledore reached out and took the piece of parchment from Fudge. He gazed at the heading scribbled by Hermione months before and for a moment seemed unable to speak. Then he looked up, smiling.

"Well, the game is up," he said simply. "Would you like a written confession from me, Cornelius - or will a statement before these witnesses suffice?"

Harry saw McGonagall and Kingsley look at each other. There was fear in both faces. He did not understand what was going on, and nor, apparently, did Fudge.

"Statement?" said Fudge slowly. "What - I don't -?"

"Dumbledore's Army, Cornelius," said Dumbledore, still smiling as he waved the list of names before Fudge's face. "Not Potter's Army. Dumbledore's Army."

"But - but -"

Understanding blazed suddenly in Fudges face. He took a horrified step backwards, yelped, and jumped out of the fire again.

"You?" he whispered, stamping again on his smouldering cloak.

"That's right," said Dumbledore pleasantly.

"You organized this?"

"I did," said Dumbledore.

"You recruited these students for - for your army?"

“Tonight was supposed to be the first meeting,” said Dumbledore, nodding. “Merely to see whether they would be interested in joining me. I see now that it was a mistake to invite Miss Edgecombe, of course.”

Marietta nodded. Fudge looked from her to Dumbledore, his chest swelling.

“Then you have been plotting against me!” he yelled.

“That’s right,” said Dumbledore cheerfully.

“NO!” shouted Harry.

Kingsley flashed a look of warning at him, McGonagall widened her eyes threateningly, but it had suddenly dawned on Harry what Dumbledore was about to do, and he could not let it happen.

“No — Professor Dumbledore -!”

“Be quiet, Harry, or I am afraid you will have to leave my office,” said Dumbledore calmly.

“Yes, shut up, Potter!” barked Fudge, who was still ogling Dumbledore with a kind of horrified delight. “Well, well, well - I came here tonight expecting to expel Potter and instead -”

“Instead you get to arrest me,” said Dumbledore, smiling. “It’s like losing a Knut and finding a Galleon, isn’t it?”

“Weasley!” cried Fudge, now positively quivering with delight, “Weasley, have you written it all down, everything he’s said, his confession, have you got it?”

“Yes, sir, I think so, sir!” said Percy eagerly, whose nose was splattered with ink from the speed of his note-taking.

“The bit about how he’s been trying to build up an army against the Ministry, how he’s been working to destabilize me?”

“Yes, sir, I’ve got it, yes!” said Percy, scanning his notes joyfully.

“Very well, then,” said Fudge, now radiant with glee, “duplicate your notes, Weasley, and send a copy to the Daily Prophet at once. If we send a fast owl we should make the morning edition!”

Percy dashed from the room, slamming the door behind him, and Fudge turned back to Dumbledore. “You will now be escorted back to the Ministry, where you will be formally charged, then sent to Azkaban to await trial!”

“Ah,” said Dumbledore gently, “yes. Yes, I thought we might hit that little snag.”

“Snag?” said Fudge, his voice still vibrating with joy. “I see no snag, Dumbledore!”

“Well,” said Dumbledore apologetically, “I’m afraid I do.”

“Oh, really?”

“Well - it’s just that you seem to be laboring under the delusion that I am going to - what is the phrase? - come quietly. I am afraid I am not going to come quietly at all, Cornelius. I have absolutely no intention of being sent to Azkaban. I could break out, of course - but what a waste of time, and frankly, I can think of a whole host of things I would rather be doing.”

Umbridge’s face was growing steadily redder; she looked as though she was being filled with boiling water. Fudge stared at Dumbledore with a very silly expression on his face, as though he had just been stunned by a sudden blow and could not quite believe it had happened. He made a small choking noise, then looked round at Kingsley and the man with short grey hair, who alone of everyone in the room had remained entirely silent so far. The latter gave Fudge a reassuring nod and moved forwards a little, away from the wall. Harry saw his hand drift, almost casually, towards his pocket.

“Don’t be silly, Dawlish,” said Dumbledore kindly. “I’m sure you are an excellent Auror - I seem to remember that you achieved ‘Outstanding’ in all your NEWT s — but if you attempt to — er — bring me in by force, I will have to hurt you.”

The man called Dawlish blinked rather foolishly. He looked towards Fudge again, but this time seemed to be hoping for a clue as to what to do next.

“So,” sneered Fudge, recovering himself, “you intend to take on Dawlish, Shacklebolt, Dolores and myself single-handed, do you, Dumbledore?”

“Merlin’s beard, no,” said Dumbledore, smiling, “not unless you are foolish enough to force me to.”

“He will not be single-handed!” said Professor McGonagall loudly, plunging her hand inside her robes.

“Oh yes he will, Minerva!” said Dumbledore sharply. “Hogwarts needs you!”

“Enough of this rubbish!” said Fudge, pulling out his own wand. “Dawlish! Shacklebolt! Take him!”

A streak of silver light flashed around the room; there was a bang like a gunshot and the floor trembled; a hand grabbed the scruff of Harry’s neck and forced him down on the floor as a second silver flash went off; several of the portraits yelled, Fawkes screeched and a cloud of dust filled the air. Coughing in the dust, Harry saw a dark figure fall to the ground with a crash in front of him; there was a shriek and a thud and somebody cried, “No!”; then there was the sound of breaking glass, frantically scuffling footsteps, a groan… and silence.

Harry struggled around to see who was half-strangling him and saw Professor McGonagall crouched beside him; she had forced both him and Marietta out of harm's way. Dust was still floating gently down through the air on to them. Panting slightly, Harry saw a very tall figure moving towards them.

"Are you all right?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yes!" said Professor McGonagall, getting up and dragging Harry and Marietta with her.

The dust was clearing. The wreckage of the office loomed into view: Dumbledore's desk had been overturned, all of the spindly tables had been knocked to the floor, their silver instruments in pieces. Fudge, Umbridge, Kingsley and Dawlish lay motionless on the floor. Fawkes the phoenix soared in wide circles above them, singing softly.

"Unfortunately, I had to hex Kingsley too, or it would have looked very suspicious," said Dumbledore in a low voice. "He was remarkably quick on the uptake, modifying Miss Edgecombe's memory like that while everyone was looking the other way - thank him, for me, won't you, Minerva?

"Now, they will all awake very soon and it will be best if they do not know that we had time to communicate - you must act as though no time has passed, as though they were merely knocked to the ground, they will not remember -"

"Where will you go, Dumbledore?" whispered Professor McGonagall. "Grimmauld Place?"

"Oh no," said Dumbledore, with a grim smile, "I am not leaving to go into hiding. Fudge will soon wish he'd never dislodged me from Hogwarts, I promise you."

"Professor Dumbledore…" Harry began.

He did not know what to say first: how sorry he was that he had started the D.A. in the first place and caused all this trouble, or how terrible he felt that Dumbledore was leaving to save him from expulsion? But Dumbledore cut him off before he could say another word.

"Listen to me, Harry," he said urgently. "You must study Occlumency as hard as you can, do you understand me? Do everything Professor Snape tells you and practice it particularly every night before sleeping so that you can close your mind to bad dreams - you will understand why soon enough, but you must promise me -"

The man called Dawlish was stirring. Dumbledore seized Harry's wrist.

"Remember - close your mind -"

But as Dumbledore's fingers closed over Harrys skin, a pain shot through the scar on his forehead and he felt again that terrible, snakelike longing to strike Dumbledore, to bite him, to hurt him -

“- you will understand,” whispered Dumbledore.

Fawkes circled the office and swooped low over him. Dumbledore released Harry, raised his hand and grasped the phoenix’s long golden tail. There was a flash of fire and the pair of them were gone.

“Where is he?” yelled Fudge, pushing himself up from the floor. “Where is he?”

“I don’t know!” shouted Kingsley, also leaping to his feet.

“Well, he can’t have Disapparated!” cried Umbridge. “You can’t do it from inside this school -”

“The stairs!” cried Dawlish, and he flung himself upon the door, wrenched it open and disappeared, followed closely by Kingsley and Umbridge. Fudge hesitated, then got slowly to his feet, brushing dust from his front. There was a long and painful silence.

“Well, Minerva,” said Fudge nastily, straightening his torn shirtsleeve, “I’m afraid this is the end of your friend Dumbledore.”

“You think so, do you?” said Professor McGonagall scornfully.

Fudge seemed not to hear her. He was looking around at the wrecked office. A few of the portraits hissed at him; one or two even made rude hand gestures.

“You’d better get those two off to bed,” said Fudge, looking back at Professor McGonagall with a dismissive nod towards Harry and Marietta.

Professor McGonagall said nothing, but marched Harry and Marietta to the door. As it swung closed behind them, Harry heard Phineas Nigellus’s voice.

“You know, Minister, I disagree with Dumbledore on many counts… but you cannot deny he’s got style…”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Snape's Worst Memory

BY ORDER OF THE MINISTRY OF MAGIC

Dolores Jane Umbridge (High Inquisitor) has replaced Albus Dumbledore as Head of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

The above is in accordance with Educational Decree Number Twenty-eight.

Signed: Cornelius Oswald Fudge, Minister for Magic

The notices had gone up all around the school overnight, but they did not explain how every single person within the castle seemed to know that Dumbledore had overcome two Aurors, the High Inquisitor, the Minister for Magic and his Junior Assistant to escape. No matter where Harry went within the castle, the sole topic of conversation was Dumbledore's flight, and though some of the details may have gone awry in the retelling (Harry overheard one second-year girl assuring another that Fudge was now lying in St. Mungo's with a pumpkin for a head) it was surprising how accurate the rest of their information was. Everybody knew, for instance, that Harry and Marietta were the only students to have witnessed the scene in Dumbledore's office and, as Marietta was now in the hospital wing, Harry found himself besieged with requests to give a first-hand account.

"Dumbledore will be back before long," said Ernie Macmillan confidently on the way back from Herbology, after listening intently to Harry's story. "They couldn't keep him away in our second year and they won't be able to this time. The Fat Friar told me -" he dropped his voice conspiratorially, so that Harry, Ron and Hermione had to lean closer to him to hear "- that Umbridge tried to get back into his office last night after they'd searched the castle and grounds for him. Couldn't get past the gargoyle. The Head's office has sealed itself against her." Ernie smirked. "Apparently, she had a right little tantrum."

"Oh, I expect she really fancied herself sitting up there in the Heads office," said Hermione viciously, as they walked up the stone steps into the Entrance Hall. "Lording it over all the other teachers, the stupid puffed-up, power-crazy old -"

"Now, do you really want to finish that sentence, Granger?"

Draco Malfoy had slid out from behind the door, closely followed by Crabbe and Goyle. His pale, pointed face was alight with malice.

"Afraid I'm going to have to dock a few points from Gryffindor and Hufflepuff," he drawled.

"It's only teachers who can dock points from houses, Malfoy," said Ernie at once.

“Yeah, we’re prefects, too, remember?” snarled Ron.

“I know prefects can’t dock points, Weasel King,” sneered Malfoy. Crabbe and Goyle sniggered. “But members of the Inquisitorial Squad -”

“The what!” said Hermione sharply.

“The Inquisitorial Squad, Granger,” said Malfoy, pointing towards a tiny silver ‘I’ on his robes just beneath his prefect’s badge. “A select group of students who are supportive of the Ministry of Magic, hand-picked by Professor Umbridge. Anyway, members of the Inquisitorial Squad do have the power to dock points… so, Granger, I’ll have five from you for being rude about our new Headmistress. Macmillan, five for contradicting me. Five because I don’t like you, Potter. Weasley, your shirts untucked, so I’ll have another five for that. Oh yeah, I forgot, you’re a Mudblood, Granger, so ten off for that.”

Ron pulled out his wand, but Hermione pushed it away, whispering, “Don’t!”

“Wise move, Granger,” breathed Malfoy. “New Head, new times… be good now, Potty… Weasel King…”

Laughing heartily, he strode away with Crabbe and Goyle.

“He was bluffing,” said Ernie, looking appalled. “He can’t be allowed to dock points… that would be ridiculous… it would completely undermine the prefect system.”

But Harry, Ron and Hermione had turned automatically towards the giant hour-glasses set in niches along the wall behind them, which recorded the house-points. Gryffindor and Ravenclaw had been neck and neck in the lead that morning. Even as they watched, stones flew upwards, reducing the amounts in the lower bulbs. In fact, the only glass that seemed unchanged was the emerald-filled one of Slytherin.

“Noticed, have you?” said Fred’s voice.

He and George had just come down the marble staircase and joined Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ernie in front of the hour-glasses.

“Malfoy just docked us all about fifty points,” said Harry furiously, as they watched several more stones fly upwards from the Gryffindor hour-glass.

“Yeah, Montague tried to do us during break,” said George.

“What do you mean, ‘tried’?” said Ron quickly.

“He never managed to get all the words out,” said Fred, “due to the fact that we forced him headfirst into that Vanishing Cabinet on the first floor.”

Hermione looked very shocked.

“But you’ll get into terrible trouble!”

“Not until Montague reappears, and that could take weeks, I dunno where we sent him,” said Fred coolly. “Anyway… we’ve decided we don’t care about getting into trouble any more.”

“Have you ever?” asked Hermione.

“Course we have,” said George. “Never been expelled, have we?”

“We’ve always known where to draw the line,” said Fred.

“We might have put a toe across it occasionally,” said George.

“But we’ve always stopped short of causing real mayhem,” said Fred.

“But now?” said Ron tentatively.

“Well, now -” said George.

“- what with Dumbledore gone -” said Fred.

“- we reckon a bit of mayhem —” said George.

“— is exactly what our dear new Head deserves,” said Fred.

“You mustn’t!” whispered Hermione. “You really mustn’t! She’d love a reason to expel you!”

“You don’t get it, Hermione, do you?” said Fred, smiling at her. “We don’t care about staying anymore. We’d walk out right now if we weren’t determined to do our bit for Dumbledore first. So, anyway,” he checked his watch, “phase one is about to begin. I’d get in the Great Hall for lunch, if I were you, that way the teachers will see you can’t have had anything to do with it.”

“Anything to do with what?” said Hermione anxiously.

“You’ll see,” said George. “Run along, now.”

Fred and George turned away and disappeared into the swelling crowd descending the stairs towards lunch. Looking highly disconcerted, Ernie muttered something about unfinished Transfiguration homework and scurried away.

“I think we should get out of here, you know,” said Hermione nervously. “Just in case”

“Yeah, all right,” said Ron, and the three of them moved towards the doors to the Great Hall, but Harry had barely glimpsed the day’s ceiling of scudding white clouds when somebody tapped

him on the shoulder and, turning, he found himself almost nose-to-nose with Filch the caretaker. He took several hasty steps backwards; Filch was best viewed at a distance.

“The Headmistress would like to see you, Potter,” he leered.

“I didn’t do it,” said Harry stupidly, thinking of whatever Fred and George were planning. Filch’s jowls wobbled with silent laughter.

“Guilty conscience, eh?” he wheezed. “Follow me.”

Harry glanced back at Ron and Hermione, who were both looking worried. He shrugged, and followed Filch back into the Entrance Hall, against the tide of hungry students.

Filch seemed to be in an extremely good mood; he hummed creakily under his breath as they climbed the marble staircase. As they reached the first landing he said, “Things are changing around here, Potter.”

“I’ve noticed,” said Harry coldly.

“Yerse… I’ve been telling Dumbledore for years and years he’s too soft with you all,” said Filch, chuckling nastily. “You filthy little beasts would never have dropped Stink Pellets if you’d known I had it in my power to whip you raw, would you, now? Nobody would have thought of throwing Fanged Frisbees down the corridors if I could’ve strung you up by the ankles in my office, would they? But when Educational Decree Number Twenty-nine comes in, Potter, I’ll be allowed to do them things… and she’s asked the Minister to sign an order for the expulsion of Peeves… oh, things are going to be very different around here with her in charge.”

Umbridge had obviously gone to some lengths to get Filch on her side, Harry thought, and the worst of it was that he would probably prove an important weapon; his knowledge of the school’s secret passageways and hiding places was probably second only to that of the Weasley twins.

“Here we are,” he said, leering down at Harry as he rapped three times on Professor Umbridge’s door and pushed it open. “The Potter boy to see you, Ma’am.”

Umbridge’s office, so very familiar to Harry from his many detentions, was the same as usual except for the large wooden block lying across the front of her desk on which golden letters spelled the word: HEADMISTRESS. Also, his Firebolt and Fred and George’s Cleansweeps, which he saw with a pang, were chained and padlocked to a stout iron peg in the wall behind the desk.

Umbridge was sitting behind the desk, busily scribbling on some of her pink parchment, but she looked up and smiled widely at their entrance.

“Thank you, Argus,” she said sweetly.

“Not at all, Ma’am, not at all,” said Filch, bowing as low as his rheumatism would permit, and exiting backwards.

“Sit,” said Umbridge curtly, pointing towards a chair. Harry sat. She continued to scribble for a few moments. He watched some of the foul kittens gamboling around the plates over her head, wondering what fresh horror she had in store for him.

“Well, now,” she said finally, setting down her quill and surveying him complacently, like a toad about to swallow a particularly juicy fly. “What would you like to drink?”

“What?” said Harry, quite sure he had misheard her.

“To drink, Mr. Potter,” she said, smiling still more widely. “Tea? Coffee? Pumpkin juice?”

As she named each drink, she gave her short wand a wave, and a cup or glass of it appeared on her desk.

“Nothing, thank you,” said Harry.

“I wish you to have a drink with me,” she said, her voice becoming dangerously sweet. “Choose one.”

“Fine… tea then,” said Harry, shrugging.

She got up and made quite a performance of adding milk with her back to him. She then bustled around the desk with it, smiling in a sinisterly sweet fashion.

“There,” she said, handing it to him. “Drink it before it gets cold, won’t you? Well, now, Mr. Potter… I thought we ought to have a little chat, after the distressing events of last night.”

He said nothing. She settled herself back into her seat and waited. When several long moments had passed in silence, she said gaily, “You’re not drinking up!”

He raised the cup to his lips and then, just as suddenly, lowered it. One of the horrible painted kittens behind Umbridge had great round blue eyes just like Mad-Eye Moody’s magical one and it had just occurred to Harry what Mad-Eye would say if he ever heard that Harry had drunk anything offered by a known enemy.

“What’s the matter?” said Umbridge, who was still watching him closely. “Do you want sugar?”

“No,” said Harry.

He raised the cup to his lips again and pretended to take a sip, though keeping his mouth tightly closed. Umbridge’s smile widened.

“Good,” she whispered. “Very good. Now then…” She leaned forwards a little. “Where is Albus

Dumbledore?”

“No idea,” said Harry promptly.

“Drink up, drink up,” she said, still smiling. “Now, Mr. Potter, let us not play childish games. I know that you know where he has gone. You and Dumbledore have been in this together from the beginning. Consider your position, Mr. Potter…”

“I don’t know where he is,” Harry repeated.

He pretended to drink again. She was watching him very closely.

“Very well,” she said, though she looked displeased. “In that case, you will kindly tell me the whereabouts of Sirius Black.”

Harry’s stomach turned over and his hand holding the teacup shook so that it rattled in its saucer. He tilted the cup to his mouth with his lips pressed together, so that some of the hot liquid trickled down on to his robes.

“I don’t know,” he said, a little too quickly.

“Mr. Potter,” said Umbridge, “let me remind you that it was I who almost caught the criminal Black in the Gryffindor fire in October. I know perfectly well it was you he was meeting and if I had had any proof neither of you would be at large today, I promise you. I repeat, Mr. Potter… where is Sirius Black?”

“No idea,” said Harry loudly. “Haven’t got a clue.”

They stared at each other so long that Harry felt his eyes watering. Then Umbridge stood up.

“Very well, Potter, I will take your word for it this time, but be warned: the might of the Ministry stands behind me. All channels of communication in and out of this school are being monitored. A Floo Network Regulator is keeping watch over every fire in Hogwarts - except my own, of course. My Inquisitorial Squad is opening and reading all owl post entering and leaving the castle. And Mr. Filch is observing all secret passages in and out of the castle. If I find a shred of evidence…”

BOOM!

The very floor of the office shook. Umbridge slipped sideways, clutching her desk for support, and looking shocked.

“What was -?”

She was gazing towards the door. Harry took the opportunity to empty his almost-full cup of tea into the nearest vase of dried flowers. He could hear people running and screaming several floors

below.

“Back to lunch you go, Potter!” cried Umbridge, raising her wand and dashing out of the office. Harry gave her a few seconds’ start, then hurried after her to see what the source of all the uproar was.

It was not difficult to find. One floor down, pandemonium reigned. Somebody (and Harry had a very shrewd idea who) had set off what seemed to be an enormous crate of enchanted fireworks. Dragons comprised entirely of green and gold sparks were soaring up and down the corridors, emitting loud fiery blasts and bangs as they went; shocking-pink Catherine wheels five feet in diameter were whizzing lethally through the air like so many flying saucers; rockets with long tails of brilliant silver stars were ricocheting off the walls; sparklers were writing swear words in midair of their own accord; firecrackers were exploding like mines everywhere Harry looked, and instead of burning themselves out, fading from sight or fizzling to a halt, these pyrotechnical miracles seemed to be gaining in energy and momentum the longer he watched.

Filch and Umbridge were standing, apparently transfixed in horror, halfway down the stairs. As Harry watched, one of the larger Catherine wheels seemed to decide that what it needed was more room to maneuver; it whirled towards Umbridge and Filch with a sinister ‘wheeeeeeeeee’. They both yelled with fright and ducked, and it soared straight out of the window behind them and off across the grounds. Meanwhile, several of the dragons and a large purple bat that was smoking ominously took advantage of the open door at the end of the corridor to escape towards the second floor.

“Hurry, Filch, hurry!” shrieked Umbridge, “they’ll be all over the school unless we do something - Stupefy”

A jet of red light shot out of the end of her wand and hit one of the rockets. Instead of freezing in midair, it exploded with such force that it blasted a hole in a painting of a soppy-looking witch in the middle of a meadow; she ran for it just in time, reappearing seconds later squashed into the next painting, where a couple of wizards playing cards stood up hastily to make room for her.

“Don’t Stun them, Filch!” shouted Umbridge angrily, for all the world as though it had been his incantation.

“Right you are, Headmistress!” wheezed Filch, who as a Squib could no more have Stunned the fireworks than swallowed them. He dashed to a nearby cupboard, pulled out a broom and began swatting at the fireworks in midair; within seconds the head of the broom was ablaze.

Harry had seen enough; laughing, he ducked down low, ran to a door he knew was concealed behind a tapestry a little way along the corridor and slipped through it to find Fred and George hiding just behind it, listening to Umbridge and Filch’s yells and quaking with suppressed mirth.

“Impressive,” Harry said quietly, grinning. “Very impressive… you’ll put Dr. Filibuster out of business, no problem…”

“Cheers,” whispered George, wiping tears of laughter from his face. “Oh, I hope she tries Vanishing them next… they multiply by ten every time you try.”

The fireworks continued to burn and to spread all over the school that afternoon. Though they caused plenty of disruption, particularly the firecrackers, the other teachers didn’t seem to mind them very much.

“Dear, dear,” said Professor McGonagall sardonically, as one of the dragons soared around her classroom, emitting loud bangs and exhaling flame. “Miss Brown, would you mind running along to the Headmistress and informing her that we have an escaped firework in our classroom?”

The upshot of it all was that Professor Umbridge spent her first afternoon as Headmistress running all over the school answering the summonses of the other teachers, none of whom seemed able to rid their rooms of the fireworks without her. When the final bell rang and they were heading back to Gryffindor Tower with their bags, Harry saw, with immense satisfaction, a disheveled and soot-blackened Umbridge tottering sweaty-faced from Professor Flitwick’s classroom.

“Thank you so much, Professor!” said Professor Flitwick in his squeaky little voice. “I could have got rid of the sparklers myself, of course, but I wasn’t sure whether or not I had the authority.”

Beaming, he closed his classroom door in her snarling face.

Fred and George were heroes that night in the Gryffindor common room. Even Hermione fought her way through the excited crowd to congratulate them.

“They were wonderful fireworks,” she said admiringly.

“Thanks,” said George, looking both surprised and pleased. “Weasleys’ Wildfire Whiz-bangs. Only thing is, we used our whole stock; we’re going to have to start again from scratch now.”

“It was worth it, though,” said Fred, who was taking orders from clamouring Gryffindors. “If you want to add your name to the waiting list, Hermione, it’s five Galleons for your Basic Blaze box and twenty for the Deflagration Deluxe…”

Hermione returned to the table where Harry and Ron were sitting staring at their schoolbags as though hoping their homework would spring out and start doing itself.

“Oh, why don’t we have a night off?” said Hermione brightly, as a silver-tailed Weasley rocket zoomed past the window. “After all, the Easter holidays start on Friday, we’ll have plenty of time then.”

“Are you feeling all right?” Ron asked, staring at her in disbelief.

“Now you mention it,” said Hermione happily, “d’you know… I think I’m feeling a bit… rebellious.”

Harry could still hear the distant bangs of escaped firecrackers when he and Ron went up to bed an hour later; and as he got undressed a sparkler floated past the tower, still resolutely spelling out the word *TOO.*

He got into bed, yawning. With his glasses off, the occasional firework passing the window had become blurred, looking like sparkling clouds, beautiful and mysterious against the black sky. He turned on to his side, wondering how Umbridge was feeling about her first day in Dumbledore’s job, and how Fudge would react when he heard that the school had spent most of the day in a state of advanced disruption. Smiling to himself, Harry closed his eyes…

The whizzes and bangs of escaped fireworks in the grounds seemed to be growing more distant… or perhaps he was simply speeding away from them…

He had fallen right into the corridor leading to the Department of Mysteries. He was speeding towards the plain black door… let it open… let it open…

It did. He was inside the circular room lined with doors… he crossed it, placed his hand on an identical door and it swung inwards…

Now he was in a long, rectangular room full of an odd mechanical clicking. There were dancing flecks of light on the walls but he did not pause to investigate… he had to go on…

There was a door at the far end… it, too, opened at his touch…

And now he was in a dimly lit room as high and wide as a church, full of nothing but rows and rows of towering shelves, each laden with small, dusty, spun-glass spheres… now Harrys heart was beating fast with excitement… he knew where to go… he ran forwards, but his footsteps made no noise in the enormous, deserted room…

There was something in this room he wanted very, very much…

Something he wanted… or somebody else wanted…

His scar was hurting…

BANG!

Harry awoke instantly, confused and angry. The dark dormitory was full of the sound of laughter.

“Cool!” said Seamus, who was silhouetted against the window. “I think one of those Catherine wheels hit a rocket and it’s like they mated, come and see!”

Harry heard Ron and Dean scramble out of bed for a better look. He lay quite still and silent while the pain in his scar subsided and disappointment washed over him. He felt as though a wonderful treat had been snatched from him at the very last moment… he had got so close that time.

Glittering pink and silver winged piglets were now soaring past the windows of Gryffindor Tower. Harry lay and listened to the appreciative whoops of Gryffindors in the dormitories below them. His stomach gave a sickening jolt as he remembered that he had Occlumency the following evening.

Harry spent the whole of the next day dreading what Snape was going to say if he found out how much further into the Department of Mysteries Harry had penetrated during his last dream. With a surge of guilt he realized that he had not practiced Occlumency once since their last lesson: there had been too much going on since Dumbledore had left; he was sure he would not have been able to empty his mind even if he had tried. He doubted, however, whether Snape would accept that excuse.

He attempted a little last-minute practice during classes that day, but it was no good. Hermione kept asking him what was wrong whenever he fell silent trying to rid himself of all thought and emotion and, after all, the best moment to empty his brain was not while teachers were firing review questions at the class.

Resigned to the worst, he set off for Snape's office after dinner. Halfway across the Entrance Hall, however, Cho came hurrying up to him.

"Over here," said Harry, glad of a reason to postpone his meeting with Snape, and beckoning her across to the corner of the Entrance Hall where the giant hour-glasses stood. Gryffindor's was now almost empty. "Are you okay? Umbridge hasn't been asking you about the D.A., has she?"

"Oh, no," said Cho hurriedly. "No, it was only… well, I just wanted to say… Harry, I never dreamed Marietta would tell…"

"Yeah, well," said Harry moodily. He did feel Cho might have chosen her friends a bit more carefully; it was small consolation that the last he had heard, Marietta was still up in the hospital wing and Madam Pomfrey had not been able to make the slightest improvement to her pimples.

"She's a lovely person really," said Cho. "She just made a mistake -"

Harry looked at her incredulously.

"A lovely person who made a mistake? She sold us all out, including you!"

"Well… we all got away, didn't we?" said Cho pleadingly. "You know, her mum works for the Ministry, it's really difficult for her -"

“Ron’s dad works for the Ministry too!” Harry said furiously. “And in case you hadn’t noticed, he hasn’t got sneak written across his face -”

“That was a really horrible trick of Hermione Granger’s,” said Cho fiercely. “She should have told us she’d jinxed that list -”

“I think it was a brilliant idea,” said Harry coldly. Cho flushed and her eyes grew brighter.

“Oh yes, I forgot - of course, if it was darling Hermione’s idea -”

“Don’t start crying again,” said Harry warningly.

“I wasn’t going to!” she shouted.

“Yeah… well… good,” he said. “I’ve got enough to cope with at the moment.”

“Go and cope with it then!” Cho said furiously, turning on her heel and stalking off.

Fuming, Harry descended the stairs to Snape’s dungeon and, though he knew from experience how much easier it would be for Snape to penetrate his mind if he arrived angry and resentful, he succeeded in nothing but thinking of a few more things he should have said to Cho about Marietta before reaching the dungeon door.

“You’re late, Potter,” said Snape coldly, as Harry closed the door behind him.

Snape was standing with his back to Harry, removing, as usual, certain of his thoughts and placing them carefully in Dumbledores Pensieve. He dropped the last silvery strand into the stone basin and turned to face Harry.

“So,” he said. “Have you been practicing?”

“Yes,” Harry lied, looking carefully at one of the legs of Snape’s desk.

“Well, we’ll soon find out, won’t we?” said Snape smoothly. “Wand out, Potter.”

Harry moved into his usual position, facing Snape with the desk between them. His heart was pumping fast with anger at Cho and anxiety about how much Snape was about to extract from his mind.

“On the count of three then,” said Snape lazily. “One - two -”

Snape’s office door banged open and Draco Malfoy sped in.

“Professor Snape, sir - oh - sorry -”

Malfoy was looking at Snape and Harry in some surprise.

“It’s all right, Draco,” said Snape, lowering his w and. “Potter is here for a little remedial Potions.”

Harry had not seen Malfoy look so gleeful since Umbridge had turned up to inspect Hagrid.

“I didn’t know,” he said, leering at Harry, who knew his face was burning. He would have given a great deal to be able to shout the truth at Malfoy - or, even better, to hit him with a good curse.

“Well, Draco, what is it?” asked Snape.

“It’s Professor Umbridge, sir - she needs your help,” said Malfoy. “They’ve found Montague, sir, he’s turned up jammed inside a toilet on the fourth floor.”

“How did he get in there?” demanded Snape.

“I don’t know, sir, he’s a bit confused.”

“Very well, very well. Potter,” said Snape, “we shall resume this lesson tomorrow evening.”

He turned and swept from his office. Malfoy mouthed, “Remedial Potions?” at Harry behind Snape’s back before following him.

Seething, Harry replaced his wand inside his robes and made to leave the room. At least he had twenty-four more hours in which to practice; he knew he ought to feel grateful for the narrow escape, though it was hard that it came at the expense of Malfoy telling the whole school that he needed remedial Potions.

He was at the office door when he saw it: a patch of shivering light dancing on the doorframe. He stopped, and stood looking at it, reminded of something… then he remembered: it was a little like the lights he had seen in his dream last night, the lights in the second room he had walked through on his journey through the Department of Mysteries.

He turned around. The light was coming from the Pensieve sitting on Snape’s desk. The silverwhite contents were ebbing and swirling within. Snape’s thoughts… things he did not want Harry to see if he broke through Snape’s Defenses accidentally…

Harry gazed at the Pensieve, curiosity welling inside him… what was it that Snape was so keen to hide from Harry?

The silvery lights shivered on the wall… Harry took two steps towards the desk, thinking hard. Could it possibly be information about the Department of Mysteries that Snape was determined to keep from him?

Harry looked over his shoulder, his heart now pumping harder and faster than ever. How long would it take Snape to release Montague from the toilet? Would he come straight back to his office afterwards, or accompany Montague to the hospital wing? Surely the latter… Montague

was Captain of the Slytherin Quidditch team, Snape would want to make sure he was all right. Harry walked the remaining few feet to the Pensieve and stood over it, gazing into its depths. He hesitated, listening, then pulled out his wand again. The office and the corridor beyond were completely silent. He gave the contents of the Pensieve a small prod with the end of his wand.

The silvery stuff within began to swirl very fast. Harry leaned forwards over it and saw that it had become transparent. He was, once again, looking down into a room as though through a circular window in the ceiling… in fact, unless he was much mistaken, he was looking down into the Great Hall.

His breath was actually fogging the surface of Snape's thoughts… his brain seemed to be in limbo… it would be insane to do the thing he was so strongly tempted to do… he was trembling… Snape could be back at any moment… but Harry thought of Cho's anger, of Malfoy's jeering face, and a reckless daring seized him.

He took a great gulp of breath, and plunged his face into the surface of Snape's thoughts. At once, the floor of the office lurched, tipping Harry head-first into the Pensieve…

He was falling through cold blackness, spinning furiously as he went, and then -

He was standing in the middle of the Great Hall, but the four house tables were gone. Instead, there were more than a hundred smaller tables, all facing the same way, at each of which sat a student, head bent low, scribbling on a roll of parchment. The only sound was the scratching of quills and the occasional rustle as somebody adjusted their parchment. It was clearly exam time.

Sunshine was streaming through the high windows on to the bent heads, which shone chestnut and copper and gold in the bright light. Harry looked around carefully. Snape had to be here somewhere… this was his memory…

And there he was, at a table right behind Harry. Harry stared. Snape-the-teenager had a stringy, pallid look about him, like a plant kept in the dark. His hair was lank and greasy and was flopping on to the table, his hooked nose barely half an inch from the surface of the parchment as he scribbled. Harry moved around behind Snape and read the heading of the examination paper: *DEFENSE AGAINST THE DARK ARTS - ORDINARY WIZARDING LEVEL.*

So Snape had to be fifteen or sixteen, around Harry's own age. His hand was flying across the parchment; he had written at least a foot more than his closest neighbors, and yet his writing was minuscule and cramped.

"Five more minutes!"

The voice made Harry jump. Turning, he saw the top of Professor Flitwick's head moving between the desks a short distance away. Professor Flitwick was walking past a boy with untidy black hair… very untidy black hair…

Harry moved so quickly that, had he been solid, he would have knocked desks flying. Instead he

seemed to slide, dreamlike, across two aisles and up a third. The back of the black-haired boy's head drew nearer and… he was straightening up now, putting down his quill, pulling his roll of parchment towards him so as to reread what he had written…

Harry stopped in front of the desk and gazed down at his fifteen-year-old father.

Excitement exploded in the pit of his stomach: it was as though he was looking at himself but with deliberate mistakes. James's eyes were hazel, his nose was slightly longer than Harry's and there was no scar on his forehead, but they had the same thin face, same mouth, same eyebrows; James's hair stuck up at the back exactly as Harry's did, his hands could have been Harry's and Harry could tell that, when James stood up, they would be within an inch of each other in height.

James yawned hugely and rumpled up his hair, making it even messier than it had been. Then, with a glance towards Professor Flitwick, he turned in his seat and grinned at a boy sitting four seats behind him.

With another shock of excitement, Harry saw Sirius give James the thumbs-up. Sirius was lounging in his chair at his ease, tilting it back on two legs. He was very good-looking; his dark hair fell into his eyes with a sort of casual elegance neither James's nor Harry's could ever have achieved, and a girl sitting behind him was eyeing him hopefully, though he didn't seem to have noticed. And two seats along from this girl - Harry's stomach gave another pleasurable squirm - was Remus Lupin. He looked rather pale and peaky (was the full moon approaching?) and was absorbed in the exam: as he reread his answers, he scratched his chin with the end of his quill, frowning slightly.

So that meant Wormtail had to be around here somewhere, too… and sure enough, Harry spotted him within seconds: a small, mousy-haired boy with a pointed nose. Wormtail looked anxious; he was chewing his fingernails, staring down at his paper, scuffing the ground with his toes. Every now and then he glanced hopefully at his neighbors paper. Harry stared at Wormtail for a moment, then back at James, who was now doodling on a bit of scrap parchment. He had drawn a Snitch and was now tracing the letters *L.E.* What did they stand for?

"Quills down, please!" squeaked Professor Flitwick. "That means you too, Stebbins! Please remain seated while I collect your parchment! Accio!"

Over a hundred rolls of parchment zoomed into the air and into Professor Flitwick's outstretched arms, knocking him backwards off his feet. Several people laughed. A couple of students at the front desks got up, took hold of Professor Flitwick beneath the elbows and lifted him back on to his feet.

"Thank you… thank you," panted Professor Flitwick. "Very well, everybody, you're free to go!"

Harry looked down at his father, who had hastily crossed out the *L.E.* he had been embellishing, jumped to his feet, stuffed his quill and the exam paper into his bag, which he slung over his back, and stood waiting for Sirius to join him.

Harry looked around and glimpsed Snape a short way away, moving between the tables towards the doors to the Entrance Hall, still absorbed in his own exam paper. Round-shouldered yet angular, he walked in a twitchy manner that recalled a spider, and his oily hair was jumping about his face.

A gang of chattering girls separated Snape from James, Sirius and Lupin, and by planting himself in their midst, Harry managed to keep Snape in sight while straining his ears to catch the voices of James and his friends.

“Did you like question ten, Moony?” asked Sirius as they emerged into the Entrance Hall.

“Loved it,” said Lupin briskly. “Give five signs that identify the werewolf. Excellent question.”

“D’you think you managed to get all the signs?” said James in tones of mock concern.

“Think I did,” said Lupin seriously, as they joined the crowd thronging around the front doors eager to get out into the sunlit grounds. “One: he’s sitting on my chair. Two: he’s wearing my clothes. Three: his name’s Remus Lupin.”

Wormtail was the only one who didn’t laugh.

“I got the snout shape, the pupils of the eyes and the tufted tail,’ he said anxiously, “but I couldn’t think what else -”

“How thick are you, Wormtail?” said James impatiently. “You run round with a werewolf once a month -”

“Keep your voice down,” implored Lupin.

Harry looked anxiously behind him again. Snape remained close by, still buried in his exam questions - but this was Snape’s memory and Harry was sure that if Snape chose to wander off in a different direction once outside in the grounds, he, Harry, would not be able to follow James any further. To his intense relief, however, when James and his three friends strode off down the lawn towards the lake, Snape followed, still poring over the exam paper and apparently with no fixed idea of where he was going. By keeping a little ahead of him, Harry managed to maintain a close watch on James and the others.

“Well, I thought that paper was a piece of cake,” he heard Sirius say. “I’ll be surprised if I don’t get ‘Outstanding’ on it at least.”

“Me too,” said James. He put his hand in his pocket and took out a struggling Golden Snitch.

“Where’d you get that?”

“Nicked it,” said James casually. He started playing with the Snitch, allowing it to fly as much as a foot away before seizing it again; his reflexes were excellent. Wormtail watched him in awe.

They stopped in the shade of the very same beech tree on the edge of the lake where Harry, Ron and Hermione had once spent a Sunday finishing their homework, and threw themselves down on the grass. Harry looked over his shoulder yet again and saw, to his delight, that Snape had settled himself on the grass in the dense shadow of a clump of bushes. He was as deeply immersed in the OWL paper as ever, which left Harry free to sit down on the grass between the beech and the bushes and watch the foursome under the tree. The sunlight was dazzling on the smooth surface of the lake, on the bank of which the group of laughing girls who had just left the Great Hall were sitting, with their shoes and socks off, cooling their feet in the water.

Lupin had pulled out a book and was reading. Sirius stared around at the students milling over the grass, looking rather haughty and bored, but very handsomely so. James was still playing with the Snitch, letting it zoom further and further away, almost escaping but always grabbed at the last second. Wormtail was watching him with his mouth open. Every time James made a particularly difficult catch, Wormtail gasped and applauded. After five minutes of this, Harry wondered why James didn't tell Wormtail to get a grip on himself, but James seemed to be enjoying the attention. Harry noticed that his father had a habit of rumpling up his hair as though to keep it from getting too tidy, and he also kept looking over at the girls by the water's edge.

"Put that away, will you," said Sirius finally, as James made a fine catch and Wormtail let out a cheer, "before Wormtail wets himself with excitement."

Wormtail turned slightly pink, but James grinned.

"If it bothers you," he said, stuffing the Snitch back in his pocket. Harry had the distinct impression that Sirius was the only one for whom James would have stopped showing off.

"I'm bored," said Sirius. "Wish it was full moon."

"You might," said Lupin darkly from behind his book. "We've still got Transfiguration, if you're bored you could test me. Here…" and he held out his book.

But Sirius snorted. "I don't need to look at that rubbish, I know it all."

"This'll liven you up, Padfoot," said James quietly. "Look who it is…"

Sirius's head turned. He became very still, like a dog that has scented a rabbit.

"Excellent," he said softly. "Snivellus."

Harry turned to see what Sirius was looking at.

Snape was on his feet again, and was stowing the OWL paper in his bag. As he left the shadows of the bushes and set off across the grass, Sirius and James stood up.

Lupin and Wormtail remained sitting: Lupin was still staring down at his book, though his eyes were not moving and a faint frown line had appeared between his eyebrows; Wormtail was

looking from Sirius and James to Snape with a look of avid anticipation on his face.

“All right, Snivellus?” said James loudly.

Snape reacted so fast it was as though he had been expecting an attack: dropping his bag, he plunged his hand inside his robes and his wand was halfway into the air when James shouted, “Expelliarmus!”

Snape’s wand flew twelve feet into the air and fell with a little thud in the grass behind him. Sirius let out a bark of laughter.

“Impedimenta!” he said, pointing his wand at Snape, who was knocked off his feet halfway through a dive towards his own fallen wand.

Students all around had turned to watch. Some of them had got to their feet and were edging nearer. Some looked apprehensive, others entertained.

Snape lay panting on the ground. James and Sirius advanced on him, wands raised, James glancing over his shoulder at the girls at the water’s edge as he went. Wormtail was on his feet now, watching hungrily, edging around Lupin to get a clearer view.

“How’d the exam go, Snivelly?” said James.

“I was watching him, his nose was touching the parchment,” said Sirius viciously. “There’ll be great grease marks all over it, they won’t be able to read a word.”

Several people watching laughed; Snape was clearly unpopular. Wormtail sniggered shrilly. Snape was trying to get up, but the jinx was still operating on him; he was struggling, as though bound by invisible ropes.

“You - wait,” he panted, staring up at James with an expression of purest loathing, “you - wait!”

“Wait for what?” said Sirius coolly. “What’re you going to do, Snivelly, wipe your nose on us?”

Snape let out a stream of mixed swear words and hexes, but with his wand ten feet away nothing happened.

“Wash out your mouth,” said James coldly. “Scourgify!”

Pink soap bubbles streamed from Snape’s mouth at once; the froth was covering his lips, making him gag, choking him -

“Leave him ALONE!”

James and Sirius looked round. James’s free hand immediately jumped to his hair.

It was one of the girls from the lake edge. She had thick, dark red hair that fell to her shoulders, and startlingly green almond-shaped eyes - Harry’s eyes.

Harry’s mother.

“All right, Evans?” said James, and the tone of his voice was suddenly pleasant, deeper, more mature.

“Leave him alone,” Lily repeated. She was looking a t James with every sign of great dislike. “What’s he done to you?”

“Well,” said James, appearing to deliberate the point, “it’s more the fact that he exists, if you know what I mean…”

Many of the surrounding students laughed, Sirius and Wormtail included, but Lupin, still apparently intent on his book, didn’t, and nor did Lily.

“You think you’re funny,” she said coldly. “But you’re just an arrogant, bullying toerag, Potter. Leave him alone.”

“I will if you go out with me, Evans,” said James quickly. “Go on… go out with me and I’ll never lay a wand on old Snivelly again.”

Behind him, the Impediment Jinx was wearing off. Snape was beginning to inch towards his fallen wand, spitting out soapsuds as he crawled.

“I wouldn’t go out with you if it was a choice between you and the giant squid,” said Lily.

“Bad luck, Prongs,” said Sirius briskly, and turned back to Snape. “Oy!”

But too late; Snape had directed his wand straight at James; there was a flash of light and a gash appeared on the side of James’s face, spattering his robes with blood. James whirled about: a second flash of light later, Snape was hanging upside-down in the air, his robes falling over his head to reveal skinny, pallid legs and a pair of graying underpants.

Many people in the small crowd cheered; Sirius, James and Wormtail roared with laughter. Lily, whose furious expression had twitched for an instant as though she was going to smile, said, “Let him down!”

“Certainly,” said James and he jerked his wand upwards; Snape fell into a crumpled heap on the ground. Disentangling himself from his robes he got quickly to his feet, wand up, but Sirius said, "Locomotor mortis!" and Snape keeled over again at once, rigid as a board.

“LEAVE HIM ALONE!” Lily shouted. She had her own wand out now. James and Sirius eyed it warily.

“Ah, Evans, don’t make me hex you,” said James earnestly.

“Take the curse off him, then!”

James sighed deeply, then turned to Snape and muttered the counter-curse.

“There you go,” he said, as Snape struggled to his feet. “You’re lucky Evans was here, Snivellus —”

“I don’t need help from filthy little Mudbloods like her!”

Lily blinked.

“Fine,” she said coolly. “I won’t bother in future. And I’d wash your pants if I were you, Snivellus.”

“Apologize to Evans!” James roared at Snape, his wand pointed threateningly at him.

“I don’t want you to make him apologize,” Lily shouted, rounding on James. “You’re as bad as he is.”

“What?” yelped James. “I’d NEVER call you a - you-know-what!”

“Messing up your hair because you think it looks cool to look like you’ve just got off your broomstick, showing off with that stupid Snitch, walking down corridors and hexing anyone who annoys you just because you can - I’m surprised your broomstick can get off the ground with that fat head on it. You make me SICK.”

She turned on her heel and hurried away.

“Evans!” James shouted after her. “Hey, EVANS!”

But she didn’t look back.

“What is it with her?” said James, trying and failing to look as though this was a throwaway question of no real importance to him.

“Reading between the lines, I’d say she thinks you’re a bit conceited, mate,” said Sirius.

“Right,” said James, who looked furious now, “right -”

There was another flash of light, and Snape was once again hanging upside-down in the air.

“Who wants to see me take off Snivelly’s pants?”

But whether James really did take off Snapes pants, Harry never found out. A hand had closed

tight over his upper arm, closed with a pincer-like grip. Wincing, Harry looked round to see who had hold of him, and saw, with a thrill of horror, a fully grown, adult-sized Snape standing right beside him, white with rage.

“Having fun?”

Harry felt himself rising into the air; the summer’s day evaporated around him; he was floating upwards through icy blackness, Snape’s hand still tight upon his upper arm. Then, with a swooping feeling as though he had turned head-over-heels in midair, his feet hit the stone floor of Snape’s dungeon and he was standing again beside the Pensieve on Snape’s desk in the shadowy, present-day Potion masters study.

“So,” said Snape, gripping Harry’s arm so tightly Harry’s hand was starting to feel numb. “So… been enjoying yourself, Potter?”

“N-no,” said Harry, trying to free his arm.

It was scary: Snape’s lips were shaking, his face was white, his teeth were bared.

“Amusing man, your father, wasn’t he?” said Snape, shaking Harry so hard his glasses slipped down his nose.

“I - didn’t -”

Snape threw Harry from him with all his might. Harry fell hard on to the dungeon floor.

“You will not repeat what you saw to anybody!” Snape bellowed.

“No,” said Harry, getting to his feet as far from Snape as he could. “No, of course I w—”

“Get out, get out, I don’t want to see you in this office ever again!”

And as Harry hurtled towards the door, a jar of dead cockroaches exploded over his head. He wrenched the door open and flew along the corridor, stopping only when he had put three floors between himself and Snape. There he leaned against the wall, panting, and rubbing his bruised arm.

He had no desire at all to return to Gryffindor Tower so early, nor to tell Ron and Hermione what he had just seen. What was making Harry feel so horrified and unhappy was not being shouted at or having jars thrown at him; it was that he knew how it felt to be humiliated in the middle of a circle of onlookers, knew exactly how Snape had felt as his father had taunted him, and that judging from what he had just seen, his father had been every bit as arrogant as Snape had always told him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Career Advice

“But why haven’t you got Occlumency lessons any more?” said Hermione, frowning.

“I’ve told you,” Harry muttered. “Snape reckons I can carry on by myself now I’ve got the basics.”

“So you’ve stopped having funny dreams?” said Hermione skeptically.

“Pretty much,” said Harry, not looking at her.

“Well, I don’t think Snape should stop until you’re absolutely sure you can control them!” said Hermione indignantly. “Harry, I think you should go back to him and ask -”

“No,” said Harry forcefully. “Just drop it, Hermione, okay?”

It was the first day of the Easter holidays and Hermione, as was her custom, had spent a large part of the day drawing up study schedule for the three of them. Harry and Ron had let her do it; it was easier than arguing with her and, in any case, they might come in useful.

Ron had been startled to discover there were only six weeks left until their exams.

“How can that come as a shock?” Hermione demanded, as she tapped each little square on Ron’s schedule with her wand so that it flashed a different color according to its subject.

“I dunno,” said Ron, “there’s been a lot going on. “

“Well, there you are,” she said, handing him his timetable, “if you follow that you should do fine.”

Ron looked down it gloomily, but then brightened.

“You’ve given me an evening off every week!”

“That’s for Quidditch practice,” said Hermione.

The smile faded from Ron’s face.

“What’s the point?” he said dully. “We’ve got about as much chance of winning the Quidditch Cup this year as Dad’s got of becoming Minister for Magic.”

Hermione said nothing; she was looking at Harry, who was staring blankly at the opposite wall of the common room while Crookshanks pawed at his hand, trying to get his ears scratched.

“What’s wrong, Harry?”

“What?” he said quickly. “Nothing.”

He seized his copy of Defensive Magical Theory and pretended to be looking something up in the index. Crookshanks gave him up as a bad job and slunk away under Hermione’s chair.

“I saw Cho earlier,” said Hermione tentatively. “She looked really miserable, too… have you two had a row again?”

“Wha — oh, yeah, we have,” said Harry, seizing gratefully on the excuse.

“What about?”

“That sneak friend of hers, Marietta,” said Harry.

“Yeah, well, I don’t blame you!” said Ron angrily, setting down his revision timetable. “If it hadn’t been for her…”

Ron went into a rant about Marietta Edgecombe, which Harry found helpful; all he had to do was look angry, nod and say “Yeah” and “That’s right” whenever Ron drew breath, leaving his mind free to dwell, ever more miserably, on what he had seen in the Pensieve.

He felt as though the memory of it was eating him from inside. He had been so sure his parents were wonderful people that he had never had the slightest difficulty in disbelieving the aspersions Snape cast on his father’s character. Hadn’t people like Hagrid and Sirius told Harry how wonderful his father had been? (Yeah, well, look what Sirius was like himself, said a nagging voice inside Harry’s head… he was as bad, wasn’t he?) Yes, he had once overheard Professor McGonagall saying that his father and Sirius had been troublemakers at school, but she had described them as forerunners of the Weasley twins, and Harry could not imagine Fred and George dangling someone upside-down for the fun of it… not unless they really loathed them… perhaps Malfoy, or somebody who really deserved it…

Harry tried to make a case for Snape having deserved what he had suffered at James’s hands: but hadn’t Lily asked, “What’s he done to you?” And hadn’t James replied, “It’s more the fact that he exists, if you know what I mean.” Hadn’t James started it all simply because Sirius had said he was bored? Harry remembered Lupin saying back in Grimmauld Place that Dumbledore had made him prefect in the hope that he would be able to exercise some control over James and Sirius… but in the Pensieve, he had sat there and let it all happen…

Harry kept reminding himself that Lily had intervened; his mother had been decent. Yet, the memory of the look on her face as she had shouted at James disturbed him quite as much as anything else; she had clearly loathed James, and Harry simply could not understand how they could have ended up married. Once or twice he even wondered whether James had forced her into it…

For nearly five years the thought of his father had been a source of comfort, of inspiration. Whenever someone had told him he was like James, he had glowed with pride inside. And now… now he felt cold and miserable at the thought of him.

The weather grew breezier, brighter and warmer as the Easter holidays passed, but Harry, along with the rest of the fifth- and seventh-years, was trapped inside, traipsing back and forth to the library. Harry pretended his bad mood had no other cause but the approaching exams, and as his fellow Gryffindors were sick of studying themselves, his excuse went unchallenged.

"Harry, I'm talking to you, can you hear me?"

"Huh?"

He looked round. Ginny Weasley, looking very windswept, had joined him at the library table where he had been sitting alone. It was late on Sunday evening: Hermione had gone back to Gryffindor Tower to review Ancient Runes, and Ron had Quidditch practice.

"Oh, hi," said Harry, pulling his books towards him. "How come you're not at practice?"

"It's over," said Ginny. "Ron had to take Jack Sloper up to the hospital wing."

"Why?"

"Well, we're not sure, but we think he knocked himself out with his own bat." She sighed heavily. "Anyway… a package just arrived, it's only just got through Umbridge's new screening process."

She hoisted a box wrapped in brown paper on to the table; it had clearly been unwrapped and carelessly re-wrapped. There was a scribbled note across it in red ink, reading: Inspected and Passed by the Hogwarts High Inquisitor.

"It's Easter eggs from Mum," said Ginny. "There's one for you… there you go."

She handed him a handsome chocolate egg decorated with small, iced Snitches and, according to the packaging, containing a bag of Fizzing Whizzbees. Harry looked at it for a moment, then, to his horror, felt a lump rise in his throat.

"Are you okay, Harry?" Ginny asked quietly.

"Yeah, I'm fine," said Harry gruffly. The lump in his throat was painful. He did not understand why an Easter egg should have made him feel like this.

"You seem really down lately," Ginny persisted. "You know, I'm sure if you just talked to Cho…"

"It's not Cho I want to talk to," said Harry brusquely.

“Who is it, then?” asked Ginny, watching him closely.

“I…”

He glanced around to make quite sure nobody was listening. Madam Pince was several shelves away, stamping out a pile of books for a frantic-looking Hannah Abbott.

“I wish I could talk to Sirius,” he muttered. “But I know I can’t.”

Ginny continued to watch him thoughtfully. More to give himself something to do than because he really wanted any, Harry unwrapped his Easter egg, broke off a large bit and put it into his mouth.

“Well,” said Ginny slowly, helping herself to a bit of egg, too, “if you really want to talk to Sirius, I expect we could think of a way to do it.”

“Come on,” said Harry dully. “With Umbridge policing the fires and reading all our mail?”

“The thing about growing up with Fred and George,” said Ginny thoughtfully, “is that you sort of start thinking anything’s possible if you’ve got enough nerve.”

Harry looked at her. Perhaps it was the effect of the chocolate - Lupin had always advised eating some after encounters with Dementors - or simply because he had finally spoken aloud the wish that had been burning inside him for a week, but he felt a bit more hopeful.

“WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU ARE DOING?”

“Oh damn,” whispered Ginny, jumping to her feet. “I forgot -” Madam Pince was swooping down on them, her shriveled face contorted with rage.

“Chocolate in the library!” she screamed. “Out - out - OUT!” And whipping out her wand, she caused Harry’s books, bag and ink bottle to chase him and Ginny from the library, whacking them repeatedly over the head as they ran.

As though to underline the importance of their upcoming examinations, a batch of pamphlets, leaflets and notices concerning various wizarding careers appeared on the tables in Gryffindor Tower shortly before the end of the holidays, along with yet another notice on the board, which read:

All fifth-years are required to attend a short meeting with their Head of House during the first week of the summer term to discuss their future careers. Times of individual appointments are listed below.

Harry looked down the list and found that he was expected in Professor McGonagall’s office at

half past two on Monday, which would mean missing most of Divination. He and the other fifth years spent a considerable part of the final weekend of the Easter break reading all the careers information that had been left there for their perusal.

“Well, I don’t fancy Healing,” said Ron on the last evening of the holidays. He was immersed in a leaflet that carried the crossed bone-and-wand emblem of St. Mungo’s on its front. “It says here you need at least E at NEWT level in Potions, Herbology, Transfiguration, Charms and Defense Against the Dark Arts. I mean… blimey… don’t want much, do they?”

“Well, it’s a very responsible job, isn’t it?” said Hermione absently.

She was poring over a bright pink and orange leaflet that was headed, *SO YOU THINK YOU’D LIKE TO WORK IN MUGGLE RELATIONS?*

“You don’t seem to need many qualifications to liaise with Muggles; all they want is an OWL in Muggle Studies: ‘Much more important is your enthusiasm, patience and a good sense of fun!’”

“You’d need more than a good sense of fun to liaise with my uncle,” said Harry darkly. “Good sense of when to duck, more like.” He was halfway through a pamphlet on wizard banking.

“Listen to this: *Are you seeking a challenging career involving travel, adventure and substantial, danger-related treasure bonuses? Then consider a position with Gringotts Wizarding Bank, who are currently recruiting Curse-Breakers for thrilling opportunities abroad…* They want Arithmancy, though; you could do it, Hermione!”

“I don’t much fancy banking,” said Hermione vaguely, now immersed in: *HAVE YOU GOT WHAT IT TAKES TO TRAIN SECURITY TROLLS?*

“Hey,” said a voice in Harry’s ear. He looked round; Fred and George had come to join them. “Ginnys had a word with us about you,” said Fred, stretching out his legs on the table in front of them and causing several booklets on careers with the Ministry of Magic to slide off on to the floor. “She says you need to talk to Sirius?”

“What?” said Hermione sharply, freezing with her hand halfway towards picking up *MAKE A BANG AT THE DEPARTMENT OF MAGICAL ACCIDENTS AND CATASTROPHES.*

“Yeah…” said Harry, trying to sound casual, “yeah, I thought I’d like -”

“Don’t be so ridiculous,” said Hermione, straightening up and looking at him as though she could not believe her eyes. “With Umbridge groping around in the fires and frisking all the owls?”

“Well, we think we can find a way around that,” said George, stretching and smiling. “It’s a simple matter of causing a diversion. Now, you might have noticed that we have been rather quiet on the mayhem front during the Easter holidays?”

“What was the point, we asked ourselves, of disrupting leisure time?” continued Fred. “No point at all, we answered ourselves. And of course, we’d have messed up people’s studying, too, which would be the very last thing we’d want to do.”

He gave Hermione a sanctimonious little nod. She looked rather taken aback by this thoughtfulness.

“But its business as usual from tomorrow,” Fred continued briskly. “And if we’re going to be causing a bit of uproar, why not do it so that Harry can have his chat with Sirius?”

“Yes, but still,” said Hermione, with an air of explaining something very simple to somebody very obtuse, “even if you do cause a diversion, how is Harry supposed to talk to him?”

“Umbridge’s office,” said Harry quietly.

He had been thinking about it for a fortnight and could come up with no alternative. Umbridge herself had told him that the only fire that was not being watched was her own.

“Are - you - insane?” said Hermione in a hushed voice.

Ron had lowered his leaflet on jobs in the Cultivated Fungus Trade and was watching the conversation warily.

“I don’t think so,” said Harry, shrugging.

“And how are you going to get in there in the first place?”

Harry was ready for this question.

“Sirius’s knife,” he said.

“Excuse me?”

“Christmas before last Sirius gave me a knife that’ll open any lock,” said Harry. “So even if she’s bewitched the door so Alohomora won’t work, which I bet she has -”

“What do you think about this?” Hermione demanded of Ron, and Harry was reminded irresistibly of Mrs. Weasley appealing to her husband during Harry’s first dinner in Grimmauld Place.

“I dunno,” said Ron, looking alarmed at being asked to give an opinion. “If Harry wants to do it, it’s up to him, isn’t it?”

“Spoken like a true friend and Weasley,” said Fred, clapping Ron hard on the back. “Right, then. We’re thinking of doing it tomorrow, just after lessons, because it should cause maximum impact if everybody’s in the corridors - Harry, we’ll set it off in the east wing somewhere, draw her right

away from her own office — I reckon we should be able to guarantee you, what, twenty minutes?" he said, looking at George.

"Easy," said George.

"What sort of diversion is it?" asked Ron.

"You'll see, little bro'," said Fred, as he and George got up again. "At least, you will if you trot along to Gregory the Smarmy's corridor round about five o'clock tomorrow."

Harry awoke very early the next day, feeling almost as anxious as he had done on the morning of his disciplinary hearing at the Ministry of Magic. It was not only the prospect of breaking into Umbridge's office and using her fire to speak to Sirius that was making him feel nervous, though that was certainly bad enough; today also happened to be the first time Harry would be in close proximity to Snape since Snape had thrown him out of his office.

After lying in bed for a while thinking about the day ahead, Harry got up very quietly and moved across to the window beside Neville's bed, and stared out on a truly glorious morning. The sky was a clear, misty, opalescent blue. Directly ahead of him, Harry could see the towering beech tree below which his father had once tormented Snape. He was not sure what Sirius could possibly say to him that would make up for what he had seen in the Pensieve, but he was desperate to hear Sirius's own account of what had happened, to know of any mitigating factors there might have been, any excuse at all for his father's behavior…

Something caught Harry's attention: movement on the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Harry squinted into the sun and saw Hagrid emerging from between the trees. He seemed to be limping. As Harry watched, Hagrid staggered to the door of his cabin and disappeared inside it. Harry watched the cabin for several minutes. Hagrid did not emerge again, but smoke furled from the chimney, so Hagrid could not be so badly injured that he was unequal to stoking the fire.
Harry turned away from the window, headed back to his trunk and started to dress.

With the prospect of forcing entry into Umbridge's office ahead, Harry had never expected the day to be a restful one, but he had not reckoned on Hermione's almost continual attempts to dissuade him from what he was planning to do at five o'clock. For the first time ever, she was at least as inattentive to Professor Binns in History of Magic as Harry and Ron were, keeping up a stream of whispered admonitions that Harry tried very hard to ignore.

"… and if she does catch you there, apart from being expelled, she'll be able to guess you've been talking to Snuffles and this time I expect she'll force you to drink Veritaserum and answer her questions…"

"Hermione," said Ron in a low and indignant voice, "are you going to stop telling Harry off and listen to Binns, or am I going to have to take my own notes?"

"You take notes for a change, it won't kill you!"

By the time they reached the dungeons, neither Harry nor Ron was speaking to Hermione. Undeterred, she took advantage of their silence to maintain an uninterrupted flow of dire warnings, all uttered under her breath in a vehement hiss that caused Seamus to waste five whole minutes checking his cauldron for leaks.

Snape, meanwhile, seemed to have decided to act as though Harry were invisible. Harry was, of course, well-used to this tactic, as it was one of Uncle Vernon’s favorites, and on the whole was grateful he had to suffer nothing worse. In fact, compared to what he usually had to endure from Snape in the way of taunts and snide remarks, he found the new approach something of an improvement, and was pleased to find that when left well alone, he was able to concoct an Invigoration Draught quite easily. At the end of the lesson he scooped some of the potion into a flask, corked it and took it up to Snape’s desk for marking, feeling that he might at last have scraped an E.

He had just turned away when he heard a smashing noise. Malfoy gave a gleeful yell of laughter. Harry whipped around. His potion sample lay in pieces on the floor and Snape was surveying him with a look of gloating pleasure.

“Whoops,” he said softly. “Another zero, then, Potter.”

Harry was too incensed to speak. He strode back to his cauldron, intending to fill another flask and force Snape to mark it, but saw to his horror that the rest of the contents had vanished.

“I’m sorry!” said Hermione, with her hands over her mouth. “I’m really sorry, Harry. I thought you’d finished, so I cleared up!”

Harry could not bring himself to answer. When the bell rang, he hurried out of the dungeon without a backwards glance, and made sure that he found himself a seat between Neville and Seamus for lunch so that Hermione could not start nagging him again about using Umbridge’s office.

He was in such a bad mood by the time he got to Divination that he had quite forgotten his careers appointment with Professor McGonagall, remembering it only when Ron asked him why he wasn’t in her office. He hurtled back upstairs and arrived out of breath, only a few minutes late.

“Sorry, Professor,” he panted, as he closed the door. “I forgot.”

“No matter, Potter,” she said briskly, but as she spoke, somebody else sniffed from the corner. Harry looked round.

Professor Umbridge was sitting there, a clipboard on her knee, a fussy little pie-frill around her neck and a small, horribly smug smile on her face.

“Sit down, Potter,” said Professor McGonagall tersely. Her hands shook slightly as she shuffled the many pamphlets littering her desk.

Harry sat down with his back to Umbridge and did his best to pretend he could not hear the scratching of her quill on her clipboard.

“Well, Potter, this meeting is to talk over any career ideas you might have, and to help you decide which subjects you should continue into the sixth and seventh years,” said Professor McGonagall. “Have you had any thoughts about what you would like to do after you leave Hogwarts?”

“Er -” said Harry.

He was finding the scratching noise from behind him very distracting.

“Yes?” Professor McGonagall prompted Harry.

“Well, I thought of, maybe, being an Auror,” Harry mumbled.

“You’d need top grades for that,” said Professor McGonagall, extracting a small, dark leaflet from under the mass on her desk and opening it. “They ask for a minimum of five NEWTs, and nothing under ‘Exceeds Expectations’ grade, I see. Then you would be required to undergo a stringent series of character and aptitude tests at the Auror office. It’s a difficult career path, Potter, they only take the best. In fact, I don’t think anybody has been taken on in the last three years.”

At this moment, Professor Umbridge gave a very tiny cough, as though she was trying to see how quietly she could do it. Professor McGonagall ignored her.

“You’ll want to know which subjects you ought to take, I suppose?” she went on, talking a little louder than before.

“Yes,” said Harry. “Defense Against the Dark Arts, I suppose?”

“Naturally,” said Professor McGonagall crisply. “I would also advise -”

Professor Umbridge gave another cough, a little more audible this time. Professor McGonagall closed her eyes for a moment, opened them again, and continued as though nothing had happened.

“I would also advise Transfiguration, because Aurors frequently need to Transfigure or Untransfigure in their work. And I ought to tell you now, Potter, that I do not accept students into my NEWT classes unless they have achieved ‘Exceeds Expectations’ or higher at Ordinary Wizarding Level. I’d say you’re averaging ‘Acceptable’ at the moment, so you’ll need to put in some good hard work before the exams to stand a chance of continuing. Then you ought to do Charms, always useful, and Potions. Yes, Potter, Potions,” she added, with the merest flicker of a smile. “Poisons and antidotes are essential study for Aurors. And I must tell you that Professor Snape absolutely refuses to take students who get anything other than ‘Outstanding’ in their OWLs, so -”

Professor Umbridge gave her most pronounced cough yet.

“May I offer you a cough drop, Dolores?” Professor McGonagall asked curtly, without looking at Professor Umbridge.

“Oh, no, thank you very much,” said Umbridge, with that simpering laugh Harry hated so much. “I just wondered whether I could make the teensiest interruption, Minerva?”

“I daresay you’ll find you can,” said Professor McGonagall through tightly gritted teeth.

“I was just wondering whether Mr. Potter has quite the temperament for an Auror?” said Professor Umbridge sweetly.

“Were you?” said Professor McGonagall haughtily. “Well, Potter,” she continued, as though there had been no interruption, “if you are serious in this ambition, I would advise you to concentrate hard on bringing your Transfiguration and Potions up to scratch. I see Professor Flitwick has graded you between ‘Acceptable’ and ‘Exceeds Expectations’ for the last two years, so your Charmwork seems satisfactory. As for Defense Against the Dark Arts, your marks have been generally high, Professor Lupin in particular thought you - are you quite sure you wouldn’t like a cough drop, Dolores!”

“Oh, no need, thank you, Minerva” simpered Professor Umbridge, who had just coughed her loudest yet. “I was just concerned that you might not have Harrys most recent Defense Against the Dark Arts marks in front of you. I’m quite sure I slipped in a note.”

“What, this thing?” said Professor McGonagall in a tone of revulsion, as she pulled a sheet of pink parchment from between the leaves of Harry’s folder. She glanced down it, her eyebrows slightly raised, then placed it back into the folder without comment.

“Yes, as I was saying, Potter, Professor Lupin thought you showed a pronounced aptitude for the subject, and obviously for an Auror -”

“Did you not understand my note, Minerva?” asked Professor Umbridge in honeyed tones, quite forgetting to cough.

“Of course I understood it,” said Professor McGonagall, her teeth clenched so tightly the words came out a little muffled.

“Well, then, I am confused… I’m afraid I don’t quite understand how you can give Mr. Potter false hope that -”

“False hope?” repeated Professor McGonagall, still refusing to look round at Professor Umbridge. “He has achieved high marks in all his Defense Against the Dark Arts tests -”

“I’m terribly sorry to have to contradict you, Minerva, but as you will see from my note, Harry has been achieving very poor results in his classes with me -”

“I should have made my meaning plainer,” said Professor McGonagall, turning at last to look Umbridge directly in the eyes. “He has achieved high marks in all Defense Against the Dark Arts tests set by a competent teacher.”

Professor Umbridge’s smile vanished as suddenly as a light bulb blowing. She sat back in her chair, turned a sheet on her clipboard and began scribbling very fast indeed, her bulging eyes rolling from side to side. Professor McGonagall turned back to Harry, her thin nostrils flared, her eyes burning.

“Any questions, Potter?”

“Yes,” said Harry. “What sort of character and aptitude tests do the Ministry do on you, if you get enough NEWTs?”

“Well, you’ll need to demonstrate the ability to react well to pressure and so forth,” said Professor McGonagall, “perseverance and dedication, because Auror training takes a further three years, not to mention very high skills in practical Defense. It will mean a lot more study even after you’ve left school, so unless you’re prepared to -”

“I think you’ll also find,” said Umbridge, her voice very cold now, “that the Ministry looks into the records of those applying to be Aurors. Their criminal records.”

“- unless you’re prepared to take even more exams after Hogwarts, you should really look at another -”

“Which means that this boy has as much chance of becoming an Auror as Dumbledore has of ever returning to this school.”

“A very good chance, then,” said Professor McGonagall.

“Potter has a criminal record,” said Umbridge loudly.

“Potter has been cleared of all charges,” said McGonagall, even more loudly.

Professor Umbridge stood up. She was so short that this did not make a great deal of difference, but her fussy, simpering demeanour had given place to a hard fury that made her broad, flabby face look oddly sinister.

“Potter has no chance whatsoever of becoming an Auror!”

Professor McGonagall got to her feet, too, and in her case this was a much more impressive move; she towered over Professor Umbridge.

“Potter,” she said in ringing tones, “I will assist you to become an Auror if it is the last thing I do! If I have to coach you nightly, I will make sure you achieve the required results!”

“The Minister for Magic will never employ Harry Potter!” said Umbridge, her voice rising furiously.

“There may well be a new Minister for Magic by the time Potter is ready to join!” shouted Professor McGonagall.

“Aha!” shrieked Professor Umbridge, pointing a stubby finger at McGonagall. “Yes! Yes, yes, yes! Of course! That’s what you want, isn’t it, Minerva McGonagall? You want Cornelius Fudge replaced by Albus Dumbledore! You think you’ll be where I am, don’t you: Senior Undersecretary to the Minister and Headmistress to boot!”

“You are raving,” said Professor McGonagall, superbly disdainful. “Potter, that concludes our careers consultation.”

Harry swung his bag over his shoulder and hurried out of the room, not daring to look at Professor Umbridge. He could hear her and Professor McGonagall continuing to shout at each other all the way back along the corridor.

Professor Umbridge was still breathing as though she had just run a race when she strode into their Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson that afternoon.

“I hope you’ve thought better of what you were planning to do, Harry,” Hermione whispered, the moment they had opened their books to ‘Chapter Thirty-four, Non-Retaliation and Negotiation’. “Umbridge looks like she’s in a really bad mood already…”

Every now and then Umbridge shot glowering looks at Harry, who kept his head down, staring at Defensive Magical Theory, his eyes unfocused, thinking…

He could just imagine Professor McGonagall’s reaction if he was caught trespassing in Professor Umbridge’s office mere hours after she had vouched for him… there was nothing to stop him simply going back to Gryffindor Tower and hoping that some time during the next summer holidays he would have a chance to ask Sirius about the scene he had witnessed in the Pensieve… nothing, except that the thought of taking this sensible course of action made him feel as though a lead weight had dropped into his stomach… and then there was the matter of Fred and George, whose diversion was already planned, not to mention the knife Sirius had given him, which was currently residing in his schoolbag along with his father’s old Invisibility Cloak.

But the fact remained that if he was caught…

“Dumbledore sacrificed himself to keep you in school, Harry!” whispered Hermione, raising her book to hide her face from Umbridge. “And if you get thrown out today it will all have been for nothing!”

He could abandon the plan and simply learn to live with the memory of what his father had done on a summer’s day more than twenty years ago…

And then he remembered Sirius in the fire upstairs in the Gryffindor common room…

You're less like your father than I thought… the risk would've been what made it fun for James…

But did he want to be like his father any more?

"Harry, don't do it, please don't do it!" Hermione said in anguished tones as the bell rang at the end of the class.

He did not answer; he did not know what to do.

Ron seemed determined to give neither his opinion nor his advice; he would not look at Harry, though when Hermione opened her mouth to try dissuading Harry some more, he said in a low voice, "Give it a rest, okay? He can make up his own mind."

Harrys heart beat very fast as he left the classroom. He was halfway along the corridor outside when he heard the unmistakable sounds of a diversion going off in the distance. There were screams and yells reverberating from somewhere above them; people exiting the classrooms all around Harry were stopping in their tracks and looking up at the ceiling fearfully -

Umbridge came pelting out of her classroom as fast as her short legs would carry her. Pulling out her wand, she hurried off in the opposite direction: it was now or never.

"Harry - please!" Hermione pleaded weakly.

But he had made up his mind; hitching his bag more securely on to his shoulder, he set off at a run, weaving in and out of students now hurrying in the opposite direction to see what all the fuss was about in the east wing.

Harry reached the corridor to Umbridge's office and found it deserted. Dashing behind a large suit of armor whose helmet creaked around to watch him, he pulled open his bag, seized Sirius's knife and donned the Invisibility Cloak. He then crept slowly and carefully back out from behind the suit of armor and along the corridor until he reached Umbridge's door.

He inserted the blade of the magical knife into the crack around it and moved it gently up and down, then withdrew it. There was a tiny click, and the door swung open. He ducked inside the office, closed the door quickly behind him and looked around.

Nothing was moving except the horrible kittens that were still frolicking on the wall plates above the confiscated broomsticks.

Harry pulled off his Cloak and, striding over to the fireplace, found what he was looking for within seconds: a small box containing glittering Floo powder.

He crouched down in front of the empty grate, his hands shaking. He had never done this before,

though he thought he knew how it must work. Sticking his head into the fireplace, he took a large pinch of powder and dropped it on to the logs stacked neatly beneath him. They exploded at once into emerald green flames.

“Number twelve, Grimmauld Place!” Harry said loudly and clearly.

It was one of the most curious sensations he had ever experienced. He had traveled by Floo powder before, of course, but then it had been his entire body that had spun around and around in the flames through the network of wizarding fireplaces that stretched over the country. This time, his knees remained firm upon the cold floor of Umbridge’s office, and only his head hurtled through the emerald fire…

And then, as abruptly as it had begun, the spinning stopped. Feeling rather sick and as though he were wearing an exceptionally hot muffler around his head, Harry opened his eyes to find that he was looking up out of the kitchen fireplace at the long, wooden table, where a man sat poring over a piece of parchment.

“Sirius?”

The man jumped and looked around. It was not Sirius, but Lupin.

“Harry!” he said, looking thoroughly shocked. “What are you - what’s happened, is everything all right?”

“Yeah,” said Harry. “I just wondered — I mean, I just fancied a - a chat with Sirius.”

“I’ll call him,” said Lupin, getting to his feet, still looking perplexed, “he went upstairs to look for Kreacher, he seems to be hiding in the attic again…”

And Harry saw Lupin hurry out of the kitchen. Now he was left with nothing to look at but the chair and table legs. He wondered why Sirius had never mentioned how very uncomfortable it was to speak out of the fire; his knees were already objecting painfully to their prolonged contact with Umbridge’s hard stone floor.

Lupin returned with Sirius at his heels moments later.

“What is it?” said Sirius urgently, sweeping his long dark hair out of his eyes and dropping to the ground in front of the fire, so that he and Harry were on a level. Lupin knelt down too, looking very concerned. “Are you all right? Do you need help?”

“No,” said Harry, “it’s nothing like that… I just wanted to talk… about my dad.”

They exchanged a look of great surprise, but Harry did not have time to feel awkward or embarrassed; his knees were becoming sorer by the second and he guessed five minutes had already passed from the start of the diversion; George had only guaranteed him twenty. He therefore plunged immediately into the story of what he had seen in the Pensieve.

When he had finished, neither Sirius nor Lupin spoke for a moment. Then Lupin said quietly, “I wouldn’t like you to judge your father on what you saw there, Harry. He was only fifteen -”

“I’m fifteen!” said Harry heatedly.

“Look, Harry” said Sirius placatingly, “James and Snape hated each other from the moment they set eyes on each other, it was just one of those things, you can understand that, can’t you? I think James was everything Snape wanted to be - he was popular, he was good at Quidditch - good at pretty much everything. And Snape was just this little oddball who was up to his eyes in the Dark Arts, and James - whatever else he may have appeared to you, Harry - always hated the Dark Arts.”

“Yeah,” said Harry, “but he just attacked Snape for no good reason, just because - well, just because you said you were bored,” he finished, with a slightly apologetic note in his voice.

“I’m not proud of it,” said Sirius quickly.

Lupin looked sideways at Sirius, then said, “Look, Harry, what you’ve got to understand is that your father and Sirius were the best in the school at whatever they did - everyone thought they were the height of cool - if they sometimes got a bit carried away -”

“If we were sometimes arrogant little berks, you mean,” said Sirius.

Lupin smiled.

“He kept messing up his hair,” said Harry in a pained voice.

Sirius and Lupin laughed.

“I’d forgotten he used to do that,” said Sirius affectionately.

“Was he playing with the Snitch?” said Lupin eagerly.

“Yeah,” said Harry, watching uncomprehendingly as Sirius and Lupin beamed reminiscently.

“Well… I thought he was a bit of an idiot.”

“Of course he was a bit of an idiot!” said Sirius bracingly, “we were all idiots! Well - not Moony so much,” he said fairly, looking at Lupin.

But Lupin shook his head. “Did I ever tell you to lay off Snape?” he said. “Did I ever have the guts to tell you I thought you were out of order?”

“Yeah, well,” said Sirius, “you made us feel ashamed of ourselves sometimes… that was something…”

“And,” said Harry doggedly, determined to say everything that was on his mind now he was here, “he kept looking over at the girls by the lake, hoping they were watching him!”

“Oh, well, he always made a fool of himself whenever Lily was around,” said Sirius, shrugging, “he couldn’t stop himself showing off whenever he got near her.”

“How come she married him?” Harry asked miserably. “She hated him!”

“Nah, she didn’t,” said Sirius.

“She started going out with him in seventh year,” said Lupin.

“Once James had deflated his head a bit,” said Sirius.

“And stopped hexing people just for the fun of it,” said Lupin.

“Even Snape?” said Harry.

“Well,” said Lupin slowly, “Snape was a special case I mean, he never lost an opportunity to curse James so you couldn’t really expect James to take that lying down, could you?”

“And my mum was okay with that?”

“She didn’t know too much about it, to tell you the truth,” said Sirius. “I mean, James didn’t take Snape on dates with her and jinx him in front of her, did he?”

Sirius frowned at Harry, who was still looking unconvinced.

“Look,” he said, “your father was the best friend I ever had and he was a good person. A lot of people are idiots at the age of fifteen. He grew out of it.”

“Yeah, okay,” said Harry heavily. “I just never thought I’d feel sorry for Snape.”

“Now you mention it,” said Lupin, a faint crease between his eyebrows, “how did Snape react when he found you’d seen all this?”

“He told me he’d never teach me Occlumency again,” said Harry indifferently, “like that’s a big disappoint—”

“He WHAT?” shouted Sirius, causing Harry to jump and inhale a mouthful of ashes.

“Are you serious, Harry?” said Lupin quickly. “He’s stopped giving you lessons?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, surprised at what he considered a great over-reaction. “But it’s okay, I don’t care, it’s a bit of a relief to tell you the -”

“I’m coming up there to have a word with Snape!” said Sirius forcefully, and he actually made to stand up, but Lupin wrenched him back down again.

“If anyone’s going to tell Snape it will be me!” he said firmly. “But Harry, first of all, you’re to go back to Snape and tell him that on no account is he to stop giving you lessons — when Dumbledore hears -”

“I can’t tell him that, he’d kill me!” said Harry, outraged. “You didn’t see him when we got out of the Pensieve.”

“Harry there is nothing so important as you learning Occlumency!” said Lupin sternly. “Do you understand me? Nothing!”

“Okay, okay,” said Harry, thoroughly discomposed, not to mention annoyed. “I’ll… I’ll try and say something to him… but it won’t be-”

He fell silent. He could hear distant footsteps.

“Is that Kreacher coming downstairs?”

“No,” said Sirius, glancing behind him. “It must be somebody your end.” Harrys heart skipped several beats.

“I’d better go!” he said hastily and pulled his head backwards out of the Grimmauld Place fire. For a moment his head seemed to be revolving on his shoulders, then he found himself kneeling in front of Umbridge’s fire with it firmly back on and watching the emerald flames flicker and die.

“Quickly, quickly!” he heard a wheezy voice mutter right outside the office door. “Ah, she’s left it open -”

Harry dived for the Invisibility Cloak and had just managed to pull it back over himself when Filch burst into the office. He looked absolutely delighted about something and was talking to himself feverishly as he crossed the room, pulled open a drawer in Umbridge’s desk and began rifling through the papers inside it.

“Approval for Whipping… Approval for Whipping… I can do it at last… they’ve had it coming to them for years…”

He pulled out a piece of parchment, kissed it, then shuffled rapidly back out of the door, clutching it to his chest.

Harry leapt to his feet and, making sure he had his bag and that the Invisibility Cloak was completely covering him, he wrenched open the door and hurried out of the office after Filch, who was hobbling along faster than Harry had ever seen him go.

One landing down from Umbridge's office, Harry thought it was safe to become visible again. He pulled off the Cloak, shoved it in his bag and hurried onwards. There was a great deal of shouting and movement coming from the Entrance Hall. He ran down the marble staircase and found what looked like most of the school assembled there.

It was just like the night when Trelawney had been sacked. Students were standing all around the walls in a great ring (some of them, Harry noticed, covered in a substance that looked very like Stinksap); teachers and ghosts were also in the crowd. Prominent among the onlookers were members of the Inquisitorial Squad, who were all looking exceptionally pleased with themselves, and Peeves, who was bobbing overhead, gazed down at Fred and George who stood in the middle of the floor with the unmistakable look of two people who had just been cornered.

"So!" said Umbridge triumphantly. Harry realized she was standing just a few stairs in front of him, once more looking down upon her prey. "So - you think it amusing to turn a school corridor into a swamp, do you?"

"Pretty amusing, yeah," said Fred, looking up at her without the slightest sign of fear.

Filch elbowed his way closer to Umbridge, almost crying with happiness.

"I've got the form, Headmistress," he said hoarsely, waving the piece of parchment Harry had just seen him take from her desk. "I've got the form and I've got the whips waiting… oh, let me do it now…"

"Very good, Argus," she said. "You two," she went on, gazing down at Fred and George, "are about to learn what happens to wrongdoers in my school."

"You know what?" said Fred. "I don't think we are."

He turned to his twin.

"George," said Fred, "I think we've outgrown full-time education."

"Yeah, I've been feeling that way myself," said George lightly.

"Time to test our talents in the real world, d'you reckon?" asked Fred.

"Definitely," said George.

And before Umbridge could say a word, they raised their wands and said together:

"Accio brooms!"

Harry heard a loud crash somewhere in the distance. Looking to his left, he ducked just in time. Fred and George's broomsticks, one still trailing the heavy chain and iron peg with which Umbridge had fastened them to the wall, were hurtling along the corridor towards their owners;

they turned left, streaked down the stairs and stopped sharply in front of the twins, the chain clattering loudly on the flagged stone floor.

“We won’t be seeing you,” Fred told Professor Umbridge, swinging his leg over his broomstick.

“Yeah, don’t bother to keep in touch,” said George, mounting his own.

Fred looked around at the assembled students, at the silent, watchful crowd.

“If anyone fancies buying a Portable Swamp, as demonstrated upstairs, come to number ninety-three, Diagon Alley - Weasleys’ Wizarding Wheezes,” he said in a loud voice. “Our new premises!”

“Special discounts to Hogwarts students who swear they’re going to use our products to get rid of this old bat,” added George, pointing at Professor Umbridge.

“STOP THEM!” shrieked Umbridge, but it was too late. As the Inquisitorial Squad closed in, Fred and George kicked off from the floor, shooting fifteen feet into the air, the iron peg swinging dangerously below. Fred looked across the hall at the poltergeist bobbing on his level above the crowd.

“Give her hell from us, Peeves.”

And Peeves, who Harry had never seen take an order from a student before, swept his belled hat from his head and sprang to a salute as Fred and George wheeled about to tumultuous applause from the students below and sped out of the open front doors into the glorious sunset.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Grawp

The story of Fred and George's flight to freedom was retold so often over the next few days that Harry could tell it would soon become the stuff of Hogwarts legend: within a week, even those who had been eye-witnesses were half-convinced they had seen the twins dive-bomb Umbridge on their brooms and pelt her with Dungbombs before zooming out of the doors. In the immediate aftermath of their departure there was a great wave of talk about copying them. Harry frequently heard students saying things like, "Honestly some days I just feel like jumping on my broom and leaving this place," or else, "One more lesson like that and I might just do a Weasley."

Fred and George had made sure nobody was likely to forget them too soon. For one thing, they had not left instructions on how to remove the swamp that now filled the corridor on the fifth floor of the east wing. Umbridge and Filch had been observed trying different means of removing it but without success. Eventually the area was roped off and Filch, gnashing his teeth furiously, was given the task of punting students across it to their classrooms. Harry was certain that teachers like McGonagall or Flitwick could have removed the swamp in an instant but, just as in the case of Fred and Georges Wildfire Whiz-bangs, they seemed to prefer to watch Umbridge struggle.

Then there were the two large broom-shaped holes in Umbridge's office door, through which Fred and George's Cleansweeps had smashed to rejoin their masters. Filch fitted a new door and removed Harry's Firebolt to the dungeons where, it was rumored, Umbridge had set an armed security troll to guard it. However, her troubles were far from over.

Inspired by Fred and George's example, a great number of students were now vying for the newly vacant positions of Troublemakers-in-Chief. In spite of the new door, somebody managed to slip a hairy-snouted Niffler into Umbridge's office, which promptly tore the place apart in its search for shiny objects, leapt on Umbridge when she entered and tried to gnaw the rings off her stubby fingers. Dungbombs and Stink Pellets were dropped so frequently in the corridors that it became the new fashion for students to perform Bubble-Head Charms on themselves before leaving lessons, which ensured them a supply of fresh air, even though it gave them all the peculiar appearance of wearing upside-down goldfish bowls on their heads.

Filch prowled the corridors with a horsewhip ready in his hands, desperate to catch miscreants, but the problem was that there were now so many of them he never knew which way to turn. The Inquisitorial Squad was attempting to help him, but odd things kept happening to its members. Warrington of the Slytherin Quidditch team reported to the hospital wing with a horrible skin complaint that made him look as though he had been coated in cornflakes; Pansy Parkinson, to Hermiones delight, missed all her lessons the following day as she had sprouted antlers.

Meanwhile, it became clear just how many Skiving Snackboxes Fred and George had managed to sell before leaving Hogwarts. Umbridge only had to enter her classroom for the students assembled there to faint, vomit, develop dangerous fevers or else spout blood from both nostrils.

Shrieking with rage and frustration, she attempted to trace the mysterious symptoms to their source, but the students told her stubbornly they were suffering from 'Umbridge -itis'. After putting four successive classes in detention and failing to discover their secret, she was forced to give up and allow the bleeding, swooning, sweating and vomiting students to leave her classes in droves.

But not even the users of the Snackboxes could compete with that master of chaos, Peeves, who seemed to have taken Fred's parting words deeply to heart. Cackling madly, he soared through the school, upending tables, bursting out of blackboards, toppling statues and vases; twice he shut Mrs. Norris inside a suit of armor, from which she was rescued, yowling loudly, by the furious caretaker. Peeves smashed lanterns and snuffed out candles, juggled burning torches over the heads of screaming students, caused neatly stacked piles of parchment to topple into fires or out of windows; flooded the second floor when he pulled off all the taps in the bathrooms, dropped a bag of tarantulas in the middle of the Great Hall during breakfast and, whenever he fancied a break, spent hours at a time floating along after Umbridge and blowing loud raspberries every time she spoke.

None of the staff but Filch seemed to be stirring themselves to help her. Indeed, a week after Fred and George's departure Harry witnessed Professor McGonagall walking right past Peeves, who was determinedly loosening a crystal chandelier, and could have sworn he heard her tell the poltergeist out of the corner of her mouth, "It unscrews the other way."

To cap matters, Montague had still not recovered from his sojourn in the toilet; he remained confused and disorientated and his parents were to be observed one Tuesday morning striding up the front drive, looking extremely angry.

"Should we say something?" said Hermione in a worried voice, pressing her cheek against the Charms window so that she could see Mr. and Mrs. Montague marching inside. "About what happened to him? In case it helps Madam Pomfrey cure him?"

"Course not, he'll recover," said Ron indifferently.

"Anyway, more trouble for Umbridge, isn't it?" said Harry in a satisfied voice.

He and Ron both tapped the teacups they were supposed to be charming with their wands. Harry's spouted four very short legs that could not reach the desk and wriggled pointlessly in midair. Ron's grew four very thin spindly legs that hoisted the cup off the desk with great difficulty, trembled for a few seconds, then folded, causing the cup to crack into two.

"Reparo," said Hermione quickly, mending Ron's cup with a wave of her wand. "That's all very well, but what if Montague's permanently injured?"

"Who cares?" said Ron irritably, while his teacup stood up drunkenly again, trembling violently at the knees. "Montague shouldn't have tried to take all those points from Gryffindor, should he? If you want to worry about anyone, Hermione, worry about me!"

“You?” she said, catching her teacup as it scampered happily away across the desk on four sturdy little willow-patterned legs, and replacing it in front of her. “Why should I be worried about you?”

“When Mum’s next letter finally gets through Umbridge’s screening process,” said Ron bitterly, now holding his cup up while its frail legs tried feebly to support its weight, “I’m going to be in deep trouble. I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s sent another Howler.”

“But -”

“It’ll be my fault Fred and George left, you wait, “ said Ron darkly. “She’ll say I should’ve stopped them leaving, I should’ve grabbed the ends of their brooms and hung on or something… yeah, it’ll be all my fault.”

“Well, if she does say that it’ll be very unfair, you couldn’t have done anything! But I’m sure she won’t, I mean, if it’s really true they’ve got premises in Diagon Alley, they must have been planning this for ages.”

“Yeah, but that’s another thing, how did they get premises?” said Ron, hitting his teacup so hard with his wand that its legs collapsed again and it lay twitching before him. “It’s a bit dodgy isn’t it? They’ll need loads of Galleons to afford the rent on a place in Diagon Alley. She’ll want to know what they’ve been up to, to get their hands on that sort of gold.”

“Well, yes, that occurred to me, too,” said Hermione, allowing her teacup to jog in neat little circles around Harry’s, whose stubby little legs were still unable to touch the desktop, “I’ve been wondering whether Mundungus has persuaded them to sell stolen goods or something awful.”

“He hasn’t,” said Harry curtly.

“How do you know?” said Ron and Hermione together.

“Because -” Harry hesitated, but the moment to confess finally seemed to have come. There was no good to be gained in keeping silent if it meant anyone suspected that Fred and George were criminals. “Because they got the gold from me. I gave them my Triwizard winnings last June.”

There was a shocked silence, then Hermione’s teacup jogged right over the edge of the desk and smashed on the floor.

“Oh, Harry, you didn’t!” she said.

“Yes, I did,” said Harry mutinously. “And I don’t regret it, either. I didn’t need the gold and they’ll be great at running a joke shop.”

“But this is excellent!” said Ron, looking thrilled. “It’s all your fault, Harry - Mum can’t blame me at all! Can I tell her?”

“Yeah, I suppose you’d better,” said Harry dully, “specially if she thinks they’re receiving stolen cauldrons or something.”

Hermione said nothing at all for the rest of the lesson, but Harry had a shrewd suspicion that her self-restraint was bound to crack before long. Sure enough, once they had left the castle for break and were standing around in the weak May sunshine, she fixed Harry with a beady eye and opened her mouth with a determined air.

Harry interrupted her before she had even started.

“It’s no good nagging me, it’s done,” he said firmly. “Fred and George have got the gold - spent a good bit of it, too, by the sounds of it - and I can’t get it back from them and I don’t want to. So save your breath, Hermione.”

“I wasn’t going to say anything about Fred and George!” she said in an injured voice.

Ron snorted disbelievingly and Hermione threw him a very dirty look.

“No, I wasn’t!” she said angrily. “As a matter of fact, I was going to ask Harry when he’s going to go back to Snape and ask for more Occlumency lessons!”

Harry’s heart sank. Once they had exhausted the subject of Fred and George’s dramatic departure, which admittedly had taken many hours, Ron and Hermione had wanted to hear news of Sirius. As Harry had not confided in them the reason he had wanted to talk to Sirius in the first place, it had been hard to think of what to tell them; he had ended up saying, truthfully, that Sirius wanted Harry to resume Occlumency lessons. He had been regretting this ever since; Hermione would not let the subject drop and kept reverting to it when Harry least expected it.

“You can’t tell me you’ve stopped having funny dreams,” Hermione said now, “because Ron told me you were muttering in your sleep again last night.”

Harry threw Ron a furious look. Ron had the grace to look ashamed of himself.

“You were only muttering a bit,” he mumbled apologetically. “Something about ‘just a bit further’.”

“I dreamed I was watching you lot play Quidditch,” Harry lied brutally. “I was trying to get you to stretch out a bit further to grab the Quaffle.”

Ron’s ears went red. Harry felt a kind of vindictive pleasure; he had not, of course, dreamed anything of the sort.

Last night, he had once again made the journey along the Department of Mysteries corridor. He had passed through the circular room, then the room full of clicking and dancing light, until he found himself again inside that cavernous room full of shelves on which were ranged dusty glass spheres.

He had hurried straight towards row number ninety-seven, turned left, and ran along it… it had probably been then that he had spoken aloud… just a bit further… for he felt his conscious self struggling to wake… and before he had reached the end of the row, he had found himself lying in bed again, gazing up at the canopy of his four-poster.

“You are trying to block your mind, aren’t you?” said Hermione, looking beadily at Harry. “You are keeping going with your Occlumency?”

“Of course I am,” said Harry, trying to sound as though this question was insulting, but not quite meeting her eye. The truth was he was so intensely curious about what was hidden in that room full of dusty orbs, that he was quite keen for the dreams to continue.

The problem was that with just under a month to go until the exams and every free moment devoted to revision, his mind seemed so saturated with information when he went to bed he found it very difficult to get to sleep at all; and when he did, his overwrought brain presented him most nights with stupid dreams about the exams. He also suspected that part of his mind - the part that often spoke in Hermione’s voice — now felt guilty on the occasions it strayed down that corridor ending in the black door, and sought to wake him before he could reach the journeys end.

“You know,” said Ron, whose ears were still flaming red, “if Montague doesn’t recover before Slytherin play Hufflepuff, we might be in with a chance of winning the Cup.”

“Yeah, I s’pose so,” said Harry, glad of a change of subject.

“I mean, we’ve won one, lost one - if Slytherin lose to Hufflepuff next Saturday -”

“Yeah, that’s right,” said Harry, losing track of what he was agreeing to. Cho Chang had just walked across the courtyard, determinedly not looking at him.

The final match of the Quidditch season, Gryffindor versus Ravenclaw, was to take place on the last weekend of May. Although Slytherin had been narrowly defeated by Hufflepuff in their last match, Gryffindor were not daring to hope for victory, due mainly (though of course nobody said it to him) to Ron’s abysmal goal-keeping record. He, however, seemed to have found a new optimism.

“I mean, I can’t get any worse, can I?” he told Harry and Hermione grimly over breakfast on the morning of the match. “Nothing to lose now, is there?”

“You know,” said Hermione, as she and Harry walked down to the pitch a little later in the midst of a very excitable crowd, “I think Ron might do better without Fred and George around. They never exactly gave him a lot of confidence.”

Luna Lovegood overtook them with what appeared to be a live eagle perched on top of her head.

“Oh, gosh, I forgot!” said Hermione, watching the eagle flapping its wings as Luna walked

serenely past a group of cackling and pointing Slytherins. “Cho will be playing, won’t she?”

Harry, who had not forgotten this, merely grunted.

They found seats in the topmost row of the stands. It was a fine, clear day; Ron could not wish for better, and Harry found himself hoping against hope that Ron would not give the Slytherins cause for more rousing choruses of ‘Weasley is our King’.

Lee Jordan, who had been very dispirited since Fred and George had left, was commentating as usual. As the teams zoomed out on to the pitch he named the players with something less than his usual gusto.

“… Bradley… Davies… Chang,” he said, and Harry felt his stomach perform, less of a back flip, more a feeble lurch as Cho walked out on to the pitch, her shiny black hair rippling in the slight breeze. He was not sure what he wanted to happen any more, except that he could not stand any more rows. Even the sight of her chatting animatedly to Roger Davies as they prepared to mount their brooms caused him only a slight twinge of jealousy.

“And they’re off!” said Lee. “And Davies takes the Quaffle immediately, Ravenclaw Captain Davies with the Quaffle, he dodges Johnson, he dodges Bell, he dodges Spinnet as well… he’s going straight for goal! He’s going to shoot - and - and -” Lee swore very loudly. “And he’s scored.”

Harry and Hermione groaned with the rest of the Gryffindors. Predictably, horribly, the Slytherins on the other side of the stands began to sing: *“Weasley cannot save a thing He cannot block a single ring…”*

“Harry” said a hoarse voice in Harrys ear. “Hermione…”

Harry looked round and saw Hagrid’s enormous bearded face sticking between the seats. Apparently, he had squeezed his way all along the row behind, for the first- and second-years he had just passed had a ruffled, flattened look about them. For some reason, Hagrid was bent double as though anxious not to be seen, though he was still at least four feet taller than everybody else.

“Listen,” he whispered, “can yeh come with me? Now? While ev’ryone’s watchin’ the match?”

“Er… can’t it wait, Hagrid?” asked Harry. “Till the match is over?”

“No,” said Hagrid. “No, Harry, it’s gotta be now… while ev’ryone’s lookin’ the other way… please?”

Hagrid’s nose was gently dripping blood. His eyes were both blackened. Harry had not seen him this close-up since his return to the school; he looked utterly woebegone.

“Course,” said Harry at once, “course we’ll come.”

He and Hermione edged back along their row of seats, causing much grumbling among the students who had to stand up for them. The people in Hagrid's row were not complaining, merely attempting to make themselves as small as possible.

"I 'ppreciate this, you two, I really do," said Hag rid as they reached the stairs. He kept looking around nervously as they descended towards the lawn below. "I jus' hope she doesn' notice us goin'."

"You mean Umbridge?" said Harry. "She won't, she's got her whole Inquisitorial Squad sitting with her, didn't you see? She must be expecting trouble at the match."

"Yeah, well, a bit o' trouble wouldn' hurt," said Hagrid, pausing to peer around the edge of the stands to make sure the stretch of lawn between there and his cabin was deserted. "Give us more time."

"What is it, Hagrid?" said Hermione, looking up at him with a concerned expression on her face as they hurried across the grass towards the edge of the Forest.

"Yeh - yeh'll see in a mo'," said Hagrid, looking over his shoulder as a great roar rose from the stands behind them. "Hey - did someone jus' score?"

"It'll be Ravenclaw," said Harry heavily.

"Good… good…" said Hagrid distractedly. "Tha's good…"

They had to jog to keep up with him as he strode across the lawn, looking around with every other step. When they reached his cabin, Hermione turned automatically left towards the front door. Hagrid, however, walked straight past it into the shade of the trees on the outermost edge of the Forest, where he picked up a crossbow that was leaning against a tree. When he realized they were no longer with him, he turned.

"We're goin' in here," he said, jerking his shaggy head behind him.

"Into the Forest?" said Hermione, perplexed.

"Yeah," said Hagrid. "C'mon now, quick, before we're spotted!"

Harry and Hermione looked at each other, then ducked into the cover of the trees behind Hagrid, who was already striding away from them into the green gloom, his crossbow over his arm. Harry and Hermione ran to catch up with him.

"Hagrid, why are you armed?" said Harry.

"Jus' a precaution," said Hagrid, shrugging his massive shoulders.

"You didn't bring your crossbow the day you showed us the Thestrals," said Hermione timidly.

“Nah, well, we weren’ goin’ in so far then,” said Hagrid. “An’ anyway, tha’ was before Firenze left the Forest, wasn’ it?”

“Why does Firenze leaving make a difference?” asked Hermione curiously.

“Cause the other centaurs are good an’ riled at me, tha’s why,” said Hagrid quietly, glancing around. “They used ter be - well, yeh couldn’ call ‘em friendly — but we got on all righ’. Kept ‘emselves to ‘emselves, bu’ always turned up if I wanted a word. Not any more.”

He sighed deeply.

“Firenze said they’re angry because he went to work for Dumbledore,” Harry said, tripping on a protruding root because he was busy watching Hagrid’s profile.

“Yeah,” said Hagrid heavily. “Well, angry doesn’ cover it. Ruddy livid. If I hadn’ stepped in, I reckon they’d’ve kicked Firenze ter death -”

“They attacked him?” said Hermione, sounding shocked.

“Yep,” said Hagrid gruffly, forcing his way through several low-hanging branches. “He had half the herd on to him.”

“And you stopped it?” said Harry, amazed and impressed. “By yourself?”

“Course I did, couldn’t stand by an’ watch ‘em kill ‘im, could I?” said Hagrid. “Lucky I was passin’, really… an’ I’d’ve thought Firenze mighta remembered tha’ before he started sendin’ me stupid warnin’s!” he added hotly and unexpectedly.

Harry and Hermione looked at each other, startled, but Hagrid, scowling, did not elaborate.

“Anyway,” he said, breathing a little more heavily than -usual, “since then the other centaurs’ve bin livid with me, an’ the trouble is they’ve got a lot of influence in the Forest… cleverest creatures in here.”

“Is that why we’re here, Hagrid?” asked Hermione. “The centaurs?”

“Ah, no,” said Hagrid, shaking his head dismissively, “no, it’s not them. Well, o’ course, they could complicate the problem, yeah… but yeh’ll see what I mean in a bit.”

On this incomprehensible note he fell silent and forged a little ahead, taking one stride for every three of theirs, so that they had great trouble keeping up with him.

The path was becoming increasingly overgrown and the trees grew so closely together as they walked further and further into the Forest that it was as dark as dusk. They were soon a long way past the clearing where Hagrid had shown them the Thestrals, but Harry felt no sense of unease until Hagrid stepped unexpectedly off the path and began wending his way in and out of trees

towards the dark heart of the Forest.

"Hagrid!" said Harry, fighting his way through thickly knotted brambles, over which Hagrid had stepped with ease, and remembering very vividly what had happened to him on the other occasion he had stepped off the Forest path. "Where are we going?"

"Bit further," said Hagrid over his shoulder. "C'mon, Harry… we need ter keep together now."

It was a great struggle to keep up with Hagrid, what with branches and thickets of thorn through which Hagrid marched as easily as if they were cobwebs, but which snagged Harry and Hermione's robes, frequently entangling them so severely that they had to stop for minutes at a time to free themselves. Harry's arms and legs were soon covered in small cuts and scratches. They were so deep in the Forest now that sometimes all Harry could see of Hagrid in the gloom was a massive dark shape ahead of him. Any sound seemed threatening in the muffled silence. The breaking of a twig echoed loudly and the tiniest rustle of movement, even though it might have been made by an innocent sparrow, caused Harry to peer through the gloom for a culprit. It occurred to him that he had never managed to get this far into the Forest without meeting some kind of creature; their absence struck him as rather ominous.

"Hagrid, would it be all right if we lit our wands?" said Hermione quietly.

"Er… all righ'," Hagrid whispered back. "In fact -"

He stopped suddenly and turned around; Hermione walked right into him and was knocked over backwards. Harry caught her just before she hit the Forest floor.

"Maybe we bes' jus' stop fer a momen', so I can… fill yeh in," said Hagrid. "Before we ge' there, like."

"Good!" said Hermione, as Harry set her back on her feet. They both murmured "Lumos!" and their wand-tips ignited. Hagrid's face swam through the gloom by the light of the two wavering beams and Harry saw again that he looked nervous and sad.

"Righ'," said Hagrid. "Well… see… the thing is…"

He took a great breath.

"Well, there's a good chance I'm goin' ter be gettin' the sack any day now," he said.

Harry and Hermione looked at each other, then back at him.

"But you've lasted this long -" Hermione said tentatively. "What makes you think -"

"Umbridge reckons it was me that put tha' Niffler in her office."

"And was it?" said Harry, before he could stop himself.

“No, it ruddy well wasn’!” said Hagrid indignantly. “On’y any-thin’ ter do with magical creatures an’ she thinks it’s got somethin’ ter do with me. Yeh know she’s bin lookin’ fer a chance ter get rid of me ever since I got back. I don’ wan’ ter go, o’ course, but if it wasn’ fer… well… the special circumstances I’m abou’ ter explain to yeh, I’d leave righ’ now, before she’s go’ the chance ter do it in front o’ the whole school, like she did with Trelawney.”

Harry and Hermione both made noises of protest, but Hagrid overrode them with a wave of one of his enormous hands.

“It’s not the end o’ the world, I’ll be able ter help Dumbledore once I’m outta here, I can be useful ter the Order. An’ you lot’ll have Grubbly-Plank, yeh’ll - yeh’ll get through yer exams fine…”

His voice trembled and broke.

“Don’ worry abou’ me,” he said hastily, as Hermione made to pat his arm. He pulled his enormous spotted handkerchief from the pocket of his waistcoat and mopped his eyes with it. “Look, I wouldn’ be tellin’ yer this at all if I didn’ have ter. See, if I go… well, I can’ leave withou’… withou’ tellin’ someone… because I’ll - I’ll need yeh two ter help me. An’ Ron, if he’s willin’.”

“Of course we’ll help you,” said Harry at once. “What do you want us to do?”

Hagrid gave a great sniff and patted Harry wordlessly on the shoulder with such force Harry was knocked sideways into a tree.

“I knew yeh’d say yes,” said Hagrid into his handkerchief, “but I won’… never… forget… well… c’mon… jus’ a little bit further through here… watch yerselves, now, there’s nettles…”

They walked on in silence for another fifteen minutes; Harry had opened his mouth to ask how much further they had to go when Hagrid threw out his right arm to signal that they should stop.

“Really easy” he said softly. “Very quiet, now…”

They crept forwards and Harry saw that they were facing a large, smooth mound of earth nearly as tall as Hagrid that he thought, with a jolt of dread, was sure to be the lair of some enormous animal. Trees had been ripped up at the roots all around the mound, so that it stood on a bare patch of ground surrounded by heaps of trunks and boughs that formed a kind of fence or barricade, behind which Harry, Hermione and Hagrid now stood.

“Sleepin’,” breathed Hagrid.

Sure enough, Harry could hear a distant, rhythmic rumbling that sounded like a pair of enormous lungs at work. He glanced sideways at Hermione, who was gazing at the mound with her mouth slightly open. She looked utterly terrified.

“Hagrid,” she said in a whisper barely audible over the sound of the sleeping creature, “who is he?”

Harry found this an odd question…”What is it?” was the one he had been planning on asking.

“Hagrid, you told us -” said Hermione, her wand now shaking in her hand, “you told us none of them wanted to come!”

Harry looked from her to Hagrid and then, as realization hit him, he looked back at the mound with a small gasp of horror.

The great mound of earth, on which he, Hermione and Hagrid could easily have stood, was moving slowly up and down in time with the deep, grunting breathing. It was not a mound at all. It was the curved back of what was clearly —

“Well - no - he didn’ want ter come,” said Hagrid, sounding desperate. “But I had ter bring him, Hermione, I had ter!”

“But why?” asked Hermione, who sounded as though she wanted to cry. “Why - what - oh, Hagrid!”

“I knew if I jus’ got him back,” said Hagrid, sounding close to tears himself, “an’ - an’ taught him a few manners - I’d be able ter take him outside an’ show ev’ryone he’s harmless!”

“Harmless!” said Hermione shrilly, and Hagrid made frantic hushing noises with his hands as the enormous creature before them grunted loudly and shifted in its sleep. “He’s been hurting you all this time, hasn’t he? That’s why you’ve had all these injuries!”

“He don’ know his own strength!” said Hagrid earnestly. “An’ he’s gettin’ better, he’s not fightin’ so much any more —”

“So, this is why it took you two months to get home!” said Hermione distractedly. “Oh, Hagrid, why did you bring him back if he didn’t want to come? Wouldn’t he have been happier with his own people?”

“They were all bullyin’ him, Hermione, ‘cause he’s so small!” said Hagrid.

“Small?” said Hermione. “Small?”

“Hermione, I couldn’ leave him,” said Hagrid, tears now trickling down his bruised face into his beard. “See - he’s my brother!”

Hermione simply stared at him, her mouth open.

“Hagrid, when you say ‘brother’,” said Harry slowly, “d o you mean —?”

“Well - half-brother,” amended Hagrid. “Turns out me mother took up with another giant when she left me dad, an’ she went an’ had Grawp here -”

“Grawp?” said Harry.

“Yeah… well, tha’s what it sounds like when he says his name,” said Hagrid anxiously. “He don’ speak a lot of English… I’ve bin tryin’ ter teach him… anyway, she don’ seem ter have liked him much more’n she liked me. See, with giantesses, what counts is producin’ good big kids, and he’s always been a bit on the runty side fer a giant - on’y sixteen foot -”

“Oh, yes, tiny!” said Hermione, with a kind of hysterical sarcasm. “Absolutely minuscule!”

“He was bein’ kicked aroun’ by all o’ them - I jus’ couldn’ leave him -”

“Did Madame Maxime want to bring him back?” asked Harry.

“She - well, she could see it was right importan’ ter me,” said Hagrid, twisting his enormous hands. “Bu’ - bu’ she got a bit tired o’ him after a while, I must admit… so we split up on the journey home… she promised not ter tell anyone, though…”

“How on earth did you get him back without anyone noticing?” said Harry.

“Well, tha’s why it took so long, see,” said Hagrid. “Could on’y travel by nigh’ an’ through wild country an’ stuff. Course, he covers the ground pretty well when he wants ter, but he kep’ wantin’ ter go back.”

“Oh, Hagrid, why on earth didn’t you let him!” said Hermione, flopping down on to a ripped up tree and burying her face in her hands. “What do you think you’re going to do with a violent giant who doesn’t even want to be here!”

“Well, now - ‘violent’ - tha’s a bit harsh,” said Hagrid, still twisting his hands agitatedly. “I’ll admit he mighta taken a couple o’ swings at me when he’s bin in a bad mood, but he’s gettin’ better, loads better, settlin’ down well.”

“What are those ropes for, then?” Harry asked.

He had just noticed ropes thick as saplings stretching from around the trunks of the largest nearby trees towards the place where Grawp lay curled on the ground with his back to them.

“You have to keep him tied up?” said Hermione faintly.

“Well… yeah…” said Hagrid, looking anxious. “See - it’s like I say - he doesn’ really know ‘is own strength.”

Harry understood now why there had been such a suspicious lack of any other living creature in this part of the Forest.

“So, what is it you want Harry and Ron and me to do?” Hermione asked apprehensively.

“Look after him,” said Hagrid croakily. “After I’m gone.”

Harry and Hermione exchanged miserable looks, Harry uncomfortably aware that he had already promised Hagrid that he would do whatever he asked.

“What - what does that involve, exactly?” Hermione enquired.

“Not food or anythin’!” said Hagrid eagerly. “He can get his own food, no problem. Birds an’ deer an’ stuff… no, it’s company he needs. If I jus’ knew someone was carryin’ on tryin’ ter help him a bit… teachin’ him, yeh know.”

Harry said nothing, but turned to look back at the gigantic form lying asleep on the ground in front of them. Unlike Hagrid, who simply looked like an oversized human, Grawp looked strangely misshapen. What Harry had taken to be a vast mossy boulder to the left of the great earthen mound he now recognized as Grawp’s head. It was much larger in proportion to the body than a human head, and was almost perfectly round and covered with tightly curling, close-growing hair the color of bracken. The rim of a single large, fleshy ear was visible on top of the head, which seemed to sit, rather like Uncle Vernon’s, directly upon the shoulders with little or no neck in between. The back, under what looked like a dirty brownish smock comprised of animal skins sewn roughly together, was very broad; and as Grawp slept, it seemed to strain a little at the rough seams of the skins. The legs were curled up under the body. Harry could see the soles of enormous, filthy, bare feet, large as sledges, resting one on top of the other on the earthy Forest floor.

“You want us to teach him,” Harry said in a hollow voice. He now understood what Firenze’s warning had meant. *His attempt is not working. He would do better to abandon it.* Of course, the other creatures who lived in the Forest would have heard Hagrids fruitless attempts to teach Grawp English.

“Yeah - even if yeh jus’ talk ter him a bit,” said Hagrid hopefully. “Cause I reckon, if he can talk ter people, he’ll understand more that we all like ‘im really, an’ want ‘im ter stay.”

Harry looked at Hermione, who peered back at him from between the fingers over her face.

“Kind of makes you wish we had Norbert back, doesn’t it?” he said, and she gave a very shaky laugh.

“Yeh’ll do it, then?” said Hagrid, who did not seem to have caught what Harry had just said.

“We’ll…” said Harry, already bound by his promise. “We’ll try, Hagrid.”

“I knew I could count on yeh, Harry,” Hagrid said, beaming in a very watery way and dabbing at his face with his handkerchief again. “An’ I don’ want yeh ter put yerself out too much, like… I know yeh’ve got exams… if yeh could jus’ nip down here in yer Invisibility Cloak maybe once a

week an’ have a little chat with ‘im. I’ll wake ‘im up, then - introduce yeh -”

“Wha— no!” said Hermione, jumping up. “Hagrid, no, don’t wake him, really, we don’t need -”

But Hagrid had already stepped over the great tree trunk in front of them and was proceeding towards Grawp. When he was about ten feet away, he lifted a long, broken bough from the ground, smiled reassuringly over his shoulder at Harry and Hermione, then poked Grawp hard in the middle of the back with the end of the bough.

The giant gave a roar that echoed around the silent Forest; birds in the treetops overhead rose twittering from their perches and soared away. In front of Harry and Hermione, meanwhile, the gigantic Grawp was rising from the ground, which shuddered as he placed an enormous hand upon it to push himself on to his knees. He turned his head to see who and what had disturbed him.

“All righ’, Grawpy?” said Hagrid, in a would-be cheery voice, backing away with the long bough raised, ready to poke Grawp again. “Had a nice sleep, eh?”

Harry and Hermione retreated as far as they could while still keeping the giant within their sights. Grawp knelt between two trees he had not yet uprooted. They looked up into his startlingly huge face that resembled a grey full moon swimming in the gloom of the clearing. It was as though the features had been hewn on to a great stone ball. The nose was stubby and shapeless, the mouth lopsided and full of misshapen yellow teeth the size of half-bricks; the eyes, small by giant standards, were a muddy greenish-brown and just now were half-gummed together with sleep. Grawp raised dirty knuckles, each as big as a cricket ball, to his eyes, rubbed vigorously, then, without warning, pushed himself to his feet with surprising speed and agility.

“Oh my!” Harry heard Hermione squeal, terrified, beside him.

The trees to which the other ends of the ropes around Grawp’s wrists and ankles were attached creaked ominously. He was, as Hagrid had said, at least sixteen feet tall. Gazing blearily around, Grawp reached out a hand the size of a beach umbrella, seized a bird’s nest from the upper branches of a towering pine and turned it upside-down with a roar of apparent displeasure that there was no bird in it; eggs fell like grenades towards the ground and Hagrid threw his arms over his head to protect himself.

“Anyway, Grawpy,” shouted Hagrid, looking up apprehensively in case of further falling eggs, “I’ve brought some friends ter meet yeh. Remember, I told yeh I might? Remember, when I said I might have ter go on a little trip an’ leave them ter look after yeh fer a bit? Remember that, Grawpy?”

But Grawp merely gave another low roar; it was hard to say whether he was listening to Hagrid or whether he even recognized the sounds Hagrid was making as speech. He had now seized the top of the pine tree and was pulling it towards him, evidently for the simple pleasure of seeing how far it would spring back when he let go.

“Now, Grawpy, don’ do that!” shouted Hagrid. “Tha’s how you ended up pullin’ up the others -”

And sure enough, Harry could see the earth around the tree’s roots beginning to crack.

“I got company for yeh!” Hagrid shouted. “Company, see! Look down, yeh big buffoon, I brought yeh some friends!”

“Oh, Hagrid, don’t,” moaned Hermione, but Hagrid had already raised the bough again and gave Grawp’s knee a sharp poke.

The giant let go of the top of the tree, which swayed alarmingly and deluged Hagrid with a rain of pine needles, and looked down.

“This,” said Hagrid, hastening over to where Harry and Hermione stood, “is Harry, Grawp! Harry Potter! He migh’ be comin’ ter visit yeh if I have ter go away, understand?”

The giant had only just realized that Harry and Hermione were there. They watched, in great trepidation, as he lowered his huge boulder of a head so that he could peer blearily at them.

“An’ this is Hermione, see? Her—” Hagrid hesitated. Turning to Hermione, he said, “Would yeh mind if he called yeh Hermy, Hermione? On’y it’s a difficult name fer him ter remember.”

“No, not at all,” squeaked Hermione.

“This is Hermy, Grawp! An’ she’s gonna be comin’ an’ all! Is’n’ tha’ nice? Eh? Two friends fer yeh ter - GRAWPY, NO!”

Grawp’s hand had shot out of nowhere towards Hermione; Harry seized her and pulled her backwards behind the tree, so that Grawp’s fist scraped the trunk but closed on thin air.

“BAD BOY, GRAWPY!” they heard Hagrid yelling, as Hermione clung to Harry behind the tree, shaking and whimpering. “VERY BAD BOY! YEH DON’ GRAB - OUCH!”

Harry poked his head out from around the trunk and saw Hagrid lying on his back, his hand over his nose. Grawp, apparently losing interest, had straightened up and was again engaged in pulling back the pine as far as it would go.

“Righ’,” said Hagrid thickly, getting up with one hand pinching his bleeding nose and the other grasping his crossbow, “well… there yeh are… yeh’ve met him an’ - an’ now he’ll know yeh when yeh come back. Yeah… well…”

He looked up at Grawp, who was now pulling back the pine with an expression of detached pleasure on his boulderish face; the roots were creaking as he ripped them away from the ground.

“Well, I reckon tha’s enough fer one day,” said Hagrid. “We’ll -er - we’ll go back now, shall we?”

Harry and Hermione nodded. Hagrid shouldered his crossbow again and, still pinching his nose, led the way back into the trees.

Nobody spoke for a while, not even when they heard the distant crash that meant Grawp had pulled over the pine tree at last. Hermione's face was pale and set. Harry could not think of a single thing to say. What on earth was going to happen when somebody found out that Hagrid had hidden Grawp in the Forbidden Forest? And he had promised that he, Ron and Hermione would continue Hagrid's totally pointless attempts to civilize the giant. How could Hagrid, even with his immense capacity to delude himself that fanged monsters were loveably harmless, fool himself that Grawp would ever be fit to mix with humans?

"Hold it," said Hagrid abruptly, just as Harry and Hermione were struggling through a patch of thick knotgrass behind him. He pulled an arrow out of the quiver over his shoulder and fitted it into the crossbow. Harry and Hermione raised their wands; now that they had stopped walking, they, too, could hear movement close by.

"Oh, blimey" said Hagrid quietly.

"I thought we told you, Hagrid," said a deep male voice, "that you are no longer welcome here?"

A man's naked torso seemed for an instant to be floating towards them through the dappled green half-light; then they saw that his waist joined smoothly into a horse's chestnut body. This centaur had a proud, high-cheekboned face and long black hair. Like Hagrid, he was armed; a quiverful of arrows and a longbow were slung over his shoulders.

"How are yeh, Magorian?" said Hagrid warily.

The trees behind the centaur rustled and four or five more centaurs emerged behind him. Harry recognized the black-bodied and bearded Bane, whom he had met nearly four years ago on the same night he had met Firenze. Bane gave no sign that he had ever seen Harry before.

"So," he said, with a nasty inflection in his voice, before turning immediately to Magorian. "We agreed, I think, what we would do if this human ever showed his face in the Forest again?"

"'This human' now, am I?" said Hagrid testily. "Jus ' fer stoppin' all of yeh committin' murder?"

"You ought not to have meddled, Hagrid," said Magorian. "Our ways are not yours, nor are our laws. Firenze has betrayed and dishonored us."

"I dunno how yeh'work that out," said Hagrid impatiently. "He's done nothin' except help Albus Dumbledore -"

"Firenze has entered into servitude to humans," said a grey centaur with a hard, deeply lined face.

“Servitude!” said Hagrid scathingly. “He’s doin’ Dumbledore a favor is all -”

“He is peddling our knowledge and secrets among humans,” said Magorian quietly. “There can be no return from such disgrace.”

“If yeh say so,” said Hagrid, shrugging, “but personally I think yeh’re makin’ a big mistake -”

“As are you, human,” said Bane, “coming back into our Forest when we warned you -”

“Now, yeh listen ter me,” said Hagrid angrily. “I’ll have less of the ‘our’ Forest, if it’s all the same ter yeh. It’s not up ter yeh who comes an’ goes in here -”

“No more is it up to you, Hagrid,” said Magorian smoothly. “I shall let you pass today because you are accompanied by your young —”

“They’re not his!” interrupted Bane contemptuously. “Students, Magorian, from up at the school! They have probably already profited from the traitor Firenze’s teachings.”

“Nevertheless,” said Magorian calmly, “the slaughter of foals is a terrible crime - we do not touch the innocent. Today, Hagrid, you pass. Henceforth, stay away from this place. You forfeited the friendship of the centaurs when you helped the traitor Firenze escape us.”

“I won’ be kept outta the Fores’ by a bunch o’ old mules like yeh!” said Hagrid loudly.

“Hagrid,” said Hermione in a high-pitched and terrified voice, as both Bane and the grey centaur pawed at the ground, “let’s go, please let’s go!”

Hagrid moved forwards, but his crossbow was still raised and his eyes were still fixed threateningly upon Magorian.

“We know what you are keeping in the Forest, Hagrid!” Magorian called after them, as the centaurs slipped out of sight. “And our tolerance is waning!”

Hagrid turned and gave every appearance of wanting to walk straight back to Magorian.

“Yeh’ll tolerate ‘im as long as he’s here, it’s as much his Forest as yours!” he yelled, as Harry and Hermione both pushed with all their might against Hagrid’s moleskin waistcoat in an effort to keep him moving forwards. Still scowling, he looked down; his expression changed to mild surprise at the sight of them both pushing him; he seemed not to have felt it.

“Calm down, you two,” he said, turning to walk on while they panted along behind him. “Ruddy old mules, though, eh?”

“Hagrid,” said Hermione breathlessly, skirting the patch of nettles they had passed on their way there, “if the centaurs don’t want humans in the Forest, it doesn’t really look as though Harry and I will be able -”

“Ah, you heard what they said,” said Hagrid dismissively, “they wouldn’t hurt foals - I mean, kids. Anyway, we can’ let ourselves be pushed aroun’ by that lot.”

“Nice try,” Harry murmured to Hermione, who looked crestfallen.

At last they rejoined the path and, after another ten minutes, the trees began to thin; they were able to see patches of clear blue sky again and, in the distance, the definite sounds of cheering and shouting.

“Was that another goal?” asked Hagrid, pausing in the shelter of the trees as the Quidditch stadium came into view. “Or d’yeh reckon the match is over?”

“I don’t know,” said Hermione miserably. Harry saw that she looked much the worse for wear; her hair was full of twigs and leaves, her robes were ripped in several places and there were numerous scratches on her face and arms. He knew he must look little better.

“I reckon it’s over, yeh know!” said Hagrid, still squinting towards the stadium. “Look - there’s people comin’ out already - if yeh two hurry yeh’ll be able ter blend in with the crowd an’ no one’ll know yeh weren’t there!”

“Good idea,” said Harry. “Well… see you later, then, Hagrid.”

“I don’t believe him,” said Hermione in a very unsteady voice, the moment they were out of earshot of Hagrid. “I don’t believe him. I really don’t believe him.”

“Calm down,” said Harry.

“Calm down!” she said feverishly. “A giant! A giant in the Forest! And we’re supposed to give him English lessons! Always assuming, of course, we can get past the herd of murderous centaurs on the way in and out! I - don’t -believe - him!”

“We haven’t got to do anything yet!” Harry tried to reassure her in a quiet voice, as they joined a stream of jabbering Hufflepuffs heading back towards the castle. “He’s not asking us to do anything unless he gets chucked out and that might not even happen.”

“Oh, come off it, Harry!” said Hermione angrily, stopping dead in her tracks so that the people behind had to swerve to avoid her. “Of course he’s going to be chucked out and, to be perfectly honest, after what we’ve just seen, who can blame Umbridge?”

There was a pause in which Harry glared at her, and her eyes filled slowly with tears.

“You didn’t mean that,” said Harry quietly.

“No… well… all right… I didn’t,” she said, wiping her eyes angrily. “But why does he have to make life so difficult for himself - for us?’

“I dunno -”

“Weasley is our King, Weasley is our King, He didn’t let the Quaffle in, Weasley is our King…”

“And I wish they’d stop singing that stupid song,” said Hermione miserably, “haven’t they gloated enough?”

A great tide of students was moving up the sloping lawns from the pitch.

“Oh, let’s get in before we have to meet the Slytherins,” said Hermione.

“Weasley can save anything, He never leaves a single ring, That’s why Gryffindors all sing, Weasley is our King.”

“Hermione…” said Harry slowly.

The song was growing louder, but it was issuing not from a crowd of green-and-silver-clad Slytherins, but from a mass of red and gold moving slowly towards the castle, bearing a solitary figure upon its many shoulders.

“Weasley is our King, Weasley is our King, He didn’t let the Quaffle in, Weasley is our King…”

“No?” said Hermione in a hushed voice.

“YES!” said Harry loudly.

“HARRY! HERMIONE!” yelled Ron, waving the silver Quidditch cup in the air and looking quite beside himself. “WE DID IT! WE WON!”

They beamed up at him as he passed. There was a scrum at the door of the castle and Ron’s head got rather badly bumped on the lintel, but nobody seemed to want to put him down. Still singing, the crowd squeezed itself into the Entrance Hall and out of sight. Harry and Hermione watched them go, beaming, until the last echoing strains of ‘Weasley is our King’ died away. Then they turned to each other, their smiles fading.

“We’ll save our news till tomorrow, shall we?” said Harry.

“Yes, all right,” said Hermione wearily. “I’m not in any hurry.”

They climbed the steps together. At the front doors both instinctively looked back at the Forbidden Forest. Harry was not sure whether or not it was his imagination, but he rather thought he saw a small cloud of birds erupting into the air over the tree tops in the distance, almost as though the tree in which they had been nesting had just been pulled up by the roots.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

O.W.L.s

Ron's euphoria at helping Gryffindor scrape the Quidditch cup was such that he couldn't settle to anything next day. All he wanted to do was talk over the match, so Harry and Hermione found it very difficult to find an opening in which to mention Grawp. Not that either of them tried very hard; neither was keen to be the one to bring Ron back to reality in quite such a brutal fashion. As it was another fine, warm day, they persuaded him to join them in revising under the beech tree at the edge of the lake, where they had less chance of being overheard than in the common room. Ron was not particularly keen on this idea at first - he was thoroughly enjoying being patted on the back by every Gryffindor who walked past his chair, not to mention the occasional outbursts of 'Weasley is our King' - but after a while he agreed that some fresh air might do him good.

They spread their books out in the shade of the beech tree and sat down while Ron talked them through his first save of the match for what felt like the dozenth time.

"Well, I mean, I'd already let in that one of Davies's, so I wasn't feeling all that confident, but I dunno, when Bradley came towards me, just out of nowhere, I thought - you can do this! And I had about a second to decide which way to fly, you know, because he looked like he was aiming for the right goalhoop - my right, obviously, his left - but I had a funny feeling that he was feinting, and so I took the chance and flew left - his right, I mean - and - well - you saw what happened," he concluded modestly, sweeping his hair back quite unnecessarily so that it looked interestingly windswept and glancing around to see whether the people nearest to them — a bunch of gossiping third-year Hufflepuffs — had heard him. "And then, when Chambers came at me about five minutes later - What?" Ron asked, having stopped mid-sentence at the look on Harry's face. "Why are you grinning?"

"I'm not," said Harry quickly, and looked down at his Transfiguration notes, attempting to straighten his face. The truth was that Ron had just reminded Harry forcibly of another Gryffindor Quidditch player who had once sat rumpling his hair under this very tree. "I'm just glad we won, that's all."

"Yeah," said Ron slowly, savoring the words, "we won. Did you see the look on Changs face when Ginny got the Snitch right out from under her nose?"

"I suppose she cried, did she?" said Harry bitterly.

"Well, yeah - more out of temper than anything, though…" Ron frowned slightly. "But you saw her chuck her broom away when she got back to the ground, didn't you?"

"Er -" said Harry.

“Well, actually… no, Ron,” said Hermione with a heavy sigh, putting down her book and looking at him apologetically. “As a matter of fact, the only bit of the match Harry and I saw was Davies’s first goal.”

Ron’s carefully ruffled hair seemed to wilt with disappointment. “You didn’t watch?” he said faintly, looking from one to the other. “You didn’t see me make any of those saves?”

“Well - no,” said Hermione, stretching out a placatory hand towards him. “But Ron, we didn’t want to leave — we had to!”

“Yeah?” said Ron, whose face was growing rather red. “How come?”

“It was Hagrid,” said Harry. “He decided to tell us why he’s been covered in injuries ever since he got back from the giants. He wanted us to go into the Forest with him, we had no choice, you know how he gets. Anyway…”

The story was told in five minutes, by the end of which Ron’s indignation had been replaced by a look of total incredulity.

“He brought one back and hid it in the Forest?”

“Yep,” said Harry grimly.

“No,” said Ron, as though by saying this he could make it untrue. “No, he can’t have.”

“Well, he has,” said Hermione firmly. “Grawp’s about sixteen feet tall, enjoys ripping up twenty-foot pine trees, and knows me,” she snorted, “as Hermy.”

Ron gave a nervous laugh.

“And Hagrid wants us to…?”

“Teach him English, yeah,” said Harry.

“He’s lost his mind,” said Ron in an almost awed voice.

“Yes,” said Hermione irritably, turning a page of Intermediate Transfiguration and glaring at a series of diagrams showing an owl turning into a pair of opera glasses. “Yes, I’m starting to think he has. But, unfortunately, he made Harry and me promise.”

“Well, you’re just going to have to break your promise, that’s all,” said Ron firmly. “I mean, come on… we’ve got exams and we’re about that far -” he held up his hand to show thumb and forefinger almost touching “- from being chucked out as it is. And anyway… remember Norbert? Remember Aragog? Have we ever come off better for mixing with any of Hagrid’s monster mates?”

“I know, it’s just that - we promised,” said Hermione in a small voice.

Ron smoothed his hair flat again, looking preoccupied.

“Well,” he sighed, “Hagrid hasn’t been sacked yet, has he? He’s hung on this long, maybe he’ll hang on till the end of term and we won’t have to go near Grawp at all.”

The castle grounds were gleaming in the sunlight as though freshly painted; the cloudless sky smiled at itself in the smoothly sparkling lake; the satin green lawns rippled occasionally in a gentle breeze. June had arrived, but to the fifth-years this meant only one thing: their OWLs were upon them at last.

Their teachers were no longer setting them homework; lessons were devoted to revising those topics the teachers thought most likely to come up in the exams. The purposeful, feverish atmosphere drove nearly everything but the OWLs from Harry’s mind, though he did wonder occasionally during Potions lessons whether Lupin had ever told Snape that he must continue giving Harry Occlumency tuition. If he had, then Snape had ignored Lupin as thoroughly as he was now ignoring Harry. This suited Harry very well; he was quite busy and tense enough without extra classes with Snape, and to his relief Hermione was much too preoccupied these days to badger him about Occlumency; she was spending a lot of time muttering to herself, and had not laid out any elf clothes for days.

She was not the only person acting oddly as the OWLs drew steadily nearer. Ernie Macmillan had developed an irritating habit of interrogating people about their study habits.

“How many hours d’you think you’re doing a day?” he demanded of Harry and Ron as they queued outside Herbology, a manic gleam in his eyes.

“I dunno,” said Ron. “A few.”

“More or less than eight?”

“Less, I s’pose,” said Ron, looking slightly alarmed.

“I’m doing eight,” said Ernie, puffing out his chest. “Eight or nine. I’m getting an hour in before breakfast every day. Eights my average. I can do ten on a good weekend day. I did nine and a half on Monday. Not so good on Tuesday - only seven and a quarter. Then on Wednesday -”

Harry was deeply thankful that Professor Sprout ushered them into greenhouse three at that point, forcing Ernie to abandon his recital.

Meanwhile, Draco Malfoy had found a different way to induce panic.

“Of course, it’s not what you know,” he was heard to tell Crabbe and Goyle loudly outside Potions a few days before the exams were to start, “it’s who you know. Now, Father’s been friendly with the head of the Wizarding Examinations Authority for years — old Griselda

Marchbanks - we've had her round for dinner and everything…"

"Do you think that's true?" Hermione whispered in alarm to Harry and Ron.

"Nothing we can do about it if it is," said Ron gloomily.

"I don't think it's true," said Neville quietly from behind them. "Because Griselda Marchbanks is a friend of my gran's, and she's never mentioned the Malfoys."

"What's she like, Neville?" asked Hermione at once. "Is she strict?"

"Bit like Gran, really," said Neville in a subdued voice.

"Knowing her won't hurt your chances, though, will it?" Ron told him encouragingly.

"Oh, I don't think it will make any difference," said Neville, still more miserably. "Grans always telling Professor Marchbanks I'm not as good as my dad… well… you saw what she's like at St Mungo's" Neville looked fixedly at the floor. Harry, Ron and Hermione glanced at each other, but didn't know what to say. It was the first time Neville had acknowledged that they had met at the wizarding hospital.

Meanwhile, a flourishing black-market trade in aids to concentration, mental agility and wakefulness had sprung up among the fifth- and seventh-years. Harry and Ron were much tempted by the bottle of Baruffio's Brain Elixir offered to them by Ravenclaw sixth-year Eddie Carmichael, who swore it was solely responsible for the nine 'Outstanding' OWLs he had gained the previous summer and was offering a whole pint for a mere twelve Galleons. Ron assured Harry he would reimburse him for his half the moment he left Hogwarts and got a job, but before they could close the deal, Hermione had confiscated the bottle from Carmichael and poured the contents down a toilet.

"Hermione, we wanted to buy that!" shouted Ron.

"Don't be stupid," she snarled. "You might as well take Harold Dingle's powdered dragon claw and have done with it."

"Dingle's got powdered dragon claw?" said Ron eagerly.

"Not any more," said Hermione. "I confiscated that, too. None of these things actually work, you know."

"Dragon claw does work!" said Ron. "It's supposed to be incredible, really gives your brain a boost, you come over all cunning for a few hours - Hermione, let me have a pinch, go on, it can't hurt -"

"This stuff can," said Hermione grimly. "I've had a look at it, and it's actually dried Doxy droppings."

This information took the edge off Harry and Rons desire for brain stimulants.

They received their examination timetables and details of the procedure for OWLs during their next Transfiguration lesson.

“As you can see,” Professor McGonagall told the class as they copied down the dates and times of their exams from the blackboard, “your OWLs are spread over two successive weeks. You will sit the theory exams in the mornings and the practice in the afternoons. Your practical Astronomy examination will, of course, take place at night.

“Now, I must warn you that the most stringent anti-cheating charms have been applied to your examination papers. Auto-Answer Quills are banned from the examination hall, as are Remembralls, Detachable Cribbing Cuffs and Self-Correcting Ink. Every year, I am afraid to say, seems to harbor at least one student who thinks that he or she can get around the Wizarding Examinations Authority’s rules. I can only hope that it is nobody in Gryffindor. Our new - Headmistress —” Professor McGonagall pronounced the word with the same look on her face that Aunt Petunia had whenever she was contemplating a particularly stubborn bit of dirt “- has asked the Heads of House to tell their students that cheating will be punished most severely - because, of course, your examination results will reflect upon the Headmistress’s new regime at the school -”

Professor McGonagall gave a tiny sigh; Harry saw the nostrils of her sharp nose flare.

“- however, that is no reason not to do your very best. You have your own futures to think about.”

“Please, Professor,” said Hermione, her hand in the air, “when will we find out our results?”

“An owl will be sent to you some time in July” said Professor McGonagall.

“Excellent,” said Dean Thomas in an audible whisper, “so we don’t have to worry about it till the holidays.”

Harry imagined sitting in his bedroom in Privet Drive in six weeks’ time, waiting for his OWL results. Well, he thought dully, at least he would be sure of one bit of post next summer.

Their first examination, Theory of Charms, was scheduled for Monday morning. Harry agreed to test Hermione after lunch on Sunday, but regretted it almost at once; she was very agitated and kept snatching the book back from him to check that she had got the answer completely right, finally hitting him hard on the nose with the sharp edge of Achievements in Charming.

“Why don’t you just do it yourself?” he said firmly, handing the book back to her, his eyes watering.

Meanwhile, Ron was reading two years’ worth of Charms notes with his fingers in his ears, his lips moving soundlessly; Seamus Finnigan was lying flat on his back on the floor, reciting the

definition of a Substantive Charm while Dean checked it against The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 5; and Parvati and Lavender, who were practicing basic Locomotion Charms, were making their pencil-cases race each other around the edge of the table.

Dinner was a subdued affair that night. Harry and Ron did not talk much, but ate with gusto, having studied hard all day. Hermione, on the other hand, kept putting down her knife and fork and diving under the table for her bag, from which she would seize a book to check some fact or figure. Ron was just telling her that she ought to eat a decent meal or she would not sleep that night, when her fork slid from her limp fingers and landed with a loud tinkle on her plate.

“Oh, my goodness,” she said faintly, staring into the Entrance Hall. “Is that them? Is that the examiners?”

Harry and Ron whipped around on their bench. Through the doors to the Great Hall they could see Umbridge standing with a small group of ancient-looking witches and wizards. Umbridge, Harry was pleased to see, looked rather nervous.

“Shall we go and have a closer look?” said Ron.

Harry and Hermione nodded and they hastened towards the double doors into the Entrance Hall, slowing down as they stepped over the threshold to walk sedately past the examiners. Harry thought Professor Marchbanks must be the tiny, stooped witch with a face so lined it looked as though it had been draped in cobwebs; Umbridge was speaking to her deferentially. Professor Marchbanks seemed to be a little deaf; she was answering Professor Umbridge very loudly considering they were only a foot apart.

“Journey was fine, journey was fine, we’ve made it plenty of times before!” she said impatiently. “Now, I haven’t heard from Dumbledore lately!” she added, peering around the Hall as though hopeful he might suddenly emerge from a broom cupboard. “No idea where he is, I suppose?”

“None at all,” said Umbridge, shooting a malevolent look at Harry, Ron and Hermione, who were now dawdling around the foot of the stairs as Ron pretended to do up his shoelace. “But I daresay the Ministry of Magic will track him down soon enough.”

“I doubt it,” shouted tiny Professor Marchbanks, “not if Dumbledore doesn’t want to be found! I should know… examined him personally in Transfiguration and Charms when he did NEWTs… did things with a wand I’d never seen before.”

“Yes… well…” said Professor Umbridge as Harry, Ron and Hermione dragged their feet up the marble staircase as slowly as they dared, “let me show you to the staff room. I daresay you’d like a cup of tea after your journey.”

It was an uncomfortable sort of an evening. Everyone was trying to do some last-minute revising but nobody seemed to be getting very far. Harry went to bed early but then lay awake for what felt like hours. He remembered his careers consultation and McGonagall’s furious declaration that she would help him become an Auror if it was the last thing she did. He wished he had

expressed a more achievable ambition now that exam time was here. He knew he was not the only one lying awake, but none of the others in the dormitory spoke and finally, one by one, they fell asleep.

None of the fifth-years talked very much at breakfast next day, either: Parvati was practicing incantations under her breath while the salt cellar in front of her twitched; Hermione was rereading Achievements in Charming so fast that her eyes appeared blurred; and Neville kept dropping his knife and fork and knocking over the marmalade.

Once breakfast was over, the fifth- and seventh-years milled around in the Entrance Hall while the other students went off to lessons; then, at half past nine, they were called forwards class by class to re-enter the Great Hall, which had been rearranged exactly as Harry had seen it in the Pensieve when his father, Sirius and Snape had been taking their OWLs; the four house tables had been removed and replaced instead with many tables for one, all facing the staff-table end of the Hall where Professor McGonagall stood facing them. When they were all seated and quiet, she said, “You may begin,” and turned over an enormous hour-glass on the desk beside her, on which there were also spare quills, ink bottles and rolls of parchment.

Harry turned over his paper, his heart thumping hard - three rows to his right and four seats ahead Hermione was already scribbling - and lowered his eyes to the first question: *a) Give the incantation and b) describe the wand movement required to make objects fly.*

Harry had a fleeting memory of a club soaring high into the air and landing loudly on the thick skull of a troll… smiling slightly, he bent over the paper and began to write.

“Well, it wasn’t too bad, was it?” asked Hermione anxiously in the Entrance Hall two hours later, still clutching the exam paper. “I’m not sure I did myself justice on Cheering Charms, I just ran out of time. Did you put in the counter-charm for hiccoughs? I wasn’t, sure whether I ought to, it felt like too much - and on question twenty-three -”

“Hermione,” said Ron sternly, “we’ve been through this before… we’re not going through every exam afterwards, it’s bad enough doing them once.”

The fifth-years ate lunch with the rest of the school (the four house tables had reappeared for the lunch hour), then they trooped off into the small chamber beside the Great Hall, where they were to wait until called for their practical examination. As small groups of students were called forwards in alphabetical order, those left behind muttered incantations and practiced wand movements, occasionally poking each other in the back or eye by mistake.

Hermione’s name was called. Trembling, she left the chamber with Anthony Goldstein, Gregory Goyle and Daphne Greengrass. Students who had already been tested did not return afterwards, so Harry and Ron had no idea how Hermione had done.

“She’ll be fine, remember she got a hundred and twelve percent on one of our Charms tests?” said Ron.

Ten minutes later, Professor Flitwick called, “Parkinson, Pansy - Patil, Padma - Patil, Parvati - Potter, Harry.”

“Good luck,” said Ron quietly. Harry walked into the Great Hall, clutching his wand so tightly his hand shook.

“Professor Tofty is free, Potter,” squeaked Professor Flitwick, who was standing just inside the door. He pointed Harry towards what looked like the very oldest and baldest examiner who was sitting behind a small table in a far corner, a short distance from Professor Marchbanks, who was halfway through testing Draco Malfoy.

“Potter, is it?” said Professor Tofty, consulting his notes and peering over his pince-nez at Harry as he approached. “The famous Potter?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry distinctly saw Malfoy throw a scathing look over at him; the wine-glass Malfoy had been levitating fell to the floor and smashed. Harry could not suppress a grin; Professor Tofty smiled back at him encouragingly.

“That’s it,” he said in his quavery old voice, “no need to be nervous. Now, if I could ask you to take this egg cup and make it do some cartwheels for me.”

On the whole, Harry thought it went rather well. His Levitation Charm was certainly much better than Malfoy’s had been, though he wished he had not mixed up the incantations for Color Change and Growth Charms, so that the rat he was supposed to be turning orange swelled shockingly and was the size of a badger before Harry could rectify his mistake. He was glad Hermione had not been in the Hall at the time and neglected to mention it to her afterwards. He could tell Ron, though; Ron had caused a dinner plate to mutate into a large mushroom and had no idea how it had happened.

There was no time to relax that night; they went straight to the common room after dinner and submerged themselves in revision for Transfiguration next day; Harry went to bed with his head buzzing with complex spell models and theories.

He forgot the definition of a Switching Spell during his written paper next morning but thought his practical could have been a lot worse. At least he managed to Vanish the whole of his iguana, whereas poor Hannah Abbott lost her head completely at the next table and somehow managed to multiply her ferret into a flock of flamingos, causing the examination to be halted for ten minutes while the birds were captured and carried out of the Hall.

They had their Herbology exam on Wednesday (other than a small bite from a Fanged Geranium, Harry felt he had done reasonably well); and then, on Thursday, Defense Against the Dark Arts. Here, for the first time, Harry felt sure he had passed. He had no problem with any of the written questions and took particular pleasure, during the practical examination, in performing all the counter-jinxes and defensive spells right in front of Umbridge, who was watching coolly from near the doors into the Entrance Hall.

“Oh, bravo!” cried Professor Tofty, who was examining Harry again, when Harry demonstrated a perfect Boggart banishing spell. “Very good indeed! Well, I think that’s all, Potter… unless…”

He leaned forwards a little.

“I heard, from my dear friend Tiberius Ogden, that you can produce a Patronus? For a bonus point…?”

Harry raised his wand, looked directly at Umbridge and imagined her being sacked.

“Expecto patronum!”

His silver stag erupted from the end of his wand and cantered the length of the Hall. All of the examiners looked around to watch its progress and when it dissolved into silver mist Professor Tofty clapped his veined and knotted hands enthusiastically.

“Excellent!” he said. “Very well, Potter, you may go!”

As Harry passed Umbridge beside the door, their eyes met. There was a nasty smile playing around her wide, slack mouth, but he did not care. Unless he was very much mistaken (and he was not planning on telling anybody, in case he was), he had just achieved an ‘Outstanding’ OWL.

On Friday, Harry and Ron had a day off while Hermione sat her Ancient Runes exam, and as they had the whole weekend in front of them they permitted themselves a break from revision. They stretched and yawned beside the open window, through which warm summer air was wafting as they played wizard chess. Harry could see Hagrid in the distance, teaching a class on the edge of the Forest. He was trying to guess what creatures they were examining - he thought it must be unicorns, because the boys seemed to be standing back a little - when the portrait hole opened and Hermione clambered in, looking thoroughly bad-tempered.

“How were the Runes?” said Ron, yawning and stretching.

“I mistranslated ehwaz,” said Hermione furiously. “It means partnership, not Defense; I mixed it up with eihwaz.”

“Ah well,” said Ron lazily, “that’s only one mistake, isn’t it, you’ll still get -”

“Oh, shut up!” said Hermione angrily. “It could be the one mistake that makes the difference between a pass and a fail. And what’s more, someone’s put another Niffler in Umbridge’s office. I don’t know how they got it through that new door, but I just walked past there and Umbridge is shrieking her head off - by the sound of it, it tried to take a chunk out of her leg -”

“Good,” said Harry and Ron together.

“It is not good!” said Hermione hotly. “She thinks it’s Hagrid doing it, remember? And we do not want Hagrid chucked out!”

“He’s teaching at the moment; she can’t blame him,” said Harry, gesturing out of the window.

“Oh, you’re so naive sometimes, Harry.You really think Umbridge will wait for proof?” said Hermione, who seemed determined to be in a towering temper, and she swept off towards the girls’ dormitories, banging the door behind her.

“Such a lovely, sweet-tempered girl,” said Ron, very quietly, prodding his queen forward to beat up one of Harry’s knights.

Hermione’s bad mood persisted for most of the weekend, though Harry and Ron found it quite easy to ignore as they spent most of Saturday and Sunday revising for Potions on Monday, the exam which Harry had been looking forward to least - and which he was sure would be the downfall of his ambitions to become an Auror. Sure enough, he found the written paper difficult, though he thought he might have got full marks on the question about Polyjuice Potion; he could describe its effects accurately, having taken it illegally in his second year.

The afternoon practical was not as dreadful as he had expected it to be. With Snape absent from the proceedings, he found that he was much more relaxed than he usually was while making potions. Neville, who was sitting very near Harry, also looked happier than Harry had ever seen him during a Potions class. When Professor Marchbanks said, “Step away from your cauldrons, please, the examination is over,” Harry corked his sample flask feeling that he might not have achieved a good grade but he had, with luck, avoided a fail.

“Only four exams left,” said Parvati Patil wearily as they headed back to Gryffindor common room.

“Only!” said Hermione snappishly. “I’ve got Arithmancy and it’s probably the toughest subject there is!”

Nobody was foolish enough to snap back, so she was unable to vent her spleen on any of them and was reduced to telling off some first-years for giggling too loudly in the common room.

Harry was determined to perform well in Tuesdays Care of Magical Creatures exam so as not to let Hagrid down. The practical examination took place in the afternoon on the lawn on the edge of the Forbidden Forest, where students were required to correctly identify the Knarl hidden among a dozen hedgehogs (the trick was to offer them all milk in turn: Knarls, highly suspicious creatures whose quills had many magical properties, generally went berserk at what they saw as an attempt to poison them); then demonstrate correct handling of a Bowtruckle; feed and clean out a Fire Crab without sustaining serious burns; and choose, from a wide selection of food, the diet they would give a sick unicorn.

Harry could see Hagrid watching anxiously out of his cabin window. When Harry’s examiner, a plump little witch this time, smiled at him and told him he could leave, Harry gave Hagrid a

fleeting thumbs-up before heading back to the castle.

The Astronomy theory paper on Wednesday morning went well enough. Harry was not convinced he had got the names of all Jupiter's moons right, but was at least confident that none of them was inhabited by mice. They had to wait until evening for their practical Astronomy; the afternoon was devoted instead to Divination.

Even by Harry's low standards in Divination, the exam went very badly. He might as well have tried to see moving pictures on the desktop as in the stubbornly blank crystal ball; he lost his head completely during tea-leaf reading, saying it looked to him as though Professor Marchbanks would shortly be meeting a round, dark, soggy stranger, and rounded off the whole fiasco by mixing up the life and head lines on her palm and informing her that she ought to have died the previous Tuesday.

"Well, we were always going to fail that one," said Ron gloomily as they ascended the marble staircase. He had just made Harry feel rather better by telling him how he had told the examiner in detail about the ugly man with a wart on his nose in his crystal ball, only to look up and realize he had been describing his examiner's reflection.

"We shouldn't have taken the stupid subject in the first place," said Harry.

"Still, at least we can give it up now."

"Yeah," said Harry. "No more pretending we care what happens when Jupiter and Uranus get too friendly."

"And from now on, I don't care if my tea-leaves spell die, Ron, die - I'm just chucking them in the bin where they belong."

Harry laughed just as Hermione came running up behind them. He stopped laughing at once, in case it annoyed her.

"Well, I think I've done all right in Arithmancy" she said, and Harry and Ron both sighed with relief. "Just time for a quick look over our star-charts before dinner, then…"

When they reached the top of the Astronomy Tower at eleven o'clock, they found a perfect night for stargazing, cloudless and still. The grounds were bathed in silvery moonlight and there was a slight chill in the air. Each of them set up his or her telescope and, when Professor Marchbanks gave the word, proceeded to fill in the blank star-chart they had been given.

Professors Marchbanks and Tofty strolled among them, watching as they entered the precise positions of the stars and planets they were observing. All was quiet except for the rustle of parchment, the occasional creak of a telescope as it was adjusted on its stand, and the scribbling of many quills. Half an hour passed, then an hour; the little squares of reflected gold light flickering on the ground below started to vanish as lights in the castle windows were extinguished.

As Harry completed the constellation Orion on his chart, however, the front doors of the castle opened directly below the parapet where he was standing, so that light spilled down the stone steps a little way across the lawn. Harry glanced down as he made a slight adjustment to the position of his telescope and saw five or six elongated shadows moving over the brightly lit grass before the doors swung shut and the lawn became a sea of darkness once more.

Harry put his eye back to his telescope and refocused it, now examining Venus. He looked down at his chart to enter the planet there, but something distracted him; pausing with his quill suspended over the parchment, he squinted down into the shadowy grounds and saw half a dozen figures walking over the lawn. If they had not been moving, and the moonlight had not been gilding the tops of their heads, they would have been indistinguishable from the dark ground on which they walked. Even at this distance, Harry had a funny feeling he recognized the walk of the squattest of them, who seemed to be leading the group.

He could not think why Umbridge would be taking a stroll outside after midnight, much less accompanied by five others. Then somebody coughed behind him, and he remembered that he was halfway through an exam. He had quite forgotten Venus's position. Jamming his eye to his telescope, he found it again and was once more about to enter it on his chart when, alert for any odd sound, he heard a distant knock which echoed through the deserted grounds, followed immediately by the muffled barking of a large dog.

He looked up, his heart hammering. There were lights on in Hagrid's windows and the people he had observed crossing the lawn were now silhouetted against them. The door opened and he distinctly saw six sharply defined figures walk over the threshold. The door closed again and there was silence.

Harry felt very uneasy. He glanced around to see whether Ron or Hermione had noticed what he had, but Professor Marchbanks came walking behind him at that moment and, not wanting to look as though he was sneaking looks at anyone else's work, Harry hastily bent over his starchart and pretended to be adding notes to it while really peering over the top of the parapet towards Hagrid's cabin. Figures were now moving across the cabin windows, temporarily blocking the light.

He could feel Professor Marchbanks's eyes on the back of his neck and pressed his eye again to his telescope, staring up at the moon though he had marked its position an hour ago, but as Professor Marchbanks moved on he heard a roar from the distant cabin that echoed through the darkness right to the top of the Astronomy Tower. Several of the people around Harry ducked out from behind their telescopes and peered instead in the direction of Hagrid's cabin.

Professor Tofty gave another dry little cough.

"Try and concentrate, now, boys and girls," he said softly.

Most people returned to their telescopes. Harry looked to his left. Hermione was gazing transfixed at Hagrid's cabin.

“Ahem - twenty minutes to go,” said Professor Tofty.

Hermione jumped and returned at once to her star-chart; Harry looked down at his own and noticed that he had mislabelled Venus as Mars. He bent to correct it.

There was a loud BANG from the grounds. Several people cried ‘Ouch!’ when they poked themselves in the face with the ends of their telescopes as they hastened to see what was going on below.

Hagrid’s door had burst open and by the light flooding out of the cabin they saw him quite clearly a massive figure roaring and brandishing his fists, surrounded by six people, all of whom, judging by the tiny threads of red light they were casting in his direction, seemed to be attempting to Stun him.

“No!” cried Hermione.

“My dear!” said Professor Tofty in a scandalised voice. “This is an examination!”

But nobody was paying the slightest attention to their star-charts any more. Jets of red light were still flying about beside Hagrid’s cabin, yet somehow they seemed to be bouncing off him; he was still upright and still, as far as Harry could see, fighting. Cries and yells echoed across the grounds; a man yelled, “Be reasonable, Hagrid!”

Hagrid roared, “Reasonable be damned, yeh won’ take me like this, Dawlish!”

Harry could see the tiny outline of Fang, attempting to defend Hagrid, leaping repeatedly at the wizards surrounding him until a Stunning Spell caught him and he fell to the ground. Hagrid gave a howl of fury, lifted the culprit bodily from the ground and threw him; the man flew what looked like ten feet and did not get up again. Hermione gasped, both hands over her mouth; Harry looked round at Ron and saw that he, too, was looking scared. None of them had ever seen Hagrid in a real temper before.

“Look!” squealed Parvati, who was leaning over the parapet and pointing to the foot of the castle where the front doors had opened again; more light was spilling out on to the dark lawn and a single long black shadow was now rippling across the lawn.

“Now, really!” said Professor Tofty anxiously. “Only sixteen minutes left, you know!”

But nobody paid him the slightest attention: they were watching the person now sprinting towards the battle beside Hagrid’s cabin.

“How dare you!” the figure shouted as she ran. “How dare you!”

“It’s McGonagall!” whispered Hermione.

“Leave him alone! Alone, I say!” said Professor McGonagall’s voice through the darkness. “On

what grounds are you attacking him? He has done nothing, nothing to warrant such -”

Hermione, Parvati and Lavender all screamed. No fewer than four Stunners had shot from the figures around the cabin toward Professor McGonagall. Halfway between cabin and castle the red beams collided with her; for a moment she looked luminous, illuminated by an eerie red glow, then was lifted right off her feet, landed hard on her back, and moved no more.

“Galloping gargoyles!” shouted Professor Tofty, who seemed to have forgotten the exam completely. “Not so much as a warning! Outrageous behavior!”

“COWARDS!” bellowed Hagrid, his voice carring clearly to the top of the tower, and several lights flickered back on inside the castle. “RUDDY COWARDS! HAVE SOME O’ THAT - AN’ THAT -”

“Oh my —” gasped Hermione.

Hagrid took two massive swipes at his closest attackers; judging by their immediate collapse, they had been knocked cold. Harry saw Hagrid double over, and thought he had finally been overcome by a spell. But, on the contrary, next moment Hagrid was standing again with what appeared to be a sack on his back - then Harry realized that Fang’s limp body was draped around his shoulders.

“Get him, get him!” screamed Umbridge, but her remaining helper seemed highly reluctant to go within reach of Hagrid’s fists; indeed, he was backing away so fast he tripped over one of his unconscious colleagues and fell over. Hagrid had turned and begun to run with Fang still hung around his neck. Umbridge sent one last Stunning Spell after him but it missed; and Hagrid, running full-pelt towards the distant gates, disappeared into the darkness.

There was a long minutes quivering silence as everybody gazed open-mouthed into the grounds. Then Professor Tofty’s voice said feebly, “Um… five minutes to go, everybody.”

Though he had only filled in two-thirds of his chart, Harry was desperate for the exam to end. When it came at last he, Ron and Hermione forced their telescopes haphazardly back into their holders and dashed back down the spiral staircase. None of the students were going to bed; they were all talking loudly and excitedly at the foot of the stairs about what they had witnessed.

“That evil woman!” gasped Hermione, who seemed to be having difficulty talking due to rage. “Trying to sneak up on Hagrid in the dead of night!”

“She clearly wanted to avoid another scene like Trelawney’s,” said Ernie Macmillan sagely, squeezing over to join them.

“Hagrid did well, didn’t he?” said Ron, who looked more alarmed than impressed. “How come all the spells bounced off him?”

“It’ll be his giant blood,” said Hermione shakily. “Its very hard to Stun a giant, they’re like trolls,

really tough… but poor Professor McGonagall… four Stunners straight in the chest and she's not exactly young, is she?"

"Dreadful, dreadful," said Ernie, shaking his head pompously. "Well, I'm off to bed. Night, all."

People around them were drifting away, still talking excitedly about what they had just seen.

"At least they didn't get to take Hagrid off to Azkaban," said Ron. "I 'spect he's gone to join Dumbledore, hasn't he?"

"I suppose so," said Hermione, who looked tearful. "Oh, this is awful, I really thought Dumbledore would be back before long, but now we've lost Hagrid too."

They traipsed back to the Gryffindor common room to find it full. The commotion out in the grounds had woken several people, who had hastened to rouse their friends. Seamus and Dean, who had arrived ahead of Harry, Ron and Hermione, were now telling everyone what they had seen and heard from the top of the Astronomy Tower.

"But why sack Hagrid now?" asked Angelina Johnson, shaking her head. "It's not like Trelawney; he's been teaching much better than usual this year!"

"Umbridge hates part-humans," said Hermione bitterly, flopping down into an armchair. "She was always going to try and get Hagrid out."

"And she thought Hagrid was putting Nifflers in her office," piped up Katie Bell.

"Oh, blimey," said Lee Jordan, covering his mouth. "It's me who's been putting the Nifflers in her office. Fred and George left me a couple; I've been levitating them in through her window."

"She'd have sacked him anyway" said Dean. "He was too close to Dumbledore."

"That's true," said Harry, sinking into an armchair beside Hermione's.

"I just hope Professor McGonagall's all right," said Lavender tearfully.

"They carried her back up to the castle, we watched through the dormitory window," said Colin Creevey "She didn't look very well."

"Madam Pomfrey will sort her out," said Alicia Spinnet firmly. "She's never failed yet."

It was nearly four in the morning before the common room cleared. Harry felt wide awake; the image of Hagrid sprinting away into the dark was haunting him; he was so angry with Umbridge he could not think of a punishment bad enough for her, though Ron's suggestion of having her fed to a box of starving Blast-Ended Skrewts had its merits. He fell asleep contemplating hideous revenges and arose from bed three hours later feeling distinctly unrested.

Their final exam, History of Magic, was not to take place until that afternoon. Harry would very much have liked to go back to bed after breakfast, but he had been counting on the morning for a spot of last-minute revision, so instead he sat with his head in his hands by the common-room window, trying hard not to doze off as he read through some of the notes stacked three-and-a-half feet high that Hermione had lent him.

The fifth-years entered the Great Hall at two o'clock and took their places in front of their facedown examination papers. Harry felt exhausted. He just wanted this to be over, so that he could go and sleep; then tomorrow, he and Ron were going to go down to the Quidditch pitch - he was going to have a fly on Rons broom - and savor their freedom from revision.

"Turn over your papers," said Professor Marchbanks from the front of the Hall, flicking over the giant hour-glass. "You may begin."

Harry stared fixedly at the first question. It was several seconds before it occurred to him that he had not taken in a word of it; there was a wasp buzzing distractingly against one of the high windows. Slowly, tortuously, he at last began to write an answer.

He was finding it very difficult to remember names and kept confusing dates. He simply skipped question four *(In your opinion, did wand legislation contribute to, or lead to better control of, goblin riots of the eighteenth century?),* thinking that he would go back to it if he had time at the end. He had a stab at question five *(How wasthe Statute of Secrecy breached in 1749 and what measures were introduced to prevent a recurrence?)* but had a nagging suspicion that he had missed several important points; he had a feeling vampires had come into the story somewhere.

He looked ahead for a question he could definitely answer and his eyes alighted upon number ten*: Describe the circumstances that led to the form ation of the International Confederation of Wizards and explain why the warlocks of Liechtenstein refused to join.*

I know this, Harry thought, though his brain felt torpid and slack. He could visualize a heading, in Hermione's handwriting: *The formation of the International Confederation of Wizards…* he had read those notes only this morning.

He began to write, looking up now and again to check the large hour-glass on the desk beside Professor Marchbanks. He was sitting right behind Parvati Patil, whose long dark hair fell below the back of her chair. Once or twice he found himself staring at the tiny golden lights that glistened in it when she moved her head slightly, and had to give his own head a little shake to clear it.

… the first Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards was Pierre Bonaccord, but his appointment was contested by the wizarding community of Liechtenstein, because -

All around Harry quills were scratching on parchment like scurrying, burrowing rats. The sun was very hot on the back of his head. What was it that Bonaccord had done to offend the wizards of Liechtenstein? Harry had a feeling it had something to do with trolls… he gazed blankly at the

back of Parvati's head again. If he could only perform Legilimency and open a window in the back of her head and see what it was about trolls that had caused the breach between Pierre Bonaccord and Liechtenstein…

Harry closed his eyes and buried his face in his hands, so that the glowing red of his eyelids grew dark and cool. Bonaccord had wanted to stop troll-hunting and give the trolls rights… but Liechtenstein was having problems with a tribe of particularly vicious mountain trolls… that was it.

He opened his eyes; they stung and watered at the sight of the blazing white parchment. Slowly, he wrote two lines about the trolls, then read through what he had done so far. It did not seem very informative or detailed, yet he was sure Hermione's notes on the Confederation had gone on for pages and pages.

He closed his eyes again, trying to see them, trying to remember… the Confederation had met for the first time in France, yes, he had written that already…

Goblins had tried to attend and been ousted… he had written that, too…

And nobody from Liechtenstein had wanted to come…

Think, he told himself, his face in his hands, while all around him quills scratched out neverending answers and the sand trickled through the hour-glass at the front…

He was walking along the cool, dark corridor to the Department of Mysteries again, walking with a firm and purposeful tread, breaking occasionally into a run, determined to reach his destination at last… the black door swung open for him as usual, and here he was in the circular room with its many doors…

Straight across the stone floor and through the second door… patches of dancing light on the walls and floor and that odd mechanical clicking, but no time to explore, he must hurry…

He jogged the last few feet to the third door, which swung open just like the others…

Once again he was in the cathedral-sized room full of shelves and glass spheres… his heart was beating very fast now… he was going to get there this time… when he reached number ninety-seven he turned left and hurried along the aisle between two rows…

But there was a shape on the floor at the very end, a black shape moving on the floor like a wounded animal… Harry's stomach contracted with fear… with excitement…

A voice issued from his own mouth, a high, cold voice empty of any human kindness…

"Take it for me… lift it down, now… I cannot touch it… but you can"

The black shape on the floor shifted a little. Harry saw a long-fingered white hand clutching a

wand rise at the end of his own arm… heard the high, cold voice say “Crucio!”

The man on the floor let out a scream of pain, attempted to stand but fell back, writhing. Harry was laughing. He raised his wand, the curse lifted and the figure groaned and became motionless.

“Lord Voldemort is waiting”

Very slowly, his arms trembling, the man on the ground raised his shoulders a few inches and lifted his head. His face was bloodstained and gaunt, twisted in pain yet rigid with defiance…

“You’ll have to kill me,” whispered Sirius.

“Undoubtedly I shall in the end,” said the cold voice. “But you will fetch it for me first, Black… you think you have felt pain thus far? Think again… we have hours ahead of us and nobody to hear you scream…”

But somebody screamed as Voldemort lowered his wand again; somebody yelled and fell sideways off a hot desk on to the cold stone floor; Harry awoke as he hit the ground, still yelling, his scar on fire, as the Great Hall erupted all around him.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Out of the Fire

"I'm not going… I don't need the hospital wing… I don't want"

He was gibbering as he tried to pull away from Professor Tofty, who was looking at Harry with much concern after helping him out into the Entrance Hall with the students all around them staring.

"I'm - I'm fine, sir," Harry stammered, wiping the sweat from his face. "Really… I just fell asleep… had a nightmare…"

"Pressure of examinations!" said the old wizard sympathetically, patting Harry shakily on the shoulder. "It happens, young man, it happens! Now, a cooling drink of water, and perhaps you will be ready to return to the Great Hall? The examination is nearly over, but you may be able to round off your last answer nicely?"

"Yes," said Harry wildly. "I mean… no… I've done - done as much as I can, I think…"

"Very well, very well," said the old wizard gently. "I shall go and collect your examination paper and I suggest that you go and have a nice lie down."

"I'll do that," said Harry, nodding vigorously. "Thanks very much."

The second that the old man's heels disappeared over the threshold into the Great Hall, Harry ran up the marble staircase, hurtled along the corridors so fast the portraits he passed muttered reproaches, up more flights of stairs, and finally burst like a hurricane through the double doors of the hospital wing, causing Madam Pomfrey - who had been spooning some bright blue liquid into Montague's open mouth - to shriek in alarm.

"Potter, what do you think you're doing?"

"I need to see Professor McGonagall," gasped Harry, the breath tearing his lungs. "Now… it's urgent!"

"She's not here, Potter," said Madam Pomfrey sadly. "She was transferred to St. Mungo's this morning. Four Stunning Spells straight to the chest at her age? It's a wonder they didn't kill her."

"She's… gone?" said Harry, shocked.

The bell rang just outside the dormitory and he heard the usual distant rumbling of students starting to flood out into the corridors above and below him. He remained quite still, looking at Madam Pomfrey. Terror was rising inside him.

There was nobody left to tell. Dumbledore had gone, Hagrid had gone, but he had always expected Professor McGonagall to be there, irascible and inflexible, perhaps, but always dependably, solidly present…

“I don’t wonder you’re shocked, Potter,” said Madam Pomfrey, with a kind of fierce approval in her face. “As if one of them could have Stunned Minerva McGonagall face-on by daylight! Cowardice, that’s what it was… despicable cowardice… if I wasn’t worried what would happen to you students without me, I’d resign in protest.”

“Yes,” said Harry blankly.

He wheeled around and strode blindly from the hospital wing into the teeming corridor where he stood, buffeted by the crowd, panic expanding inside him like poison gas so that his head swam and he could not think what to do…

Ron and Hermione, said a voice in his head.

He was running again, pushing students out of the way, oblivious to their angry protests. He sprinted back down two floors and was at the top of the marble staircase when he saw them hurrying towards him.

“Harry!” said Hermione at once, looking very frightened. “What happened? Are you all right? Are you ill?”

“Where have you been?” demanded Ron.

“Come with me,” Harry said quickly. “Come on, I’ve got to tell you something.”

He led them along the first-floor corridor, peering through doorways, and at last found an empty classroom into which he dived, closing the door behind Ron and Hermione the moment they were inside, and leaned against it, facing them.

“Voldemort’s got Sirius.”

“What?”

“How d’you -?”

“Saw it. Just now. When I fell asleep in the exam.”

“But - but where? How?” said Hermione, whose face was white.

“I dunno how,” said Harry. “But I know exactly where. There’s a room in the Department of Mysteries full of shelves covered in these little glass balls and they’re at the end of row ninety-seven… he’s trying to use Sirius to get whatever it is he wants from in there… he’s torturing him… says he’ll end by killing him!”

Harry found his voice was shaking, as were his knees. He moved over to a desk and sat down on it, trying to master himself.

“How’re we going to get there?” he asked them.

There was a moment’s silence. Then Ron said, “G-get there?”

“Get to the Department of Mysteries, so we can rescue Sirius!” Harry said loudly.

“But - Harry…” said Ron weakly.

“What? What?” said Harry.

He could not understand why they were both gaping at him as though he was asking them something unreasonable.

“Harry,” said Hermione in a rather frightened voice, “er… how… how did Voldemort get into the Ministry of Magic without anybody realizing he was there?”

“How do I know?” bellowed Harry. “The question is how we’re going to get in there!”

“But… Harry, think about this,” said Hermione, taking a step towards him, “it’s five o’clock in the afternoon… the Ministry of Magic must be full of workers… how would Voldemort and Sirius have got in without being seen? Harry… they’re probably the two most wanted wizards in the world… you think they could get into a building full of Aurors undetected?”

“I dunno, Voldemort used an Invisibility Cloak or something!” Harry shouted. “Anyway, the Department of Mysteries has always been completely empty whenever I’ve been -”

“You’ve never been there, Harry,” said Hermione quietly. “You’ve dreamed about the place, that’s all.”

“They’re not normal dreams!” Harry shouted in her face, standing up and taking a step closer to her in turn. He wanted to shake her. “How d’you explain Ron’s dad then, what was all that about, how come I knew what had happened to him?”

“He’s got a point,” said Ron quietly, looking at Hermione.

“But this is just — just sounds unlikely.” said Hermione desperately. “Harry, how on earth could Voldemort have got hold of Sirius when he’s been in Grimmauld Place all the time?”

“Sirius might’ve cracked and just wanted some fresh air,” said Ron, sounding worried. “He’s been desperate to get out of that house for ages -”

“But why,” Hermione persisted, “why on earth would Voldemort want to use Sirius to get the weapon, or whatever the thing is?”

“I dunno, there could be loads of reasons!” Harry yelled at her. “Maybe Sirius is just someone Voldemort doesn’t care about seeing hurt -”

“You know what, I’ve just thought of something,” said Ron in a hushed voice. “Sirius’s brother was a Death Eater, wasn’t he? Maybe he told Sirius the secret of how to get the weapon!”

“Yeah - and that’s why Dumbledore’s been so keen to keep Sirius locked up all the time!” said Harry.

“Look, I’m sorry,” cried Hermione, “but neither of you is making sense, and we’ve got no proof for any of this, no proof Voldemort and Sirius are even there -”

“Hermione, Harrys seen them!” said Ron, rounding on her.

“Okay,” she said, looking frightened yet determined, “I’ve just got to say this -”

“What?”

“You… this isn’t a criticism, Harry! But you do… sort of… I mean - don’t you think you’ve got a bit of a - a -saving-people thing!” she said.

He glared at her.

“And what’s that supposed to mean, ‘a -saving-people thing’?”

“Well… you…” she looked more apprehensive than ever. “I mean… last year, for instance… in the lake… during the Tournament… you shouldn’t have… I mean, you didn’t need to save that little Delacour girl… you got a bit… carried away…”

A wave of hot, prickly anger swept through Harrys body; how could she remind him of that blunder now?

“I mean, it was really great of you and everything,” said Hermione quickly, looking positively petrified at the look on Harrys face, “everyone thought it was a wonderful thing to do -”

“That’s funny,” said Harry through gritted teeth, “because I definitely remember Ron saying I’d wasted time acting the hero… is that what you think this is? You reckon I want to act the hero again?”

“No, no, no!” said Hermione, looking aghast. “That’s not what I mean at all!”

“Well, spit out what you’ve got to say, because we’re wasting time here!” Harry shouted.

“I’m trying to say - Voldemort knows you, Harry! He took Ginny down into the Chamber of Secrets to lure you there, it’s the kind of thing he does, he knows you’re the - the sort of person who’d go to Sirius’s aid! What if he’s just trying to get you into the Department of Myst—?”

“Hermione, it doesn’t matter if he’s done it to get me there or not - they’ve taken McGonagall to St. Mungo’s, there isn’t anyone from the Order left at Hogwarts who we can tell, and if we don’t go, Sirius is dead!”

“But Harry - what if your dream was - was just that, a dream?”

Harry let out a roar of frustration. Hermione actually stepped back from him, looking alarmed.

“You don’t get it!” Harry shouted at her, “I’m not having nightmares, I’m not just dreaming! What d’you think all the Occlumency was for, why d’you think Dumbledore wanted me prevented from seeing these things? Because they’re REAL, Hermione - Sirius is trapped, I’ve seen him. Voldemort’s got him, and no one else knows, and that means we’re the only ones who can save him, and if you don’t want to do it, fine, but I’m going, understand? And if I remember rightly, you didn’t have a problem with my saving-people thing when it was you I was saving from the Dementors, or -” he rounded on Ron “- when it was your sister I was saving from the Basilisk -”

“I never said I had a problem!” said Ron heatedly.

“But Harry, you’ve just said it,” said Hermione fiercely, “Dumbledore wanted you to learn to shut these things out of your mind, if you’d done Occlumency properly you’d never have seen this -”

“IF YOU THINK I’M JUST GOING TO ACT LIKE I HAVEN’T SEEN -”

“Sirius told you there was nothing more important than you learning to close your mind!”

“WELL, I EXPECT HE’D SAY SOMETHING DIFFERENT IF HE KNEW WHAT I’D JUST-”

The classroom door opened. Harry, Ron and Hermione whipped around. Ginny walked in, looking curious, closely followed by Luna, who as usual looked as though she had drifted in accidentally.

“Hi,” said Ginny uncertainly. “We recognized Harry’s voice. What are you yelling about?”

“Never you mind,” said Harry roughly.

Ginny raised her eyebrows.

“There’s no need to take that tone with me,” she said coolly, “I was only wondering whether I could help.”

“Well, you can’t,” said Harry shortly.

“You’re being rather rude, you know,” said Luna serenely.

Harry swore and turned away. The very last thing he wanted now was a conversation with Luna Lovegood.

“Wait,” said Hermione suddenly. “Wait… Harry, they can help.”

Harry and Ron looked at her.

“Listen,” she said urgently, “Harry, we need to establish whether Sirius really has left Headquarters.”

“I’ve told you, I saw -”

“Harry, I’m begging you, please!” said Hermione desperately. “Please let’s just check that Sirius isn’t at home before we go charging off to London. If we find out he’s not there, then I swear I won’t try to stop you. I’ll come, I’ll d - do whatever it takes to try and save him.”

“Sirius is being tortured NOW!” shouted Harry. “We haven’t got time to waste.”

“But if this is a trick of Voldemort’s, Harry, we’ve got to check, we’ve got to.”

“How?” Harry demanded. “How’re we going to check?”

“We’ll have to use Umbridge’s fire and see if we can contact him,” said Hermione, who looked positively terrified at the thought. “We’ll draw Umbridge away again, but we’ll need lookouts, and that’s where we can use Ginny and Luna.”

Though clearly struggling to understand what was going on, Ginny said immediately, “Yeah, we’ll do it,” and Luna said, “When you say ‘Sirius’, are you talking about Stubby Boardman?”

Nobody answered her.

“Okay,” Harry said aggressively to Hermione, “Okay, if you can think of a way of doing this quickly, I’m with you, otherwise I’m going to the Department of Mysteries right now.”

“The Department of Mysteries?” said Luna, looking mildly surprised. “But how are you going to get there?”

Again, Harry ignored her.

“Right,” said Hermione, twisting her hands together and pacing up and down between the desks. “Right… well… one of us has to go and find Umbridge and - and send her off in the wrong direction, keep her away from her office. They could tell her - I don’t know - that Peeves is up to something awful as usual”

“I’ll do it,” said Ron at once. “I’ll tell her Peeves is smashing up the Transfiguration department or something, it’s miles away from her office. Come to think of it, I could probably persuade

Peeves to do it if I met him on the way."

It was a mark of the seriousness of the situation that Hermione made no objection to the smashing up of the Transfiguration department.

"Okay," she said, her brow furrowed as she continued to pace. "Now, we need to keep students right away from her office while we force entry, or some Slytherins bound to go and tip her off."

"Luna and I can stand at either end of the corridor," said Ginny promptly, "and warn people not to go down there because someone's let off a load of Garrotting Gas." Hermione looked surprised at the readiness with which Ginny had come up with this lie; Ginny shrugged and said, "Fred and George were planning to do it before they left."

"Okay," said Hermione. "Well then, Harry, you and I will be under the Invisibility Cloak and we'll sneak into the office and you can talk to Sirius -"

"He's not there, Hermione!"

"I mean, you can - can check whether Sirius is at home or not while I keep watch, I don't think you should be in there alone, Lee's already proved the windows a weak spot, sending those Nifflers through it."

Even through his anger and impatience, Harry recognized Hermiones offer to accompany him into Umbridge's office as a sign of solidarity and loyalty.

"I… okay, thanks," he muttered.

"Right, well, even if we do all of that, I don't think we're going to be able to bank on more than five minutes," said Hermione, looking relieved that Harry seemed to have accepted the plan, "not with Filch and the wretched Inquisitorial Squad floating around."

"Five minutes'll be enough," said Harry. "C'mon, let's go -"

"Now?" said Hermione, looking shocked.

"Of course now!" said Harry angrily. "What did you think, we're going to wait until after dinner or something? Hermione, Sirius is being tortured right now!"

"I - oh, all right," she said desperately. "You go and get the Invisibility Cloak and we'll meet you at the end of Umbridge's corridor, okay?"

Harry didn't answer, but flung himself out of the room and began to fight his way through the milling crowds outside. Two floors up he met Seamus and Dean, who hailed him jovially and told him they were planning a dusk-till-dawn end-of-exams celebration in the common room. Harry barely heard them. He scrambled through the portrait hole while they were still arguing about how many black-market Butterbeers they would need and was climbing back out of it, the

Invisibility Cloak and Sirius's knife secure in his bag, before they noticed he had left them.

"Harry, d'you want to chip in a couple of Galleons? Harold Dingle reckons he could sell us some Firewhisky -"

But Harry was already tearing away back along the corridor, and a couple of minutes later was jumping the last few stairs to join Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Luna, who were huddled together at the end of Umbridge's corridor.

"Got it," he panted. "Ready to go, then?"

"All right," whispered Hermione as a gang of loud sixth-years passed them. "So Ron - you go and head Umbridge off… Ginny, Luna, if you can start moving people out of the corridor… Harry and I will get the Cloak on and wait until the coast is clear…"

Ron strode away, his bright-red hair visible right to the end of the passage; meanwhile Ginnys equally vivid head bobbed between the jostling students surrounding them in the other direction, trailed by Luna's blonde one.

"Get over here," muttered Hermione, tugging at Harry's wrist and pulling him back into a recess where the ugly stone head of a medieval wizard stood muttering to itself on a column. "Are - are you sure you're okay, Harry? You're still very pale."

"I'm fine," he said shortly, tugging the Invisibil i ty Cloak from out of his bag. In truth, his scar was aching, but not so badly that he thought Voldemort had yet dealt Sirius a fatal blow; it had hurt much worse than this when Voldemort had been punishing Avery…

"Here," he said; he threw the Invisibility Cloak over both of them and they stood listening carefully over the Latin mumblings of the bust in front of them.

"You can't come down here!" Ginny was calling to the crowd. "No, sorry, you're going to have to go round by the swivelling staircase, someone's let off Garrotting Gas just along here -"

They could hear people complaining; one surly voice said, "I can't see no gas."

"That's because it's colorless," said Ginny in a convincingly exasperated voice, "but if you want to walk through it, carry on, then we'll have your body as proof for the next idiot who doesn't believe us."

Slowly, the crowd thinned. The news about the Garrotting Gas seemed to have spread; people were not coming this way any more. When at last the surrounding area was quite clear, Hermione said quietly, "I think that's as good as we're going to get, Harry — come on, let's do it."

They moved forwards, covered by the Cloak. Luna was standing with her back to them at the far end of the corridor. As they passed Ginny, Hermione whispered, "Good one… don't forget the

signal.”

“What’s the signal?” muttered Harry, as they approached Umbridge’s door.

“A loud chorus of ‘Weasly is our King’ if they see Umbridge coming,” replied Hermione, as Harry inserted the blade of Sirius’s knife in the crack between door and wall. The lock clicked open and they entered the office.

The garish kittens were basking in the late-afternoon sunshine that was warming their plates, but otherwise the office was as still and unoccupied as last time. Hermione breathed a sigh of relief.

“I thought she might have added extra security after the second Niffler.”

They pulled off the Cloak; Hermione hurried over to the window and stood out of sight, peering down into the grounds with her wand out. Harry dashed over to the fireplace, seized the pot of Floo powder and threw a pinch into the grate, causing emerald flames to burst into life there. He knelt down quickly, thrust his head into the dancing fire and cried, “Number twelve, Grimmauld Place!”

His head began to spin as though he had just got off a fair-ground ride though his knees remained firmly planted on the cold office floor. He kept his eyes screwed up against the whirling ash and when the spinning stopped he opened them to find himself looking out at the long, cold kitchen of Grimmauld Place.

There was nobody there. He had expected this, yet was not prepared for the molten wave of dread and panic that seemed to burst through his stomach at the sight of the deserted room.

“Sirius?” he shouted. “Sirius, are you there?”

His voice echoed around the room, but there was no answer except a tiny scuffing sound to the right of the fire.

“Who’s there?” he called, wondering whether it was just a mouse.

Kreacher the house-elf crept into view. He looked highly delighted about something, though he seemed to have recently sustained a nasty injury to both hands, which were heavily bandaged.

“It’s the Potter boy’s head in the fire,” Kreacher informed the empty kitchen, stealing furtive, oddly triumphant glances at Harry. “What has he come for, Kreacher wonders?”

“Where’s Sirius, Kreacher?” Harry demanded.

The house-elf gave a wheezy chuckle.

“Master has gone out, Harry Potter.”

“Where’s he gone? Where’s he gone, Kreacher?”

Kreacher merely cackled.

“I’m warning you!” said Harry, fully aware that his scope for inflicting punishment upon Kreacher was almost non-existent in this position. “What about Lupin? Mad-Eye? Any of them, are any of them there?”

“Nobody here but Kreacher!” said the elf gleefully, and turning away from Harry he began to walk slowly towards the door at the end of the kitchen. “Kreacher thinks he will have a little chat with his mistress now, yes, he hasn’t had a chance in a long time, Kreacher’s master has been keeping him away from her -”

“Where has Sirius gone?” Harry yelled after the elf. “Kreacher, has he gone to the Department of Mysteries?”

Kreacher stopped in his tracks. Harry could just make out the back of his bald head through the forest of chair legs before him.

“Master does not tell poor Kreacher where he is going,” said the elf quietly.

“But you know!” shouted Harry. “Don’t you? You know where he is!”

There was a moment’s silence, then the elf let out his loudest cackle yet.

“Master will not come back from the Department of Mysteries!” he said gleefully. “Kreacher and his mistress are alone again!”

And he scurried forwards and disappeared through the door to the hall.

“You -!”

But before he could utter a single curse or insult, Harry felt a great pain at the top of his head; he inhaled a lot of ash and, choking, found himself being dragged backwards through the flames, until with a horrible abruptness he was staring up into the wide, pallid face of Professor Umbridge who had dragged him backwards out of the fire by the hair and was now bending his neck back as far as it would go, as though she were going to slit his throat.

“You think,” she whispered, bending Harry’s neck back even further, so that he was looking up at the ceiling, “that after two Nifflers I was going to let one more foul, scavenging little creature enter my office without my knowledge? I had Stealth Sensoring Spells placed all around my doorway after the last one got in, you foolish boy. Take his wand,” she barked at someone he could not see, and he felt a hand grope inside the chest pocket of his robes and remove the wand. “Hers, too.”

Harry heard a scuffle over by the door and knew that Hermione had also just had her wand

wrested from her.

“I want to know why you are in my office,” said Umbridge, shaking the fist clutching his hair so that he staggered.

“I was - trying to get my Firebolt!” Harry croaked.

“Liar.” She shook his head again. “Your Firebolt is under strict guard in the dungeons, as you very well know, Potter. You had your head in my fire. With whom have you been communicating?”

“No one -” said Harry, trying to pull away from her. He felt several hairs part company with his scalp.

“Liar!” shouted Umbridge. She threw him from her and he slammed into the desk. Now he could see Hermione pinioned against the wall by Millicent Bulstrode. Malfoy was leaning on the windowsill, smirking as he threw Harry’s wand into the air one-handed and caught it again.

There was a commotion outside and several large Slytherins entered, each gripping Ron, Ginny, Luna and - to Harry’s bewilderment - Neville, who was trapped in a stranglehold by Crabbe and looked in imminent danger of suffocation. All four of them had been gagged.

“Got ‘em all,” said Warrington, shoving Ron roughly forwards into the room. “That one,” he poked a thick finger at Neville, “tried to stop me taking her,” he pointed at Ginny, who was trying to kick the shins of the large Slytherin girl holding her, “so I brought him along too.”

“Good, good,” said Umbridge, watching Ginny’s struggles. “Well, it looks as though Hogwarts will shortly be a Weasley-free zone, doesn’t it?”

Malfoy laughed loudly and sycophantically. Umbridge gave her wide, complacent smile and settled herself into a chintz-covered armchair, blinking up at her captives like a toad in a flowerbed.

“So, Potter,” she said. “You stationed lookouts around my office and you sent this buffoon,” she nodded at Ron — Malfoy laughed even louder - “to tell me the poltergeist was wreaking havoc in the Transfiguration department when I knew perfectly well that he was busy smearing ink on the eyepieces of all the school telescopes - Mr. Filch having just informed me so.

“Clearly, it was very important for you to talk to somebody. Was it Albus Dumbledore? Or the half-breed, Hagrid? I doubt it was Minerva McGonagall, I hear she is still too ill to talk to anyone.”

Malfoy and a few of the other members of the Inquisitorial Squad laughed some more at that. Harry found he was so full of rage and hatred he was shaking.

“It’s none of your business who I talk to,” he snarled.

Umbridge's slack face seemed to tighten.

"Very well," she said in her most dangerous and falsely sweet voice. "Very well, Mr Potter… I offered you the chance to tell me freely. You refused. I have no alternative but to force you. Draco fetch Professor Snape."

Malfoy stowed Harry's wand inside his robes and left the room smirking, but Harry hardly noticed. He had just realized something; he could not believe he had been so stupid as to forget it. He had thought that all the members of the Order, all those who could help him save Sirius, were gone - but he had been wrong. There was still a member of the Order of the Phoenix at Hogwarts - Snape.

There was silence in the office except for the fidgetings and scufflings resulting from the Slytherins' efforts to keep Ron and the others under control. Ron's lip was bleeding on to Umbridge's carpet as he struggled against Warrington's half-nelson; Ginny was still trying to stamp on the feet of the sixth-year girl who had both her upper arms in a tight grip; Neville was turning steadily more purple in the face while tugging at Crabbe's arms; and Hermione was attempting, in vain, to throw Millicent Bulstrode off her. Luna, however, stood limply by the side of her captor, gazing vaguely out of the window as though rather bored by the proceedings.

Harry looked back at Umbridge, who was watching him closely. He kept his face deliberately smooth and blank as footsteps were heard in the corridor outside and Draco Malfoy entered the room, closely followed by Snape.

"You wanted to see me, Headmistress?" said Snape, looking around at all the pairs of struggling students with an expression of complete indifference.

"Ah, Professor Snape," said Umbridge, smiling widely and standing up again. "Yes, I would like another bottle of Veritaserum, as quick as you can, please."

"You took my last bottle to interrogate Potter," he said, surveying her coolly through his greasy curtains of black hair. "Surely you did not use it all? I told you that three drops would be sufficient."

Umbridge flushed.

"You can make some more, can't you?" she said, her voice becoming more sweetly girlish as it always did when she was furious.

"Certainly," said Snape, his lip curling. "It takes a full moon-cycle to mature, so I should have it ready for you in around a month."

"A month?" squawked Umbridge, swelling toadishly. "A month? But I need it this evening, Snape! I have just found Potter using my fire to communicate with a person or persons unknown!"

“Really?” said Snape, showing his first, faint sign of interest as he looked round at Harry. “Well, it doesn’t surprise me. Potter has never shown much inclination to follow school rules.”

His cold, dark eyes were boring into Harry’s, who met his gaze unflinchingly, concentrating hard on what he had seen in his dream, willing Snape to read it in his mind, to understand…

“I wish to interrogate him!” repeated Umbridge angrily, and Snape looked away from Harry back into her furiously quivering face. “I wish you to provide me with a potion that will force him to tell me the truth!”

“I have already told you,” said Snape smoothly, “that I have no further stocks of Veritaserum. Unless you wish to poison Potter - and I assure you I would have the greatest sympathy with you if you did - I cannot help you. The only trouble is that most venoms act too fast to give the victim much time for truth-telling.”

Snape looked back at Harry, who stared at him, frantic to communicate without words.

Voldemort’s got Sirius in the Department of Mysteries, he thought desperately.*Voldemort’s got Sirius* -

“You are on probation!” shrieked Professor Umbridge, and Snape looked back at her, his eyebrows slightly raised. “You are being deliberately unhelpful! I expected better, Lucius Malfoy always speaks most highly of you! Now get out of my office!”

Snape gave her an ironic bow and turned to leave. Harry knew his last chance of letting the Order know what was going on was walking out of the door.

“He’s got Padfoot!” he shouted. “He’s got Padfoot at the place where it’s hidden!”

Snape had stopped with his hand on Umbridges door handle.

“Padfoot?” cried Professor Umbridge, looking eagerly from Harry to Snape. “What is Padfoot? Where what is hidden? What does he mean, Snape?”

Snape looked round at Harry. His face was inscrutable. Harry could not tell whether he had understood or not, but he did not dare speak more plainly in front of Umbridge.

“I have no idea,” said Snape coldly. “Potter, when I want nonsense shouted at me I shall give you a Babbling Beverage. And Crabbe, loosen your hold a little. If Longbottom suffocates it will mean a lot of tedious paperwork and I am afraid I shall have to mention it on your reference if ever you apply for a job.”

He closed the door behind him with a snap, leaving Harry in a state of worse turmoil than before: Snape had been his very last hope. He looked at Umbridge, who seemed to be feeling the same way; her chest was heaving with rage and frustration.

“Very well,” she said, and she pulled out her wand. “Very well...I am left with no alternative... this is more than a matter of school discipline...this is an issue of Ministry security...yes...yes…”

She seemed to be talking herself into something. She was shifting her weight nervously from foot to foot, staring at Harry, beating her wand against her empty palm and breathing heavily. As he watched her, Harry felt horribly powerless without his own wand.

“You are forcing me, Potter… I do not want to,” said Umbridge, still moving restlessly on the spot, “but sometimes circumstances justify the use… I am sure the Minister will understand that I had no choice.”

Malfoy was watching her with a hungry expression on his face.

“The Cruciatus Curse ought to loosen your tongue,” said Umbridge quietly.

“No!” shrieked Hermione. “Professor Umbridge - it’s illegal.”

But Umbridge took no notice. There was a nasty, eager, excited look on her face that Harry had never seen before. She raised her wand.

“The Minister wouldn’t want you to break the law, Professor Umbridge!” cried Hermione.

“What Cornelius doesn’t know won’t hurt him,” said Umbridge, who was now panting slightly as she pointed her wand at different parts of Harry’s body in turn, apparently trying to decide where it would hurt most. “He never knew I ordered Dementors to go after Potter last summer, but he was delighted to be given the chance to expel him, all the same.”

“It was you!” gasped Harry. “You sent the Dementors after me?”

“Somebody had to act,” breathed Umbridge, as her wand came to rest pointing directly at Harrys forehead. “They were all bleating about silencing you somehow - discrediting you - but I was the one who actually did something about it… only you wriggled out of that one, didn’t you, Potter? Not today though, not now -” And taking a deep breath, she cried, “Cruc—”

“NO!” shouted Hermione in a cracked voice from behind Millicent Bulstrode. “No - Harry - we’ll have to tell her!”

“No way!” yelled Harry, staring at the little of Hermione he could see.

“We’ll have to, Harry, she’ll force it out of you anyway, what’s… what’s the point?”

And Hermione began to cry weakly into the back of Millicent Bulstrode’s robes. Millicent stopped trying to squash her against the wall immediately and dodged out of her way looking disgusted.

“Well, well, well!” said Umbridge, looking triumphant. “Little Miss Question-all is going to give

us some answers! Come on then, girl, come on!"

"Er - my - nee - no!" shouted Ron through his gag.

Ginny was staring at Hermione as though she had never seen her before. Neville, still choking for breath, was gazing at her, too. But Harry had just noticed something. Though Hermione was sobbing desperately into her hands, there was no trace of a tear.

"I'm - I'm sorry everyone," said Hermione. "But - I can't stand it -"

"That's right, that's right, girl!" said Umbridge, seizing Hermione by the shoulders, thrusting her into the abandoned chintz chair and leaning over her. "Now then… with whom was Potter communicating just now?"

"Well," gulped Hermione into her hands, "well, he was trying to speak to Professor Dumbledore."

Ron froze, his eyes wide; Ginny stopped trying to stamp on her Slytherin captor's toes; and even Luna looked mildly surprised. Fortunately, the attention of Umbridge and her minions was focused too exclusively upon Hermione to notice these suspicious signs.

"Dumbledore?" said Umbridge eagerly. "You know where Dumbledore is, then?"

"Well… no" sobbed Hermione. "We've tried the Leaky Cauldron in Diagon Alley and the Three Broomsticks and even the Hog's Head -"

"Idiot girl - Dumbledore won't be sitting in a pub when the whole Ministry's looking for him!" shouted Umbridge, disappointment etched in every sagging line of her face.

"But - but we needed to tell him something important!" wailed Hermione, holding her hands more tightly over her face, not, Harry knew, out of anguish, but to disguise the continued absence of tears.

"Yes?" said Umbridge with a sudden resurgence of excitement. "What was it you wanted to tell him?"

"We… we wanted to tell him it's r - ready!" choked H ermione.

"What's ready?" demanded Umbridge, and now she grabbed Hermione's shoulders again and shook her slightly. "What's ready, girl?"

"The… the weapon," said Hermione.

"Weapon? Weapon?" said Umbridge, and her eyes seemed to pop with excitement. "You have been developing some method of resistance? A weapon you could use against the Ministry? On Professor Dumbledore's orders, of course?"

“Y — y - yes,” gasped Hermione, “but he had to leave before it was finished and n - n - now we’ve finished it for him, and we c - c - can’t find him t - t - to tell him!”

“What kind of weapon is it?” said Umbridge harshly, her stubby hands still tight on Hermione’s shoulders.

“We don’t r - r - really understand it,” said Hermione, sniffing loudly. “We j - j - just did what P - P - Professor Dumbledore told us t - t - to do.”

Umbridge straightened up, looking exultant.

“Lead me to the weapon,” she said.

“I’m not showing… them,” said Hermione shrilly, looking around at the Slytherins through her fingers.

“It is not for you to set conditions,” said Professor Umbridge harshly.

“Fine,” said Hermione, now sobbing into her hands again. “Fine… let them see it, I hope they use it on you! In fact, I wish you’d invite loads and loads of people to come and see! Th - that would serve you right - oh, I’d love it if the wh - whole school knew where it was, and how to u - use it, and then if you annoy any of them they’ll be able to s - sort you out!”

These words had a powerful impact on Umbridge: she glanced swiftly and suspiciously around at her Inquisitorial Squad, her bulging eyes resting for a moment on Malfoy, who was too slow to disguise the look of eagerness and greed that had appeared on his face.

Umbridge contemplated Hermione for another long moment, then spoke in what she clearly thought was a motherly voice.

“All right, dear, let’s make it just you and me… and we’ll take Potter, too, shall we? Get up, now.”

“Professor,” said Malfoy eagerly, “Professor Umbridge, I think some of the Squad should come with you to look after -”

“I am a fully qualified Ministry official, Malfoy, do you really think I cannot manage two wandless teenagers alone?” asked Umbridge sharply. “In any case, it does not sound as though this weapon is something that schoolchildren should see. You will remain here until I return and make sure none of these -” she gestured around at Ron, Ginny, Neville and Luna “- escape.”

“All right,” said Malfoy, looking sulky and disappointed.

“And you two can go ahead of me and show me the way” said Umbridge, pointing at Harry and Hermione with her wand. “Lead on.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Fight and Flight

Harry had no idea what Hermione was planning, or even whether she had a plan. He walked half a pace behind her as they headed down the corridor outside Umbridge's office, knowing it would look very suspicious if he appeared not to know where they were going. He did not dare attempt to talk to her; Umbridge was walking so closely behind them that he could hear her ragged breathing.

Hermione led the way down the stairs into the Entrance Hall. The din of loud voices and the clatter of cutlery on plates echoed from out of the double doors to the Great Hall - it seemed incredible to Harry that twenty feet away were people who were enjoying dinner, celebrating the end of exams, not a care in the world…

Hermione walked straight out of the oak front doors and down the stone steps into the balmy evening air. The sun was falling towards the tops of the trees in the Forbidden Forest now, and as Hermione marched purposefully across the grass - Umbridge jogging to keep up - their long dark shadows rippled over the grass behind them like cloaks.

"It's hidden in Hagrid's hut, is it?" said Umbridge eagerly in Harry's ear.

"Of course not," said Hermione scathingly. "Hagrid might have set it off accidentally"

"Yes," said Umbridge, whose excitement seemed to be mounting. "Yes, he would have done, of course, the great half-breed oaf."

She laughed. Harry felt a strong urge to swing round and seize her by the throat, but resisted. His scar was throbbing in the soft evening air but it had not yet burned white-hot, as he knew it would if Voldemort had moved in for the kill.

"Then… where is it?" asked Umbridge, with a hint of uncertainty in her voice as Hermione continued to stride towards the Forest.

"In there, of course," said Hermione, pointing into the dark trees. "It had to be somewhere that students weren't going to find it accidentally, didn't it?"

"Of course," said Umbridge, though she sounded a little apprehensive now. "Of course… very well, then… you two stay ahead of me."

"Can we have your wand, then, if we're going first?" Harry asked her.

"No, I don't think so, Mr. Potter," said Umbridge sweetly, poking him in the back with it. "The Ministry places a rather higher value on my life than yours, I'm afraid."

As they reached the cool shade of the first trees, Harry tried to catch Hermiones eye; walking into the Forest without wands seemed to him to be more foolhardy than anything they had done so far this evening. She, however, merely gave Umbridge a contemptuous glance and plunged straight into the trees, moving at such a pace that Umbridge, with her shorter legs, had difficulty in keeping up.

“Is it very far in?” Umbridge asked, as her robe ripped on a bramble.

“Oh yes,” said Hermione, “yes, it’s well hidden.”

Harry’s misgivings increased. Hermione was not taking the path they had followed to visit Grawp, but the one he followed three years ago to the lair of the monster Aragog. Hermione had not been with him on that occasion; he doubted she had any idea what danger lay at the end of it.

“Er - are you sure this is the right way?” he asked her pointedly.

“Oh yes,” she said in a steely voice, crashing through the undergrowth with what he thought was a wholly unnecessary amount of noise. Behind them, Umbridge tripped over a fallen sapling. Neither of them paused to help her up again; Hermione merely strode on, calling loudly over her shoulder, “It’s a bit further in!”

“Hermione, keep your voice down,” Harry muttered, hurrying to catch up with her. “Anything could be listening in here -”

“I want us heard,” she answered quietly, as Umbridge jogged noisily after them. “You’ll see…”

They walked on for what seemed a long time, until they were once again so deep into the Forest that the dense tree canopy blocked out all light. Harry had the feeling he had had before in the Forest, one of being watched by unseen eyes.

“How much further?” demanded Umbridge angrily from behind him.

“Not far now!” shouted Hermione, as they emerged into a dim, dank clearing. “Just a little bit -”

An arrow flew through the air and landed with a menacing thud in the tree just over her head. The air was suddenly full of the sound of hooves; Harry could feel the Forest floor trembling; Umbridge gave a little scream and pushed him in front of her like a shield -

He wrenched himself free of her and turned. Around fifty centaurs were emerging on every side, their bows raised and loaded, pointing at Harry Hermione and Umbridge. They backed slowly into the center of the clearing, Umbridge uttering odd little whimpers of terror. Harry looked sideways at Hermione. She was wearing a triumphant smile.

“Who are you?” said a voice.

Harry looked left. The chestnut-bodied centaur called Magorian was walking towards them out

of the circle: his bow, like those of the others, was raised. On Harry's right, Umbridge was still whimpering, her wand trembling violently as she pointed it at the advancing centaur.

"I asked you who are you, human," said Magorian rou ghly.

"I am Dolores Umbridge!" said Umbridge in a high-p i tched, terrified voice. "Senior Undersecretary to the Minister for Magic and Headmistress and High Inquisitor of Hogwarts!"

"You are from the Ministry of Magic?" said Magorian, as many of the centaurs in the surrounding circle shifted restlessly.

"That's right!" said Umbridge, in an even higher voice, "so be very careful! By the laws laid down by the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, any attack by half-breeds such as yourselves on a human -"

"What did you call us?" shouted a wild-looking black centaur, whom Harry recognized as Bane.

There was a great deal of angry muttering and tightening of bowstrings around them.

"Don't call them that!" Hermione said furiously, but Umbridge did not appear to have heard her. Still pointing her shaking wand at Magorian, she continued, "Law Fifteen 'B' states clearly that 'any attack by a magical creature who is deemed to have near-human intelligence, and therefore considered responsible for its actions' —"

"'Near-human intelligence'?" repeated Magorian, as Bane and several others roared with rage and pawed the ground. "We consider that a great insult, human! Our intelligence, thankfully, far outstrips your own."

"What are you doing in our Forest?" bellowed the hard-faced grey centaur Harry and Hermione had seen on their last trip into the Forest. "Why are you here?"

"Your Forest?" said Umbridge, shaking now not only with fright but also, it seemed, with indignation. "I would remind you that you live here only because the Ministry of Magic permits you certain areas of land -"

An arrow flew so close to her head that it caught at her mousy hair in passing: she let out an earsplitting scream and threw her hands over her head, while some of the centaurs bellowed their approval and others laughed raucously. The sound of their wild, neighing laughter echoing around the dimly lit clearing and the sight of their pawing hooves was extremely unnerving.

"Whose Forest is it now, human?" bellowed Bane.

"Filthy half-breeds!" she screamed, her hands still tight over her head. "Beasts! Uncontrolled animals!"

"Be quiet!" shouted Hermione, but it was too late: Umbridge pointed her wand at Magorian and

screamed, “Incarcerous!”

Ropes flew out of midair like thick snakes, wrapping themselves tightly around the centaur’s torso and trapping his arms: he gave a cry of rage and reared on to his hind legs, attempting to free himself, while the other centaurs charged.

Harry grabbed Hermione and pulled her to the ground; face down on the Forest floor, he knew a moment of terror as hooves thundered around him, but the centaurs leapt over and around them, bellowing and screaming with rage.

“Nooooo!” he heard Umbridge shriek. “Noooooo… I am Senior Undersecretary… you cannot - Unhand me, you animals… nooooo!”

Harry saw a flash of red light and knew she had attempted to Stun one of them; then she screamed very loudly. Lifting his head a few inches, Harry saw that Umbridge had been seized from behind by Bane and lifted high into the air, wriggling and yelling with fright. Her wand fell from her hand to the ground, and Harry’s heart leapt. If he could just reach it -

But as he stretched out a hand towards it, a centaur’s hoof descended upon the wand and it broke cleanly in half.

“Now!” roared a voice in Harry’s ear and a thick hairy arm descended from thin air and dragged him upright. Hermione, too, had been pulled to her feet. Over the plunging, many-colored backs and heads of the centaurs, Harry saw Umbridge being borne away through the trees by Bane. Screaming non-stop, her voice grew fainter and fainter until they could no longer hear it over the trampling of hooves surrounding them.

“And these?” said the hard-faced, grey centaur holding Hermione.

“They are young,” said a slow, doleful voice from behind Harry. “We do not attack foals.”

“They brought her here, Ronan,” replied the centaur who had such a firm grip on Harry. “And they are not so young… he is nearing manhood, this one.”

He shook Harry by the neck of his robes.

“Please,” said Hermione breathlessly, “please, don’t attack us, we don’t think like her, we aren’t Ministry of Magic employees! We only came in here because we hoped you’d drive her off for us.”

Harry knew at once, from the look on the face of the grey centaur holding Hermione, that she had made a terrible mistake in saying this. The grey centaur threw back his head, his back legs stamping furiously, and bellowed, “You see, Ronan? They already have the arrogance of their kind! So we were to do your dirty work, were we, human girl? We were to act as your servants, drive away your enemies like obedient hounds?”

“No!” said Hermione in a horrorstruck squeak. “Please - I didn’t mean that! I just hoped you’d be able to - to help us -”

But she seemed to be going from bad to worse.

“We do not help humans!” snarled the centaur holding Harry, tightening his grip and rearing a little at the same time, so that Harry’s feet left the ground momentarily. “We are a race apart and proud to be so. We will not permit you to walk from here, boasting that we did your bidding!”

“We’re not going to say anything like that!” Harry shouted. “We know you didn’t do what you did because we wanted you to -”

But nobody seemed to be listening to him.

A bearded centaur towards the back of the crowd shouted, “They came here unasked, they must pay the consequences!”

A roar of approval met these words and a dun-colored centaur shouted, “They can join the woman!”

“You said you didn’t hurt the innocent!” shouted Hermione, real tears sliding down her face now. “We haven’t done anything to hurt you, we haven’t used wands or threats, we just want to go back to school, please let us go back -”

“We are not all like the traitor Firenze, human girl!” shouted the grey centaur, to more neighing roars of approval from his fellows. “Perhaps you thought us pretty talking horses? We are an ancient people who will not stand wizard invasions and insults! We do not recognize your laws, we do not acknowledge your superiority, we are -”

But they did not hear what else centaurs were, for at that moment there came a crashing noise on the edge of the clearing so loud that all of them, Harry, Hermione and the fifty or so centaurs filling the clearing, looked around. Harry’s centaur let him fall to the ground again as his hands flew to his bow and quiver of arrows. Hermione had been dropped, too, and Harry hurried towards her as two thick tree trunks parted ominously and the monstrous form of Grawp the giant appeared in the gap.

The centaurs nearest him backed into those behind; the clearing was now a forest of bows and arrows waiting to be fired, all pointing upwards at the enormous greyish face now looming over them from just beneath the thick canopy of branches. Grawp’s lopsided mouth was gaping stupidly; they could see his bricklike yellow teeth glimmering in the half-light, his dull sludgecolored eyes narrowed as he squinted down at the creatures at his feet. Broken ropes trailed from both ankles.

He opened his mouth even wider.

“Hagger.”

Harry did not know what ‘hagger’ meant, or what language it was from, nor did he much care; he was watching Grawp’s feet, which were almost as long as Harry’s whole body. Hermione gripped his arm tightly; the centaurs were quite silent, staring up at the giant, whose huge, round head moved from side to side as he continued to peer amongst them as though looking for something he had dropped.

“Hagger!” he said again, more insistently.

“Get away from here, giant!” called Magorian. “You are not welcome among us!”

These words seemed to make no impression whatsoever on Grawp. He stooped a little (the centaurs’ arms tensed on their bows), then bellowed, “HAGGER!”

A few of the centaurs looked worried now. Hermione, however, gave a gasp.

“Harry!” she whispered. “I think he’s trying to say ‘Hagrid’!”

At this precise moment Grawp caught sight of them, the only two humans in a sea of centaurs. He lowered his head another foot or so, staring intently at them. Harry could feel Hermione shaking as Grawp opened his mouth wide again and said, in a deep, rumbling voice, “Hermy.”

“Goodness,” said Hermione, gripping Harry’s arm so tightly it was growing numb and looking as though she was about to faint, “he - he remembered!”

“HERMY!” roared Grawp. “WHERE HAGGER?”

“I don’t know!” squealed Hermione, terrified. “I’m sorry, Grawp, I don’t know!”

“GRAWP WANT HAGGER!”

One of the giant’s massive hands reached down. Hermione let out a real scream, ran a few steps backwards and fell over. Devoid of a wand, Harry braced himself to punch, kick, bite or whatever else it took as the hand swooped towards him and knocked a snow-white centaur off his legs.

It was what the centaurs had been waiting for — Grawp’s outstretched fingers were a foot from Harry when fifty arrows soared through the air at the giant, peppering his enormous face, causing him to howl with pain and rage and straighten up, rubbing his face with his enormous hands, breaking off the arrow shafts but forcing the arrowheads in still deeper.

He yelled and stamped his enormous feet and the centaurs scattered out of the way; pebble-sized droplets of Grawp’s blood showered Harry as he pulled Hermione to her feet and the pair of them ran as fast as they could for the shelter of the trees. Once there they looked back; Grawp was snatching blindly at the centaurs as blood ran down his face; they were retreating in disorder, galloping away through the trees on the other side of the clearing. Harry and Hermione watched Grawp give another roar of fury and plunge after them, smashing more trees aside as he

went.

“Oh no,” said Hermione, quaking so badly that her knees gave way. “Oh, that was horrible. And he might kill them all.”

“I’m not that fussed, to be honest,” said Harry bitterly.

The sounds of the galloping centaurs and the blundering giant grew fainter and fainter. As Harry listened to them, his scar gave another great throb and a wave of terror swept over him.

They had wasted so much time - they were even further from rescuing Sirius than they had been when he had had the vision. Not only had Harry managed to lose his wand but they were stuck in the middle of the Forbidden Forest with no means of transport whatsoever.

“Smart plan,” he spat at Hermione, having to release some of his fury. “Really smart plan. Where do we go from here?”

“We need to get back up to the castle,” said Hermione faintly.

“By the time we’ve done that, Sirius’ll probably be dead!” said Harry, kicking a nearby tree in temper. A high-pitched chattering started up overhead and he looked up to see an angry Bowtruckle flexing its long twiglike fingers at him.

“Well, we can’t do anything without wands,” said Hermione hopelessly, dragging herself up again. “Anyway, Harry, how exactly were you planning to get all the way to London?”

“Yeah, we were just wondering that,” said a familiar voice from behind her.

Harry and Hermione moved together instinctively and peered through the trees.

Ron came into sight, closely followed by Ginny, Neville and Luna. All of them looked a little the worse for wear - there were several long scratches running the length of Ginny’s cheek; a large purple lump was swelling above Neville’s right eye; Ron’s lip was bleeding worse than ever - but all were looking rather pleased with themselves.

“So,” said Ron, pushing aside a low-hanging branch and holding out Harry’s wand, “had any ideas?”

“How did you get away?” asked Harry in amazement, taking his wand from Ron.

“Couple of Stunners, a Disarming Charm, Neville brought off a really nice little Impediment Jinx,” said Ron airily, now handing back Hermione’s wand, too. “But Ginny was best, she got Malfoy - Bat Bogey Hex - it was superb, his whole face was covered in the great flapping things. Anyway, we saw you out of the window heading into the Forest and followed. What’ve you done with Umbridge?”

“She got carried away,” said Harry. “By a herd of centaurs.”

“And they left you behind?” asked Ginny, looking astonished.

“No, they got chased off by Grawp,” said Harry

“Who’s Grawp?” Luna asked interestedly.

“Hagrid’s little brother,” said Ron promptly. “Anyway, never mind that now. Harry, what did you find out in the fire? Has You-Know-Who got Sirius or -?”

“Yes,” said Harry, as his scar gave another painful prickle, “and I’m sure Sirius is still alive, but I can’t see how we’re going to get there to help him.”

They all fell silent, looking rather scared; the problem facing them seemed insurmountable.

“Well, we’ll have to fly, won’t we?” said Luna, in the closest thing to a matter-of-fact voice Harry had ever heard her use.

“Okay,” said Harry irritably, rounding on her. “First of all, ‘we’ aren’t doing anything if you’re including yourself in that, and second of all, Ron’s the only one with a broomstick that isn’t being guarded by a security troll, so -”

“I’ve got a broom!” said Ginny.

“Yeah, but you’re not coming,” said Ron angrily.

“Excuse me, but I care what happens to Sirius as much as you do!” said Ginny, her jaw set so that her resemblance to Fred and George was suddenly striking.

“You’re too -” Harry began, but Ginny said fiercely, “I’m three years older than you were when you fought You-Know-Who over the Sorcerer’s Stone, and it’s because of me that Malfoy’s stuck back in Umbridge’s office with giant flying bogies attacking him -”

“Yeah, but -”

“We were all in the D.A, together,” said Neville quietly. “It was all supposed to be about fighting You-Know-Who, wasn’t it? And this is the first chance we’ve had to do something real - or was that all just a game or something?”

“No — of course it wasn’t -” said Harry impatiently.

“Then we should come too,” said Neville simply. “We want to help.”

“That’s right,” said Luna, smiling happily.

Harry's eyes met Ron's. He knew Ron was thinking exactly what he was: if he could have chosen any members of the D.A., in addition to himself, Ron and Hermione, to join him in the attempt to rescue Sirius, he would not have picked Ginny, Neville or Luna.

"Well, it doesn't matter, anyway," said Harry through gritted teeth, "because we still don't know how to get there -"

"I thought we'd settled that," said Luna maddeningly. "We're flying!"

"Look," said Ron, barely containing his anger, "you might be able to fly without a broomstick but the rest of us can't sprout wings whenever we -"

"There are ways of flying other than with broomsticks," said Luna serenely.

"I s'pose we're going to ride on the back of the Kacky Snorgle or whatever it is?" Ron demanded.

"The Crumple-Horned Snorkack can't fly," said Luna in a dignified voice, "but they can, and Hagrid says they're very good at finding places their riders are looking for."

Harry whirled round. Standing between two trees, their white eyes gleaming eerily, were two Thestrals, watching the whispered conversation as though they understood every word.

"Yes!" he whispered, moving towards them. They tossed their reptilian heads, throwing back long black manes, and Harry stretched out his hand eagerly and patted the nearest one's shining neck; how could he ever have thought them ugly?

"Is it those mad horse things?" said Ron uncertainly, staring at a point slightly to the left of the Thestral Harry was patting. "Those ones you can't see unless you've watched someone snuff it?"

"Yeah," said Harry.

"How many?"

"Just two."

"Well, we need three," said Hermione, who was still looking a little shaken, but determined just the same.

"Four, Hermione," said Ginny, scowling.

"I think there are six of us, actually," said Luna calmly, counting.

"Don't be stupid, we can't all go!" said Harry angrily. "Look, you three -" he pointed at Neville, Ginny and Luna, "you're not involved in this, you're not -"

They burst into more protests. His scar gave another, more painful, twinge. Every moment they delayed was precious; he did not have time to argue.

“Okay, fine, it’s your choice,” he said curtly, “but unless we can find more Thestrals you’re not going to be able -”

“Oh, more of them will come,” said Ginny confidently, who like Ron was squinting in quite the wrong direction, apparently under the impression that she was looking at the horses.

“What makes you think that?”

“Because, in case you hadn’t noticed, you and Hermione are both covered in blood,” she said coolly, “and we know Hagrid lures Thestrals with raw meat. That’s probably why these two turned up in the first place.”

Harry felt a soft tug on his robes at that moment and looked down to see the closest Thestral licking his sleeve, which was damp with Grawp’s blood.

“Okay, then,” he said, a bright idea occurring, “Ron and I will take these two and go ahead, and Hermione can stay here with you three and she’ll attract more Thestrals -”

“I’m not staying behind!” said Hermione furiously.

“There’s no need,” said Luna, smiling. “Look, here come more now… you two must really smell…”

Harry turned: no fewer than six or seven Thestrals were picking their way through the trees, their great leathery wings folded tight to their bodies, their eyes gleaming through the darkness. He had no excuse now.

“All right,” he said angrily, “pick one and get on, then.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The Department of Mysteries

Harry wound his hand tightly into the mane of the nearest Thestral, placed a foot on a stump nearby and scrambled clumsily on to the horses silken back. It did not object, but twisted its head around, fangs bared, and attempted to continue its eager licking of his robes.

He found there was a way of lodging his knees behind the wing joints that made him feel more secure, then looked around at the others. Neville had heaved himself over the back of the next Thestral and was now attempting to swing one short leg over the creature's back. Luna was already in place, sitting side-saddle and adjusting her robes as though she did this every day. Ron, Hermione and Ginny, however, were still standing motionless on the spot, open-mouthed and staring.

"What?" he said.

"How're we supposed to get on?" said Ron faintly. "When we can't see the things?"

"Oh, it's easy," said Luna, sliding obligingly from her Thestral and marching over to him, Hermione and Ginny. "Come here…"

She pulled them over to the other Thestrals standing around and one by one managed to help them on to the back of their mount. All three looked extremely nervous as she wound their hands into their horses mane and told them to grip tightly before she got back on to her own steed.

"This is mad," Ron murmured, moving his free hand gingerly up and down his horse's neck. "Mad… if I could just see it -"

"You'd better hope it stays invisible," said Harry darkly. "We all ready, then?"

They all nodded and he saw five pairs of knees tighten beneath their robes.

"Okay…"

He looked down at the back of his Thestral's glossy black head and swallowed.

"Ministry of Magic, visitors' entrance, London, then," he said uncertainly. "Er… if you know… where to go…"

For a moment Harry's Thestral did nothing at all; then, with a sweeping movement that nearly unseated him, the wings on either side extended; the horse crouched slowly, then rocketed upwards so fast and so steeply that Harry had to clench his arms and legs tightly around the horse to avoid sliding backwards over its bony rump. He closed his eyes and pressed his face down into the horse's silky mane as they burst through the topmost branches of the trees and soared out

into a blood-red sunset.

Harry did not think he had ever moved so fast: the Thestral streaked over the castle, its wide wings hardly beating; the cooling air was slapping Harry’s face; eyes screwed up against the rushing wind, he looked round and saw his five fellows soaring along behind him, each of them bent as low as possible into the neck of their Thestral to protect themselves from his slipstream.

They were over the Hogwarts grounds, they had passed Hogsmeade; Harry could see mountains and gullies below them. As the daylight began to fail, Harry saw small collections of lights as they passed over more villages, then a winding road on which a single car was beetling its way home through the hills…

“This is bizarre!” Harry barely heard Ron yell from somewhere behind him, and he imagined how it must feel to be speeding along at this height with no visible means of support.

Twilight fell: the sky was turning to a light, dusky purple littered with tiny silver stars, and soon only the lights of Muggle towns gave them any clue of how far from the ground they were, or how very fast they were traveling. Harry’s arms were wrapped tightly around his horses neck as he willed it to go even faster. How much time had elapsed since he had seen Sirius lying on the Department of Mysteries floor? How much longer would Sinus be able to resist Voldemort? All Harry knew for sure was that his godfather had neither done as Voldemort wanted, nor died, for he was convinced that either outcome would have caused him to feel Voldemort’s jubilation or fury course through his own body, making his scar sear as painfully as it had on the night Mr. Weasley was attacked.

On they flew through the gathering darkness; Harry’s face felt stiff and cold, his legs numb from gripping the Thestrals sides so tightly, but he did not dare shift his position lest he slip… he was deaf from the thundering rush of air in his ears, and his mouth was dry and frozen from the cold night wind. He had lost all sense of how far they had come; all his faith was in the beast beneath him, still streaking purposefully through the night, barely flapping its wings as it sped ever onwards.

If they were too late…

He’s still alive, he’s still fighting, I can feel it…

If Voldemort decided Sirius was not going to crack…

I’d know…

Harrys stomach gave a jolt; the Thestrals head was suddenly pointing towards the ground and he actually slid forwards a few inches along its neck. They were descending at last… he thought he heard a shriek behind him and twisted around dangerously, but could see no sign of a falling body… presumably they had all received a shock from the change of direction, just as he had.

And now bright orange lights were growing larger and rounder on all sides; they could see the

tops of buildings, streams of headlights like luminous insect eyes, squares of pale yellow that were windows. Quite suddenly, it seemed, they were hurtling towards the pavement; Harry gripped the Thestral with every last ounce of his strength, braced for a sudden impact, but the horse touched the dark ground as lightly as a shadow and Harry slid from its back, looking around at the street where the overflowing skip still stood a short way from the vandalized telephone box, both drained of color in the flat orange glare of the streetlights.

Ron landed a short way off and toppled immediately from his Thestral on to the pavement.

“Never again,” he said, struggling to his feet. He made as though to stride away from his Thestral, but, unable to see it, collided with its hindquarters and almost fell over again. “Never, ever again… that was the worst -”

Hermione and Ginny touched down on either side of him: both slid off their mounts a little more gracefully than Ron, though with similar expressions of relief at being back on firm ground; Neville jumped down, shaking; and Luna dismounted smoothly.

“Where do we go from here, then?” she asked Harry in a politely interested voice, as though this was all a rather interesting day-trip.

“Over here,” he said. He gave his Thestral a quick, grateful pat, then led the way quickly to the battered telephone box and opened the door. “Come on!” he urged the others, as they hesitated.

Ron and Ginny marched in obediently; Hermione, Neville and Luna squashed themselves in after them; Harry took one glance back at the Thestrals, now foraging for scraps of rotten food inside the skip, then forced himself into the box after Luna.

“Whoever’s nearest the receiver, dial six two four four two!” he said.

Ron did it, his arm bent bizarrely to reach the dial; as it whirred back into place the cool female voice sounded inside the box.

“Welcome to the Ministry of Magic. Please state your name and business.”

“Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger,” Harry said very quickly, “Ginny Weasley, Neville Longbottom, Luna Lovegood… we’re here to save someone, unless your Ministry can do it first!”

“Thank you,” said the cool female voice. “Visitors, please take the badges and attach them to the front of your robes.”

Half a dozen badges slid out of the metal chute where returned coins normally appeared. Hermione scooped them up and handed them mutely to Harry over Ginny’s head; he glanced at the topmost one, *Harry Potter, Rescue Mission.*

“Visitors to the Ministry, you are required to submit to a search and present your wands for

registration at the security desk, which is located at the far end of the Atrium."

"Fine!" Harry said loudly, as his scar gave another throb. "Now can we move?"

The floor of the telephone box shuddered and the pavement rose up past its glass windows; the scavenging Thestrals were sliding out of sight; blackness closed over their heads and with a dull grinding noise they sank down into the depths of the Ministry of Magic.

A chink of soft golden light hit their feet and, widening, rose up their bodies. Harry bent his knees and held his wand as ready as he could in such cramped conditions as he peered through the glass to see whether anybody was waiting for them in the Atrium, but it seemed to be completely empty. The light was dimmer than it had been by day; there were no fires burning under the mantelpieces set into the walls, but as the lift slid smoothly to a halt he saw that golden symbols continued to twist sinuously in the dark blue ceiling.

"The Ministry of Magic wishes you a pleasant evening," said the woman's voice.

The door of the telephone box burst open; Harry toppled out of it, closely followed by Neville and Luna. The only sound in the Atrium was the steady rush of water from the golden fountain, where jets from the wands of the witch and wizard, the point of the centaur's arrow, the tip of the goblin's hat and the house-elf's ears continued to gush into the surrounding pool.

"Come on," said Harry quietly and the six of them sprinted off down the hall, Harry in the lead, past the fountain towards the desk where the security man who had weighed Harry's wand had sat, and which was now deserted.

Harry felt sure there ought to be a security person there, sure that their absence was an ominous sign, and his feeling of foreboding increased as they passed through the golden gates to the lifts. He pressed the nearest 'down' button and a lift clattered into sight almost immediately, the golden grilles slid apart with a great, echoing clanking and they dashed inside. Harry stabbed the number nine button; the grilles closed with a bang and the lift began to descend, jangling and rattling. Harry had not realized how noisy the lifts were on the day he had come with Mr. Weasley; he was sure the din would raise every security person within the building, yet when the lift halted, the cool female voice said, "Department of Mysteries," and the grilles slid open. They stepped out into the corridor where nothing was moving but the nearest torches, flickering in the rush of air from the lift.

Harry turned towards the plain black door. After months and months of dreaming about it, he was here at last.

"Let's go," he whispered, and he led the way down t he corridor, Luna right behind him, gazing around with her mouth slightly open.

"Okay, listen," said Harry stopping again within six feet of the door. "Maybe… maybe a couple of people should stay here as a — as a lookout, and —"

“And how’re we going to let you know something’s coming?” asked Ginny, her eyebrows raised. “You could be miles away.”

“We’re coming with you, Harry,” said Neville.

“Let’s get on with it,” said Ron firmly.

Harry still did not want to take them all with him, but it seemed he had no choice. He turned to face the door and walked forwards… just as it had in his dream, it swung open and he marched over the threshold, the others at his heels.

They were standing in a large, circular room. Everything in here was black including the floor and ceiling; identical, unmarked, handleless black doors were set at intervals all around the black walls, interspersed with branches of candles whose flames burned blue; their cool, shimmering light reflected in the shining marble floor made it look as though there was dark water underfoot.

“Someone shut the door,” Harry muttered.

He regretted giving this order the moment Neville had obeyed it. Without the long chink of light from the torchlit corridor behind them, the place became so dark that for a moment the only things they could see were the bunches of shivering blue flames on the walls and their ghostly reflections in the floor.

In his dream, Harry had always walked purposefully across this room to the door immediately opposite the entrance and walked on. But there were around a dozen doors here. Just as he was gazing ahead at the doors opposite him, trying to decide which was the right one, there was a great rumbling noise and the candles began to move sideways. The circular wall was rotating.

Hermione grabbed Harry’s arm as though frightened the floor might move, too, but it did not. For a few seconds, the blue flames around them were blurred to resemble neon lines as the wall sped around; then, quite as suddenly as it had started, the rumbling stopped and everything became stationary once again.

Harry’s eyes had blue streaks burned into them; it was all he could see.

“What was that about?” whispered Ron fearfully.

“I think it was to stop us knowing which door we came in through,” said Ginny in a hushed voice.

Harry realized at once she was right: he could no sooner identify the exit door than locate an ant on the jet-black floor; and the door through which they needed to proceed could be any one of the dozen surrounding them.

“How’re we going to get back out?” said Neville uncomfortably.

“Well, that doesn’t matter now,” said Harry forcefully, blinking to try to erase the blue lines from his vision, and clutching his wand tighter than ever, “we won’t need to get out till we’ve found Sirius -”

“Don’t go calling for him, though!” Hermione said urgently; but Harry had never needed her advice less, his instinct was to keep as quiet as possible.

“Where do we go, then, Harry?” Ron asked.

“I don’t -” Harry began. He swallowed. “In the dreams I went through the door at the end of the corridor from the lifts into a dark room - that’s this one - and then I went through another door into a room that kind of… glitters. We should try a few doors,” he said hastily, “I’ll know the right way when I see it. C’mon.”

He marched straight at the door now facing him, the others following close behind him, set his left hand against its cool, shining surface, raised his wand ready to strike the moment it opened, and pushed.

It swung open easily.

After the darkness of the first room, the lamps hanging low on golden chains from this ceiling gave the impression that this long rectangular room was much brighter, though there were no glittering, shimmering lights as Harry had seen in his dreams. The place was quite empty except for a few desks and, in the very middle of the room, an enormous glass tank of deep green liquid, big enough for all of them to swim in; a number of pearly-white objects were drifting around lazily in it.

“What’re those things?” whispered Ron.

“Dunno,” said Harry.

“Are they fish?” breathed Ginny.

“Aquavirius Maggots!” said Luna excitedly. “Dad said the Ministry were breeding —”

“No,” said Hermione. She sounded odd. She moved forward to look through the side of the tank. “They’re brains.”

“Brains?”

“Yes… I wonder what they’re doing with them?”

Harry joined her at the tank. Sure enough, there could be no mistake now he saw them at close quarters. Glimmering eerily, they drifted in and out of sight in the depths of the green liquid, looking something like slimy cauliflowers.

“Let’s get out of here,” said Harry. “This isn’t right, we need to try another door.”

“There are doors here, too,” said Ron, pointing around the walls. Harry’s heart sank; how big was this place?

“In my dream I went through that dark room into the second one,” he said. “I think we should go back and try from there.”

So they hurried back into the dark, circular room; the ghostly shapes of the brains were now swimming before Harry’s eyes instead of the blue candle flames.

“Wait!” said Hermione sharply, as Luna made to close the door of the brain room behind them. “Flagrate!”

She drew with her wand in midair and a fiery ‘X’ appeared on the door. No sooner had the door clicked shut behind them than there was a great rumbling, and once again the wall began to revolve very fast, but now there was a great red-gold blur in amongst the faint blue and, when all became still again, the fiery cross still burned, showing the door they had already tried.

“Good thinking,” said Harry. “Okay, let’s try this one -”

Again, he strode directly at the door facing him and pushed it open, his wand still raised, the others at his heels.

This room was larger than the last, dimly lit and rectangular, and the center of it was sunken, forming a great stone pit some twenty feet deep. They were standing on the topmost tier of what seemed to be stone benches running all around the room and descending in steep steps like an amphitheatre, or the courtroom in which Harry had been tried by the Wizengamot. Instead of a chained chair, however, there was a raised stone dais in the center of the pit, on which stood a stone archway that looked so ancient, cracked and crumbling that Harry was amazed the thing was still standing. Unsupported by any surrounding wall, the archway was hung with a tattered black curtain or veil which, despite the complete stillness of the cold surrounding air, was fluttering very slightly as though it had just been touched.

“Who’s there?” said Harry, jumping down on to the bench below. There was no answering voice, but the veil continued to flutter and sway.

“Careful!” whispered Hermione.

Harry scrambled down the benches one by one until he reached the stone bottom of the sunken pit. His footsteps echoed loudly as he walked slowly towards the dais. The pointed archway looked much taller from where he now stood than it had when he’d been looking down on it from above. Still the veil swayed gently, as though somebody had just passed through it.

“Sirius?” Harry spoke again, but more quietly now that he was nearer.

He had the strangest feeling that there was someone standing right behind the veil on the other side of the archway. Gripping his wand very tightly, he edged around the dais, but there was nobody there; all that could be seen was the other side of the tattered black veil.

“Let’s go,” called Hermione from halfway up the stone steps. “This isn’t right, Harry, come on, let’s go.”

She sounded scared, much more scared than she had in the room where the brains swam, yet Harry thought the archway had a kind of beauty about it, old though it was. The gently rippling veil intrigued him; he felt a very strong inclination to climb up on the dais and walk through it.

“Harry, let’s go, okay?” said Hermione more forcefully.

“Okay,” he said, but did not move. He had just heard something. There were faint whispering, murmuring noises coming from the other side of the veil.

“What are you saying?” he said, very loudly, so that his words echoed all around the stone benches.

“Nobody’s talking, Harry!” said Hermione, now moving over to him.

“Someone’s whispering behind there,” he said, moving out of her reach and continuing to frown at the veil. “Is that you, Ron?”

“I’m here, mate,” said Ron, appearing around the side of the archway.

“Can’t anyone else hear it?” Harry demanded, for the whispering and murmuring was becoming louder; without really meaning to put it there, he found his foot was on the dais.

“I can hear them too,” breathed Luna, joining them around the side of the archway and gazing at the swaying veil. “There are people in there!”

“What do you mean, ‘in there’?” demanded Hermione, jumping down from the bottom step and sounding much angrier than the occasion warranted, “there isn’t any ‘in there’, it’s just an archway, there’s no room for anybody to be there. Harry, stop it, come away -”

She grabbed his arm and pulled, but he resisted.

“Harry, we are supposed to be here for Sirius!” she said in a high-pitched, strained voice.

“Sirius,” Harry repeated, still gazing, mesmerized, at the continuously swaying veil. “Yeah…”

Something finally slid back into place in his brain; Sirius, captured, bound and tortured, and he was staring at this archway…

He took several paces back from the dais and wrenched his eyes from the veil.

“Let’s go,” he said.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to - well, come on, then!” said Hermione, and she led the way back around the dais. On the other side, Ginny and Neville were staring, apparently entranced, at the veil too. Without speaking, Hermione took hold of Ginny’s arm, Ron grabbed Neville’s, and they marched them firmly back to the lowest stone bench and clambered all the way back up to the door.

“What d’you reckon that arch was?” Harry asked Hermione as they regained the dark circular room.

“I don’t know, but whatever it was, it was dangerous,” she said firmly, again inscribing a fiery cross on the door.

Once more, the wall span and became still again. Harry approached another door at random and pushed. It did not move.

“What’s wrong?” said Hermione.

“It’s… locked…” said Harry, throwing his weight at the door, but it didn’t budge.

“This is it, then, isn’t it?” said Ron excitedly, joining Harry in the attempt to force the door open. “Bound to be!”

“Get out of the way!” said Hermione sharply. She pointed her wand at the place where a lock would have been on an ordinary door and said, “Alohomora!”

Nothing happened.

“Sirius’s knife!” said Harry. He pulled it out from inside his robes and slid it into the crack between the door and the wall. The others all watched eagerly as he ran it from top to bottom, withdrew it and then flung his shoulder again at the door. It remained as firmly shut as ever. What was more, when Harry looked down at the knife, he saw the blade had melted.

“Right, we’re leaving that room,” said Hermione decisively.

“But what if that’s the one?” said Ron, staring at it with a mixture of apprehension and longing.

“It can’t be, Harry could get through all the doors in his dream,” said Hermione, marking the door with another fiery cross as Harry replaced the now-useless handle of Sirius’s knife in his pocket.

“You know what could be in there?” said Luna eagerly, as the wall started to spin yet again.

“Something blibbering, no doubt,” said Hermione under her breath and Neville gave a nervous little laugh.

The wall slid to a halt and Harry, with a feeling of increasing desperation, pushed the next door open.

“This is it!”

He knew it at once by the beautiful, dancing, diamond-sparkling light. As Harrys eyes became accustomed to the brilliant glare, he saw clocks gleaming from every surface, large and small, grandfather and carriage, hanging in spaces between the bookcases or standing on desks ranging the length of the room, so that a busy, relentless ticking filled the place like thousands of minuscule, marching footsteps. The source of the dancing, diamond-bright light was a towering crystal ball jar that stood at the far end of the room.

“This way!”

Harry’s heart was pumping frantically now that he knew they were on the right track; he led the way down the narrow space between the lines of desks, heading, as he had done in his dream, for the source of the light, the crystal bell jar quite as tall as he was that stood on a desk and appeared to be full of a billowing, glittering wind.

“Oh, look!” said Ginny, as they drew nearer, pointing at the very heart of the bell jar.

Drifting along in the sparkling current inside was a tiny, jewel-bright egg. As it rose in the jar, it cracked open and a hummingbird emerged, which was carried to the very top of the jar, but as it fell on the draught its feathers became bedraggled and damp again, and by the time it had been borne back to the bottom of the jar it had been enclosed once more in its egg.

“Keep going!” said Harry sharply, because Ginny showed signs of wanting to stop and watch the egg’s progress back into a bird.

“You dawdled enough by that old arch!” she said crossly, but followed him past the bell jar to the only door behind it.

“This is it,” Harry said again, and his heart was now pumping so hard and fast he felt it must interfere with his speech, “it’s through here -”

He glanced around at them all; they had their wands out and looked suddenly serious and anxious. He looked back at the door and pushed. It swung open.

They were there, they had found the place: high as a church and full of nothing but towering shelves covered in small, dusty, glass orbs. They glimmered dully in the light issuing from more candle-brackets set at intervals along the shelves. Like those in the circular room behind them, their flames were burning blue. The room was very cold.

Harry edged forward and peered down one of the shadowy aisles between two rows of shelves. He could not hear anything or see the slightest sign of movement.

“You said it was row ninety-seven,” whispered Hermione.

“Yeah,” breathed Harry, looking up at the end of the closest row. Beneath the branch of blueglowing candles protruding from it glimmered the silver figure fifty-three.

“We need to go right, I think,” whispered Hermione, squinting to the next row. “Yes… that’s fifty-four…”

“Keep your wands ready,” Harry said softly.

They crept forward, glancing behind them as they went on down the long alleys of shelves, the further ends of which were in near-total darkness. Tiny, yellowing labels had been stuck beneath each glass orb on the shelves. Some of them had a weird, liquid glow; others were as dull and dark within as blown light bulbs.

They passed row eighty-four… eighty-five… Harry was listening hard for the slightest sound of movement, but Sirius might be gagged now, or else unconscious… or, said an unbidden voice inside his head, he might already be dead…

I’d have felt it, he told himself, his heart now hammering against his Adam’s apple, *I’d already know…*

“Ninety-seven!” whispered Hermione.

They stood grouped around the end of the row, gazing down the alley beside it. There was nobody there.

“He’s right down at the end,” said Harry, whose mouth had become slightly dry. “You can’t see properly from here.”

And he led them between the towering rows of glass balls, some of which glowed softly as they passed…

“He should be near here,” whispered Harry, convinced that every step was going to bring the ragged form of Sirius into view on the darkened floor. “Anywhere here… really close…”

“Harry?” said Hermione tentatively, but he did not want to respond. His mouth was very dry.

“Somewhere about… here…” he said.

They had reached the end of the row and emerged into more dim candlelight. There was nobody there. All was echoing, dusty silence.

“He might be…” Harry whispered hoarsely, peering down the next alley. “Or maybe…” He hurried to look down the one beyond that.

“Harry?” said Hermione again.

“What?” he snarled.

“I… I don’t think Sirius is here.”

Nobody spoke. Harry did not want to look at any of them. He felt sick. He did not understand why Sirius was not here. He had to be here. This was where he, Harry, had seen him…

He ran up the space at the end of the rows, staring down them. Empty aisle after empty aisle flickered past. He ran the other way, back past his staring companions. There was no sign of Sirius anywhere, nor any hint of a struggle.

“Harry?” Ron called.

“What?”

He did not want to hear what Ron had to say; did not want to hear Ron tell him he had been stupid or suggest that they ought to go back to Hogwarts, but the heat was rising in his face and he felt as though he would like to skulk down here in the darkness for a long while before facing the brightness of the Atrium above and the others’ accusing stares…

“Have you seen this?” said Ron,

“What?” said Harry, but eagerly this time - it had to be a sign that Sirius had been there, a clue. He strode back to where they were all standing, a little way down row ninety-seven, but found nothing except Ron staring at one of the dusty glass spheres on the shelf.

“What?” Harry repeated glumly.

“It’s — it’s got your name on,” said Ron.

Harry moved a little closer. Ron was pointing at one of the small glass spheres that glowed with a dull inner light, though it was very dusty and appeared not to have been touched for many years.

“My name?” said Harry blankly.

He stepped forwards. Not as tall as Ron, he had to crane his neck to read the yellowish label affixed to the shelf right beneath the dusty glass ball. In spidery writing was written a date of some sixteen years previously, and below that:

S.P.T. to A.P.W.B.D.

Dark Lord and (?)Harry Potter

Harry stared at it.

“What is it?” Ron asked, sounding unnerved. “What’s your name doing down here?”

He glanced along at the other labels on that stretch of shelf.

“I’m not here,” he said, sounding perplexed. “None of the rest of us are here.”

“Harry, I don’t think you should touch it,” said Hermione sharply, as he stretched out his hand.

“Why not?” he said. “It’s something to do with me, isn’t it?”

“Don’t, Harry,” said Neville suddenly. Harry looked at him. Neville’s round face was shining slightly with sweat. He looked as though he could not take much more suspense.

“It’s got my name on,” said Harry.

And feeling slightly reckless, he closed his fingers around the dusty ball’s surface. He had expected it to feel cold, but it did not. On the contrary, it felt as though it had been lying in the sun for hours, as though the glow of light within was warming it. Expecting, even hoping, that something dramatic was going to happen, something exciting that might make their long and dangerous journey worthwhile after all, Harry lifted the glass ball down from its shelf and stared at it.

Nothing whatsoever happened. The others moved in closer around Harry, gazing at the orb as he brushed it free of the clogging dust.

And then, from right behind them, a drawling voice spoke.

“Very good, Potter. Now turn around, nice and slowly, and give that to me.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Beyond the Veil

Black shapes were emerging out of thin air all around them, blocking their way left and right; eyes glinted through slits in hoods, a dozen lit wand tips were pointing directly at their hearts; Ginny gave a gasp of horror.

“To me, Potter,” repeated the drawling voice of Lucius Malfoy as he held out his hand, palm up. Harrys insides plummeted sickeningly. They were trapped, and outnumbered two to one.

“To me,” said Malfoy yet again.

“Where’s Sirius?” Harry said.

Several of the Death Eaters laughed; a harsh female voice from the midst of the shadowy figures to Harry’s left said triumphantly, “The Dark Lord always knows!”

“Always,” echoed Malfoy softly. “Now, give me the prophecy Potter.”

“I want to know where Sirius is!”

“I want to know where Sirius is!” mimicked the woman to his left.

She and her fellow Death Eaters had closed in so that they were mere feet away from Harry and the others, the light from their wands dazzling Harry’s eyes.

“You’ve got him,” said Harry, ignoring the rising panic in his chest, the dread he had been fighting since they had first entered the ninety-seventh row. “He’s here. I know he is.”

“The little baby woke up fwightened and fort what it dweamed was twoo,” said the woman in a horrible, mock baby voice. Harry felt Ron stir beside him.

“Don’t do anything,” Harry muttered. “Not yet -”

The woman who had mimicked him let out a raucous scream of laughter.

“You hear him? You hear him? Giving instructions to the other children as though he thinks of fighting us!”

“Oh, you don’t know Potter as I do, Bellatrix,” said Malfoy softly. “He has a great weakness for heroics; the Dark Lord understands this about him. Now give me the prophecy, Potter.”

“I know Sirius is here,” said Harry, though panic w as causing his chest to constrict and he felt as though he could not breathe properly. “I know you’ve got him!”

More of the Death Eaters laughed, though the woman laughed loudest of all.

“It’s time you learned the difference between life and dreams, Potter,” said Malfoy. “Now give me the prophecy, or we start using wands.”

“Go on, then,” said Harry, raising his own wand to chest height. As he did so, the five wands of Ron, Hermione, Neville, Ginny and Luna rose on either side of him. The knot in Harry’s stomach tightened. If Sirius really was not here, he had led his friends to their deaths for no reason at all…

But the Death Eaters did not strike.

“Hand over the prophecy and no one need get hurt,” said Malfoy coolly.

It was Harry’s turn to laugh.

“Yeah, right!” he said. “I give you this - prophecy, is it? And you’ll just let us skip off home, will you?”

The words were hardly out of his mouth when the female Death Eater shrieked: “Accio proph—”

Harry was just ready for her: he shouted “Protego!” before she had finished her spell, and though the glass sphere slipped to the tips of his fingers he managed to cling on to it.

“Oh, he knows how to play, little bitty baby Potter,” she said, her mad eyes staring through the slits in her hood. “Very well, then -”

“I TOLD YOU, NO!” Lucius Malfoy roared at the woman. “If you smash it -!”

Harry’s mind was racing. The Death Eaters wanted this dusty spun-glass sphere. He had no interest in it. He just wanted to get them all out of this alive, to make sure none of his friends paid a terrible price for his stupidity…

The woman stepped forward, away from her fellows, and pulled off her hood. Azkaban had hollowed Bellatrix Lestrange’s face, making it gaunt and skull-like, but it was alive with a feverish, fanatical glow.

“You need more persuasion?” she said, her chest rising and falling rapidly. “Very well - take the smallest one,” she ordered the Death Eaters beside her. “Let him watch while we torture the little girl. I’ll do it.”

Harry felt the others close in around Ginny; he stepped sideways so that he was right in front of her, the prophecy held up to his chest.

“You’ll have to smash this if you want to attack any of us,” he told Bellatrix. “I don’t think your boss will be too pleased if you come back without it, will he?”

She did not move; she merely stared at him, the tip of her tongue moistening her thin mouth.

“So,” said Harry, “what kind of prophecy are we talking about, anyway?”

He could not think what to do but to keep talking. Neville’s arm was pressed against his, and he could feel him shaking; he could feel one of the others’ quickened breath on the back of his head. He was hoping they were all thinking hard about ways to get out of this, because his mind was blank.

“What kind of prophecy?” repeated Bellatrix, the grin fading from her face. “You jest, Harry Potter.”

“Nope, not jesting,” said Harry, his eyes flicking from Death Eater to Death Eater, looking for a weak link, a space through which they could escape. “How come Voldemort wants it?”

Several of the Death Eaters let out low hisses.

“You dare speak his name?” whispered Bellatrix.

“Yeah,” said Harry, maintaining his tight grip on the glass ball, expecting another attempt to bewitch it from him. “Yeah, I’ve got no problem with saying Vol—”

“Shut your mouth!” Bellatrix shrieked. “You dare speak his name with your unworthy lips, you dare besmirch it with your half-blood’s tongue, you dare -”

“Did you know he’s a half-blood too?” said Harry recklessly. Hermione gave a little moan in his ear. “Voldemort? Yeah, his mother was a witch but his dad was a Muggle - or has he been telling you lot he’s pure-blood?”

“STUPEF—”

“NO!”

A jet of red light had shot from the end of Bellatrix Lestrange’s wand, but Malfoy had deflected it; his spell caused hers to hit the shelf a foot to the left of Harry and several of the glass orbs there shattered.

Two figures, pearly-white as ghosts, fluid as smoke, unfurled themselves from the fragments of broken glass upon the floor and each began to speak; their voices vied with each other, so that only fragments of what they were saying could be heard over Malfoy and Bellatrix’s shouts.

“… at the solstice will come a new…” said the figure of an old, bearded man.

“DO NOT ATTACK! WE NEED THE PROPHECY!”

“He dared - he dares -” shrieked Bellatrix incoherently, “he stands there - filthy half-blood -”

“WAIT UNTIL WE’VE GOT THE PROPHECY!” bawled Malfoy.

“… and none will come after…” said the figure of a young woman.

The two figures that had burst from the shattered spheres had melted into thin air. Nothing remained of them or their erstwhile homes but fragments of glass upon the floor. They had, however, given Harry an idea. The problem was going to be conveying it to the others.

“You haven’t told me what’s so special about this prophecy I’m supposed to be handing over,” he said, playing for time. He moved his foot slowly sideways, feeling around for someone else’s.

“Do not play games with us, Potter,” said Malfoy.

“I’m not playing games,” said Harry, half his mind on the conversation, half on his wandering foot. And then he found someone’s toes and pressed down upon them. A sharp intake of breath behind him told him they were Hermiones.

“What?” she whispered.

“Dumbledore never told you the reason you bear that scar was hidden in the bowels of the Department of Mysteries?” Malfoy sneered.

“I - what?” said Harry. And for a moment he quite forgot his plan. “What about my scar?”

“What?” whispered Hermione more urgently behind him.

“Can this be?” said Malfoy, sounding maliciously delighted; some of the Death Eaters were laughing again, and under cover of their laughter, Harry hissed to Hermione, moving his lips as little as possible, “Smash shelves -”

“Dumbledore never told you?” Malfoy repeated. “Well, this explains why you didn’t come earlier, Potter, the Dark Lord wondered why -”

“- when I say now-”

“- you didn’t come running when he showed you the place where it was hidden in your dreams. He thought natural curiosity would make you want to hear the exact wording…”

“Did he?” said Harry. Behind him he felt rather than heard Hermione passing his message to the others and he sought to keep talking, to distract the Death Eaters. “So he wanted me to come and get it, did he? Why?”

“Why?” Malfoy sounded incredulously delighted. “Because the only people who are permitted to retrieve a prophecy from the Department of Mysteries, Potter, are those about whom it was made, as the Dark Lord discovered when he attempted to use others to steal it for him.”

“And why did he want to steal a prophecy about me?”

“About both of you, Potter, about both of you… haven’t you ever wondered why the Dark Lord tried to kill you as a baby?”

Harry stared into the slitted eye-holes through which Malfoy’s grey eyes were gleaming. Was this prophecy the reason Harry’s parents had died, the reason he carried his lightning-bolt scar? Was the answer to all of this clutched in his hand?

“Someone made a prophecy about Voldemort and me?” he said quietly, gazing at Lucius Malfoy, his fingers tightening over the warm glass sphere in his hand. It was hardly larger than a Snitch and still gritty with dust. “And he’s made me come and get it for him? Why couldn’t he come and get it himself?”

“Get it himself?” shrieked Bellatrix, over a cackle of mad laughter. “The Dark Lord, walk into the Ministry of Magic, when they are so sweetly ignoring his return? The Dark Lord, reveal himself to the Aurors, when at the moment they are wasting their time on my dear cousin?”

“So, he’s got you doing his dirty work for him, has he?” said Harry. “Like he tried to get Sturgis to steal it - and Bode?”

“Very good, Potter, very good…” said Malfoy slowly. “But the Dark Lord knows you are not unintell—”

“NOW!” yelled Harry.

Five different voices behind him bellowed, “REDUCTO!” Five curses flew in five different directions and the shelves opposite them exploded as they hit; the towering structure swayed as a hundred glass spheres burst apart, pearly-white figures unfurled into the air and floated there, their voices echoing from who knew what long-dead past amid the torrent of crashing glass and splintered wood now raining down upon the floor -

“RUN!” Harry yelled, as the shelves swayed precariously and more glass spheres began to fall from above. He seized a handful of Hermione’s robes and dragged her forwards, holding one arm over his head as chunks of shelf and shards of glass thundered down upon them. A Death Eater lunged forwards through the cloud of dust and Harry elbowed him hard in the masked face; they were all yelling, there were cries of pain, and thunderous crashes as the shelves collapsed upon themselves, weirdly echoing fragments of the Seers unleashed from their spheres -

Harry found the way ahead clear and saw Ron, Ginny and Luna sprint past him, their arms over their heads; something heavy struck him on the side of the face but he merely ducked his head and sprinted onwards; a hand caught him by the shoulder; he heard Hermione shout, “Stupefy!” The hand released him at once –

They were at the end of row ninety-seven; Harry turned right and began to sprint in earnest; he could hear footsteps right behind him and Hermione’s voice urging Neville on; straight ahead,

the door through which they had come was ajar; Harry could see the glittering light of the bell jar; he pelted through the doorway, the prophecy still clutched tight and safe in his hand, and waited for the others to hurtle over the threshold before slamming the door behind them -

“Colloportus!” gasped Hermione and the door sealed itself with an odd squelching noise.

“Where - where are the others?” gasped Harry.

He had thought Ron, Luna and Ginny were ahead of them, that they would be waiting in this room, but there was nobody there.

“They must have gone the wrong way!” whispered Hermione, terror in her face.

“Listen!” whispered Neville.

Footsteps and shouts echoed from behind the door they had just sealed; Harry put his ear close to the door to listen and heard Lucius Malfoy roar, “Leave Nott, leave him, I say — his injuries will be nothing to the Dark Lord compared to losing that prophecy. Jugson, come back here, we need to organize! We’ll split into pairs and search, and don’t forget, be gentle with Potter until we’ve got the prophecy, you can kill the others if necessary - Bellatrix, Rodolphus, you take the left; Crabbe, Rabastan, go right -Jugson, Dolohov, the door straight ahead - Macnair and Avery, through here - Rookwood, over there - Mulciber, come with me!”

“What do we do?” Hermione asked Harry, trembling from head to foot.

“Well, we don’t stand here waiting for them to find us, for a start,” said Harry. “Let’s get away from this door.” They ran as quietly as they could, past the shimmering bell jar where the tiny egg was hatching and unhatching, towards the exit into the circular hallway at the far end of the room. They were almost there when Harry heard something large and heavy collide with the door Hermione had charmed shut.

“Stand aside!” said a rough voice. “Alahomora!”

As the door flew open, Harry, Hermione and Neville dived under desks. They could see the bottom of the two Death Eaters’ robes drawing nearer, their feet moving rapidly.

“They might’ve run straight through to the hall,” said the rough voice.

“Check under the desks,” said another.

Harry saw the knees of the Death Eaters bend; poking his wand out from under the desk, he shouted, “STUPEFY!”

A jet of red light hit the nearest Death Eater; he fell backwards into a grandfather clock and knocked it over; the second Death Eater, however, had leapt aside to avoid Harry’s spell and was pointing his own wand at Hermione, who was crawling out from under the desk to get a better

aim.

“Avada -

Harry launched himself across the floor and grabbed the Death Eater around the knees, causing him to topple and his aim to go awry. Neville overturned a desk in his anxiety to help; and pointing his wand wildly at the struggling pair, he cried:

“EXPELLIARMUS!”

Both Harry’s and the Death Eater’s wands flew out of their hands and soared back towards the entrance to the Hall of Prophecy; both scrambled to their feet and charged after them, the Death Eater in front, Harry hot on his heels, and Neville bringing up the rear, plainly horrorstruck by what he had done.

“Get out of the way, Harry!” yelled Neville, clearly determined to repair the damage.

Harry flung himself sideways as Neville took aim again and shouted:

“STUPEFY!”

The jet of red light had flown right over the Death Eater’s shoulder and hit a glass-fronted cabinet on the wall full of variously shaped hour-glasses; the cabinet fell to the floor and burst apart, glass flying everywhere, sprang back up on to the wall, fully mended, then fell down again, and shattered -

The Death Eater had snatched up his wand, which lay on the floor beside the glittering bell jar. Harry ducked down behind another desk as the man turned; his mask had slipped so that he couldn’t see. He ripped it off with his free hand and shouted: “STUP—”

“STUPEFY!” screamed Hermione, who had just caught up with them. The jet of red light hit the Death Eater in the middle of his chest: he froze, his arm still raised, his wand fell to the floor with a clatter and he collapsed backwards towards the bell jar. Harry expected to hear a dunk, for the man to hit solid glass and slide off the jar on to the floor, but instead, his head sank through the surface of the bell jar as though it were nothing but a soap bubble and he came to rest, sprawled on his back on the table, with his head lying inside the jar full of glittering wind.

“Accio wand!” cried Hermione. Harry’s wand flew from a dark corner into her hand and she threw it to him.

“Thanks,” he said. “Right, let’s get out of —”

“Look out!” said Neville, horrified. He was staring at the Death Eater’s head in the bell jar.

All three of them raised their wands again, but none of them struck: they were all gazing, openmouthed, appalled, at what was happening to the man’s head.

It was shrinking very fast, growing balder and balder, the black hair and stubble retracting into his skull; his cheeks becoming smooth, his skull round and covered with a peachlike fuzz…

A baby's head now sat grotesquely on top of the thick, muscled neck of the Death Eater as he struggled to get up again; but even as they watched, their mouths open, the head began to swell to its previous proportions again; thick black hair was sprouting from the pate and chin…

"It's Time," said Hermione in an awestruck voice. "Time…"

The Death Eater shook his ugly head again, trying to clear it, but before he could pull himself together it began to shrink back to babyhood once more…

There was a shout from a room nearby, then a crash and a scream.

"RON?" Harry yelled, turning quickly from the monstrous transformation taking place before them. "GINNY? LUNA?"

"Harry!" Hermione screamed.

The Death Eater had pulled his head out of the bell jar. His appearance was utterly bizarre, his tiny baby's head bawling loudly while his thick arms flailed dangerously in all directions, narrowly missing Harry, who had ducked. Harry raised his wand but to his amazement Hermione seized his arm.

"You can't hurt a baby!"

There was no time to argue the point; Harry could hear more footsteps growing louder from the Hall of Prophecy and knew, too late, that he ought not to have shouted and given away their position.

"Come on!" he said, and leaving the ugly baby-headed Death Eater staggering behind them they took off for the door that stood open at the other end of the room, leading back into the black hallway.

They had run halfway towards it when Harry saw through the open door two more Death Eaters running across the black room towards them; veering left, he burst instead into a small, dark, cluttered office and slammed the door behind them.

"Collo—" began Hermione, but before she could complete the spell the door had burst open and the two Death Eaters had come hurtling inside.

With a cry of triumph, both yelled:

"IMPEDIMENTA!"

Harry, Hermione and Neville were all knocked backwards off their feet; Neville was thrown over

the desk and disappeared from view; Hermione smashed into a bookcase and was promptly deluged in a cascade of heavy books; the back of Harry's head slammed into the stone wall behind him, tiny lights burst in front of his eyes and for a moment he was too dizzy and bewildered to react.

"WE'VE GOT HIM!" yelled the Death Eater nearest Harry. "IN AN OFFICE OFF—"

"Silencio!" cried Hermione and the man's voice was extinguished. He continued to mouth through the hole in his mask, but no sound came out. He was thrust aside by his fellow Death Eater.

"Petrificus Totalus!" shouted Harry, as the second Death Eater raised his wand. His arms and legs snapped together and he fell forwards, face down on to the rug at Harry's feet, stiff as a board and unable to move.

"Well done, Ha—"

But the Death Eater Hermione had just struck dumb made a sudden slashing movement with his wand; a streak of what looked like purple flame passed right across Hermione's chest. She gave a tiny "Oh!" as though of surprise and crumpled on to the floor, where she lay motionless.

"HERMIONE!"

Harry fell to his knees beside her as Neville crawled rapidly towards her from under the desk, his wand held up in front of him. The Death Eater kicked out hard at Neville's head as he emerged - his foot broke Neville's wand in two and connected with his face. Neville gave a howl of pain and recoiled, clutching his mouth and nose. Harry twisted around, his own wand held high, and saw that the Death Eater had ripped off his mask and was pointing his wand directly at Harry, who recognized the long, pale, twisted face from the Daily Prophet: Antonin Dolohov, the wizard who had murdered the Prewetts.

Dolohov grinned. With his free hand, he pointed from the prophecy still clutched in Harrys hand, to himself, then at Hermione. Though he could no longer speak, his meaning could not have been clearer. Give me the prophecy, or you get the same as her…

"Like you won't kill us all anyway, the moment I hand it over!" said Harry.

A whine of panic inside his head was preventing him thinking properly: he had one hand on Hermione's shoulder, which was still warm, yet did not dare look at her properly. Don't let her be dead, don't let her be dead, it's my fault if she's dead…

"Whaddever you do, Harry," said Neville fiercely from under the desk, lowering his hands to show a clearly broken nose and blood pouring down his mouth and chin, "don'd gib it to him!"

Then there was a crash outside the door and Dolohov looked over his shoulder - the baby-headed Death Eater had appeared in the doorway, his head bawling, his great fists still flailing

uncontrollably at everything around him. Harry seized his chance:

“PETRIFICUS TOTALUS!”

The spell hit Dolohov before he could block it and he toppled forwards across his comrade, both of them rigid as boards and unable to move an inch.

“Hermione,” Harry said at once, shaking her as the baby-headed Death Eater blundered out of sight again. “Hermione, wake up…”

“Whad did he do to her?” said Neville, crawling out from under the desk to kneel at her other side, blood streaming from his rapidly swelling nose.

“I dunno…”

Neville groped for Hermione’s wrist.

“Dat’s a pulse, Harry, I’b sure id is.”

Such a powerful wave of relief swept through Harry that for a moment he felt light-headed.

“She’s alive?”

“Yeah, I dink so.”

There was a pause in which Harry listened hard for the sound of more footsteps, but all he could hear were the whimpers and blunderings of the baby-headed Death Eater in the next room.

“Neville, we’re not far from the exit,” Harry whispered, “we’re right next to that circular room… if we can just get you across it and find the right door before any more Death Eaters come, I’ll bet you can get Hermione up the corridor and into the lift… then you could find someone… raise the alarm…”

“And whad are you going do do?” said Neville, mopping his bleeding nose with his sleeve and frowning at Harry.

“I’ve got to find the others,” said Harry.

“Well, I’b going do find dem wid you,” said Neville firmly.

“But Hermione —”

“We’ll dake her wid us,” said Neville firmly. “I’ll carry her — you’re bedder at fighding dem dan I ab -”

He stood up and seized one of Hermione’s arms, glaring at Harry, who hesitated, then grabbed

the other and helped hoist Hermione's limp form over Neville's shoulders.

"Wait," said Harry, snatching up Hermione's wand from the floor and shoving it into Neville's hand, "you'd better take this."

Neville kicked aside the broken fragments of his own wand as they walked slowly towards the door.

"My gran's going do kill be," said Neville thickly, blood spattering from his nose as he spoke, "dat was by dad's old wand."

Harry stuck his head out of the door and looked around cautiously. The baby-headed Death Eater was screaming and banging into things, toppling grandfather clocks and overturning desks, bawling and confused, while the glass-fronted cabinet that Harry now suspected had contained Time-Turners continued to fall, shatter and repair itself on the wall behind them.

"He's never going to notice us," he whispered. "C'mon… keep close behind me…"

They crept out of the office and back towards the door into the black hallway, which now seemed completely deserted. They walked a few steps forwards, Neville tottering slightly due to Hermione's weight; the door of the Time Room swung shut behind them and the walls began to rotate once more. The recent blow on the back of Harrys head seemed to have unsteadied him; he narrowed his eyes, swaying slightly, until the walls stopped moving again. With a sinking heart, Harry saw that Hermione's fiery crosses had faded from the doors.

"So which way d'you reck—?"

But before they could make a decision as to which way to try, a door to their right sprang open and three people fell out of it.

"Ron!" croaked Harry, dashing towards them. "Ginny - are you all -?"

"Harry," said Ron, giggling weakly, lurching forwards, seizing the front of Harry's robes and gazing at him with unfocused eyes, "there you are… ha ha ha… you look funny, Harry… you're all messed up…"

Ron's face was very white and something dark was trickling from the corner of his mouth. Next moment his knees had given way, but he still clutched the front of Harry's robes, so that Harry was pulled into a kind of bow.

"Ginny?" Harry said fearfully. "What happened?"

But Ginny shook her head and slid down the wall into a sitting position, panting and holding her ankle.

"I think her ankle's broken, I heard something crack," whispered Luna, who was bending over

her and who alone seemed to be unhurt. “Four of them chased us into a dark room full of planets; it was a very odd place, some of the time we were just floating in the dark -”

“Harry, we saw Uranus up close!” said Ron, still giggling feebly. “Get it, Harry? We saw Uranus - ha ha ha -”

A bubble of blood grew at the corner of Ron’s mouth and burst.

“- anyway, one of them grabbed Ginny’s foot, I used the Reductor Curse and blew up Pluto in his face, but…”

Luna gestured hopelessly at Ginny, who was breathing in a very shallow way, her eyes still closed.

“And what about Ron?” said Harry fearfully, as Ron continued to giggle, still hanging off the front of Harry’s robes.

“I don’t know what they hit him with,” said Luna sadly, “but he’s gone a bit funny, I could hardly get him along at all.”

“Harry,” said Ron, pulling Harry’s ear down to his mouth and still giggling weakly, “you know who this girl is, Harry? She’s Loony… Loony Lovegood… ha ha ha “

“We’ve got to get out of here,” said Harry firmly. “Luna, can you help Ginny?”

“Yes,” said Luna, sticking her wand behind her ear for safekeeping, then putting an arm around Ginnys waist and pulling her up.

“It’s only my ankle, I can do it myself!” said Ginny impatiently, but next moment she had collapsed sideways and grabbed Luna for support. Harry pulled Ron’s arm over his shoulder just as, so many months ago, he had pulled Dudley’s. He looked around: they had a one in twelve chance of getting the exit right first time -

He heaved Ron towards a door; they were within a few feet of it when another door across the hall burst open and three Death Eaters sped in, led by Bellatrix Lestrange.

“There they are!” she shrieked.

Stunning Spells shot across the room: Harry smashed his way through the door ahead, flung Ron unceremoniously from him and ducked back to help Neville in with Hermione: they were all over the threshold just in time to slam the door against Bellatrix.

“Colloportus!” shouted Harry, and he heard three bodies slam into the door on the other side.

“It doesn’t matter!” said a man’s voice. “There are other ways in - WE’VE GOT THEM, THEY’RE HERE!”

Harry span around; they were back in the Brain Room and, sure enough, there were doors all around the walls. He could hear footsteps in the hall behind them as more Death Eaters came running to join the first.

“Luna - Neville - help me!”

The three of them tore around the room, sealing the doors as they went; Harry crashed into a table and rolled over the top of it in his haste to reach the next door:

“Colloportus!”

There were footsteps running along behind the doors, every now and then another heavy body would launch itself against one, so it creaked and shuddered; Luna and Neville were bewitching the doors along the opposite wall - then, as Harry reached the very top of the room, he heard Luna cry:

“Collo—aaaaaaaaargh…”

He turned in time to see her flying through the air; five Death Eaters were surging into the room through the door she had not reached in time; Luna hit a desk, slid over its surface and on to the floor on the other side where she lay sprawled, as still as Hermione.

“Get Potter!” shrieked Bellatrix, and she ran at him; he dodged her and sprinted back up the room; he was safe as long as they thought they might hit the prophecy -

“Hey!” said Ron, who had staggered to his feet and was now tottering drunkenly towards Harry, giggling. “Hey Harry, there are brains in here, ha h a ha, isn’t that weird, Harry?”

“Ron, get out of the way, get down -”

But Ron had already pointed his wand at the tank.

“Honest, Harry, they’re brains - look -Accio brain!”

The scene seemed momentarily frozen. Harry, Ginny and Neville and each of the Death Eaters turned in spite of themselves to watch the top of the tank as a brain burst from the green liquid like a leaping fish: for a moment it seemed suspended in midair, then it soared towards Ron, spinning as it came, and what looked like ribbons of moving images flew from it, unraveling like rolls of film-

“Ha ha ha, Harry, look at it -” said Ron, watching it disgorge its gaudy innards, “Harry come and touch it; bet it’s weird -”

“RON, NO!”

Harry did not know what would happen if Ron touched the tentacles of thought now flying

behind the brain, but he was sure it would not be anything good. He darted forwards but Ron had already caught the brain in his outstretched hands.

The moment they made contact with his skin, the tentacles began wrapping themselves around Ron's arms like ropes.

"Harry, look what's happen— No - no - I don't like it - no, stop - stop -"

But the thin ribbons were spinning around Ron's chest now; he tugged and tore at them as the brain was pulled tight against him like an octopus's body.

"Diffindo!" yelled Harry, trying to sever the feelers wrapping themselves tightly around Ron before his eyes, but they would not break. Ron fell over, still thrashing against his bonds.

"Harry, it'll suffocate him!" screamed Ginny, immobilized by her broken ankle on the floor – then a jet of red light flew from one of the Death Eater's wands and hit her squarely in the face. She keeled over sideways and lay there unconscious.

"STUBEFY!" shouted Neville, wheeling around and waving Hermione's wand at the oncoming Death Eaters, "STUBEFY, STUBEFY!"

But nothing happened.

One of the Death Eaters shot their own Stunning Spell at Neville; it missed him by inches. Harry and Neville were now the only two left fighting the five Death Eaters, two of whom sent off streams of silver light like arrows which missed but left craters in the wall behind them. Harry ran for it as Bellatrix Lestrange raced right at him: holding the prophecy high above his head, he sprinted back up the room; all he could think of doing was to draw the Death Eaters away from the others.

It seemed to have worked; they streaked after him, knocking chairs and tables flying but not daring to bewitch him in case they hurt the prophecy, and he dashed through the only door still open, the one through which the Death Eaters themselves had come; inwardly praying that Neville would stay with Ron and find some way of releasing him. He ran a few feet into the new room and felt the floor vanish -

He was falling down steep stone step after steep stone step, bouncing on every tier until at last, with a crash that knocked all the breath out of his body, he landed flat on his back in the sunken pit where the stone archway stood on its dais. The whole room was ringing with the Death Eaters' laughter: he looked up and saw the five who had been in the Brain Room descending towards him, while as many more emerged through other doorways and began leaping from bench to bench towards him. Harry got to his feet though his legs were trembling so badly they barely supported him: the prophecy was still miraculously unbroken in his left hand, his wand clutched tightly in his right. He backed away, looking around, trying to keep all the Death Eaters within his sight. The back of his legs hit something solid: he had reached the dais where the archway stood. He climbed backwards onto it.

The Death Eaters all halted, gazing at him. Some were panting as hard as he was. One was bleeding badly; Dolohov, freed of the Body-Bind Curse, was leering, his wand pointing straight at Harrys face.

“Potter, your race is run,” drawled Lucius Malfoy, pulling off his mask, “now hand me the prophecy like a good boy.”

“Let - let the others go, and I’ll give it to you!” said Harry desperately.

A few of the Death Eaters laughed.

“You are not in a position to bargain, Potter,” said Lucius Malfoy, his pale face flushed with pleasure. “You see, there are ten of us and only one of you… or hasn’t Dumbledore ever taught you how to count?”

“He’s dot alone!” shouted a voice from above them. “He’s still god be!”

Harry’s heart sank: Neville was scrambling down the stone benches towards them, Hermiones wand held fast in his trembling hand.

“Neville - no - go back to Ron -”

“STUBEFY!” Neville shouted again, pointing his wand at each Death Eater in turn. “STUBEFY! STUBE—”

One of the largest Death Eaters seized Neville from behind, pinioning his arms to his sides. He struggled and kicked; several of the Death Eaters laughed.

“It’s Longbottom, isn’t it” sneered Lucius Malfoy. “Well, your grandmother is used to losing family members to our cause… your death will not come as a great shock.”

“Longbottom?” repeated Bellatrix, and a truly evil smile lit her gaunt face. “Why, I have had the pleasure of meeting your parents, boy,”

“I DOE YOU HAB!” roared Neville, and he fought so hard against his captors encircling grip that the Death Eater shouted, “Someone Stun him!”

“No, no, no,” said Bellatrix. She looked transported, alive with excitement as she glanced at Harry, then back at Neville. “No, let’s see how long Longbottom lasts before he cracks like his parents… unless Potter wants to give us the prophecy.”

“DON’D GIB ID DO DEM!” roared Neville, who seemed beside himself, kicking and writhing as Bellatrix drew nearer to him and his captor, her wand raised. “DON’D GIB ID DO DEM, HARRY!”

Bellatrix raised her wand. “Crucio!”

Neville screamed, his legs drawn up to his chest so that the Death Eater holding him was momentarily holding him off the ground. The Death Eater dropped him and he fell to the floor, twitching and screaming in agony.

“That was just a taster!” said Bellatrix, raising her wand so that Neville’s screams stopped and he lay sobbing at her feet. She turned and gazed up at Harry. “Now, Potter, either give us the prophecy, or watch your little friend die the hard way!”

Harry did not have to think; there was no choice. The prophecy was hot with the heat of his clutching hand as he held it out. Malfoy jumped forwards to take it.

Then, high above them, two more doors burst open and five more people sprinted into the room: Sirius, Lupin, Moody, Tonks and Kingsley.

Malfoy turned, and raised his wand, but Tonks had already sent a Stunning Spell right at him. Harry did not wait to see whether it had made contact, but dived off the dais out of the way. The Death Eaters were completely distracted by the appearance of the members of the Order, who were now raining spells down upon them as they jumped from step to step towards the sunken floor. Through the darting bodies, the flashes of light, Harry could see Neville crawling along. He dodged another jet of red light and flung himself flat on the ground to reach Neville.

“Are you okay?” he yelled, as another spell soared inches over their heads.

“Yes,” said Neville, trying to pull himself up.

“And Ron?”

“I dink he’s all righd - he was still fighding de brain when I lefd -”

The stone floor between them exploded as a spell hit it, leaving a crater right where Neville’s hand had been only seconds before; both scrambled away from the spot, then a thick arm came out of nowhere, seized Harry around the neck and pulled him upright, so that his toes were barely touching the floor.

“Give it to me,” growled a voice in his ear, “give me the prophecy -”

The man was pressing so tightly on Harry’s windpipe that he could not breathe. Through watering eyes he saw Sirius dueling with a Death Eater some ten feet away; Kingsley was fighting two at once; Tonks, still halfway up the tiered seats, was firing spells down at Bellatrix - nobody seemed to realize that Harry was dying. He turned his wand backwards towards the man’s side, but had no breath to utter an incantation, and the man’s free hand was groping towards the hand in which Harry was grasping the prophecy -

“AARGH!”

Neville had come lunging out of nowhere; unable to articulate a spell, he had jabbed Hermione’s

wand hard into the eyehole of the Death Eaters mask. The man relinquished Harry at once with a howl of pain. Harry whirled around to face him and gasped:

“STUPEFY!”

The Death Eater keeled over backwards and his mask slipped off: it was Macnair, Buckbeak’s would-be killer, one of his eyes now swollen and bloodshot.

“Thanks!” Harry said to Neville, pulling him aside as Sirius and his Death Eater lurched past, dueling so fiercely that their wands were blurs; then Harry’s foot made contact with something round and hard and he slipped. For a moment he thought he had dropped the prophecy, but then he saw Moody’s magical eye spinning away across the floor.

Its owner was lying on his side, bleeding from the head, and his attacker was now bearing down upon Harry and Neville: Dolohov, his long pale face twisted with glee.

“Tarantallegra!” he shouted, his wand pointing at Neville, whose legs went immediately into a kind of frenzied tap-dance, unbalancing him and causing him to fall to the floor again. “Now, Potter -”

He made the same slashing movement with his wand that he had used on Hermione just as Harry yelled, “Protego!”

Harry felt something streak across his face like a blunt knife; the force of it knocked him sideways and he fell over Neville’s jerking legs, but the Shield Charm had stopped the worst of the spell.

Dolohov raised his wand again. “Accio proph—”

Sirius had hurtled out of nowhere, rammed Dolohov with his shoulder and sent him flying out of the way. The prophecy had again flown to the tips of Harry’s fingers but he had managed to cling on to it. Now Sirius and Dolohov were dueling, their wands flashing like swords, sparks flying from their wand-tips -

Dolohov drew back his wand to make the same slashing movement he had used on Harry and Hermione. Springing up, Harry yelled, “Petrificus Totalus!” Once again, Dolohov’s arms and legs snapped together and he keeled over backwards, landing with a crash on his back.

“Nice one!” shouted Sirius, forcing Harry’s head down as a pair of Stunning Spells flew towards them. “Now I want you to get out of-”

They both ducked again; a jet of green light had narrowly missed Sirius. Across the room Harry saw Tonks fall from halfway up the stone steps, her limp form toppling from stone seat to stone seat and Bellatrix, triumphant, running back towards the fray.

“Harry, take the prophecy, grab Neville and run!” Sirius yelled, dashing to meet Bellatrix. Harry

did not see what happened next: Kingsley swayed across his field of vision, battling with the pockmarked and no longer masked Rookwood; another jet of green light flew over Harry's head as he launched himself towards Neville -

"Can you stand?" he bellowed in Neville's ear, as Neville's legs jerked and twitched uncontrollably. "Put your arm round my neck -"

Neville did so - Harry heaved — Neville's legs were still flying in every direction, they would not support him, and then, out of nowhere, a man lunged at them: both fell backwards, Neville's legs waving wildly like an overturned beetle's, Harry with his left arm held up in the air to try to save the small glass ball from being smashed.

"The prophecy, give me the prophecy, Potter!" snarled Lucius Malfoy's voice in his ear, and Harry felt the tip of Malfoy's wand pressing hard between his ribs.

"No - get - off - me… Neville - catch it!"

Harry flung the prophecy across the floor, Neville spun himself around on his back and scooped the ball to his chest. Malfoy pointed the wand instead at Neville, but Harry jabbed his own wand back over his shoulder and yelled, "Impedimenta!"

Malfoy was blasted off his back. As Harry scrambled up again he looked around and saw Malfoy smash into the dais on which Sirius and Bellatrix were now dueling. Malfoy aimed his wand at Harry and Neville again, but before he could draw breath to strike, Lupin had jumped between them.

"Harry, round up the others and GO!"

Harry seized Neville by the shoulder of his robes and lifted him bodily on to the first tier of stone steps; Neville's legs twitched and jerked and would not support his weight; Harry heaved again with all the strength he possessed and they climbed another step -

A spell hit the stone bench at Harrys heel; it crumbled away and he fell back to the step below. Neville sank to the ground, his legs still jerking and thrashing, and he thrust the prophecy into his pocket.

"Come on!" said Harry desperately, hauling at Neville's robes. "Just try and push with your legs"

He gave another stupendous heave and Neville's robes tore all along the left seam - the small spun-glass ball dropped from his pocket and, before either of them could catch it, one of Neville's floundering feet kicked it: it flew some ten feet to their right and smashed on the step beneath them. As both of them stared at the place where it had broken, appalled at what had happened, a pearly-white figure with hugely magnified eyes rose into the air, unnoticed by any but them. Harry could see its mouth moving, but in all the crashes and screams and yells surrounding them, not one word of the prophecy could he hear. The figure stopped speaking and

dissolved into nothingness.

“Harry, I’b sorry!” cried Neville, his face anguished as his legs continued to flounder. “I’b so sorry, Harry, I didn’d bean do -”

“It doesn’t matter!” Harry shouted. “Just try and stand, let’s get out of -”

“Dubbledore!” said Neville, his sweaty face suddenly transported, staring over Harry’s shoulder.

“What?”

“DUBBLEDORE!”

Harry turned to look where Neville was staring. Directly above them, framed in the doorway from the Brain Room, stood Albus Dumbledore, his wand aloft, his face white and furious. Harry felt a kind of electric charge surge through every particle of his body - they were saved.

Dumbledore sped down the steps past Neville and Harry, who had no more thoughts of leaving. Dumbledore was already at the foot of the steps when the Death Eaters nearest realized he was there and yelled to the others. One of the Death Eaters ran for it, scrabbling like a monkey up the stone steps opposite. Dumbledore’s spell pulled him back as easily and effortlessly as though he had hooked him with an invisible line -

Only one pair was still battling, apparently unaware of the new arrival. Harry saw Sirius duck Bellatrix’s jet of red light: he was laughing at her.

“Come on, you can do better than that!” he yelled, his voice echoing around the cavernous room.

The second jet of light hit him squarely on the chest.

The laughter had not quite died from his face, but his eyes widened in shock.

Harry released Neville, though he was unaware of doing so. He was jumping down the steps again, pulling out his wand, as Dumbledore, too, turned towards the dais.

It seemed to take Sirius an age to fall: his body curved in a graceful arc as he sank backwards through the ragged veil hanging from the arch.

Harry saw the look of mingled fear and surprise on his godfather’s wasted, once-handsome face as he fell through the ancient doorway and disappeared behind the veil, which fluttered for a moment as though in a high wind, then fell back into place.

Harry heard Bellatrix Lestrange’s triumphant scream, but knew it meant nothing - Sirius had only just fallen through the archway, he would reappear from the other side any second…

But Sirius did not reappear.

“SIRIUS!” Harry yelled. “SIRIUS!”

He had reached the floor, his breath coming in searing gasps. Sirius must be just behind the curtain, he, Harry, would pull him back out…

But as he reached the ground and sprinted towards the dais, Lupin grabbed Harry around the chest, holding him back.

“There’s nothing you can do, Harry -”

“Get him, save him, he’s only just gone through!”

“- it’s too late, Harry.”

“We can still reach him -” Harry struggled hard and viciously, but Lupin would not let go…

“There’s nothing you can do, Harry… nothing… he’s gone.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

The Only One He Ever Feared

“He hasn’t gone!” Harry yelled.

He did not believe it; he would not believe it; still he fought Lupin with every bit of strength he had. Lupin did not understand; people hid behind that curtain; Harry had heard them whispering the first time he had entered the room. Sirius was hiding, simply lurking out of sight.

“SIRIUS!” he bellowed. “SIRIUS!”

“He can’t come back, Harry,” said Lupin, his voice breaking as he struggled to contain Harry. “He can’t come back, because he’s d-”

“HE - IS - NOT - DEAD!” roared Harry. “SIRIUS!”

There was movement going on around them, pointless bustling, the flashes of more spells. To Harry it was meaningless noise, the deflected curses flying past them did not matter, nothing mattered except that Lupin should stop pretending that Sirius - who was standing feet from them behind that old curtain - was not going to emerge at any moment, shaking back his dark hair and eager to re-enter the battle.

Lupin dragged Harry away from the dais. Harry, still staring at the archway, was angry at Sirius now for keeping him waiting

But some part of him realized, even as he fought to break free from Lupin, that Sirius had never kept him waiting before… Sirius had risked everything, always, to see Harry, to help him… if Sirius was not reappearing out of that archway when Harry was yelling for him as though his life depended on it, the only possible explanation was that he could not come back… that he really was.

Dumbledore had most of the remaining Death Eaters grouped in the middle of the room, seemingly immobilized by invisible ropes; Mad-Eye Moody had crawled across the room to where Tonks lay, and was attempting to revive her; behind the dais there were still hashes of light, grunts and cries - Kingsley had run forward to continue Sirius’s duel with Bellatrix.

“Harry?”

Neville had slid down the stone benches one by one to the place where Harry stood. Harry was no longer struggling against Lupin, who maintained a precautionary grip on his arm nevertheless.

“Harry… I’b really sorry…” said Neville. His legs were still dancing uncontrollably. “Was dad man - was Sirius Black a - a friend of yours?”

Harry nodded.

“Here,” said Lupin quietly, and pointing his wand at Neville’s legs he said, “Finite.” The spell was lifted: Neville’s legs fell back to the floor and remained still. Lupin’s face was pale. “Let’s - let’s find the others. Where are they all, Neville?”

Lupin turned away from the archway as he spoke. It sounded as though every word was causing him pain.

“Dey’re all back dere,” said Neville. “A brain addacked Ron bud I dink he’s all righd - and Herbione’s unconscious, bud we could feel a bulse”

There was a loud bang and a yell from behind the dais. Harry saw Kingsley hit the ground yelling in pain: Bellatrix Lestrange turned tail and ran as Dumbledore whipped around. He aimed a spell at her but she deflected it; she was halfway up the steps now

“Harry - no!” cried Lupin, but Harry had already ripped his arm from Lupin’s slackened grip.

“SHE KILLED SIRIUS!” bellowed Harry. “SHE KILLED HIM I’LL KILL HER!”

And he was off, scrambling up the stone benches; people were shouting behind him but he did not care. The hem of Bellatrix’s robes whipped out of sight ahead and they were back in the room where the brains were swimming…

She aimed a curse over her shoulder. The tank rose into the air and tipped. Harry was deluged in the foul-smelling potion within: the brains slipped and slid over him and began spinning their long colored tentacles, but he shouted, “Wingardium Leviosa!” and they flew off him up into the air. Slipping and sliding, he ran on towards the door; he leapt over Luna, who was groaning on the floor, past Ginny, who said, “Harry - what -?”, past Ron, who giggled feebly, and Hermione, who was still unconscious. He wrenched open the door into the circular black hall and saw Bellatrix disappearing through a door on the other side of the room; beyond her was the corridor leading back to the lifts.

He ran, but she had slammed the door behind her and the walls were already rotating. Once more, he was surrounded by streaks of blue light from the whirling candelabra.

“Where’s the exit?” he shouted desperately, as the wall rumbled to a halt again. “Where’s the way out?”

The room seemed to have been waiting for him to ask. The door right behind him flew open and the corridor towards the lifts stretched ahead of him, torch-lit and empty. He ran…

He could hear a lift clattering ahead; he sprinted up the passageway, swung around the corner and slammed his fist on to the button to call a second lift. It jangled and banged lower and lower; the grilles slid open and Harry dashed inside, now hammering the button marked ‘Atrium’. The doors slid shut and he was rising…

He forced his way out of the lift before the grilles were fully open and looked around. Bellatrix was almost at the telephone lift at the other end of the hall, but she looked back as he sprinted towards her and aimed another spell at him. He dodged behind the Fountain of Magical Brethren: the spell zoomed past him and hit the wrought gold gates at the other end of the Atrium so that they rang like bells. There were no more footsteps. She had stopped running. He crouched behind the statues, listening.

“Come out, come out, little Harry!” she called in her mock baby voice, which echoed off the polished wooden floors. “What did you come after me for, then? I thought you were here to avenge my dear cousin!”

“I am!” shouted Harry, and a score of ghostly Harrys seemed to chorus I am! I am! I am! all around the room

“Aaaaaah… did you love him, little baby Potter?”

Hatred rose in Harry such as he had never known before; he flung himself out from behind the fountain and bellowed, “Crucio!”

Bellatrix screamed: the spell had knocked her off her feet, but she did not writhe and shriek with pain as Neville had - she was already back on her feet, breathless, no longer laughing. Harry dodged behind the golden fountain again. Her counter-spell hit the head of the handsome wizard, which was blown off and landed twenty feet away, gouging long scratches into the wooden floor.

“Never used an Unforgivable Curse before, have you, boy?” she yelled. She had abandoned her baby voice now. “You need to mean them, Potter! You need to really want to cause pain - to enjoy it - righteous anger won’t hurt me for long - I’ll show you how it is done, shall I? I’ll give you a lesson -”

Harry was edging around the fountain on the other side when she screamed, “Crucio!” and he was forced to duck down again as the centaur’s arm, holding its bow, span off and landed with a crash on the floor a short distance from the golden wizard’s head.

“Potter, you cannot win against me!” she cried.

He could hear her moving to the right, trying to get a clear shot of him. He backed around the statue away from her, crouching behind the centaur’s legs, his head level with the house-elf’s.

“I was and am the Dark Lord’s most loyal servant. I learned the Dark Arts from him, and I know spells of such power that you, pathetic little boy, can never hope to compete”

“Stupefy!” yelled Harry. He had edged right around to where the goblin stood beaming up at the now headless wizard and taken aim at her back as she peered around the fountain. She reacted so fast he barely had time to duck.

“Protego!”

The jet of red light, his own Stunning Spell, bounced back at him. Harry scrambled back behind the fountain and one of the goblin's ears went flying across the room.

"Potter, I'm going to give you one chance!" shouted Bellatrix. "Give me the prophecy - roll it out towards me now - and I may spare your life!"

"Well, you're going to have to kill me, because it's gone!" Harry roared and, as he shouted it, pain seared across his forehead; his scar was on fire again, and he felt a surge of fury that was quite unconnected with his own rage. "And he knows!'" said Harry, with a mad laugh to match Bellatrix's own. "Your dear old mate Voldemort knows it's gone! He's not going to be happy with you, is he?"

"What? What do you mean?" she cried, and for the first time there was fear in her voice.

"The prophecy smashed when I was trying to get Neville up the steps! What do you think Voldemort'll say about that, then?"

His scar seared and burned… the pain of it was making his eyes stream…

"LIAR!" she shrieked, but he could hear the terror behind the anger now. "YOU'VE GOT IT, POTTER, AND YOU WILL GIVE IT TO ME! Accio prophecy! ACCIO PROPHECY!"

Harry laughed again because he knew it would incense her, the pain building in his head so badly he thought his skull might burst. He waved his empty hand from behind the one-eared goblin and withdrew it quickly as she sent another jet of green light flying at him.

"Nothing there!" he shouted. "Nothing to summon! It smashed and nobody heard what it said, tell your boss that!"

"No!" she screamed. "It isn't true, you're lying! MASTER, I TRIED, I TRIED - DO NOT PUNISH ME"

"Don't waste your breath!" yelled Harry, his eyes screwed up against the pain in his scar, now more terrible than ever. "He can't hear you from here!"

"Can't I, Potter?" said a high, cold voice.

Harry opened his eyes.

Tall, thin and black-hooded, his terrible snakelike face white and gaunt, his scarlet, slit-pupilled eyes staring… Lord Voldemort had appeared in the middle of the hall, his wand pointing at Harry who stood frozen, quite unable to move.

"So, you smashed my prophecy?" said Voldemort softly, staring at Harry with those pitiless red

eyes. “No, Bella, he is not lying… I see the truth looking at me from within his worthless mind… months of preparation, months of effort… and my Death Eaters have let Harry Potter thwart me again”

“Master, I am sorry I knew not, I was fighting the Animagus Black!” sobbed Bellatrix, flinging herself down at Voldemort’s feet as he paced slowly nearer. “Master, you should know”

“Be quiet, Bella,” said Voldemort dangerously. “I shall deal with you in a moment. Do you think I have entered the Ministry of Magic to hear your sniveling apologies?”

“But Master - he is here - he is below”

Voldemort paid no attention.

“I have nothing more to say to you, Potter,” he said quietly. “You have irked me too often, for too long. AVADA KEDAVRA!”

Harry had not even opened his mouth to resist; his mind was blank, his wand pointing uselessly at the floor.

But the headless golden statue of the wizard in the fountain had sprung alive, leaping from its plinth to land with a crash on the floor between Harry and Voldemort. The spell merely glanced off its chest as the statue flung out its arms to protect Harry.

“What -?” cried Voldemort, staring around. And then he breathed, “Dumbledore!”

Harry looked behind him, his heart pounding. Dumbledore was standing in front of the golden gates.

Voldemort raised his wand and another jet of green light streaked at Dumbledore, who turned and was gone in a whirling of his cloak. Next second, he had reappeared behind Voldemort and waved his wand towards the remnants of the fountain. The other statues sprang to life. The statue of the witch ran at Bellatrix, who screamed and sent spells streaming uselessly off its chest, before it dived at her, pinning her to the floor. Meanwhile, the goblin and the house-elf scuttled towards the fireplaces set along the wall and the one-armed centaur galloped at Voldemort, who vanished and reappeared beside the pool. The headless statue thrust Harry backwards, away from the fight, as Dumbledore advanced on Voldemort and the golden centaur cantered around them both.

“It was foolish to come here tonight, Tom,” said Dumbledore calmly. “The Aurors are on their way”

“By which time I shall be gone, and you will be dead!” spat Voldemort. He sent another killing curse at Dumbledore but missed, instead hitting the security guard’s desk, which burst into flame.

Dumbledore flicked his own wand: the force of the spell that emanated from it was such that Harry, though shielded by his golden guard, felt his hair stand on end as it passed and this time Voldemort was forced to conjure a shining silver shield out of thin air to deflect it. The spell, whatever it was, caused no visible damage to the shield, though a deep, gong-like note reverberated from it - an oddly chilling sound.

“You do not seek to kill me, Dumbledore?” called Voldemort, his scarlet eyes narrowed over the top of the shield. “Above such brutality, are you?”

“We both know that there are other ways of destroying a man, Tom,” Dumbledore said calmly, continuing to walk towards Voldemort as though he had not a fear in the world, as though nothing had happened to interrupt his stroll up the hall. “Merely taking your life would not satisfy me, I admit”

“There is nothing worse than death, Dumbledore!” snarled Voldemort.

“You are quite wrong,” said Dumbledore, still closing in upon Voldemort and speaking as lightly as though they were discussing the matter over drinks. Harry felt scared to see him walking along, undefended, shieldless; he wanted to cry out a warning, but his headless guard kept shunting him backwards towards the wall, blocking his every attempt to get out from behind it. “Indeed, your failure to understand that there are things much worse than death has always been your greatest weakness”

Another jet of green light flew from behind the silver shield. This time it was the one-armed centaur, galloping in front of Dumbledore, that took the blast and shattered into a hundred pieces, but before the fragments had even hit the floor, Dumbledore had drawn back his wand and waved it as though brandishing a whip. A long thin flame flew from the tip; it wrapped itself around Voldemort, shield and all. For a moment, it seemed Dumbledore had won, but then the fiery rope became a serpent, which relinquished its hold on Voldemort at once and turned, hissing furiously, to face Dumbledore.

Voldemort vanished; the snake reared from the floor, ready to strike.

There was a burst of flame in midair above Dumbledore just as Voldemort reappeared, standing on the plinth in the middle of the pool where so recently the five statues had stood.

“Look out!” Harry yelled.

But even as he shouted, another jet of green light flew at Dumbledore from Voldemort’s wand and the snake had struck.

Fawkes swooped down in front of Dumbledore, opened his beak wide and swallowed the jet of green light whole: he burst into flame and fell to the floor, small, wrinkled and flightless. At the same moment, Dumbledore brandished his wand in one long, fluid movement - the snake, which had been an instant from sinking its fangs into him, flew high into the air and vanished in a wisp of dark smoke; and the water in the pool rose up and covered Voldemort like a cocoon of molten

glass.

For a few seconds Voldemort was visible only as a dark, rippling, faceless figure, shimmering and indistinct upon the plinth, clearly struggling to throw off the suffocating mass.

Then he was gone and the water fell with a crash back into its pool, slopping wildly over the sides, drenching the polished floor.

“MASTER!” screamed Bellatrix.

Sure it was over, sure Voldemort had decided to flee, Harry made to run out from behind his statue guard, but Dumbledore bellowed: “Stay where you are, Harry!”

For the first time, Dumbledore sounded frightened. Harry could not see why: the hall was quite empty but for themselves, the sobbing Bellatrix still trapped under the witch statue, and the baby phoenix Fawkes croaking feebly on the floor

And then Harry's scar burst open and he knew he was dead: it was pain beyond imagining, pain past endurance.

He was gone from the hall, he was locked in the coils of a creature with red eyes, so tightly bound that Harry did not know where his body ended and the creature’s began: they were fused together, bound by pain, and there was no escape

And when the creature spoke, it used Harry’s mouth, so that in his agony he felt his jaw move

“Kill me now, Dumbledore…”

Blinded and dying, every part of him screaming for release, Harry felt the creature use him again…

“If death is nothing, Dumbledore, kill the boy…”

Let the pain stop, thought Harry… let him kill us… end it, Dumbledore… death is nothing compared to this…

And I’ll see Sirius again…

And as Harry’s heart filled with emotion, the creature’s coils loosened, the pain was gone; Harry was lying face down on the floor, his glasses gone, shivering as though he lay upon ice, not wood…

And there were voices echoing through the hall, more voices than there should have been… Harry opened his eyes, saw his glasses lying by the heel of the headless statue that had been guarding him, but which now lay flat on its back, cracked and immobile. He put them on and raised his head a little to find Dumbledore’s crooked nose inches from his own.

“Are you all right, Harry?”

“Yes,” said Harry, shaking so violently he could not hold his head up properly. “Yeah, I’m - where’s Voldemort, where - who are all these - what’s –”

The Atrium was full of people; the floor was reflecting the emerald green flames that had burst into life in all the fireplaces along one wall; and streams of witches and wizards were emerging from them. As Dumbledore pulled him back to his feet, Harry saw the tiny gold statues of the house-elf and the goblin, leading a stunned-looking Cornelius Fudge forward.

“He was there!” shouted a scarlet-robed man with a ponytail, who was pointing at a pile of golden rubble on the other side of the hall, where Bellatrix had lain trapped only moments before. “I saw him, Mr. Fudge, I swear it was You-Know-Who, he grabbed a woman and Disapparated!”

“I know, Williamson, I know, I saw him too!” gibbered Fudge, who was wearing pajamas under his pinstriped cloak and was gasping as though he had just run miles. “Merlin’s beard - here - here! - in the Ministry of Magic! - great heavens above - it doesn’t seem possible - my word - how can this be -?”

“If you proceed downstairs into the Department of Mysteries, Cornelius,” said Dumbledore - apparently satisfied that Harry was all right, and walking forwards so that the newcomers realized he was there for the first time (a few of them raised their wands; others simply looked amazed; the statues of the elf and goblin applauded and Fudge jumped so much that his slipperclad feet left the floor) - “you will find several escaped Death Eaters contained in the Death Chamber, bound by an Anti-Disapparation Jinx and awaiting your decision as to what to do with them.”

“Dumbledore!” gasped Fudge, beside himself with amazement. “You-here-I-I”

He looked wildly around at the Aurors he had brought with him and it could not have been clearer that he was in half a mind to cry, “Seize him!”

“Cornelius, I am ready to fight your men - and win, again!” said Dumbledore in a thunderous voice. “But a few minutes ago you saw proof, with your own eyes, that I have been telling you the truth for a year. Lord Voldemort has returned, you have been chasing the wrong man for twelve months, and it is time - you listened to sense!”

“I - don’t – well” blustered Fudge, looking around as though hoping somebody was going to tell him what to do. When nobody did, he said, “Very well - Dawlish! Williamson! Go down to the Department of Mysteries and see… Dumbledore, you - you will need to tell me exactly - the Fountain of Magical Brethren - what happened?” he added in a kind of whimper, staring around at the floor, where the remains of the statues of the witch, wizard and centaur now lay scattered.

“We can discuss that after I have sent Harry back to Hogwarts,” said Dumbledore.

“Harry - Harry Potter?”

Fudge wheeled around and stared at Harry, who was still standing against the wall beside the fallen statue that had guarded him during Dumbledore and Voldemort’s duel.

“He - here?” said Fudge, goggling at Harry. “Why - what’s all this about?”

“I shall explain everything,” repeated Dumbledore, “when Harry is back at school.”

He walked away from the pool to the place where the golden wizard’s head lay on the floor. He pointed his wand at it and muttered, “Portus.” The head glowed blue and trembled noisily against the wooden floor for a few seconds, then became still once more.

“Now see here, Dumbledore!” said Fudge, as Dumbledore picked up the head and walked back to Harry carrying it. “You haven’t got authorization for that Portkey! You can’t do things like that right in front of the Minister for Magic, you – you”

His voice faltered as Dumbledore surveyed him magisterially over his half-moon spectacles.

“You will give the order to remove Dolores Umbridge from Hogwarts,” said Dumbledore. “You will tell your Aurors to stop searching for my Care of Magical Creatures teacher so that he can return to work. I will give you…” Dumbledore pulled a watch with twelve hands from his pocket and surveyed it… “half an hour of my time tonight, in which I think we shall be more than able to cover the important points of what has happened here. After that, I shall need to return to my school. If you need more help from me you are, of course, more than welcome to contact me at Hogwarts. Letters addressed to the Headmaster will find me.”

Fudge goggled worse than ever; his mouth was open and his round face grew pinker under his rumpled grey hair.

“I - you”

Dumbledore turned his back on him.

“Take this Portkey, Harry.”

He held out the golden head of the statue and Harry placed his hand on it, past caring what he did next or where he went.

“I shall see you in half an hour,” said Dumbledore quietly “One… two… three…”

Harry felt the familiar sensation of a hook being jerked behind his navel. The polished wooden floor was gone from beneath his feet; the Atrium, Fudge and Dumbledore had all disappeared and he was flying forwards in a whirlwind of color and sound…

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

The Lost Prophecy

Harry's feet hit solid ground; his knees buckled a little and the golden wizard's head fell with a resounding dunk to the floor. He looked around and saw that he had arrived in Dumbledore's office.

Everything seemed to have repaired itself during the Headmaster's absence. The delicate silver instruments stood once more on the spindle-legged tables, puffing and whirring serenely the portraits of the headmasters and headmistresses were snoozing in their frames, heads lolling back in armchairs or against the edge of the picture. Harry looked through the window. There was a cool line of pale green along the horizon: dawn was approaching.

The silence and the stillness, broken only by the occasional grunt or snuffle of a sleeping portrait, was unbearable to him. If his surroundings could have reflected the feelings inside him, the pictures would have been screaming in pain. He walked around the quiet, beautiful office, breathing quickly, trying not to think. But he had to think… there was no escape…

It was his fault Sirius had died; it was all his fault. If he, Harry, had not been stupid enough to fall for Voldemort's trick, if he had not been so convinced that what he had seen in his dream was real, if he had only opened his mind to the possibility that Voldemort was, as Hermione had said, banking on Harry's love of playing the hero…

It was unbearable, he would not think about it, he could not stand it… there was a terrible hollow inside him he did not want to feel or examine, a dark hole where Sirius had been, where Sirius had vanished; he did not want to have to be alone with that great, silent space, he could not stand it -

A picture behind him gave a particularly loud grunting snore, and a cool voice said, "Ah… Harry Potter…"

Phineas Nigellus gave a long yawn, stretching his arms as he surveyed Harry out of shrewd, narrow eyes.

"And what brings you here in the early hours of the morning?" said Phineas eventually "This office is supposed to be barred to all but the rightful Headmaster. Or has Dumbledore sent you here? Oh, don't tell me…" He gave another shuddering yawn. "Another message for my worthless great-great-grandson?"

Harry could not speak. Phineas Nigellus did not know that Sirius was dead, but Harry could not tell him. To say it aloud would be to make it final, absolute, irretrievable.

A few more of the portraits had stirred now. Terror of being interrogated made Harry stride across the room and seize the doorknob.

It would not turn. He was shut in.

“I hope this means,” said the corpulent, red-nosed wizard who hung on the wall behind the Headmaster’s desk, “that Dumbledore will soon be back among us?”

Harry turned. The wizard was surveying him with great interest. Harry nodded. He tugged again on the doorknob behind his back, but it remained immovable.

“Oh good,” said the wizard. “It has been very dull without him, very dull indeed.”

He settled himself on the throne-like chair on which he had been painted and smiled benignly upon Harry

“Dumbledore thinks very highly of you, as I am sure you know,” he said comfortably. “Oh yes. Holds you in great esteem.”

The guilt filling the whole of Harry’s chest like some monstrous, weighty parasite, now writhed and squirmed. Harry could not stand this, he could not stand being himself any more… he had never felt more trapped inside his own head and body, never wished so intensely that he could be somebody; anybody, else…

The empty fireplace burst into emerald green flame, making Harry leap away from the door, staring at the man spinning inside the grate. As Dumbledore’s tall form unfolded itself from the fire, the wizards and witches on the surrounding walls jerked awake, many of them giving cries of welcome.

“Thank you,” said Dumbledore softly.

He did not look at Harry at first, but walked over to the perch beside the door and withdrew, from an inside pocket of his robes, the tiny, ugly, featherless Fawkes, whom he placed gently on the tray of soft ashes beneath the golden post where the full-grown Fawkes usually stood.

“Well, Harry,” said Dumbledore, finally turning away from the baby bird, “you will be pleased to hear that none of your fellow students are going to suffer lasting damage from the night’s events.”

Harry tried to say, “Good,” but no sound came out. It seemed to him that Dumbledore was reminding him of the amount of damage he had caused, and although Dumbledore was for once looking at him directly, and although his expression was kindly rather than accusatory, Harry could not bear to meet his eyes.

“Madam Pomfrey is patching everybody up,” said Dumbledore. “Nymphadora Tonks may need to spend a little time in St. Mungo’s, but it seems she will make a full recovery.”

Harry contented himself with nodding at the carpet, which was growing lighter as the sky outside grew paler. He was sure all the portraits around the room were listening closely to every word

Dumbledore spoke, wondering where Dumbledore and Harry had been, and why there had been injuries.

“I know how you’re feeling, Harry,” said Dumbledore very quietly.

“No, you don’t,” said Harry, and his voice was suddenly loud and strong; white-hot anger leapt inside him; Dumbledore knew nothing about his feelings.

“You see, Dumbledore?” said Phineas Nigellus slyly “Never try to understand the students. They hate it. They would much rather be tragically misunderstood, wallow in self-pity, stew in their own -”

“That’s enough, Phineas,” said Dumbledore.

Harry turned his back on Dumbledore and stared determinedly out of the window. He could see the Quidditch stadium in the distance. Sirius had appeared there once, disguised as the shaggy black dog, so he could watch Harry play… he had probably come to see whether Harry was as good as James had been… Harry had never asked him…

“There is no shame in what you are feeling, Harry,” said Dumbledore’s voice. “On the contrary… the fact that you can feel pain like this is your greatest strength.”

Harry felt the white-hot anger lick his insides, blazing in the terrible emptiness, filling him with the desire to hurt Dumbledore for his calmness and his empty words.

“My greatest strength, is it?” said Harry, his voice shaking as he stared out at the Quidditch stadium, no longer seeing it. “You haven’t got a clue… you don’t know…”

“What don’t I know?” asked Dumbledore calmly.

It was too much. Harry turned around, shaking with rage.

“I don’t want to talk about how I feel, all right?”

“Harry, suffering like this proves you are still a man! This pain is part of being human”

“THEN - I - DON’T - WANT - TO - BE - HUMAN!” Harry roared, and he seized the delicate silver instrument from the spindlelegged table beside him and flung it across the room; it shattered into a hundred tiny pieces against the wall. Several of the pictures let out yells of anger and fright, and the portrait of Armando Dippet said, “Really!”

“I DON’T CARE!” Harry yelled at them, snatching up a lunascope and throwing it into the fireplace. “I’VE HAD ENOUGH, I’VE SEEN ENOUGH, I WANT OUT, I WANT IT TO END, I DON’T CARE ANY MORE”

He seized the table on which the silver instrument had stood and threw that, too. It broke apart on

the floor and the legs rolled in different directions.

“You do care,” said Dumbledore. He had not flinched or made a single move to stop Harry demolishing his office. His expression was calm, almost detached. “You care so much you feel as though you will bleed to death with the pain of it.”

“I - DON’T!” Harry screamed, so loudly that he felt his throat might tear, and for a second he wanted to rush at Dumbledore and break him, too; shatter that calm old face, shake him, hurt him, make him feel some tiny part of the horror inside himself.

“Oh, yes, you do,” said Dumbledore, still more calmly. “You have now lost your mother, your father, and the closest thing to a parent you have ever known. Of course you care.”

“YOU DON’T KNOW HOW I FEEL!” Harry roared. “YOU - STANDING THERE – YOU”

But words were no longer enough, smashing things was no more help; he wanted to run, he wanted to keep running and never look back, he wanted to be somewhere he could not see the clear blue eyes staring at him, that hatefully calm old face. He turned on his heel and ran to the door, seized the doorknob again and wrenched at it.

But the door would not open. Harry turned back to Dumbledore. “Let me out,” he said. He was shaking from head to foot.

“No,” said Dumbledore, simply. For a few seconds they stared at each other.

“Let me out,” Harry said again.

“No,” Dumbledore repeated.

“If you don’t - if you keep me in here - if you don ‘t let me”

“By all means continue destroying my possessions,” said Dumbledore serenely. “I daresay I have too many.”

He walked around his desk and sat down. behind it, watching Harry.

“Let me out,” Harry said yet again, in a voice that was cold and almost as calm as Dumbledore’s.

“Not until I have had my say,” said Dumbledore.

“Do you - do you think I want to - do you think I give a - I DON’T CARE WHAT YOU’VE GOT TO SAY!” Harry roared. “I don’t want to hear anything you’ve got to say!”

“You will,” said Dumbledore steadily. “Because you are not nearly as angry with me as you ought to be. If you are to attack me, as I know you are close to doing, I would like to have

thoroughly earned it."

"What are you talking -?"

"It is my fault that Sirius died," said Dumbledore clearly. "Or should I say, almost entirely my fault - I will not be so arrogant as to claim responsibility for the whole. Sirius was a brave, clever and energetic man, and such men are not usually content to sit at home in hiding while they believe others to be in danger. Nevertheless, you should never have believed for an instant that there was any necessity for you to go to the Department of Mysteries tonight. If I had been open with you, Harry, as I should have been, you would have known a long time ago that Voldemort might try and lure you to the Department of Mysteries, and you would never have been tricked into going there tonight. And Sirius would not have had to come after you. That blame lies with me, and with me alone."

Harry was still standing with his hand on the doorknob but was unaware of it. He was gazing at Dumbledore, hardly breathing, listening yet barely understanding what he was hearing.

"Please sit down," said Dumbledore. It was not an order, it was a request.

Harry hesitated, then walked slowly across the room now littered with silver cogs and fragments of wood, and took the seat facing Dumbledore's desk.

"Am I to understand," said Phineas Nigellus slowly from Harry's left, "that my great-great-grandson - the last of the Blacks - is dead?"

"Yes, Phineas," said Dumbledore.

"I don't believe it," said Phineas brusquely.

Harry turned his head in time to see Phineas marching out of his portrait and knew that he had gone to visit his other painting in Grimmauld Place. He would walk, perhaps, from portrait to portrait, calling for Sirius through the house…

"Harry, I owe you an explanation," said Dumbledore. "An explanation of an old man's mistakes. For I see now that what I have done, and not done, with regard to you, bears all the hallmarks of the failings of age. Youth cannot know how age thinks and feels. But old men are guilty if they forget what it was to be young… and I seem to have forgotten, lately…"

The sun was rising properly now; there was a rim of dazzling orange visible over the mountains and the sky above it was colorless and bright. The light fell upon Dumbledore, upon the silver of his eyebrows and beard, upon the lines gouged deeply into his face.

"I guessed, fifteen years ago," said Dumbledore, "when I saw the scar on your forehead, what it might mean. I guessed that it might be the sign of a connection forged between you and Voldemort."

“You’ve told me this before, Professor,” said Harry bluntly. He did not care about being rude. He did not care about anything very much any more.

“Yes,” said Dumbledore apologetically. “Yes, but you see - it is necessary to start with your scar. For it became apparent, shortly after you rejoined the magical world, that I was correct, and that your scar was giving you warnings when Voldemort was close to you, or else feeling powerful emotion.”

“I know,” said Harry wearily.

“And this ability of yours - to detect Voldemort’s presence, even when he is disguised, and to know what he is feeling when his emotions are roused - has become more and more pronounced since Voldemort returned to his own body and his full powers.”

Harry did not bother to nod. He knew all of this already.

“More recently” said Dumbledore, “I became concerned that Voldemort might realize that this connection between you exists. Sure enough, there came a time when you entered so far into his mind and thoughts that he sensed your presence. I am speaking, of course, of the night when you witnessed the attack on Mr. Weasley”

“Yeah, Snape told me,” Harry muttered.

“Professor Snape, Harry” Dumbledore corrected him quietly. “But did you not wonder why it was not I who explained this to you? Why I did not teach you Occlumency? Why I had not so much as looked at you for months?”

Harry looked up. He could see now that Dumbledore looked sad and tired.

“Yeah,” Harry mumbled. “Yeah, I wondered.”

“You see,” Dumbledore continued, “I believed it could not be long before Voldemort attempted to force his way into your mind, to manipulate and misdirect your thoughts, and I was not eager to give him more incentives to do so. I was sure that if he realized that our relationship was - or had ever been - closer than that of headmaster and pupil, he would seize his chance to use you as a means to spy on me. I feared the uses to which he would put you, the possibility that he might try and possess you. Harry, I believe I was right to think that Voldemort would have made use of you in such a way. On those rare occasions when we had close contact, I thought I saw a shadow of him stir behind your eyes…”

Harry remembered the feeling that a dormant snake had risen in him, ready to strike, in those moments when he and Dumbledore had made eye-contact.

“Voldemort’s aim in possessing you, as he demonstrated tonight, would not have been my destruction. It would have been yours. He hoped, when he possessed you briefly a short while ago, that I would sacrifice you in the hope of killing him. So you see, I have been trying, in

distancing myself from you, to protect you, Harry. An old man's mistake…"

He sighed deeply. Harry was letting the words wash over him. He would have been so interested to know all this a few months ago, but now it was meaningless compared to the gaping chasm inside him that was the loss of Sirius; none of it mattered…

"Sirius told me you felt Voldemort awake inside you the very night that you had the vision of Arthur Weasley's attack. I knew at once that my worst fears were correct: Voldemort had realized he could use you. In an attempt to arm you against Voldemort's assaults on your mind, I arranged Occlumency lessons with Professor Snape."

He paused. Harry watched the sunlight, which was sliding slowly across the polished surface of Dumbledore's desk, illuminate a silver ink pot and a handsome scarlet quill. Harry could tell that the portraits all around them were awake and listening raptly to Dumbledore's explanation; he could hear the occasional rustle of robes, the slight clearing of a throat. Phineas Nigellus had still not returned…

"Professor Snape discovered," Dumbledore resumed, " that you had been dreaming about the door to the Department of Mysteries for months. Voldemort, of course, had been obsessed with the possibility of hearing the prophecy ever since he regained his body; and as he dwelled on the door, so did you, though you did not know what it meant.

"And then you saw Rockwood, who worked in the Department of Mysteries before his arrest, telling Voldemort what we had known all along - that the prophecies held in the Ministry of Magic are heavily protected. Only the people to whom they refer can lift them from the shelves without suffering madness: in this case, either Voldemort himself would have to enter the Ministry of Magic, and risk revealing himself at last - or else you would have to take it for him. It became a matter of even greater urgency that you should master Occlumency"

"But I didn't," muttered Harry. He said it aloud to try and ease the dead weight of guilt inside him: a confession must surely relieve some of the terrible pressure squeezing his heart. "I didn't practice, I didn't bother, I could've stopped myself having those dreams, Hermione kept telling me to do it, if I had he'd never have been able to show me where to go, and - Sirius wouldn't - Sirius wouldn't"

Something was erupting inside Harry's head: a need to justify himself, to explain -

"I tried to check he'd really taken Sirius, I went to Umbridge's office, I spoke to Kreacher in the fire and he said Sirius wasn't there, he said he'd gone!"

"Kreacher lied," said Dumbledore calmly. "You are not his master, he could lie to you without even needing to punish himself. Kreacher intended you to go to the Ministry of Magic."

"He - he sent me on purpose?"

"Oh yes. Kreacher, I am afraid, has been serving more than one master for months."

“How?” said Harry blankly. “He hasn’t been out of Grimmauld Place for years.”

“Kreacher seized his opportunity shortly before Christmas,” said Dumbledore, “when Sirius, apparently, shouted at him to ‘get out’. He took Sirius at his word, and interpreted this as an order to leave the house. He went to the only Black family member for whom he had any respect left… Black’s cousin Narcissa, sister of Bellatrix and wife of Lucius Malfoy”

“How do you know all this?” Harry said. His heart was beating very fast. He felt sick. He remembered worrying about Kreacher’s odd absence over Christmas, remembered him turning up again in the attic…

“Kreacher told me last night,” said Dumbledore. “You see, when you gave Professor Snape that cryptic warning, he realized that you had had a vision of Sirius trapped in the bowels of the Department of Mysteries. He, like you, attempted to contact Sirius at once. I should explain that members of the Order of the Phoenix have more reliable methods of communicating than the fire in Dolores Umbridge’s office. Professor Snape found that Sirius was alive and safe in Grimmauld Place.

“When, however, you did not return from your trip into the Forest with Dolores Umbridge, Professor Snape grew worried that you still believed Sirius to be a captive of Lord Voldemort’s. He alerted certain Order members at once.”

Dumbledore heaved a great sigh and continued, “Alastor Moody, Nymphadora Tonks, Kingsley Shacklebolt and Remus Lupin were at Headquarters when he made contact. All agreed to go to your aid at once. Professor Snape requested that Sirius remain behind, as he needed somebody to remain at Headquarters to tell me what had happened, for I was due there at any moment. In the meantime he, Professor Snape, intended to search the Forest for you.

“But Sirius did not wish to remain behind while the others went to search for you. He delegated to Kreacher the task of telling me what had happened. And so it was that when I arrived in Grimmauld Place shortly after they had all left for the Ministry, it was the elf who told me - laughing fit to burst - where Sirius had gone.”

“He was laughing?” said Harry in a hollow voice.

“Oh, yes,” said Dumbledore. “You see, Kreacher was not able to betray us totally. He is not Secret Keeper for the Order, he could not give the Malfoys our whereabouts, or tell them any of the Order’s confidential plans that he had been forbidden to reveal. He was bound by the enchantments of his kind, which is to say that he could not disobey a direct order from his master, Sirius. But he gave Narcissa information of the sort that is very valuable to Voldemort, yet must have seemed much too trivial for Sirius to think of banning him from repeating it.”

“Like what?” said Harry.

“Like the fact that the person Sirius cared most about in the world was you,” said Dumbledore quietly. “Like the fact that you were coming to regard Sirius as a mixture of father and brother.

Voldemort knew already, of course, that Sirius was in the Order, and that you knew where he was - but Kreacher's information made him realize that the one person for whom you would go to any lengths to rescue was Sirius Black."

Harry's lips were cold and numb.

"So… when I asked Kreacher if Sirius was there last night…"

"The Malfoys - undoubtedly on Voldemort's instructions - had told him he must find a way of keeping Sirius out of the way once you had seen the vision of Sirius being tortured. Then, if you decided to check whether Sirius was at home or not, Kreacher would be able to pretend he was not. Kreacher injured Buckbeak the Hippogriff yesterday, and, at the moment when you made your appearance in the fire, Sirius was upstairs tending to him."

There seemed to be very little air in Harry's lungs; his breathing was quick and shallow.

"And Kreacher told you all this… and laughed?" he croaked.

"He did not wish to tell me," said Dumbledore. "But I am a sufficiently accomplished Legilimens myself to know when I am being lied to and I - persuaded him - to tell me the full story, before I left for the Department of Mysteries."

"And," whispered Harry, his hands curled in cold fists on his knees, "and Hermione kept telling us to be nice to him"

"She was quite right, Harry," said Dumbledore. "I warned Sirius when we adopted twelve Grimmauld Place as our Headquarters that Kreacher must be treated with kindness and respect. I also told him that Kreacher could be dangerous to us. I do not think Sinus took me very seriously, or that he ever saw Kreacher as a being with feelings as acute as a human's"

"Don't you blame - don't you - talk - about Sirius like -" Harry's breath was constricted, he could not get the words out properly; but the rage that had subsided briefly flared in him again: he would not let Dumbledore criticize Sirius. "Kreacher's a lying - foul - he deserved –"

"Kreacher is what he has been made by wizards, Harry" said Dumbledore. "Yes, he is to be pitied. His existence has been as miserable as your friend Dobby's. He was forced to do Sirius's bidding, because Sirius was the last of the family to which he was enslaved, but he felt no true loyalty to him. And whatever Kreacher's faults, it must be admitted that Sirius did nothing to make Kreacher's lot easier"

"DON'T TALK ABOUT SIRIUS LIKE THAT!" Harry yelled.

He was on his feet again, furious, ready to fly at Dumbledore, who had plainly not understood Sirius at all, how brave he was, how much he had suffered…

"What about Snape?" Harry spat. "You're not talking about him, are you? When I told him

Voldemort had Sirius he just sneered at me as usual –”

“Harry, you know Professor Snape had no choice but to pretend not to take you seriously in front of Dolores Umbridge,” said Dumbledore steadily, “but as I have explained, he informed the Order as soon as possible about what you had said. It was he who deduced where you had gone when you did not return from the Forest. It was he, too, who gave Professor Umbridge fake Veritaserum when she was attempting to force you to tell her Sirius’s whereabouts.”

Harry disregarded this; he felt a savage pleasure in blaming Snape, it seemed to be easing his own sense of dreadful guilt, and he wanted to hear Dumbledore agree with him.

“Snape - Snape g - goaded Sirius about staying in the house - he made out Sirius was a coward”

“Sirius was much too old and clever to have allowed such feeble taunts to hurt him,” said Dumbledore.

“Snape stopped giving me Occlumency lessons!” Harry snarled. “He threw me out of his office!”

“I am aware of it,” said Dumbledore heavily “I have already said that it was a mistake for me not to teach you myself, though I was sure, at the time, that nothing could have been more dangerous than to open your mind even further to Voldemort while in my presence –”

“Snape made it worse, my scar always hurt worse after lessons with him” Harry remembered Ron’s thoughts on the subject and plunged on “- how do you know he wasn’t trying to soften me up for Voldemort, make it easier for him to get inside my –”

“I trust Severus Snape,” said Dumbledore simply “But I forgot - another old man’s mistake - that some wounds run too deep for the healing. I thought Professor Snape could overcome his feelings about your father - I was wrong.”

“But that’s okay, is it?” yelled Harry, ignoring the scandalized faces and disapproving mutterings of the portraits on the walls. “It’s okay for Snape to hate my dad, but it’s not okay for Sirius to hate Kreacher?”

“Sirius did not hate Kreacher,” said Dumbledore. “He regarded him as a servant unworthy of much interest or notice. Indifference and neglect often do much more damage than outright dislike… the fountain we destroyed tonight told a lie. We wizards have mistreated and abused our fellows for too long, and we are now reaping our reward.”

“SO SIRIUS DESERVED WHAT HE GOT, DID HE?” Harry yelled.

“I did not say that, nor will you ever hear me say it,” Dumbledore replied quietly. “Sirius was not a cruel man, he was kind to house-elves in general. He had no love for Kreacher, because Kreacher was a living reminder of the home Sirius had hated.”

“Yeah, he did hate it!” said Harry, his voice cracking, turning his back on Dumbledore and

walking away. The sun was bright inside the room now and the eyes of all the portraits followed him as he walked, without realizing what he was doing, without seeing the office at all. “You made him stay shut up in that house and he hated it, that’s why he wanted to get out last night”

“I was trying to keep Sirius alive,” said Dumbledore quietly

“People don’t like being locked up!” Harry said furiously, rounding on him. “You did it to me all last summer”

Dumbledore closed his eyes and buried his face in his longfingered hands. Harry watched him, but this uncharacteristic sign of exhaustion, or sadness, or whatever it was from Dumbledore, did not soften him. On the contrary, he felt even angrier that Dumbledore was showing signs of weakness. He had no business being weak when Harry wanted to rage and storm at him.

Dumbledore lowered his hands and surveyed Harry through his half-moon glasses.

“It is time,” he said, “for me to tell you what I should have told you five years ago, Harry. Please sit down. I am going to tell you everything. I ask only a little patience. You will have your chance to rage at me - to do whatever you like - when I have finished. I will not stop you.”

Harry glared at him for a moment, then flung himself back into the chair opposite Dumbledore and waited.

Dumbledore stared for a moment at the sunlit grounds outside the window, then looked back at Harry and said, “Five years ago you arrived at Hogwarts, Harry, safe and whole, as I had planned and intended. Well - not quite whole. You had suffered. I knew you would when I left you on your aunt and uncle’s doorstep. I knew I was condemning you to ten dark and difficult years.”

He paused. Harry said nothing.

“You might ask - and with good reason - why it had to be so. Why could some wizarding family not have taken you in? Many would have done so more than gladly, would have been honored and delighted to raise you as a son.

“My answer is that my priority was to keep you alive. You were in more danger than perhaps anyone but I realized. Voldemort had been vanquished hours before, but his supporters - and many of them are almost as terrible as he - were still at large, angry, desperate and violent. And I had to make my decision, too, with regard to the years ahead. Did I believe that Voldemort was gone for ever? No. I knew not whether it would be ten, twenty or fifty years before he returned, but I was sure he would do so, and I was sure, too, knowing him as I have done, that he would not rest until he killed you.

“I knew that Voldemort’s knowledge of magic is perhaps more extensive than any wizard alive. I knew that even my most complex and powerful protective spells and charms were unlikely to be invincible if he ever returned to full power.

"But I knew, too, where Voldemort was weak. And so I made my decision. You would be protected by an ancient magic of which he knows, which he despises, and which he has always, therefore, underestimated - to his cost. I am speaking, of course, of the fact that your mother died to save you. She gave you a lingering protection he never expected, a protection that flows in your veins to this day. I put my trust, therefore, in your mother's blood. I delivered you to her sister, her only remaining relative."

"She doesn't love me," said Harry at once. "She doesn't give a damn -"

"But she took you," Dumbledore cut across him. "She may have taken you grudgingly, furiously, unwillingly, bitterly, yet still she took you, and in doing so, she sealed the charm I placed upon you. Your mother's sacrifice made the bond of blood the strongest shield I could give you."

"I still don't."

"While you can still call home the place where your mother's blood dwells, there you cannot be touched or harmed by Voldemort. He shed her blood, but it lives on in you and her sister. Her blood became your refuge. You need return there only once a year, but as long as you can still call it home, while you are there he cannot hurt you. Your aunt knows this. I explained what I had done in the letter I left, with you, on her doorstep. She knows that allowing you houseroom may well have kept you alive for the past fifteen years."

"Wait," said Harry. "Wait a moment."

He sat up straighter in his chair, staring at Dumbledore.

"You sent that Howler. You told her to remember - it was your voice –"

"I thought," said Dumbledore, inclining his head slightly, "that she might need reminding of the pact she had sealed by taking you. I suspected the Dementor attack might have awoken her to the dangers of having you as a surrogate son."

"It did," said Harry quietly. "Well - my uncle more than her. He wanted to chuck me out, but after the Howler came she - she said I had to stay"

He stared at the floor for a moment, then said, "But what's this got to do with – "

He could not say Sirius's name.

"Five years ago, then," continued Dumbledore, as though he had not paused in his story, "you arrived at Hogwarts, neither as happy nor as well-nourished as I would have liked, perhaps, yet alive and healthy. You were not a pampered little prince, but as normal a boy as I could have hoped under the circumstances. Thus far, my plan was working well.

"And then… well, you will remember the events of your first year at Hogwarts quite as clearly as I do. You rose magnificently to the challenge that faced you and sooner - much sooner - than I

had anticipated, you found yourself face to face with Voldemort. You survived again. You did more. You delayed his return to full power and strength. You fought a man's fight. I was… prouder of you than I can say.

"Yet there was a flaw in this wonderful plan of mine," said Dumbledore. "An obvious flaw that I knew, even then, might be the undoing of it all. And yet, knowing how important it was that my plan should succeed, I told myself that I would not permit this flaw to ruin it. I alone could prevent this, so I alone must be strong. And here was my first test, as you lay in the hospital wing, weak from your struggle with Voldemort."

"I don't understand what you're saying," said Harry.

"Don't you remember asking me, as you lay in the hospital wing, why Voldemort had tried to kill you when you were a baby?"

Harry nodded.

"Ought I to have told you then?"

Harry stared into the blue eyes and said nothing, but his heart was racing again.

"You do not see the flaw in the plan yet? No… perhaps not. Well, as you know, I decided not to answer you. Eleven, I told myself, was much too young to know. I had never intended to tell you when you were eleven. The knowledge would be too much at such a young age.

"I should have recognized the danger signs then. I should have asked myself why I did not feel more disturbed that you had already asked me the question to which I knew, one day, I must give a terrible answer. I should have recognized that I was too happy to think that I did not have to do it on that particular day… YOU were too young, much too young.

"And so we entered your second year at Hogwarts. And once again you met challenges even grown wizards have never faced: once again you acquitted yourself beyond my wildest dreams. You did not ask me again, however, why Voldemort had left that mark on you. We discussed your scar, oh yes… we came very, very close to the subject. Why did I not tell you everything?

"Well, it seemed to me that twelve was, after all, hardly better than eleven to receive such information. I allowed you to leave my presence, bloodstained, exhausted but exhilarated, and if I felt a twinge of unease that I ought, perhaps, to have told you then, it was swiftly silenced. You were still so young, you see, and I could not find it in myself to spoil that night of triumph…

"Do you see, Harry? Do you see the flaw in my brilliant plan now? I had fallen into the trap I had foreseen, that I had told myself I could avoid, that I must avoid."

"I don't –"

"I cared about you too much," said Dumbledore simply. "I cared more for your happiness than

your knowing the truth, more for your peace of mind than my plan, more for your life than the lives that might be lost if the plan failed. In other words, I acted exactly as Voldemort expects we fools who love to act.

“Is there a Defense? I defy anyone who has watched you as I have - and I have watched you more closely than you can have imagined - not to want to save you more pain than you had already suffered. What did I care if numbers of nameless and faceless people and creatures were slaughtered in the vague future, if in the here and now you were alive, and well, and happy? I never dreamed that I would have such a person on my hands.

“We entered your third year. I watched from afar as you struggled to repel Dementors, as you found Sirius, learned what he was and rescued him. Was I to tell you then, at the moment when you had triumphantly snatched your godfather from the jaws of the Ministry? But now, at the age of thirteen, my excuses were running out. Young you might be, but you had proved you were exceptional. My conscience was uneasy, Harry. I knew the time must come soon…

“But you came out of the maze last year, having watched Cedric Diggory die, having escaped death so narrowly yourself… and I did not tell you, though I knew, now Voldemort had returned, I must do it soon. And now, tonight, I know you have long been ready for the knowledge I have kept from you for so long, because you have proved that I should have placed the burden upon you before this. My only Defense is this: I have watched you struggling under more burdens than any student who as ever passed through this school and I could not bring myself to add another - the greatest one of all.”

Harry waited, but Dumbledore did not speak.

“I still don’t understand.”

“Voldemort tried to kill you when you were a child because of a prophecy made shortly before your birth. He knew the prophecy had been made, though he did not know its full contents. He set out to kill you when you were still a baby, believing he was fulfilling the terms of the prophecy. He discovered, to his cost, that he was mistaken, when the curse intended to kill you backfired. And so, since his return to his body, and particularly since your extraordinary escape from him last year, he has been determined to hear that prophecy in its entirety. This is the weapon he has been seeking so assiduously since his return: the knowledge of how to destroy you.”

The sun had risen fully now: Dumbledore’s office was bathed in it. The glass case in which the sword of Godric Gryffindor resided gleamed white and opaque, the fragments of the instruments Harry had thrown to the floor glistened like raindrops, and behind him, the baby Fawkes made soft chirruping noises in his nest of ashes.

“The prophecy’s smashed,” Harry said blankly. “I was pulling Neville up those benches in the - the room where the archway was, and I ripped his robes and it fell…”

“The thing that smashed was merely the record of the prophecy kept by the Department of

Mysteries. But the prophecy was made to somebody, and that person has the means of recalling it perfectly”

“Who heard it?” asked Harry, though he thought he knew the answer already

“I did,” said Dumbledore. “On a cold, wet night sixteen years ago, in a room above the bar at the Hog’s Head inn. I had gone there to see an applicant for the post of Divination teacher, though it was against my inclination to allow the subject of Divination to continue at all. The applicant, however, was the great-great-granddaughter of a very famous, very gifted Seer and I thought it common politeness to meet her. I was disappointed. It seemed to me that she had not a trace of the gift herself. I told her, courteously I hope, that I did not think she would be suitable for the post. I turned to leave.”

Dumbledore got to his feet and walked past Harry to the black cabinet that stood beside Fawkes’s perch. He bent down, slid back a catch and took from inside it the shallow stone basin, carved with runes around the edges, in which Harry had seen his father tormenting Snape. Dumbledore walked back to the desk, placed the Pensieve upon it, and raised his wand to his own temple. From it, he withdrew silvery, gossamer-fine strands of thought clinging to the wand and deposited them into the basin. He sat back down behind his desk and watched his thoughts swirl and drift inside the Pensieve for a moment. Then, with a sigh, he raised his wand and prodded the silvery substance with its tip.

A figure rose out of it, draped in shawls, her eyes magnified to enormous size behind her glasses, and she revolved slowly; her feet in the basin. But when Sibyll Trelawney spoke, it was not in her usual ethereal, mystic voice, but in the harsh, hoarse tones Harry had heard her use once before:

“The one with the power to vanquish the - Dark Lord approaches… born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies… and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not… and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives… the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies…”

The slowly revolving Professor Trelawney sank back into the silver mass below and vanished. The silence within the office was absolute. Neither Dumbledore nor Harry nor any of the portraits made a sound. Even Fawkes had fallen silent.

“Professor Dumbledore?” Harry said very quietly, for Dumbledore, still staring at the Pensieve, seemed completely lost in thought. “It… did that mean… what did that mean?”

“It meant,” said Dumbledore, “that the person who has the only chance of conquering Lord Voldemort for good was born at the end of July, nearly sixteen years ago. This boy would be born to parents who had already defied Voldemort three times.”

Harry felt as though something was closing in on him. His breathing seemed difficult again.

“It means - me?”

Dumbledore surveyed him for a moment through his glasses.

“The odd thing, Harry,” he said softly, “is that it may not have meant you at all. Sibyll’s prophecy could have applied to two wizard boys, both born at the end of July that year, both of whom had parents in the Order of the Phoenix, both sets of parents having narrowly escaped Voldemort three times. One, of course, was you. The other was Neville Longbottom.”

“But then… but then, why was it my name on the prophecy and not Neville’s?”

“The official record was re-labeled after Voldemort’s attack on you as a child,” said Dumbledore. “It seemed plain to the keeper of the Hall of Prophecy that Voldemort could only have tried to kill you because he knew you to be the one to whom Sibyll was referring.”

“Then - it might not be me?” said Harry

“I am afraid,” said Dumbledore slowly, looking as though every word cost him a great effort, “that there is no doubt that it is you.”

“But you said - Neville was born at the end of July, too - and his mum and dad –”

“You are forgetting the next part of the prophecy, the final identifying feature of the boy who could vanquish Voldemort… Voldemort himself would mark him as his equal. And so he did, Harry. He chose you, not Neville. He gave you the scar that has proved both blessing and curse.”

“But he might have chosen wrong!” said Harry. “He might have marked the wrong person!”

“He chose the boy he thought most likely to be a danger to him,” said Dumbledore. “And notice this, Harry: he chose, not the pureblood (which, according to his creed, is the only kind of wizard worth being or knowing) but the half-blood, like himself. He saw himself in you before he had ever seen you, and in marking you with that scar, he did not kill you, as he intended, but gave you powers, and a future, which have fitted you to escape him not once, but four times so far - something that neither your parents, nor Neville’s parents, ever achieved.”

“Why did he do it, then?” said Harry, who felt numb and cold. “Why did he try and kill me as a baby? He should have waited to see whether Neville or I looked more dangerous when we were older and tried to kill whoever it was then –”

“That might, indeed, have been the more practical course,” said Dumbledore, “except that Voldemort’s information about the prophecy was incomplete. The Hog’s Head inn, which Sibyll chose for its cheapness, has long attracted, shall we say, a more interesting clientele than the Three Broomsticks. As you and your friends found out to your cost, and I to mine that night, it is a place where it is never safe to assume you are not being overheard. Of course, I had not dreamed, when I set out to meet Sibyll Trelawney, that I would hear anything worth overhearing. My - our - one stroke of good fortune was that the eavesdropper was detected only a short way

into the prophecy and thrown from the building."

"So he only heard -?"

"He heard only the beginning, the part foretelling the birth of a boy in July to parents who had thrice defied Voldemort. Consequently, he could not warn his master that to attack you would be to risk transferring power to you, and marking you as his equal. So Voldemort never knew that there might be danger in attacking you, that it might be wise to wait, to learn more. He did not know that you would have power the Dark Lord knows not–"

"But I don't!" said Harry, in a strangled voice. "I haven't any powers he hasn't got, I couldn't fight the way he did tonight, I can't possess people or - or kill them -"

"There is a room in the Department of Mysteries," interrupted Dumbledore, "that is kept locked at all times. It contains a force that is at once more wonderful and more terrible than death, than human intelligence, than the forces of nature. It is also, perhaps, the most mysterious of the many subjects for study that reside there. It is the power held within that room that you possess in such quantities and which Voldemort has not at all. That power took you to save Sirius tonight. That power also saved you from possession by Voldemort, because he could not bear to reside in a body so full of the force he detests. In the end, it mattered not that you could not close your mind. It was your heart that saved you."

Harry closed his eyes. If he had not gone to save Sirius, Sirius would not have died… More to stave off the moment when he would have to think of Sirius again, Harry asked, without caring much about the answer, "The end of the prophecy... it was something about neither... can live..."

"… while the other survives," said Dumbledore.

"So," said Harry, dredging up the words from what felt like a deep well of despair inside him, "so does that mean that… that one of us has got to kill the other one… in the end?"

"Yes," said Dumbledore.

For a long time, neither of them spoke. Somewhere far beyond the office walls, Harry could hear the sound of voices, students heading down to the Great Hall for an early breakfast, perhaps. It seemed impossible that there could be people in the world who still desired food, who laughed, who neither knew nor cared that Sirius Black was gone forever. Sirius seemed a million miles away already; even now a part of Harry still believed that if he had only pulled back that veil, he would have found Sirius looking back at him, greeting him, perhaps, with his laugh like a bark…

"I feel I owe you another explanation, Harry," said Dumbledore hesitantly. "You may, perhaps, have wondered why I never chose you as a prefect? I must confess… that I rather thought… you had enough responsibility to be going on with."

Harry looked up at him and saw a tear trickling down Dumbledore's face into his long silver beard.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

The Second War Begins

HE-WHO-MUST-NOT-BE-NAMED RETURNS

"In a brief statement on Friday night, Minister for Magic Cornelius Fudge confirmed that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has returned to this country and is active once more.

"'It is with great regret that I must confirm that t he wizard styling himself Lord - well, you know who I mean - is alive and among us again,' said Fudge, looking tired and flustered as he addressed reporters. 'It is with almost equal regret that we report the mass revolt of the Dementors of Azkaban, who have shown themselves averse to continuing in the Ministry's employ. We believe the Dementors are currently taking direction from Lord - Thingy.

"'We urge the magical population to remain vigilant. The Ministry is currently publishing guides to elementary home and personal Defense which will be delivered free to all wizarding homes within the coming month.'

The Minister's statement was met with dismay and alarm from the wizarding community, which as recently as last Wednesday was receiving Ministry assurances that there was 'no truth whatsoever in these persistent rumors that You-Know-Who is operating amongst us once more'.

"Details of the events that led to the Ministry turnaround are still hazy, though it is believed that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and a select band of followers (known as Death Eaters) gained entry to the Ministry of Magic itself on Thursday evening.

"Albus Dumbledore, newly reinstated Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, reinstated member of the International Confederation of Wizards and reinstated Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, has so far been unavailable for comment. He has insisted over the past year that You-Know-Who is not dead, as was widely hoped and believed, but is recruiting followers once more for afresh attempt to seize power. Meanwhile, the 'Boy Who Lived' –"

"There you are, Harry, I knew they'd drag you into it somehow," said Hermione, looking over the top of the paper at him.

They were in the hospital wing. Harry was sitting on the end of Ron's bed and they were both listening to Hermione read the front page of the Sun day Prophet. Ginny, whose ankle had been mended in a trice by Madam Pomfrey, was curled up at the foot of Hermione's bed; Neville, whose nose had likewise been returned to its normal size and shape, was in a chair between the two beds; and Luna, who had dropped in to visit, clutching the latest edition of The Quibbler, was reading the magazine upside-down and apparently not taking in a word Hermione was saying.

“He’s the ‘boy who lived’ again now, though, isn’t he?” said Ron darkly. “Not such a deluded show-off any more, eh?”

He helped himself to a handful of Chocolate Frogs from the immense pile on his bedside cabinet, threw a few to Harry, Ginny and Neville and ripped off the wrapper of his own with his teeth. There were still deep welts on his forearms where the brain’s tentacles had wrapped around him. According to Madam Pomfrey, thoughts could leave deeper scarring than almost anything else, though since she had started applying copious amounts of Dr. Ubbly’s Oblivious Unction there seemed to have been some improvement.

“Yes, they’re very complimentary about you now, Harry,” said Hermione, scanning down the article. “‘A lone voice of truth… perceived as unbalanced, yet never wavered in his story… forced to bear ridicule and slander… ’ Hmmm,” she said, frowning, “I notice they don’t mention the fact that it was them doing all the ridiculing and slandering in the Prophet…”

She winced slightly and put a hand to her ribs. The curse Dolohov had used on her, though less effective than it would have been had he been able to say the incantation aloud, had nevertheless caused, in Madam Pomfrey’s words, ‘quite enough damage to be going on with’. Hermione was having to take ten different types of potion every day, was improving greatly, and was already bored with the hospital wing.

“You-Know-Who’s Last Attempt to Take Over, pages two to four, What the Ministry Should Have Told Us, page five, Why Nobody Listened to Albus Dumbledore, pages six to eight, Exclusive Interview with Harry Potter, page nine… Well,” said Hermione, folding up the newspaper and throwing it aside, “it’s certainly given them lots to write about. And that interview with Harry isn’t exclusive, it’s the one that was in The Quibbler months ago…”

“Daddy sold it to them,” said Luna vaguely, turning a page of The Quibbler. “He got a very good price for it, too, so we’re going to go on an expedition to Sweden this summer to see if we can catch a Crumple-Horned Snorkack.”

Hermione seemed to struggle with herself for a moment, then said, “That sounds lovely”

Ginny caught Harry’s eye and looked away quickly, grinning.

“So, anyway,” said Hermione, sitting up a little straighter and wincing again, “what’s going on in school?”

“Well, Flitwick’s got rid of Fred and George’s swamp,” said Ginny, “he did it in about three seconds. But he left a tiny patch under the window and he’s roped it off”

“Why?” said Hermione, looking startled.

“Oh, he just says it was a really good bit of magic,” said Ginny, shrugging.

“I think he left it as a monument to Fred and George,” said Ron, through a mouthful of chocolate.

“They sent me all these, you know,” he told Harry, pointing at the small mountain of Frogs beside him. “Must be doing all right out of that joke shop, eh?”

Hermione looked rather disapproving and asked, “So has all the trouble stopped now Dumbledore’s back?”

“Yes,” said Neville, “everything’s settled right back to normal.”

“I s’pose Filch is happy, is he?” asked Ron, propping a Chocolate Frog Card featuring Dumbledore against his water jug.

“Not at all,” said Ginny “He’s really, really miserable, actually…” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “He keeps saying Umbridge was the best thing that ever happened to Hogwarts…”

All six of them looked around. Professor Umbridge was lying in a bed opposite them, gazing up at the ceiling. Dumbledore had strode alone into the Forest to rescue her from the centaurs; how he had done it - how he had emerged from the trees supporting Professor Umbridge without so much as a scratch on him - nobody knew, and Umbridge was certainly not telling. Since she had returned to the castle she had not, as far as any of them knew, uttered a single word. Nobody really knew what was wrong with her, either. Her usually neat mousy hair was very untidy and there were still bits of twigs and leaves in it, but otherwise she seemed to be quite unscathed.

“Madam Pomfrey says she’s just in shock,” whispered Hermione.

“Sulking, more like,” said Ginny

“Yeah, she shows signs of life if you do this,” said Ron, and with his tongue he made soft clipclopping noises. Umbridge sat bolt upright, looking around wildly.

“Anything wrong, Professor?” called Madam Pomfrey, poking her head around her office door.

“No… no…” said Umbridge, sinking back into her pillows. “No, I must have been dreaming…”

Hermione and Ginny muffled their laughter in the bedclothes.

“Speaking of centaurs,” said Hermione, when she had recovered a little, “who’s Divination teacher now? Is Firenze staying?”

“He’s got to,” said Harry, “the other centaurs won’t take him back, will they?”

“It looks like he and Trelawney are both going to teach,” said Ginny

“Bet Dumbledore wishes he could’ve got rid of Trelawney for good,” said Ron, now munching on his fourteenth Frog. “Mind you, the whole subject’s useless if you ask me, Firenze isn’t a lot better…”

“How can you say that?” Hermione demanded. “After we’ve just found out that there are real prophecies?”

Harry’s heart began to race. He had not told Ron, Hermione or anyone else what the prophecy had contained. Neville had told them it had smashed while Harry was pulling him up the steps in the Death Room and Harry had not yet corrected this impression. He was not ready to see their expressions when he told them that he must be either murderer or victim, there was no other way…

“It is a pity it broke,” said Hermione quietly, shaking her head.

“Yeah, it is,” said Ron. “Still, at least You-Know-Who never found out what was in it either - where are you going?” he added, looking both surprised and disappointed as Harry stood up.

“Er - Hagrid’s,” said Harry. “You know, he just got back and I promised I’d go down and see him and tell him how you two are.”

“Oh, all right then,” said Ron grumpily, looking out of the dormitory window at the patch of bright blue sky beyond. “Wish we could come.”

“Say hello to him for us!” called Hermione, as Harry proceeded down the ward. “And ask him what’s happening about… about his little friend!”

Harry gave a wave of his hand to show he had heard and understood as he left the dormitory.

The castle seemed very quiet even for a Sunday. Everybody was clearly out in the sunny grounds, enjoying the end of their exams and the prospect of a last few days of term unhampered by revision or homework. Harry walked slowly along the deserted corridor, peering out of windows as he went; he could see people messing around in the air over the Quidditch pitch and a couple of students swimming in the lake, accompanied by the giant squid.

He was finding it hard to decide whether he wanted to be with people or not; whenever he was in company he wanted to get away and whenever he was alone he wanted company. He thought he might really go and visit Hagrid, though, as he had not talked to him properly since he’d returned…

Harry had just descended the last marble step into the Entrance Hall when Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle emerged from a door on the right that Harry knew led down to the Slytherin common room. Harry stopped dead; so did Malfoy and the others. The only sounds were the shouts, laughter and splashes drifting into the Hall from the grounds through the open front doors.

Malfoy glanced around - Harry knew he was checking for signs of teachers - then he looked back

at Harry and said in a low voice, “You’re dead, Potter.”

Harry raised his eyebrows.

“Funny” he said, “you’d think I’d have stopped walking around…”

Malfoy looked angrier than Harry had ever seen him; he felt a kind of detached satisfaction at the sight of his pale, pointed face contorted with rage.

“You’re going to pay,” said Malfoy in a voice barely louder than a whisper. “I’m going to make you pay for what you’ve done to my father…”

“Well, I’m terrified now,” said Harry sarcastically. “I s’pose Lord Voldemort’s just a warm-up act compared to you three - what’s the matter?” he added, for Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle had all looked stricken at the sound of the name. “He’s your dad’s mate, isn’t he? Not scared of him, are you?”

“You think you’re such a big man, Potter,” said Malfoy, advancing now, Crabbe and Goyle flanking him. “You wait. I’ll have you. You can’t land my father in prison”

“I thought I just had,” said Harry.

“The Dementors have left Azkaban,” said Malfoy quietly. “Dad and the others’ll be out in no time…”

“Yeah, I expect they will,” said Harry “Still, at least everyone knows what scumbags they are now”

Malfoy’s hand flew towards his wand, but Harry was too quick for him; he had drawn his own wand before Malfoy’s fingers had even entered the pocket of his robes.

“Potter!”

The voice rang across the Entrance Hall. Snape had emerged from the staircase leading down to his office and at the sight of him Harry felt a great rush of hatred beyond anything he felt towards Malfoy… whatever Dumbledore said, he would never forgive Snape… never…

“What are you doing, Potter?” said Snape, as coldly as ever, as he strode over to the four of them.

“I’m trying to decide what curse to use on Malfoy, sir,” said Harry fiercely.

Snape stared at him.

“Put that wand away at once,” he said curtly. “Ten points from Gryff-”

Snape looked towards the giant hour-glasses on the walls and gave a sneering smile.

“Ah. I see there are no longer any points left in the Gryffindor hour-glass to take away. In that case, Potter, we will simply have to -”

“Add some more?”

Professor McGonagall had just stumped up the stone steps into the castle; she was carrying a tartan carpetbag in one hand and leaning heavily on a walking stick with her other, but otherwise looked quite well.

“Professor McGonagall!” said Snape, striding forwards. “Out of St. Mungo’s, I see!”

“Yes, Professor Snape,” said Professor McGonagall, shrugging off her traveling cloak, “I’m quite as good as new. You two - Crabbe – Goyle”

She beckoned them forwards imperiously and they came, shuffling their large feet and looking awkward.

“Here,” said Professor McGonagall, thrusting her carpetbag into Crabbe’s chest and her cloak into Goyle’s; “take these up to my office for me.”

They turned and stumped away up the marble staircase.

“Right then,” said Professor McGonagall, looking up at the hourglasses on the wall. “Well, I think Potter and his friends ought to have fifty points apiece for alerting the world to the return of You-Know-Who! What say you, Professor Snape?”

“What?” snapped Snape, though Harry knew he had heard perfectly well. “Oh - well - I suppose…”

“So that’s fifty each for Potter, the two Weasleys, Longbottom and Miss Granger,” said Professor McGonagall, and a shower of rubies fell down into the bottom bulb of Gryffindor’s hour-glass as she spoke. “Oh - and fifty for Miss Lovegood, I suppose,” she added, and a number of sapphires fell into Ravenclaw’s glass. “Now, you wanted to take ten from Mr. Potter, I think, Professor Snape - so there we are…”

A few rubies retreated into the upper bulb, leaving a respectable amount below nevertheless.

“Well, Potter, Malfoy I think you ought to be outside on a glorious day like this,” Professor McGonagall continued briskly.

Harry did not need telling twice- he thrust his wand back inside his robes and headed straight for the front doors without another glance at Snape and Malfoy.

The hot sun hit him with a blast as he walked across the lawns towards Hagrid’s cabin. Students

lying around on the grass sunbathing, talking, reading the Sunday Prophet and eating sweets, looked up at him as he passed; some called out to him, or else waved, clearly eager to show that they, like the Prophet, had decided he was something of a hero. Harry said nothing to any of them. He had no idea how much they knew of what had happened three days ago, but he had so far avoided being questioned and preferred to keep it that way.

He thought at first when he knocked on Hagrid's cabin door that he was out, but then Fang came charging around the corner and almost bowled him over with the enthusiasm of his welcome. Hagrid, it transpired, was picking runner beans in his back garden.

"All righ', Harry!" he said, beaming, when Harry approached the fence. "Come in, come in, we'll have a cup o' dandelion juice…"

"How's things?" Hagrid asked him, as they settled d own at his wooden table with a glass apiece of iced juice. "Yeh - er - feelin' all righ', are yeh?"

Harry knew from the look of concern on Hagrid's face that he was not referring to Harry's physical well-being.

"I'm fine," Harry said quickly, because he could no t bear to discuss the thing that he knew was in Hagrid's mind. "So, where're you been?"

"Bin hidin' out in the mountains," said Hagrid. "Up in a cave, like Sirius did when he –"

Hagrid broke off, cleared his throat gruffly, looked at Harry, and took a long draught of juice.

"Anyway, back now," he said feebly.

"You - you look better," said Harry, who was determined to keep the conversation moving away from Sirius.

"Wha'?" said Hagrid, raising a massive hand and feeling his face. "Oh - oh yeah. Well, Grawpy's loads better behaved now, loads. Seemed right pleased ter see me when I got back, ter tell yeh the truth. He's a good lad, really… I've bin thinkin' abou' tryin' ter find him a lady friend, actually…"

Harry would normally have tried to persuade Hagrid out of this idea at once; the prospect of a second giant taking up residence in the Forest, possibly even wilder and more brutal than Grawp, was positively alarming, but somehow Harry could not muster the energy necessary to argue the point. He was starting to wish he was alone again, and with the idea of hastening his departure he took several large gulps of his dandelion juice, half-emptying his glass.

"Ev'ryone knows yeh've bin tellin' the truth now, Harry," said Hagrid softly and unexpectedly. He was watching Harry closely. "Tha's gotta be better, hasn' it?"

Harry shrugged.

“Look…” Hagrid leaned towards him across the table, “I knew Sirius longer ‘n yeh did… he died in battle, an’ tha’s the way he’d’ve wanted ter go –”

“He didn’t want to go at all!” said Harry angrily.

Hagrid bowed his great shaggy head…

“Nah, I don’ reckon he did,” he said quietly. “But s till, Harry… he was never one ter sit aroun’ at home an’ let other people do the fightin’. He couldn’ve lived with himself if he hadn’ gone ter help –”

Harry leapt up.

“I’ve got to go and visit Ron and Hermione in the hospital wing,” he said mechanically.

“Oh,” said Hagrid, looking rather upset. “Oh… all righ’ then, Harry… take care o’ yerself then, an’ drop back in if yeh’ve got a –”

“Yeah… right…”

Harry crossed to the door as fast as he could and pulled it open; he was out in the sunshine again before Hagrid had finished saying goodbye, and walking away across the lawn. Once again, people called out to him as he passed. He closed his eyes for a few moments, wishing they would all vanish, that he could open his eyes and find himself alone in the grounds…

A few days ago, before his exams had finished and he had seen the vision Voldemort had planted in his mind, he would have given almost anything for the wizarding world to know he had been telling the truth, for them to believe that Voldemort was back, and to know that he was neither a liar nor mad. Now, however…

He walked a short way around the lake, sat down on its bank, sheltered from the gaze of passersby behind a tangle of shrubs, and stared out over the gleaming water, thinking…

Perhaps the reason he wanted to be alone was because he had felt isolated from everybody since his talk with Dumbledore. An invisible barrier separated him from the rest of the world. He was - he had always been - a marked man. It was just that he had never really understood what that meant…

And yet sitting here on the edge of the lake, with the terrible weight of grief dragging at him, with the loss of Sirius so raw and fresh inside, he could not muster any great sense of fear. It was sunny, and the grounds around him were full of laughing people, and even though he felt as distant from them as though he belonged to a different race, it was still very hard to believe as he sat here that his life must include, or end in, murder…

He sat there for a long time, gazing out at the water, trying not to think about his godfather or to remember that it was directly across from here, on the opposite bank, that Sirius had once

collapsed trying to fend off a hundred Dementors…

The sun had set before he realized he was cold. He got up and returned to the castle, wiping his face on his sleeve as he went.

Ron and Hermione left the hospital wing completely cured three days before the end of term. Hermione kept showing signs of wanting to talk about Sirius, but Ron tended to make `hushing noises every time she mentioned his name. Harry was still not sure whether or not he wanted to talk about his godfather yet; his wishes varied with his mood. He knew one thing, though: unhappy as he felt at the moment, he would greatly miss Hogwarts in a few days' time when he was back at number four, Privet Drive. Even though he now understood exactly why he had to return there every summer, he did not feel any better about it. Indeed, he had never dreaded his return more.

Professor Umbridge left Hogwarts the day before the end of term. It seemed she had crept out of the hospital wing during dinnertime, evidently hoping to depart undetected, but unfortunately for her, she met Peeves on the way, who seized his last chance to do as Fred had instructed, and chased her gleefully from the premises whacking her alternately with a walking stick and a sock full of chalk. Many students ran out into the Entrance Hall to watch her running away down the path and the Heads of Houses tried only half-heartedly to restrain them. Indeed, Professor McGonagall sank back into her chair at the staff table after a few feeble remonstrances and was clearly heard to express a regret that she could not run cheering after Umbridge herself, because Peeves had borrowed her walking stick.

Their last evening at school arrived; most people had finished packing and were already heading down to the end-of-term feast, but Harry had not even started.

“Just do it tomorrow!” said Ron, who was waiting by the door of their dormitory. “Come on, I'm starving.”

“I won't be long… look, you go ahead…”

But when the dormitory door closed behind Ron, Harry made no effort to speed up his packing. The very last thing he wanted to do was to attend the Leaving Feast. He was worried that Dumbledore would make some reference to him in his speech. He was sure to mention Voldemort's return; he had talked to them about it last year, after all…

Harry pulled some crumpled robes out of the very bottom of his trunk to make way for folded ones and, as he did so, noticed a badly wrapped package lying in a corner of it. He could not think what it was doing there. He bent down, pulled it out from underneath his trainers and examined it.

He realized what it was within seconds. Sirius had given it to him just inside the front door of number twelve Grimmauld Place. ‘Use it if you need me, all right?’

Harry sank down on to his bed and unwrapped the package. Out fell a small, square mirror. It

looked old; it was certainly dirty. Harry held it up to his face and saw his own reflection looking back at him.

He turned the mirror over. There on the reverse side was a scribbled note from Sirius.

This is a two-way mirror, I've got the other. If you need to speak to me, just say my name into it; you'll appear in my mirror and I'll be able to talk in yours. James and I used to use them when we were in separate detentions.

Harry's heart began to race. He remembered seeing his dead parents in the Mirror of Erised four years ago. He was going to be able to talk to Sirius again, right now, he knew it -

He looked around to make sure there was nobody else there; the dormitory was quite empty. He looked back at the mirror, raised it in front of his face with trembling hands and said, loudly and clearly, "Sirius."

His breath misted the surface of the glass. He held the mirror even closer, excitement flooding through him, but the eyes blinking back at him through the fog were definitely his own.
He wiped the mirror clear again and said, so that every syllable rang clearly through the room:

"Sirius Black!"

Nothing happened. The frustrated face looking back out of the mirror was still, definitely, his own…

Sirius didn't have his mirror on him when he went through the archway, said a small voice in Harry's head. That's why it's not working…

Harry remained quite still for a moment, then hurled the mirror back into the trunk where it shattered. He had been convinced, for a whole, shining minute, that he was going to see Sirius, talk to him again…

Disappointment was burning in his throat; he got up and began throwing his things pell-mell into the trunk on top of the broken mirror -

But then an idea struck him… a better idea than a mirror… a much bigger, more important idea… how had he never thought of it before - why had he never asked?

He was sprinting out of the dormitory and down the spiral staircase hitting the walls as he ran and barely noticing; he hurtled across the empty common room, through the portrait hole and off along the corridor, ignoring the Fat Lady, who called after him: "The feast is about to start, you know, you're cutting it very fine!"

But Harry had no intention of going to the feast…

How could it be that the place was full of ghosts whenever you didn't need one, yet now…

He ran down staircases and along corridors and met nobody either alive or dead. They were all, clearly, in the Great Hall. Outside his Charms classroom he came to a halt, panting and thinking disconsolately that he would have to wait until later, until after the end of the feast…

But just as he had given up hope, he saw it - a translucent somebody drifting across the end of the corridor.

“Hey - hey Nick! NICK!”

The ghost stuck its head back out of the wall, revealing the extravagantly plumed hat and dangerously wobbling head of Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington.

“Good evening,” he said, withdrawing the rest of his body from the solid stone and smiling at Harry “I am not the only one who is late, then? Though,” he sighed, “in a rather different sense, of course…”

“Nick, can I ask you something?”

A most peculiar expression stole over Nearly Headless Nick’s face as he inserted a finger in the stiff ruff at his neck and tugged it a little straighter, apparently to give himself thinking time. He desisted only when his partially severed neck seemed about to give way completely.

“Er - now, Harry?” said Nick, looking discomfited. “Can’t it wait until after the feast?”

“No - Nick - please,” said Harry, “I really need to talk to you. Can we go in here?”

Harry opened the door of the nearest classroom and Nearly Headless Nick sighed.

“Oh, very well,” he said, looking resigned. “I can’t pretend I haven’t been expecting it.”

Harry was holding the door open for him, but he drifted through the wall instead.

“Expecting what?” Harry asked, as he closed the door.

“You to come and find me,” said Nick, now gliding over to the window and looking out at the darkening grounds. “It happens, sometimes… when somebody has suffered a… loss.”

“Well,” said Harry, refusing to be deflected. “You were right, I’ve - I’ve come to find you.”
Nick said nothing.

“It’s -” said Harry, who was finding this more awkward than he had anticipated, “it’s just - you’re dead. But you’re still here, aren’t you?”

Nick sighed and continued to gaze out at the grounds.

“That’s right, isn’t it?” Harry urged him. “You died, but I’m talking to you… you can walk around Hogwarts and everything, can’t you?”

“Yes,” said Nearly Headless Nick quietly, “I walk and talk, yes.”

“So, you came back, didn’t you?” said Harry urgently. “People can come back, right? As ghosts. They don’t have to disappear completely. Well?” he added impatiently, when Nick continued to say nothing.

Nearly Headless Nick hesitated, then said, “Not everyone can come back as a ghost.”

“What d’you mean?” said Harry quickly

“Only… only wizards.”

“Oh,” said Harry, and he almost laughed with relief. “Well, that’s okay then, the person I’m asking about is a wizard. So he can come back, right?”

Nick turned away from the window and looked mournfully at Harry.

“He won’t come back.”

“Who?”

“Sirius Black,” said Nick.

“But you did!” said Harry angrily. “You came back - you’re dead and you didn’t disappear -”

“Wizards can leave an imprint of themselves upon the earth, to walk palely where their living selves once trod,” said Nick miserably. “But very few wizards choose that path.”

“Why not?” said Harry. “Anyway - it doesn’t matter - Sirius won’t care if it’s unusual, he’ll come back, I know he will!”

And so strong was his belief, Harry actually turned his head to check the door, sure, for a split second, that he was going to see Sirius, pearly-white and transparent but beaming, walking through it towards him.

“He will not come back,” repeated Nick. “He will have… gone on.”

“What d’you mean, ‘gone on’?” said Harry quickly “Gone on where? Listen - what happens when you die, anyway? Where do you go? Why doesn’t everyone come back? Why isn’t this place full of ghosts? Why -?”

“I cannot answer,” said Nick.

“You’re dead, aren’t you?” said Harry exasperatedly. “Who can answer better than you?”

“I was afraid of death,” said Nick softly. “I chose to remain behind. I sometimes wonder whether I oughtn’t to have… well, that is neither here nor there… in fact, I am neither here nor there…”

He gave a small sad chuckle. “I know nothing of the secrets of death, Harry, for I chose my feeble imitation of life instead. I believe learned wizards study the matter in the Department of Mysteries -”

“Don’t talk to me about that place!” said Harry fiercely.

“I am sorry not to have been more help,” said Nick gently “Well… well, do excuse me… the feast, you know…”

And he left the room, leaving Harry there alone, gazing blankly at the wall through which Nick had disappeared.

Harry felt almost as though he had lost his godfather all over again in losing the hope that he might be able to see or speak to him once more. He walked slowly and miserably back up through the empty castle, wondering whether he would ever feel cheerful again.

He had turned the corner towards the Fat Lady’s corridor when he saw somebody up ahead fastening a note to a board on the wall. A second glance showed him it was Luna. There were no good hiding places nearby, she was bound to have heard his footsteps, and in any case, Harry could hardly muster the energy to avoid anyone at the moment.

“Hello,” said Luna vaguely, glancing around at him as she stepped back from the notice.

“How come you’re not at the feast?” Harry asked.

“Well, I’ve lost most of my possessions,” said Luna serenely. “People take them and hide them, you know. But as it’s the last night, I really do need them back, so I’ve been putting up signs.”

She gestured towards the noticeboard, upon which, sure enough, she had pinned a list of all her missing books and clothes, with a plea for their return.

An odd feeling rose in Harry; an emotion quite different from the anger and grief that had filled him since Sirius’s death. It was a few moments before he realized that he was feeling sorry for Luna.

“How come people hide your stuff?” he asked her, frowning.

“Oh… well…” she shrugged. “I think they think I’m a bit odd, you know. Some people call me ‘Loony’ Lovegood, actually.”

Harry looked at her and the new feeling of pity intensified rather painfully.

“That’s no reason for them to take your things,” he said flatly. “D’you want help finding them?”

“Oh, no,” she said, smiling at him. “They’ll come back, they always do in the end. It was just that I wanted to pack tonight. Anyway… why aren’t you at the feast?”

Harry shrugged. “Just didn’t feel like it.”

“No,” said Luna, observing him with those oddly misty, protuberant eyes. “I don’t suppose you do. That man the Death Eaters killed was your godfather, wasn’t he? Ginny told me.”

Harry nodded curtly, but found that for some reason he did not mind Luna talking about Sirius. He had just remembered that she, too, could see Thestrals.

“Have you…” he began. “I mean, who… has anyone you known ever died?”

“Yes,” said Luna simply, “my mother. She was a quite extraordinary witch, you know, but she did like to experiment and one of her spells went rather badly wrong one day. I was nine.”

“I’m sorry” Harry mumbled.

“Yes, it was rather horrible,” said Luna conversationally. “I still feel very sad about it sometimes. But I’ve still got Dad. And anyway, it’s not as though I’ll never see Mum again, is it?”

“Er - isn’t it?” said Harry uncertainly.

She shook her head in disbelief.

“Oh, come on. You heard them, just behind the veil, didn’t you?”

“You mean…”

“In that room with the archway. They were just lurking out of sight, that’s all. You heard them.”

They looked at each other. Luna was smiling slightly. Harry did not know what to say, or to think; Luna believed so many extraordinary things… yet he had been sure he had heard voices behind the veil, too.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to help you look for your stuff?” he said.

“Oh, no,” said Luna. “No, I think I’ll just go down and have some pudding and wait for it all to turn up… it always does in the end… well, have a nice holiday Harry”

“Yeah… yeah, you too.”

She walked away from him and, as he watched her go, he found that the terrible weight in his

stomach- seemed to have lessened slightly.

The journey home on the Hogwarts Express next day was eventful in several ways. Firstly Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle, who had clearly been waiting all week for the opportunity to strike without teacher witnesses, attempted to ambush Harry halfway down the train as he made his way back from the toilet. The attack might have succeeded had it not been for the fact that they unwittingly chose to stage the attack right outside a compartment full of D.A. members, who saw what was happening through the glass and rose as one to rush to Harry's aid. By the time Ernie Macmillan, Hannah Abbott, Susan Bones, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Anthony Goldstein and Terry Boot had finished using a wide variety of the hexes and jinxes Harry had taught them, Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle resembled nothing so much as three gigantic slugs squeezed into Hogwarts uniforms as Harry, Ernie and Justin hoisted them into the luggage rack and left them there to ooze.

"I must say, I'm looking forward to seeing Malfoy's mother's face when he gets off the train," said Ernie, with some satisfaction, as he watched Malfoy squirm above him. Ernie had never quite got over the indignity of Malfoy docking points from Hufflepuff during his brief spell as a member of the Inquisitorial Squad.

"Goyle's mum'll be really pleased, though," said Ron, who had come to investigate the source of the commotion. "He's loads better looking now… anyway, Harry, the food trolley's just stopped if you want anything…"

Harry thanked the others and accompanied Ron back to their compartment, where he bought a large pile of cauldron cakes and pumpkin pasties. Hermione was reading the Daily Prophet again, Ginny was doing a quiz in The Quibbler and Neville was stroking his Mimbulus mimbletonia, which had grown a great deal over the year and now made odd crooning noises when touched.

Harry and Ron whiled away most of the journey playing wizard chess while Hermione read out snippets from the Prophet. It was now full of articles about how to repel Dementors, attempts by the Ministry to track down Death Eaters and hysterical letters claiming that the writer had seen Lord Voldemort walking past their house that very morning…

"It hasn't really started yet," sighed Hermione gloomily, folding up the newspaper again. "But it won't be long now…"

"Hey, Harry" said Ron softly, nodding towards the glass window on to the corridor.

Harry looked around. Cho was passing, accompanied by Marietta Edgecombe, who was wearing a balaclava. His and Cho's eyes met for a moment. Cho blushed and kept walking. Harry looked back down at the chessboard just in time to see one of his pawns chased off its square by Ron's knight.

"What's - er - going on with you and her, anyway?" Ron asked quietly

“Nothing,” said Harry truthfully.

“I - er - heard she’s going out with someone else now,” said Hermione tentatively.

Harry was surprised to find that this information did not hurt at all. Wanting to impress Cho seemed to belong to a past that was no longer quite connected with him; so much of what he had wanted before Sirius’, death felt that way these days… the week that had elapsed since he had last seen Sirius seemed to have lasted much, much longer; it stretched across two universes, the one with Sirius in it, and the one without.

“You’re well out of it, mate,” said Ron forcefully. “I mean, she’s quite good-looking and all that, but you want someone a bit more cheerful.”

“She’s probably cheerful enough with someone else,” said Harry, shrugging.

“Who’s she with now, anyway?” Ron asked Hermione, but it was Ginny who answered.

“Michael Corner,” she said.

“Michael - but –” said Ron, craning around in hiss eat to stare at her. “But you were going out with him!”

“Not any more,” said Ginny resolutely. “He didn’t like Gryffindor beating Ravenclaw at Quidditch, and got really sulky, so I ditched him and he ran off to comfort Cho instead.” She scratched her nose absently with the end of her quill, turned The Quibbler upside-down and began marking her answers. Ron looked highly delighted.

“Well, I always thought he was a bit of an idiot,” he said, prodding his queen forwards towards Harry’s quivering castle. “Good for you. Just choose someone - better - next time.”

He cast Harry an oddly furtive look as he said it.

“Well, I’ve chosen Dean Thomas, would you say he’s better?” asked Ginny vaguely.

“WHAT?” shouted Ron, upending the chessboard: Crookshanks went plunging after the pieces and Hedwig and Pigwidgeon twittered and hooted angrily from overhead.

As the train slowed down in the approach to King’s Cross, Harry thought he had never wanted to leave it less. He even wondered fleetingly what would happen if he simply refused to get off, but remained stubbornly sitting there until the first of September, when it would take him back to Hogwarts. When it finally puffed to a standstill, however, he lifted down Hedwig’s cage and prepared to drag his trunk from the train as usual.

When the ticket inspector signaled to Harry, Ron and Hermione that it was safe to walk through the magical barrier between platforms nine and ten, however, he found a surprise awaiting him on the other side: a group of people standing there to greet him who he had not expected at all.

There was Mad-Eye Moody, looking quite as sinister with his bowler hat pulled low over his magical eye as he would have done without it, his gnarled hands clutching a long staff, his body wrapped in a voluminous traveling cloak. Tonks stood just behind him, her bright bubble-gumpink hair gleaming in the sunlight filtering through the dirty glass of the station ceiling, wearing heavily patched jeans and a bright purple T-shirt bearing the legend The Weird Sisters. Next to Tonks was Lupin, his face pale, his hair graying, a long and threadbare overcoat covering a shabby jumper and trousers. At the front of the group stood Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, dressed in their Muggle best, and Fred and George, who were both wearing brand-new jackets in some lurid green, scaly material.

“Ron, Ginny!” called Mrs. Weasley, hurrying forwards and hugging her children tightly “Oh, and Harry dear - how are you?”

“Fine,” lied Harry, as she pulled him into a tight embrace. Over her shoulder he saw Ron goggling at the twins’ new clothes.

“What are they supposed to be?” he asked, pointing at the jackets.

“Finest dragonskin, little bro’,” said Fred, giving his zip a little tweak. “Business is booming and we thought we’d treat ourselves.”

“Hello, Harry” said Lupin, as Mrs. Weasley let go of Harry and turned to greet Hermione.

“Hi,” said Harry “I didn’t expect… what are you all doing here?”

“Well,” said Lupin with a slight smile, “we thought we might have a little chat with your aunt and uncle before letting them take you home.”

“I dunno if that’s a good idea,” said Harry at once.

“Oh, I think it is,” growled Moody, who had limped a little closer. “That’ll be them, will it, Potter?”

He pointed with his thumb over his shoulder; his magical eye was evidently peering through the back of his head and his bowler hat. Harry leaned an inch or so to the left to see where Mad-Eye was pointing and there, sure enough, were the three Dursleys, who looked positively appalled to see Harry’s reception committee.

“Ah, Harry” said Mr. Weasley, turning from Hermione ‘s parents, who he had just greeted enthusiastically, and who were now taking it in turns to hug Hermione. “Well - shall we do it, then?”

“Yeah, I reckon so, Arthur,” said Moody.

He and Mr. Weasley took the lead across the station towards the Dursleys, who were apparently rooted to the floor. Hermione disengaged herself gently from her mother to join the group.

“Good afternoon,” said Mr. Weasley pleasantly to Uncle Vernon as he came to a halt right in front of him. “You might remember me, my name’s Arthur Weasley”

As Mr. Weasley had single-handedly demolished most o f the Dursleys’ living room two years previously, Harry would have been very surprised if Uncle Vernon had forgotten him. Sure enough, Uncle Vernon turned a deeper shade of puce and glared at Mr. Weasley, but chose not to say anything, partly, perhaps, because the Dursleys were outnumbered two to one. Aunt Petunia looked both frightened and embarrassed; she kept glancing around, as though terrified somebody she knew would see her in such company. Dudley, meanwhile, seemed to be trying to look small and insignificant, a feat at which he was failing extravagantly.

“We thought we’d just have a few words with you about Harry,” said Mr. Weasley, still smiling.

“Yeah,” growled Moody. “About how he’s treated when he’s at your place.”

Uncle Vernon’s moustache seemed to bristle with indignation. Possibly because the bowler hat gave him the entirely mistaken impression that he was dealing with a kindred spirit, he addressed himself to Moody.

“I am not aware that it is any of your business what goes on in my house -”

“I expect what you’re not aware of would fill several books, Dursley,” growled Moody.

“Anyway, that’s not the point,” interjected Tonks, whose pink hair seemed to offend Aunt Petunia more than all the rest put together, for she closed her eyes rather than look at her. “The point is, if we find out you’ve been horrible to Harry –”

“- And make no mistake, we’ll hear about it,” added Lupin pleasantly.

“Yes,” said Mr. Weasley, “even if you won’t let Harry use the fellytone –”

“Telephone,” whispered Hermione.

“- Yeah, if we get any hint that Potter’s been mistreated in any way, you’ll have us to answer to,” said Moody.

Uncle Vernon swelled ominously. His sense of outrage seemed to outweigh even his fear of this bunch of oddballs.

“Are you threatening me, sir?” he said, so loudly t hat passers-by actually turned to stare.

“Yes, I am,” said Mad-Eye, who seemed rather pleased that Uncle Vernon had grasped this fact so quickly.

“And do I look like the kind of man who can be intimidated?” barked Uncle Vernon.

“Well…” said Moody, pushing back his bowler hat to reveal his sinisterly revolving magical eye. Uncle Vernon leapt backwards in horror and collided painfully with a luggage trolley. “Yes, I’d have to say you do, Dursley”

He turned away from Uncle Vernon to survey Harry.

“So, Potter… give us a shout if you need us. If we don’t hear from you for three days in a row, we’ll send someone along…”

Aunt Petunia whimpered piteously. It could not have been plainer that she was thinking of what the neighbors would say if they caught sight of these people marching up the garden path.

“Bye, then, Potter,” said Moody, grasping Harry’s shoulder for a moment with a gnarled hand.

“Take care, Harry,” said Lupin quietly. “Keep in touch.”

“Harry, we’ll have you away from there as soon as we can,” Mrs. Weasley whispered, hugging him again.

“We’ll see you soon, mate,” said Ron anxiously, shaking Harry’s hand.

“Really soon, Harry” said Hermione earnestly. “We promise.”

Harry nodded. He somehow could not find words to tell them what it meant to him, to see them all ranged there, on his side. Instead, he smiled, raised a hand in farewell, turned around and led the way out of the station towards the sunlit street, with Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia and Dudley hurrying along in his wake.

HARRY POTTER
AND THE HALF-BLOOD PRINCE

BY

J.K. ROWLING

CHAPTER ONE

THE OTHER MINISTER

It was nearing midnight and the Prime Minister was sitting alone in his office, reading a long memo that was slipping through his brain without leaving the slightest trace of meaning behind. He was waiting for a call from the President of a far distant country, and between wondering when the wretched man would telephone, and trying to suppress unpleasant memories of what had been a very long, tiring, and difficult week, there was not much space in his head for anything else. The more he attempted to focus on the print on the page before him, the more clearly the Prime Minister could see the gloating face of one of his political opponents. This particular opponent had appeared on the news that very day, not only to enumerate all the terrible things that had happened in the last week (as though anyone needed reminding) but also to explain why each and every one of them was the government's fault.

The Prime Minister's pulse quickened at the very thought of these accusations, for they were neither fair nor true. How on earth was his government supposed to have stopped that bridge collapsing? It was outrageous for anybody to suggest that they were not spending enough on bridges. The bridge was fewer than ten years old, and the best experts were at a loss to explain why it had snapped cleanly in two, sending a dozen cars into the watery depths of the river below. And how dare anyone suggest that it was lack of policemen that had resulted in those two very nasty and well-publicized murders? Or that the government should have somehow foreseen the freak hurricane in the West Country that had caused so much damage to both people and property? And was it his fault that one of his Junior Ministers, Herbert Chorley, had chosen this week to act so peculiarly that he was now going to be spending a lot more time with his family?

“A grim mood has gripped the country,” the opponent had concluded, barely concealing his own broad grin.

And unfortunately, this was perfectly true. The Prime Minister felt it himself; people really did seem more miserable than usual. Even the weather was dismal; all this chilly mist in the middle of July…It wasn’t right, it wasn’t normal…

He turned over the second page of the memo, saw how much longer it went on, and gave it up as a bad job. Stretching his arms above his head he looked around his office mournfully. It was a handsome room, with a fine marble fireplace facing the long sash windows, firmly closed against the unseasonable chill. With a slight shiver, the Prime Minister got up and moved over to the window, looking out at the thin mist that was pressing itself against the glass. It was then, as he stood with his back to the room, that he heard a soft cough behind him.

He froze, nose to nose with his own scared-looking reflection in the dark glass. He knew that cough. He had heard it before. He turned very slowly to face the empty room.

“Hello?” he said, trying to sound braver than he felt.

For a brief moment he allowed himself the impossible hope that nobody would answer him. However, a voice responded at once, a crisp, decisive voice that sounded as though it were reading a prepared statement. It was coming — as the Prime Minister had known at the first cough — from the froglike little man wearing a long silver wig who was depicted in a small, dirty oil painting in the far corner of the room.

“To the Prime Minister of Muggles. Urgent we meet. Kindly respond immediately. Sincerely, Fudge.”

The man in the painting looked inquiringly at the Prime Minister.

“Er,” said the Prime Minister, “listen…It’s not a very good time for me…I’m waiting for a telephone call, you see…from the President of —”

“That can be rearranged,” said the portrait at once. The Prime Minister’s heart sank. He had been afraid of that.

“But I really was rather hoping to speak —”

“We shall arrange for the President to forget to call. He will telephone tomorrow night instead,” said the little man. “Kindly respond immediately to Mr. Fudge.”

“I…oh…very well,” said the Prime Minister weakly. “Yes, I’ll see Fudge.”

He hurried back to his desk, straightening his tie as he went. He had barely resumed his seat, and arranged his face into what he hoped was a relaxed and unfazed expression, when bright green flames

burst into life in the empty grate beneath his marble mantelpiece. He watched, trying not to betray a flicker of surprise or alarm, as a portly man appeared within the flames, spinning as fast as a top. Seconds later, he had climbed out onto a rather fine antique rug, brushing ash from the sleeves of his long pin-striped cloak, a lime-green bowler hat in his hand.

"Ah…Prime Minister," said Cornelius Fudge, striding forward with his hand outstretched. "Good to see you again."

The Prime Minister could not honestly return this compliment, so said nothing at all. He was not remotely pleased to see Fudge, whose occasional appearances, apart from being downright alarming in themselves, generally meant that he was about to hear some very bad news. Furthermore, Fudge was looking distinctly careworn. He was thinner, balder, and grayer, and his face had a crumpled look. The Prime Minister had seen that kind of look in politicians before, and it never boded well.

"How can I help you?" he said, shaking Fudge's hand very briefly and gesturing toward the hardest of the chairs in front of the desk.

"Difficult to know where to begin," muttered Fudge, pulling up the chair, sitting down, and placing his green bowler upon his knees. "What a week, what a week…"

"Had a bad one too, have you?" asked the Prime Minister stiffly, hoping to convey by this that he had quite enough on his plate already without any extra helpings from Fudge.

"Yes, of course," said Fudge, rubbing his eyes wearily and looking morosely at the Prime Minister. "I've been having the same week you have, Prime Minister. The Brockdale Bridge…the Bones and Vance murders…not to mention the ruckus in the West Country…"

"You — er — your — I mean to say, some of your people were — were involved in those — those things, were they?"

Fudge fixed the Prime Minister with a rather stern look. "Of course they were," he said,

"Surely you've realized what's going on?"

"I…" hesitated the Prime Minister.

It was precisely this sort of behavior that made him dislike Fudge's visits so much. He was, after all, the Prime Minister and did not appreciate being made to feel like an ignorant schoolboy. But of course, it had been like this from his very first meeting with Fudge on his very first evening as Prime Minister. He remembered it as though it were yesterday and knew it would haunt him until his dying day.

He had been standing alone in this very office, savoring the triumph that was his after so many years of dreaming and scheming, when he had heard a cough behind him, just like tonight, and turned to find that ugly little portrait talking to him, announcing that the Minister of Magic was about to arrive and introduce himself

Naturally, he had thought that the long campaign and the strain of the election had caused him to go mad. He had been utterly terrified to find a portrait talking to him, though this had been nothing to how he felt when a self-proclaimed wizard had bounced out of the fireplace and shaken his hand. He had remained speechless throughout Fudge's kindly explanation that there were witches and wizards still living in secret all over the world and his reassurances that he was not to bother his head about them as the Ministry of Magic took responsibility for the whole Wizarding community and prevented the non-magical population from getting wind of them. It was, said Fudge, a difficult job that encompassed everything from regulations on responsible use of broomsticks to keeping the dragon population under control (the Prime Minister remembered clutching the desk for support at this point). Fudge had then patted the shoulder of the still-dumbstruck Prime Minister in a fatherly sort of way.

"Not to worry," he had said, "it's odds-on you'll never see me again. I'll only bother you if there's something really serious going on our end, something that's likely to affect the Muggles — the non-magical population, I should say. Otherwise, it's live and let live. And I must say, you're taking it a lot better than your predecessor. He tried to throw me out the window, thought I was a hoax planned by the opposition."

At this, the Prime Minister had found his voice at last. "You're — you're not a hoax, then?"

It had been his last, desperate hope.

"No," said Fudge gently. "No, I'm afraid I'm not. Look."

And he had turned the Prime Minister's teacup into a gerbil.

"But," said the Prime Minister breathlessly, watching his teacup chewing on the corner of his next speech, "but why — why has nobody told me —?"

"The Minister of Magic only reveals him — or herself to the Muggle Prime Minister of the day," said Fudge, poking his wand back inside his jacket. "We find it the best way to maintain secrecy."

"But then," bleated the Prime Minister, "why hasn't a former Prime Minister warned me -?"

At this, Fudge had actually laughed.

"My dear Prime Minister, are you ever going to tell anybody?"

Still chortling, Fudge had thrown some powder into the fireplace, stepped into the emerald flames, and vanished with a whooshing sound. The Prime Minister had stood there, quite motionless, and realized that he would never, as long as he lived, dare mention this encounter to a living soul, for who in the wide world would believe him?

The shock had taken a little while to wear off. For a time, he had tried to convince himself that Fudge had indeed been a hallucination brought on by lack of sleep during his grueling election campaign. In a vain attempt to rid himself of all reminders of this uncomfortable encounter, he had given the gerbil to his delighted niece and instructed his private secretary to take down the portrait of the ugly little man who had announced Fudge's arrival. To the Prime Minister's dismay, however, the portrait had proved impossible to remove. When several carpenters, a builder or two, an art historian, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer had all tried unsuccessfully to pry it from the wall, the Prime Minister had abandoned the attempt and simply resolved to hope that the thing remained motionless and silent for the rest of his term in office. Occasionally he could have sworn he saw out of the corner of his eye the occupant of the painting yawning, or else scratching his nose; even, once or twice, simply walking out of his frame and leaving nothing but a stretch of muddy-brown canvas behind. However, he had trained himself not to look at the picture very much, and always to tell himself firmly that his eyes were playing tricks on him when anything like this happened.

Then, three years ago, on a night very like tonight, the Prime Minister had been alone in his office when the portrait had once again announced the imminent arrival of Fudge, who had burst out of the fireplace, sopping wet and in a state of considerable panic. Before the Prime Minister could ask why he was dripping all over the Axminster, Fudge had started ranting about a prison the Prime Minister had never heard of, a man named "Serious" Black, something that sounded like "Hogwarts," and a boy called Harry Potter, none of which made the remotest sense to the Prime Minister.

"…I've just come from Azkaban," Fudge had panted, tipping a large amount of water out of the rim of his bowler hat into his pocket. "Middle of the North Sea, you know, nasty flight…the dementors are in uproar"— he shuddered — "they've never had a breakout before. Anyway, I had to come to you, Prime Minister. Black's a known Muggle killer and may be planning to rejoin You-Know-Who…But of course, you don't even know who You-Know-Who is!" He had gazed hopelessly at the Prime Minister for a moment, then said, "Well, sit down, sit down, I'd better fill you in…Have a whiskey…"

The Prime Minister rather resented being told to sit down in his own office, let alone offered his own whiskey, but he sat nevertheless. Fudge pulled out his wand, conjured two large glasses full of amber liquid out of thin air, pushed one of them into the Prime Minister's hand, and drew up a chair.

Fudge had talked for more than an hour. At one point, he had refused to say a certain name aloud and wrote it instead on a piece of parchment, which he had thrust into the Prime Minister's whiskey-free hand. When at last Fudge had stood up to leave, the Prime Minister had stood up too.

"So you think that…" He had squinted down at the name in his left hand. "Lord Vol —"

"*He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named!*" snarled Fudge.

"I'm sorry…You think that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is still alive, then?"

"Well, Dumbledore says he is," said Fudge, as he had fastened his pin-striped cloak under his chin, "but we've never found him. If you ask me, he's not dangerous unless he's got support, so it's Black we ought to be worrying about. You'll put out that warning, then? Excellent. Well, I hope we don't see each other again, Prime Minister! Good night."

But they had seen each other again. Less than a year later a harassed-looking Fudge had appeared out of thin air in the cabinet room to inform the Prime Minister that there had been a spot of bother at the Kwidditch (or that was what it had sounded like) World Cup and that several Muggles had been "involved," but that the Prime Minister was not to worry, the fact that You-Know-Who's Mark had been seen again meant nothing; Fudge was sure it was an isolated incident, and the Muggle Liaison Office was dealing with all memory modifications as they spoke.

"Oh, and I almost forgot," Fudge had added. "We're importing three foreign dragons and a sphinx for the Triwizard Tournament, quite routine, but the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures tells me that it's down in the rule book that we have to notify you if we're bringing highly dangerous creatures into the country."

"I — what — dragons?" spluttered the Prime Minister.

"Yes, three," said Fudge. "And a sphinx. Well, good day to you."

The Prime Minister had hoped beyond hope that dragons and sphinxes would be the worst of it, but no. Less than two years later, Fudge had erupted out of the fire yet again, this time with the news that there had been a mass breakout from Azkaban.

"A mass breakout?" repeated the Prime Minister hoarsely.

"No need to worry, no need to worry!" shouted Fudge, already with one foot in the flames. "We'll have them rounded up in no time — just thought you ought to know!"

And before the Prime Minister could shout, "Now, wait just one moment!" Fudge had vanished in a shower of green sparks.

Whatever the press and the opposition might say, the Prime Minister was not a foolish man. It had not escaped his notice that, despite Fudge's assurances at their first meeting, they were now seeing rather a lot of each other, nor that Fudge was becoming more flustered with each visit. Little though he liked to think about the Minister of Magic (or, as he always called Fudge in his head, the Other Minister), the Prime Minister could not help but fear that the next time Fudge appeared it would be with graver news still. The sight, therefore, of Fudge stepping out of the fire once more, looking disheveled and fretful and sternly surprised that the Prime Minister did not know exactly why he was there, was about the worst thing that had happened in the course of this extremely gloomy week.

"How should I know what's going on in the — er — Wizarding community?" snapped the Prime Minister now. "I have a country to run and quite enough concerns at the moment without—"

"We have the same concerns," Fudge interrupted. "The Brockdale Bridge didn't wear out. That wasn't really a hurricane. Those murders were not the work of Muggles. And Herbert Chorley's family would be safer without him. We are currently making arrangements to have him transferred to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. The move should be affected tonight."

"What do you…I'm afraid I…What?" blustered the Prime Minister.

Fudge took a great, deep breath and said, "Prime Minister, I am very sorry to have to tell you that he's back. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is back."

"Back? When you say 'back'…he's alive? I mean —"

The Prime Minister groped in his memory for the details of that horrible conversation of three years previously, when Fudge had told him about the wizard who was feared above all others, the wizard who had committed a thousand terrible crimes before his mysterious disappearance fifteen years earlier.

"Yes, alive," said Fudge. "That is — I don't know — is a man alive if he can't be killed? I don't really understand it, and Dumbledore won't explain properly — but anyway, he's certainly got a body and is walking and talking and killing, so I suppose, for the purposes of our discussion, yes, he's alive."

The Prime Minister did not know what to say to this, but a persistent habit of wishing to appear well-informed on any subject that came up made him cast around for any details he could remember of their previous conversations.

“Is Serious Black with — er — He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?”

“Black? Black?” said Fudge distractedly, turning his bowler rapidly in his fingers. “Sirius Black, you mean? Merlin’s beard, no. Black’s dead. Turns out we were — er — mistaken about Black. He was innocent after all. And he wasn’t in league with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named either. I mean,” he added defensively, spinning the bowler hat still faster, “all the evidence pointed — we had more than fifty eyewitnesses — but anyway, as I say, he’s dead. Murdered, as a matter of fact. On Ministry of Magic premises. There’s going to be an inquiry, actually…”

To his great surprise, the Prime Minister felt a fleeting stab of pity for Fudge at this point. It was, however, eclipsed almost immediately by a glow of smugness at the thought that, deficient though he himself might be in the area of materializing out of fireplaces, there had never been a murder in any of the government departments under his charge…Not yet, anyway…

While the Prime Minister surreptitiously touched the wood of his desk, Fudge continued, “But Blacks by-the-by now. The point is, we’re at war, Prime Minister, and steps must be taken.”

“At war?” repeated the Prime Minister nervously. “Surely that’s a little bit of an overstatement?”

“He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has now been joined by those of his followers who broke out of Azkaban in January,” said Fudge, speaking more and more rapidly and twirling his bowler so fast that it was a lime-green blur. “Since they have moved into the open, they have been wreaking havoc. The Brockdale Bridge — he did it, Prime Minister, he threatened a mass Muggle killing unless I stood aside for him and —”

“Good grief, so it’s your fault those people were killed and I’m having to answer questions about rusted rigging and corroded expansion joints and I don’t know what else!” said the Prime Minister furiously.

“My fault!” said Fudge, coloring up. “Are you saying you would have caved in to blackmail like that?”

“Maybe not,” said the Prime Minister, standing up and striding about the room, “but I would have put all my efforts into catching the blackmailer before he committed any such atrocity!”

“Do you really think I wasn’t already making every effort?” demanded Fudge heatedly. “Every Auror in the Ministry was — and is — trying to find him and round up his followers, but we happen to be talking about one of the most powerful wizards of all time, a wizard who has eluded capture for almost three decades!”

“So I suppose you’re going to tell me he caused the hurricane in the West Country too?” said the Prime Minister, his temper rising with every pace he took. It was infuriating to discover the reason

for all these terrible disasters and not to be able to tell the public, almost worse than it being the government's fault after all.

"That was no hurricane," said Fudge miserably.

"Excuse me!" barked the Prime Minister, now positively stamping up and down. "Trees uprooted, roofs ripped off, lampposts bent, horrible injuries —"

"It was the Death Eaters," said Fudge. "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's followers. And…and we suspect giant involvement."

The Prime Minister stopped in his tracks as though he had hit an invisible wall. "What involvement?"

Fudge grimaced. "He used giants last time, when he wanted to go for the grand effect," he said. "The Office of Misinformation has been working around the clock, we've had teams of Obliviators out trying to modify the memories of all the Muggles who saw what really happened, we've got most of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures running around Somerset, but we can't find the giant — it's been a disaster."

"You don't say!" said the Prime Minister furiously.

"I won't deny that morale is pretty low at the Ministry," said Fudge. "What with all that, and then losing Amelia Bones."

"Losing who?"

"Amelia Bones. Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. We think He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named may have murdered her in person, because she was a very gifted witch and — and all the evidence was that she put up a real fight."

Fudge cleared his throat and, with an effort, it seemed, stopped spinning his bowler hat.

"But that murder was in the newspapers," said the Prime Minister, momentarily diverted from his anger. "Our newspapers. Amelia Bones…it just said she was a middle-aged woman who lived alone. It was a — a nasty killing, wasn't it? It's had rather a lot of publicity. The police are baffled, you see."

Fudge sighed. "Well, of course they are," he said. "Killed in a room that was locked from the inside, wasn't she? We, on the other hand, know exactly who did it, not that that gets us any further toward catching him. And then there was Emmeline Vance, maybe you didn't hear about that one —"

“Oh yes I did!” said the Prime Minister. “It happened just around the corner from here, as a matter of fact. The papers had a field day with it, ‘breakdown of law and order in the Prime Minister’s backyard — ’”

“And as if all that wasn’t enough,” said Fudge, barely listening to the Prime Minister, “we’ve got dementors swarming all over the place, attacking people left, right, and center…”

Once upon a happier time this sentence would have been unintelligible to the Prime Minister, but he was wiser now.

“I thought dementors guard the prisoners in Azkaban,” he said cautiously.

“They did,” said Fudge wearily. “But not anymore. They’ve deserted the prison and joined He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. I won’t pretend that wasn’t a blow.”

“But,” said the Prime Minister, with a sense of dawning horror, “didn’t you tell me they’re the creatures that drain hope and happiness out of people?”

“That’s right. And they’re breeding. That’s what’s causing all this mist.”

The Prime Minister sank, weak-kneed, into the nearest chair. The idea of invisible creatures swooping through the towns and countryside, spreading despair and hopelessness in his voters, made him feel quite faint.

“Now see here, Fudge — you’ve got to do something! It’s your responsibility as Minister of Magic!”

“My dear Prime Minister, you can’t honestly think I’m still Minister of Magic after all this? I was sacked three days ago! The whole Wizarding community has been screaming for my resignation for a fortnight. I’ve never known them so united in my whole term of office!” said Fudge, with a brave attempt at a smile.

The Prime Minister was momentarily lost for words. Despite his indignation at the position into which he had been placed, he still rather felt for the shrunken-looking man sitting opposite him.

“I’m very sorry,” he said finally. “If there’s anything I can do?”

“It’s very kind of you, Prime Minister, but there is nothing. I was sent here tonight to bring you up to date on recent events and to introduce you to my successor. I rather thought he’d be here by now, but of course, he’s very busy at the moment, with so much going on.”

Fudge looked around at the portrait of the ugly little man wearing the long curly silver wig, who was digging in his ear with the point of a quill. Catching Fudge’s eye, the portrait said, “He’ll be here in a moment, he’s just finishing a letter to Dumbledore.”

"I wish him luck," said Fudge, sounding bitter for the first time. "I've been writing to Dumbledore twice a day for the past fortnight, but he won't budge. If he'd just been prepared to persuade the boy, I might still be…Well, maybe Scrimgeour will have more success."

Fudge subsided into what was clearly an aggrieved silence, but it was broken almost immediately by the portrait, which suddenly spoke in its crisp, official voice.

"To the Prime Minister of Muggles. Requesting a meeting. Urgent. Kindly respond immediately. Rufus Scrimgeour, Minister of Magic."

"Yes, yes, fine," said the Prime Minister distractedly, and he barely flinched as the flames in the grate turned emerald green again, rose up, and revealed a second spinning wizard in their heart, disgorging him moments later onto the antique rug.

Fudge got to his feet and, after a moment's hesitation, the Prime Minister did the same, watching the new arrival straighten up, dust down his long black robes, and look around.

The Prime Minister's first, foolish thought was that Rufus Scrimgeour looked rather like an old lion. There were streaks of gray in his mane of tawny hair and his bushy eyebrows; he had keen yellowish eyes behind a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles and a certain rangy, loping grace even though he walked with a slight limp. There was an immediate impression of shrewdness and toughness; the Prime Minister thought he understood why the Wizarding community preferred Scrimgeour to Fudge as a leader in these dangerous times.

"How do you do?" said the Prime Minister politely, holding out his hand.

Scrimgeour grasped it briefly, his eyes scanning the room, then pulled out a wand from under his robes.

"Fudge told you everything?" he asked, striding over to the door and tapping the keyhole with his wand. The Prime Minister heard the lock click.

"Er — yes," said the Prime Minister. "And if you don't mind, I'd rather that door remained unlocked."

"I'd rather not be interrupted," said Scrimgeour shortly, "or watched," he added, pointing his wand at the windows, so that the curtains swept across them. "Right, well, I'm a busy man, so let's get down to business. First of all, we need to discuss your security."

The Prime Minister drew himself up to his fullest height and replied, "I am perfectly happy with the security I've already got, thank you very —"

"Well, we're not," Scrimgeour cut in. "It'll be a poor lookout for the Muggles if their Prime Minister gets put under the Imperius Curse. The new secretary in your outer office —"

“I’m not getting rid of Kingsley Shacklebolt, if that’s what you’re suggesting!” said the Prime Minister hotly. “He’s highly efficient, gets through twice the work the rest of them —”

“That’s because he’s a wizard,” said Scrimgeour, without a flicker of a smile. “A highly trained Auror, who has been assigned to you for your protection.”

“Now, wait a moment!” declared the Prime Minister. “You can’t just put your people into my office, I decide who works for me —”

“I thought you were happy with Shacklebolt?” said Scrimgeour coldly.

“I am — that’s to say, I was —”

“Then there’s no problem, is there?” said Scrimgeour.

“I…well, as long as Shacklebolt’s work continues to be…er…excellent,” said the Prime Minister lamely, but Scrimgeour barely seemed to hear him.

“Now, about Herbert Chorley, your Junior Minister,” he continued. “The one who has been entertaining the public by impersonating a duck.”

“What about him?” asked the Prime Minister.

“He has clearly reacted to a poorly performed Imperius Curse,” said Scrimgeour. “It’s addled his brains, but he could still be dangerous.”

“He’s only quacking!” said the Prime Minister weakly. “Surely a bit of a rest…Maybe go easy on the drink…”

“A team of Healers from St. Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries are examining him as we speak. So far he has attempted to strangle three of them,” said Scrimgeour. “I think it best that we remove him from Muggle society for a while.”

“I…well…He’ll be all right, won’t he?” said the Prime Minister anxiously.

Scrimgeour merely shrugged, already moving back toward the fireplace.

“Well, that’s really all I had to say. I will keep you posted of developments, Prime Minister — or, at least, I shall probably be too busy to come personally, in which case I shall send Fudge here. He has consented to stay on in an advisory capacity.”

Fudge attempted to smile, but was unsuccessful; he merely looked as though he had a toothache. Scrimgeour was already rummaging in his pocket for the mysterious powder that turned the fire green. The Prime Minister gazed hopelessly at the pair of them for a moment, then the words he had fought to suppress all evening burst from him at last.

“But for heaven’s sake — you’re wizards! You can do magic! Surely you can sort out — well — anything!”

Scrimgeour turned slowly on the spot and exchanged an incredulous look with Fudge, who really did manage a smile this time as he said kindly, “The trouble is, the other side can do magic too, Prime Minister.”

And with that, the two wizards stepped one after the other into the bright green fire and vanished.

CHAPTER TWO

SPINNER'S END

Many miles away the chilly mist that had pressed against the Prime Minister's windows drifted over a dirty river that wound between overgrown, rubbish-strewn banks. An immense chimney, relic of a disused mill, reared up, shadowy and ominous. There was no sound apart from the whisper of the black water and no sign of life apart from a scrawny fox that had slunk down the bank to nose hopefully at some old fish-and-chip wrappings in the tall grass.

But then, with a very faint pop, a slim, hooded figure appeared out of thin air on the edge of the river. The fox froze, wary eyes fixed upon this strange new phenomenon. The figure seemed to take its bearings for a few moments, then set off with light, quick strides, its long cloak rustling over the grass.

With a second and louder pop, another hooded figure materialized.

"Wait!"

The harsh cry startled the fox, now crouching almost flat in the undergrowth. It leapt from its hiding place and up the bank. There was a flash of green light, a yelp, and the fox fell back to the ground, dead.

The second figure turned over the animal with its toe.

"Just a fox," said a woman's voice dismissively from under the hood. "I thought perhaps an Auror — Cissy, wait!"

But her quarry, who had paused and looked back at the flash of light, was already scrambling up the bank the fox had just fallen down.

"Cissy — Narcissa — listen to me —"

The second woman caught the first and seized her arm, but the other wrenched it away.

"Go back, Bella!"

"You must listen to me!"

"I've listened already. I've made my decision. Leave me alone!"

The woman named Narcissa gained the top of the bank, where a line of old railings separated the river from a narrow, cobbled street. The other woman, Bella, followed at once. Side by side they stood looking across the road at the rows and rows of dilapidated brick houses, their windows dull and blind in the darkness.

"He lives here?" asked Bella in a voice of contempt. "Here? In this Muggle dunghill? We must be the first of our kind ever to set foot —"

But Narcissa was not listening; she had slipped through a gap in the rusty railings and was already hurrying across the road.

"Cissy, wait!"

Bella followed, her cloak streaming behind, and saw Narcissa darting through an alley between the houses into a second, almost identical street. Some of the streetlamps were broken; the two women were running between patches of light and deep darkness. The pursuer caught up with her prey just as she turned another corner, this time succeeding in catching hold of her arm and swinging her around so that they faced each other.

"Cissy, you must not do this, you can't trust him —"

"The Dark Lord trusts him, doesn't he?"

"The Dark Lord is…I believe…mistaken," Bella panted, and her eyes gleamed momentarily under her hood as she looked around to check that they were indeed alone. "In any case, we were told not to speak of the plan to anyone. This is a betrayal of the Dark Lord's —"

"Let go, Bella!" snarled Narcissa, and she drew a wand from beneath her cloak, holding it threateningly in the other's face. Bella merely laughed.

"Cissy, your own sister? You wouldn't —"

"There is nothing I wouldn't do anymore!" Narcissa breathed, a note of hysteria in her voice, and as she brought down the wand like a knife, there was another flash of light. Bella let go of her sister's arm as though burned.

"Narcissa!"

But Narcissa had rushed ahead. Rubbing her hand, her pursuer followed again, keeping her distance now, as they moved deeper into the deserted labyrinth of brick houses. At last, Narcissa hurried up a street named Spinner's End, over which the towering mill chimney seemed to hover like a giant admonitory finger. Her footsteps echoed on the cobbles as she passed boarded and broken windows, until she reached the very last house, where a dim light glimmered through the curtains in a downstairs room.

She had knocked on the door before Bella, cursing under her breath, had caught up. Together they stood waiting, panting slightly, breathing in the smell of the dirty river that was carried to them on the night breeze. After a few seconds, they heard movement behind the door and it opened a crack. A sliver of a man could be seen looking out at them, a man with long black hair parted in curtains around a sallow face and black eyes.

Narcissa threw back her hood. She was so pale that she seemed to shine in the darkness; the long blonde hair streaming down her back gave her the look of a drowned person.

"Narcissa!" said the man, opening the door a little wider, so that the light fell upon her and her sister too. "What a pleasant surprise!

"Severus," she said in a strained whisper. "May I speak to you? It's urgent."

"But of course."

He stood back to allow her to pass him into the house. Her still-hooded sister followed without invitation.

"Snape," she said curtly as she passed him.

"Bellatrix," he replied, his thin mouth curling into a slightly mocking smile as he closed the door with a snap behind them.

They had stepped directly into a tiny sitting room, which had the feeling of a dark, padded cell. The walls were completely covered in books, most of them bound in old black or brown leather; a threadbare sofa, an old armchair, and a rickety table stood grouped together in a pool of dim light cast by a candle-filled lamp hung from the ceiling. The place had an air of neglect, as though it was not usually inhabited.

Snape gestured Narcissa to the sofa. She threw off her cloak, cast it aside, and sat down, staring at her white and trembling hands clasped in her lap. Bellatrix lowered her hood more slowly. Dark as her sister was fair, with heavily lidded eyes and a strong jaw, she did not take her gaze from Snape as she moved to stand behind Narcissa.

"So, what can I do for you?" Snape asked, settling himself in the armchair opposite the two sisters.

"We…we are alone, aren't we?" Narcissa asked quietly.

"Yes, of course. Well, Wormtail's here, but we're not counting vermin, are we?"

He pointed his wand at the wall of books behind him and with a bang, a hidden door flew open, revealing a narrow staircase upon which a small man stood frozen.

"As you have clearly realized, Wormtail, we have guests," said Snape lazily.

The man crept, hunchbacked, down the last few steps and moved into the room. He had small, watery eyes, a pointed nose, and wore an unpleasant simper. His left hand was caressing his right, which looked as though it was encased in a bright silver glove.

"Narcissa!" he said, in a squeaky voice. "And Bellatrix! How charming —"

“Wormtail will get us drinks, if you’d like them,” said Snape. “And then he will return to his bedroom.”

Wormtail winced as though Snape had thrown something at him.

“I am not your servant!” he squeaked, avoiding Snape’s eye.

“Really? I was under the impression that the Dark Lord placed you here to assist me.”

“To assist, yes — but not to make you drinks and — and clean your house!”

“I had no idea, Wormtail, that you were craving more dangerous assignments,” said Snape silkily. “This can be easily arranged: I shall speak to the Dark Lord —”

“I can speak to him myself if I want to!”

“Of course you can,” said Snape, sneering. “But in the meantime, bring us drinks. Some of the elf-made wine will do.”

Wormtail hesitated for a moment, looking as though he might argue, but then turned and headed through a second hidden door. They heard banging and a clinking of glasses. Within seconds he was back, bearing a dusty bottle and three glasses upon a tray. He dropped these on the rickety table and scurried from their presence, slamming the book-covered door behind him.

Snape poured out three glasses of bloodred wine and handed two of them to the sisters. Narcissa murmured a word of thanks, whilst Bellatrix said nothing, but continued to glower at Snape. This did not seem to discompose him; on the contrary, he looked rather amused.

“The Dark Lord,” he said, raising his glass and draining it.

The sisters copied him. Snape refilled their glasses. As Narcissa took her second drink she said in a rush, “Severus, I’m sorry to come here like this, but I had to see you. I think you are the only one who can help me —”

Snape held up a hand to stop her, then pointed his wand again at the concealed staircase door. There was a loud bang and a squeal, followed by the sound of Wormtail scurrying back up the stairs.

“My apologies,” said Snape. “He has lately taken to listening at doors, I don’t know what he means by it…You were saying, Narcissa?”

She took a great, shuddering breath and started again.

“Severus, I know I ought not to be here, I have been told to say nothing to anyone, but —”

“Then you ought to hold your tongue!” snarled Bellatrix. “Particularly in present company!”

“‘Present company’?” repeated Snape sardonically. “And what am I to understand by that, Bellatrix?”

“That I don’t trust you, Snape, as you very well know!”

Narcissa let out a noise that might have been a dry sob and covered her face with her hands. Snape set his glass down upon the table and sat back again, his hands upon the arms of his chair, smiling into Bellatrix's glowering face.

"Narcissa, I think we ought to hear what Bellatrix is bursting to say; it will save tedious interruptions. Well, continue, Bellatrix," said Snape. "Why is it that you do not trust me?"

"A hundred reasons!" she said loudly, striding out from behind the sofa to slam her glass upon the table. "Where to start! Where were you when the Dark Lord fell? Why did you never make any attempt to find him when he vanished? What have you been doing all these years that you've lived in Dumbledore's pocket? Why did you stop the Dark Lord procuring the Sorcerer's Stone? Why did you not return at once when the Dark Lord was reborn? Where were you a few weeks ago when we battled to retrieve the prophecy for the Dark Lord? And why, Snape, is Harry Potter still alive, when you have had him at your mercy for five years?"

She paused, her chest rising and falling rapidly, the color high in her cheeks. Behind her, Narcissa sat motionless, her face still hidden in her hands.

Snape smiled.

"Before I answer you — oh yes, Bellatrix, I am going to answer! You can carry my words back to the others who whisper behind my back, and carry false tales of my treachery to the Dark Lord! Before I answer you, I say, let me ask a question in turn. Do you really think that the Dark Lord has not asked me each and every one of those questions? And do you really think that, had I not been able to give satisfactory answers, I would be sitting here talking to you?"

She hesitated.

"I know he believes you, but…"

"You think he is mistaken? Or that I have somehow hoodwinked him? Fooled the Dark Lord, the greatest wizard, the most accomplished Legilimens the world has ever seen?"

Bellatrix said nothing, but looked, for the first time, a little discomfited. Snape did not press the point. He picked up his drink again, sipped it, and continued, "You ask where I was when the Dark Lord fell. I was where he had ordered me to be, at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, because he wished me to spy upon Albus Dumbledore. You know, I presume, that it was on the Dark Lord's orders that I took up the post?"

She nodded almost imperceptibly and then opened her mouth, but Snape forestalled her.

"You ask why I did not attempt to find him when he vanished. For the same reason that Avery, Yaxley, the Carrows, Greyback, Lucius"— he inclined his head slightly to Narcissa — "and many

others did not attempt to find him. I believed him finished. I am not proud of it, I was wrong, but there it is…If he had not forgiven we who lost faith at that time, he would have very few followers left."

"He'd have me!" said Bellatrix passionately. "I, who spent many years in Azkaban for him!"

"Yes, indeed, most admirable," said Snape in a bored voice. "Of I nurse, you weren't a lot of use to him in prison, but the gesture was undoubtedly fine —"

"Gesture!" she shrieked; in her fury she looked slightly mad. "While I endured the dementors, you remained at Hogwarts, comfortably playing Dumbledore's pet!"

"Not quite," said Snape calmly. "He wouldn't give me the Defense Against the Dark Arts job, you know. Seemed to think it might, ah, bring about a relapse…tempt me into my old ways."

"This was your sacrifice for the Dark Lord, not to teach your favorite subject?" she jeered. "Why did you stay there all that time, Snape? Still spying on Dumbledore for a master you believed dead?"

"Hardly," said Snape, "although the Dark Lord is pleased that I never deserted my post: I had sixteen years of information on Dumbledore to give him when he returned, a rather more useful welcome-back present than endless reminiscences of how unpleasant Azkaban is…"

"But you stayed —"

"Yes, Bellatrix, I stayed," said Snape, betraying a hint of impatience for the first time. "I had a comfortable job that I preferred to a stint in Azkaban. They were rounding up the Death Eaters, you know. Dumbledore's protection kept me out of jail; it was most convenient and I used it. I repeat: The Dark Lord does not complain that I stayed, so I do not see why you do.

"I think you next wanted to know," he pressed on, a little more loudly, for Bellatrix showed every sign of interrupting, "why I stood between the Dark Lord and the Sorcerer's Stone. That is easily answered. He did not know whether he could trust me. He thought, like you, that I had turned from faithful Death Eater to Dumbledore's stooge. He was in a pitiable condition, very weak, sharing the body of a mediocre wizard. He did not dare reveal himself to a former ally if that ally might turn him over to Dumbledore or the Ministry. I deeply regret that he did not trust me. He would have returned to power three years sooner. As it was, I saw only greedy and unworthy Quirrell attempting to steal the stone and, I admit, I did all I could to thwart him."

Bellatrix's mouth twisted as though she had taken an unpleasant dose of medicine.

"But you didn't return when he came back, you didn't fly back to him at once when you felt the Dark Mark burn —"

"Correct. I returned two hours later. I returned on Dumbledore's orders."

“On Dumbledore’s —?” she began, in tones of outrage.

“Think!” said Snape, impatient again. “Think! By waiting two hours, just two hours, I ensured that I could remain at Hogwarts as a spy! By allowing Dumbledore to think that I was only returning to the Dark Lord’s side because I was ordered to, I have been able to pass information on Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix ever since! Consider, Bellatrix: The Dark Mark had been growing stronger for months. I knew he must be about to return, all the Death Eaters knew! I had plenty of time to think about what I wanted to do, to plan my next move, to escape like Karkaroff, didn’t I?

“The Dark Lord’s initial displeasure at my lateness vanished entirely, I assure you, when I explained that I remained faithful, although Dumbledore thought I was his man. Yes, the Dark Lord thought that I had left him forever, but he was wrong.”

“But what use have you been?” sneered Bellatrix. “What useful information have we had from you?”

“My information has been conveyed directly to the Dark Lord,” said Snape. “If he chooses not to share it with you —”

“He shares everything with me!” said Bellatrix, firing up at once. “He calls me his most loyal, his most faithful —”

“Does he?” said Snape, his voice delicately inflected to suggest his disbelief. “Does he still, after the fiasco at the Ministry?”

“That was not my fault!” said Bellatrix, flushing. “The Dark Lord has, in the past, entrusted me with his most precious — if Lucius hadn’t —”

“Don’t you dare — don’t you dare blame my husband!” said Narcissa, in a low and deadly voice, looking up at her sister.

“There is no point apportioning blame,” said Snape smoothly. “What is done, is done.”

“But not by you!” said Bellatrix furiously. “No, you were once again absent while the rest of us ran dangers, were you not, Snape?”

“My orders were to remain behind,” said Snape. “Perhaps you disagree with the Dark Lord, perhaps you think that Dumbledore would not have noticed if I had joined forces with the Death Eaters to fight the Order of the Phoenix? And — forgive me — you speak of dangers…you were facing six teenagers, were you not?”

"They were joined, as you very well know, by half of the Order before long!" snarled Bellatrix. "And, while we are on the subject of the Order, you still claim you cannot reveal the whereabouts of their headquarters, don't you?"

"I am not the Secret-Keeper; I cannot speak the name of the place. You understand how the enchantment works, I think? The Dark Lord is satisfied with the information I have passed him on the Order. It led, as perhaps you have guessed, to the recent capture and murder of Emmeline Vance, and it certainly helped dispose of Sirius Black, though I give you full credit for finishing him off."

He inclined his head and toasted her. Her expression did not soften.

"You are avoiding my last question, Snape. Harry Potter. You could have killed him at any point in the past five years. You have not done it. Why?"

"Have you discussed this matter with the Dark Lord?" asked Snape.

"He…lately, we…I am asking you, Snape!"

"If I had murdered Harry Potter, the Dark Lord could not have used his blood to regenerate, making him invincible —"

"You claim you foresaw his use of the boy!" she jeered.

"I do not claim it; I had no idea of his plans; I have already confessed that I thought the Dark Lord dead. I am merely trying to explain why the Dark Lord is not sorry that Potter survived, at least until a year ago…"

"But why did you keep him alive?"

"Have you not understood me? It was only Dumbledore's protection that was keeping me out of Azkaban! Do you disagree that murdering his favorite student might have turned him against me? But there was more to it than that. I should remind you that when Potter first arrived at Hogwarts there were still many stories circulating about him, rumors that he himself was a great Dark wizard, which was how he had survived the Dark Lord's attack. Indeed, many of the Dark Lords old followers thought Potter might be a standard around which we could all rally once more. I was curious, I admit it, and not at all inclined to murder him the moment he set foot in the castle.

"Of course, it became apparent to me very quickly that he had no extraordinary talent at all. He has fought his way out of a number of tight corners by a simple combination of sheer luck and more talented friends. He is mediocre to the last degree, though as obnoxious and self-satisfied as was his father before him. I have done my utmost to have him thrown out of Hogwarts, where I believe he

scarcely belongs, but kill him, or allow him to be killed in front of me? I would have been a fool to risk it with Dumbledore close at hand."

"And through all this we are supposed to believe Dumbledore has never suspected you?" asked Bellatrix. "He has no idea of your true allegiance, he trusts you implicitly still?"

"I have played my part well," said Snape. "And you overlook Dumbledore's greatest weakness: He has to believe the best of people. I spun him a tale of deepest remorse when I joined his staff, fresh from my Death Eater days, and he embraced me with open arms — though, as I say, never allowing me nearer the Dark Arts than he could help. Dumbledore has been a great wizard — oh yes, he has," (for Bellatrix had made a scathing noise), "the Dark Lord acknowledges it. I am pleased to say, however, that Dumbledore is growing old. The duel with the Dark Lord last month shook him. He has since sustained a serious injury because his reactions are slower than they once were. But through all these years, he has never stopped trusting Severus Snape, and therein lies my great value to the Dark Lord."

Bellatrix still looked unhappy, though she appeared unsure how best to attack Snape next. Taking advantage of her silence, Snape turned to her sister.

"Now…you came to ask me for help, Narcissa?"

Narcissa looked up at him, her face eloquent with despair.

"Yes, Severus. I — I think you are the only one who can help me, I have nowhere else to turn. Lucius is in jail and…"

She closed her eyes and two large tears seeped from beneath her eyelids.

"The Dark Lord has forbidden me to speak of it," Narcissa continued, her eyes still closed. "He wishes none to know of the plan. It is…very secret. But —"

"If he has forbidden it, you ought not to speak," said Snape at once. "The Dark Lord's word is law."

Narcissa gasped as though he had doused her with cold water. Bellatrix looked satisfied for the first time since she had entered the house.

"There!" she said triumphantly to her sister. "Even Snape says so: You were told not to talk, so hold your silence!"

But Snape had gotten to his feet and strode to the small window, peered through the curtains at the deserted street, then closed them again with a jerk. He turned around to face Narcissa, frowning.

"It so happens that I know of the plan," he said in a low voice. "I am one of the few the Dark Lord has told. Nevertheless, had I not been in on the secret, Narcissa, you would have been guilty of great treachery to the Dark Lord."

"I thought you must know about it!" said Narcissa, breathing more freely. "He trusts you so, Severus…"

"You know about the plan?" said Bellatrix, her fleeting expression of satisfaction replaced by a look of outrage. "You know?"

"Certainly," said Snape. "But what help do you require, Narcissa? If you are imagining I can persuade the Dark Lord to change his mind, I am afraid there is no hope, none at all."

"Severus," she whispered, tears sliding down her pale cheeks. "My son…my only son…"

"Draco should be proud," said Bellatrix indifferently. "The Dark Lord is granting him a great honor. And I will say this for Draco: I can see he isn't shrinking away from his duty, he seems glad of a chance to prove himself, excited at the prospect —"

Narcissa began to cry in earnest, gazing beseechingly all the while at Snape.

"That's because he is sixteen and has no idea what lies in store! Why, Severus? Why my son? It is too dangerous! This is vengeance for Lucius's mistake, I know it!"

Snape said nothing. He looked away from the sight of her tears as though they were indecent, but he could not pretend not to hear her.

"That's why he's chosen Draco, isn't it?" she persisted. "To punish Lucius?"

"If Draco succeeds," said Snape, still looking away from her, "he will be honored above all others."

"But he won't succeed!" sobbed Narcissa. "How can he, when the Dark Lord himself —?"

Bellatrix gasped; Narcissa seemed to lose her nerve.

"I only meant…that nobody has yet succeeded…Severus…please…You are, you have always been, Draco's favorite teacher…You are Lucius's old friend…I beg you…You are the Dark Lord's favorite, his most trusted advisor…Will you speak to him, persuade him —?"

"The Dark Lord will not be persuaded, and I am not stupid enough to attempt it," said Snape flatly. "I cannot pretend that the Dark Lord is not angry with Lucius. Lucius was supposed to be in charge. He got himself captured, along with how many others, and failed to retrieve the prophecy into the bargain. Yes, the Dark Lord is angry, Narcissa, very angry indeed."

"Then I am right, he has chosen Draco in revenge!" choked Narcissa. "He does not mean him to succeed, he wants him to be killed trying!"

When Snape said nothing, Narcissa seemed to lose what little self-restraint she still possessed. Standing up, she staggered to Snape and seized the front of his robes. Her face close to his, her tears falling onto his chest, she gasped, "You could do it. You could do it instead of Draco, Severus. You would succeed, of course you would, and he would reward you beyond all of us -"

Snape caught hold of her wrists and removed her clutching hands. Looking down into her tearstained face, he said slowly, "He intends me to do it in the end, I think. But he is determined that Draco should try first. You see, in the unlikely event that Draco succeeds, I shall be able to remain at Hogwarts a little longer, fulfilling my useful role as spy."

"In other words, it doesn't matter to him if Draco is killed!"

"The Dark Lord is very angry," repeated Snape quietly. "He failed to hear the prophecy. You know as well as I do, Narcissa, that he does not forgive easily."

She crumpled, falling at his feet, sobbing and moaning on the floor.

"My only son…my only son…"

"You should be proud!" said Bellatrix ruthlessly. "If I had sons, I would be glad to give them up to the service of the Dark Lord!"

Narcissa gave a little scream of despair and clutched at her long blonde hair. Snape stooped, seized her by the arms, lifted her up, and steered her back onto the sofa. He then poured her more wine and forced the glass into her hand.

"Narcissa, that's enough. Drink this. Listen to me."

She quieted a little; slopping wine down herself, she took a shaky sip.

"It might be possible…for me to help Draco."

She sat up, her face paper-white, her eyes huge.

"Severus — oh, Severus — you would help him? Would you look after him, see he comes to no harm?"

"I can try."

She flung away her glass; it skidded across the table as she slid off the sofa into a kneeling position at Snape's feet, seized his hand in both of hers, and pressed her lips to it.

"If you are there to protect him…Severus, will you swear it? Will you make the Unbreakable Vow?"

"The Unbreakable Vow?"

Snape's expression was blank, unreadable. Bellatrix, however, let out a cackle of triumphant laughter.

“Aren’t you listening, Narcissa? Oh, he’ll try, I’m sure…The usual empty words, the usual slithering out of action…oh, on the Dark Lord’s orders, of course!”

Snape did not look at Bellatrix. His black eyes were fixed upon Narcissa’s tear-filled blue ones as she continued to clutch his hand.

“Certainly, Narcissa, I shall make the Unbreakable Vow,” he said quietly. “Perhaps your sister will consent to be our Bonder.”

Bellatrix’s mouth fell open. Snape lowered himself so that he was kneeling opposite Narcissa. Beneath Bellatrix’s astonished gaze, they grasped right hands.

“You will need your wand, Bellatrix,” said Snape coldly.

She drew it, still looking astonished.

“And you will need to move a little closer,” he said.

She stepped forward so that she stood over them, and placed the tip of her wand on their linked hands.

Narcissa spoke.

“Will you, Severus, watch over my son, Draco, as he attempts to fulfill the Dark Lord’s wishes?”

“I will,” said Snape.

A thin tongue of brilliant flame issued from the wand and wound its way around their hands like a red-hot wire.

“And will you, to the best of your ability, protect him from harm?”

“I will,” said Snape.

A second tongue of flame shot from the wand and interlinked with the first, making a fine, glowing chain.

“And, should it prove necessary…if it seems Draco will fail…” whispered Narcissa (Snape’s hand twitched within hers, but he did not draw away), “will you carry out the deed that the Dark Lord has ordered Draco to perform?”

There was a moment’s silence. Bellatrix watched, her wand upon their clasped hands, her eyes wide.

“I will,” said Snape.

Bellatrix’s astounded face glowed red in the blaze of a third unique flame, which shot from the wand, twisted with the others, and bound itself thickly around their clasped hands, like a fiery snake.

CHAPTER THREE

WILL AND WON'T

Harry Potter was snoring loudly. He had been sitting in a chair beside his bedroom window for the best part of four hours, staring out at the darkening street, and had finally fallen asleep with one side of his face pressed against the cold windowpane, his glasses askew and his mouth wide open. The misty fog his breath had left on the window sparkled in the orange glare of the streetlamp outside, and the artificial light drained his face of all color, so that he looked ghostly beneath his shock of untidy black hair.

The room was strewn with various possessions and a good smattering of rubbish. Owl feathers, apple cores, and sweet wrappers littered the floor, a number of spellbooks lay higgledy-piggledy among the tangled robes on his bed, and a mess of newspapers sat in a puddle of light on his desk. The headline of one blared:

HARRY POTTER: THE CHOSEN ONE?

Rumors continue to fly about the mysterious recent disturbance at the Ministry of Magic, during which He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was sighted once more.

"We're not allowed to talk about it, don't ask me anything" said one agitated Obliviator, who refused to give his name as he left the Ministry last night.

Nevertheless, highly placed sources within the Ministry have confirmed that the disturbance centered on the fabled Hall of Prophecy.

Though Ministry spokeswizards have hitherto refused even to confirm the existence of such a place, a growing number of the Wizarding community believe that the Death Eaters now serving sentences in Azkaban for trespass and attempted theft were attempting to steal a prophecy. The nature of that prophecy is unknown, although speculation is rife that it concerns Harry Potter, the only person ever known to have survived the Killing Curse, and who is also known to have been at the Ministry on the night in question. Some are going so far as to call Potter "the Chosen One," believing that the prophecy names him as the only one who will be able to rid us of He-Who-Must-No t-Be-Named.

The current whereabouts of the prophecy, if it exists, are unknown, although *{ctd. page2, column 5)*

A second newspaper lay beside die first. This one bore die headline:

SCRIMGEOUR SUCCEEDS FUDGE

Most of this front page was taken up with a large black-and-white picture of a man with a lionlike mane of thick hair and a rather ravaged face. The picture was moving — the man was waving at the ceiling.

Rufus Scrimgeour, previously Head of the Auror office in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, has succeeded Cornelius Fudge as Minister of Magic. The appointment has largely been greeted with enthusiasm by the Wizarding community, though rumors of a rift between the new Minister and Albus Dumbledore, newly reinstated Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, surfaced within hours of Scrimgeour taking office.

Scrimgeours representatives admitted that he had met with Dumbledore at once upon taking possession of the top job, but refused to comment on the topics under discussion. Albus Dumbledore is known to *(ctd. page 3, column 2)*

To the left of this paper sat another, which had been folded so that a story bearing the title ministry guarantees students' safety was visible.

Newly appointed Minister of Magic, Rufus Scrimgeour, spoke today of the tough new measures taken by his Ministry to ensure the safety of students returning to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry this autumn.

"For obvious reasons, the Ministry will not be going into detail about its stringent new security plans," said the Minister, although an insider confirmed that measures include defensive spells and charms, a complex array of countercurses, and a small task force of Aurors dedicated solely to the protection of Hogwarts School.

Most seem reassured by the new Minister's tough stand on student safety. Said Mrs. Augusta Longbottom, "My grandson, Neville — a good friend of Harry Potter's, incidentally, who fought the Death Eaters alongside him at the Ministry in June and —

But the rest of this story was obscured by the large birdcage, standing on top of it. Inside it was a magnificent snowy owl. Her amber eyes surveyed the room imperiously, her head swiveling occasionally to gaze at her snoring master. Once or twice she clicked her beak impatiently, but Harry was too deeply asleep to hear her.

A large trunk stood in the very middle of the room. Its lid was open; it looked expectant; yet it was almost empty but for a residue of old underwear, sweets, empty ink bottles, and broken quills that coated the very bottom. Nearby, on the floor, lay a purple leaflet emblazoned with the words:

— — ISSUED ON BEHALF OF — —

The Ministry of Magic

PROTECTING YOUR HOME AND FAMILY AGAINST DARK FORCES

The Wizarding community is currently under threat from an organization calling itself the Death Eaters. Observing the following simple security guidelines will help protect you, your family, and your home from attack.

1. You are advised not to leave the house alone.

2. Particular care should be taken during the hours of darkness. Wherever possible, arrange to complete journeys before night has fallen.

3. Review the security arrangements around your house, making sure that all family members are aware of emergency measures such as Shield and Disillusionment Charms, and, in the case of underage family members, Side-Along-Apparition.

4. Agree on security questions with close friends and family so as to detect Death Eaters masquerading as others by use of the Polyjuice Potion (see page 2).

5. Should you feel that a family member, colleague, friend, or neighbor is acting in a strange manner, contact the Magical Law Enforcement Squad at once. They may have been put under the Imperius Curse (see page 4).

6. Should the Dark Mark appear over any dwelling place or other building, DO NOT ENTER, but contact the Auror office immediately.

7. Unconfirmed sightings suggest that the Death Eaters may now be using Inferi (see page 10). Any sighting of an Inferius, or encounter with same, should be reported to the Ministry IMMEDIATELY.

Harry grunted in his sleep and his face slid down the window an inch or so, making his glasses still more lopsided, but he did not wake up. An alarm clock, repaired by Harry several years ago, ticked loudly on the sill, showing one minute to eleven. Beside it, held in place by Harry's relaxed hand, was a piece of parchment covered in thin, slanting writing. Harry had read this letter so often since its arrival three days ago that although it had been delivered in a tightly furled scroll, it now lay quite flat.

Dear Harry,

If it is convenient to you, I shall call at number four, Privet Drive this coming Friday at eleven p.m. to escort you to the Burrow, where you have been invited to spend the remainder of your school holidays.

If you are agreeable, I should also be glad of your assistance in a matter to which I hope to attend on the way to the Burrow. I shall explain this more fully when I see you.

Kindly send your answer by return of this owl. Hoping to see you this Friday,

I am yours most sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

Though he already knew it by heart, Harry had been stealing glances at this missive every few minutes since seven o'clock that evening, when he had first taken up his position beside his bedroom window, which had a reasonable view of both ends of Privet Drive. He knew it was pointless to keep

rereading Dumbledore's words; Harry had sent back his *"yes"* with the delivering owl, as requested, and all he could do now was wait: Either Dumbledore was going to come, or he was not.

But Harry had not packed. It just seemed too good to be true that he was going to be rescued from the Dursleys after a mere fortnight of their company. He could not shrug off the feeling that something was going to go wrong — his reply to Dumbledore's letter might have gone astray; Dumbledore could be prevented from collecting him; the letter might turn out not to be from Dumbledore at all, but a trick or joke or trap. Harry had not been able to face packing and then being let down and having to unpack again. The only gesture he had made to the possibility of a journey was to shut his snowy owl, Hedwig, safely in her cage.

The minute hand on the alarm clock reached the number twelve and, at that precise moment, the street-lamp outside the window went out.

Harry awoke as though the sudden darkness were an alarm. Hastily straightening his glasses and unsticking his cheek from the glass, he pressed his nose against the window instead and squinted down at the pavement. A tall figure in a long, billowing cloak was walking up the garden path.

Harry jumped up as though he had received an electric shock, knocked over his chair, and started snatching anything and everything within reach from the floor and throwing it into the trunk. Then as he lobbed a set of robes, two spellbooks, and a packet of clasps across the room, the doorbell rang. Downstairs in the living room his Uncle Vernon shouted, "Who the blazes is calling at this time of night?"

Harry froze with a brass telescope in one hand and a pair of trainers in the other. He had completely forgotten to warn the Dursleys that Dumbledore might be coming. Feeling both panicky mid close to laughter, he clambered over the trunk and wrenched open his bedroom door in time to hear a deep voice say, "Good evening. You must be Mr. Dursley. I daresay Harry has told you I would be coming for him?"

Harry ran down the stairs two at a time, coming to an abrupt halt several steps from the bottom, as long experience had taught him to remain out of arm's reach of his uncle whenever possible. There in the doorway stood a tall, thin man with waist-length silver hair and beard. Half-moon spectacles were perched on his crooked nose, and he was wearing a long black traveling cloak and a pointed hat. Vernon Dursley, whose mustache was quite as bushy as Dumbledore's, though black, and who was wearing a puce dressing gown, was staring at the visitor as though he could not believe his tiny eyes.

"Judging by your look of stunned disbelief, Harry did not warn you that I was coming," said Dumbledore pleasantly. "However, let us assume that you have invited me warmly into your house. It is unwise to linger overlong on doorsteps in these troubled times."

He stepped smartly over the threshold and closed the front door behind him.

"It is a long time since my last visit," said Dumbledore, peering down his crooked nose at Uncle Vernon. "I must say, your agapanthus are flourishing."

Vernon Dursley said nothing at all. Harry did not doubt that speech would return to him, and soon — the vein pulsing in his uncles temple was reaching danger point — but something about Dumbledore seemed to have robbed him temporarily of breath. It might have been the blatant wizardishness of his appearance, but it might, too, have been that even Uncle Vernon could sense that here was a man whom it would be very difficult to bully.

"Ah, good evening Harry," said Dumbledore, looking up at him through his half-moon glasses with a most satisfied expression. "Excellent, excellent."

These words seemed to rouse Uncle Vernon. It was clear that as far as he was concerned, any man who could look at Harry and say "excellent" was a man with whom he could never see eye to eye.

"I don't mean to be rude —" he began, in a tone that threatened rudeness in every syllable.

"— yet, sadly, accidental rudeness occurs alarmingly often," Dumbledore finished the sentence gravely. "Best to say nothing at all, my dear man. Ah, and this must be Petunia."

The kitchen door had opened, and there stood Harry's aunt, wearing rubber gloves and a housecoat over her nightdress, clearly halfway through her usual pre-bedtime wipe-down of all the kitchen surfaces. Her rather horsey face registered nothing but shock.

"Albus Dumbledore," said Dumbledore, when Uncle Vernon failed to effect an introduction. "We have corresponded, of course." Harry thought this an odd way of reminding Aunt Petunia that he had once sent her an exploding letter, but Aunt Petunia did not challenge the term. "And this must be your son, Dudley?"

Dudley had that moment peered round the living room door, his large, blond head rising out of the stripy collar of his pajamas looked oddly disembodied, his mouth gaping in astonishment and fear. Dumbledore waited a moment or two, apparently to see whether any of the Dursleys were going to say anything, but as the silence stretched on he smiled.

"Shall we assume that you have invited me into your sitting room?"

Dudley scrambled out of the way as Dumbledore passed him. Harry, still clutching the telescope and trainers, jumped the last few stairs and followed Dumbledore, who had settled himself in the armchair nearest the fire and was taking in the surroundings with an expression of benign interest. He looked quite extraordinarily out of place.

"Aren't — aren't we leaving, sir?" Harry asked anxiously.

"Yes, indeed we are, but there are a few matters we need to discuss first," said Dumbledore. "And I would prefer not to do so in the open. We shall trespass upon your aunt and uncle's hospitality only a little longer."

"You will, will you?"

Vernon Dursley had entered the room, Petunia at his shoulder, and Dudley skulking behind them both.

"Yes," said Dumbledore simply, "I shall."

He drew his wand so rapidly that Harry barely saw it; with a casual flick, the sofa zoomed forward and knocked the knees out from under all three of the Dursleys so that they collapsed upon it in a heap. Another flick of the wand and the sofa zoomed back to its original position.

"We may as well be comfortable," said Dumbledore pleasantly.

As he replaced his wand in his pocket, Harry saw that his hand was blackened and shriveled; it looked as though his flesh had been burned away.

"Sir — what happened to your —?"

"Later, Harry," said Dumbledore. "Please sit down."

Harry took the remaining armchair, choosing not to look at the Dursleys, who seemed stunned into silence.

"I would assume that you were going to offer me refreshment," Dumbledore said to Uncle Vernon, "but the evidence so far suggests that that would be optimistic to the point of foolishness."

A third twitch of the wand, and a dusty bottle and five glasses appeared in midair. The bottle tipped and poured a generous measure of honey-colored liquid into each of the glasses, which then floated to each person in the room.

"Madam Rosmertas finest oak-matured mead," said Dumbledore, raising his glass to Harry, who caught hold of his own and sipped. He had never tasted anything like it before, but enjoyed it immensely. The Dursleys, after quick, scared looks at one another, tried to ignore their glasses completely, a difficult feat, as they were nudging them gently on the sides of their heads. Harry could not suppress a suspicion that Dumbledore was rather enjoying himself.

“Well, Harry,” said Dumbledore, turning toward him, “a difficulty has arisen which I hope you will be able to solve for us. By us, I mean the Order of the Phoenix. But first of all I must tell you that Sirius’s will was discovered a week ago and that he left you everything he owned.”

Over on the sofa, Uncle Vernons head turned, but Harry did not look at him, nor could he think of anything to say except, “Oh. Right.”

“This is, in the main, fairly straightforward,” Dumbledore went on. “You add a reasonable amount of gold to your account at gringotts, and you inherit all of Sirius’s personal possessions. The slightly problematic part of the legacy —”

“His godfather’s dead?” said Uncle Vernon loudly from the sofa. Dumbledore and Harry both turned to look at him. The glass of mead was now knocking quite insistently on the side of Vernons head; he attempted to beat it away. “He’s dead? His godfather?”

“Yes,” said Dumbledore. He did not ask Harry why he had not confided in the Dursleys. “Our problem,” he continued to Harry, as if there had been no interruption, “is that Sirius also left you number twelve, Grimmauld Place.”

“He’s been left a house?” said Uncle Vernon greedily, his small eyes narrowing, but nobody answered him.

“You can keep using it as headquarters,” said Harry. “I don’t care. You can have it, I don’t really want it.” Harry never wanted to set foot in number twelve, Grimmauld Place again if he could help it. He thought he would be haunted forever by the memory of Sirius prowling its dark musty rooms alone, imprisoned within the place he had wanted so desperately to leave.

“That is generous,” said Dumbledore. “We have, however, vacated the building temporarily.”

“Why?”

“Well,” said Dumbledore, ignoring the mutterings of Uncle Vernon, who was now being rapped smartly over the head by the persistent glass of mead, “Black family tradition decreed that the house was handed down the direct line, to the next male with the name of ‘Black.’ Sirius was the very last of the line as his younger brother, Regulus, predeceased him and both were childless. While his will makes it perfectly plain that he wants you to have the house, it is nevertheless possible that some spell or enchantment has been set upon the place to ensure that it cannot be owned by anyone other than a pureblood.”

A vivid image of the shrieking, spitting portrait of Sirius’s mother that hung in the hall of number twelve, Grimmauld Place flashed into Harry’s mind. “I bet there has,” he said.

"Quite," said Dumbledore. "And if such an enchantment exists, then the ownership of the house is most likely to pass to the eldest of Sirius's living relatives, which would mean his cousin, Bellatrix Lestrange."

Without realizing what he was doing, Harry sprang to his feet; the telescope and trainers in his lap rolled across the floor. Bellatrix Lestrange, Sirius's killer, inherit his house?

"No," he said.

"Well, obviously we would prefer that she didn't get it either," said Dumbledore calmly. "The situation is fraught with complications. We do not know whether the enchantments we ourselves have placed upon it, for example, making it Unplottable, will hold now that ownership has passed from Sirius's hands. It might be that Bellatrix will arrive on the doorstep at any moment. Naturally we had to move out until such time as we have clarified the position."

"But how are you going to find out if I'm allowed to own it?"

"Fortunately," said Dumbledore, "there is a simple test."

He placed his empty glass on a small table beside his chair, but before he could do anything else, Uncle Vernon shouted, "Will you get these ruddy things off us?"

Harry looked around; all three of the Dursleys were cowering with their arms over their heads as their glasses bounced up and down on their skulls, their contents flying everywhere.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," said Dumbledore politely, and he raised his wand again. All three glasses vanished. "But it would have been better manners to drink it, you know."

It looked as though Uncle Vernon was bursting with any number of unpleasant retorts, but he merely shrank back into the cushions with Aunt Petunia and Dudley and said nothing, keeping his small piggy eyes on Dumbledore's wand.

"You see," Dumbledore said, turning back to Harry and again speaking as though Uncle Vernon had not uttered, "if you have indeed inherited the house, you have also inherited —"

He flicked his wand for a fifth time. There was a loud crack, and a house-elf appeared, with a snout for a nose, giant bat's ears, and enormous bloodshot eyes, crouching on the Dursleys' shag carpet and covered in grimy rags. Aunt Petunia let out a hair-raising shriek; nothing this filthy had entered her house in living memory. Dudley drew his large, bare, pink feet off the floor and sat with them raised almost above his head, as though he thought the creature might run up his pajama trousers, and Uncle Vernon bellowed,

"What the hell is that?"

"Kreacher," finished Dumbledore.

“Kreacher won’t, Kreacher won’t, Kreacher won’t!” croaked the house-elf, quite as loudly as Uncle Vernon, stamping his long, gnarled feet and pulling his ears. “Kreacher belongs to Miss Bellatrix, oh yes, Kreacher belongs to the Blacks, Kreacher wants his new mistress, Kreacher won’t go to the Potter brat, Kreacher won’t, won’t, won’t —”

“As you can see, Harry,” said Dumbledore loudly, over Kreacher’s continued croaks of “wont, won’t, won’t,” “Kreacher is showing a certain reluctance to pass into your ownership.”

“I don’t care,” said Harry again, looking with disgust at the writhing, stamping house-elf. “I don’t want him.”

“Won’t, won’t, won’t, won’t —”

“You would prefer him to pass into the ownership of Bellatrix Lestrange? Bearing in mind that he has lived at the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix for the past year?”

“Won’t, won’t, won’t, won’t —”

Harry stared at Dumbledore. He knew that Kreacher could not be permitted to go and live with Bellatrix Lestrange, but the idea of owning him, of having responsibility for the creature that had betrayed Sirius, was repugnant.

“Give him an order,” said Dumbledore. “If he has passed into your ownership, he will have to obey. If not, then we shall have to think of some other means of keeping him from his rightful mistress.”

“Won’t, won’t, won’t, WON’T!”

Kreacher’s voice had risen to a scream. Harry could think of nothing to say, except, “Kreacher, shut up!”

It looked for a moment as though Kreacher was going to choke. He grabbed his throat, his mouth still working furiously, his eyes bulging. After a few seconds of frantic gulping, he threw himself face forward onto the carpet (Aunt Petunia whimpered) and beat the floor with his hands and feet, giving himself over to a violent, but entirely silent, tantrum.

“Well, that simplifies matters,” said Dumbledore cheerfully. “It means that Sirius knew what he was doing. You are the rightful owner of number twelve, Grimmauld Place and of Kreacher.”

“Do I — do I have to keep him with me?” Harry asked, aghast, us Kreacher thrashed around at his feet.

“Not if you don’t want to,” said Dumbledore. “If I might make a suggestion, you could send him to Hogwarts to work in the kitchen there. In that way, the other house-elves could keep an eye on him.”

“Yeah,” said Harry in relief, “yeah, I’ll do that. Er — Kreacher — I want you to go to Hogwarts and work in the kitchens there with the other house-elves.”

Kreacher, who was now lying flat on his back with his arms and legs in the air, gave Harry one upside-down look of deepest loathing and, with another loud crack, vanished.

“Good,” said Dumbledore. “There is also the matter of the hippogriff, Buckbeak. Hagrid has been looking after him since Sirius died, but Buckbeak is yours now, so if you would prefer to make different arrangements —”

“No,” said Harry at once, “he can stay with Hagrid. I think Buckbeak would prefer that.”

“Hagrid will be delighted,” said Dumbledore, smiling. “He was thrilled to see Buckbeak again. Incidentally, we have decided, in the interests of Buckbeak’s safety, to rechristen him ‘Witherwings’ for the time being, though I doubt that the Ministry would ever guess he is the hippogriff they once sentenced to death. Now, Harry, is your trunk packed?”

“Erm…”

“Doubtful that I would turn up?” Dumbledore suggested shrewdly.

“I’ll just go and — er — finish off,” said Harry hastily, hurrying to pick up his fallen telescope and trainers.

It took him a little over ten minutes to track down everything he needed; at last he had managed to extract his Invisibility Cloak from under the bed, screwed the top back on his jar of color-change ink, and forced the lid of his trunk shut on his cauldron. Then, heaving his trunk in one hand and holding Hedwig’s cage in the other, he made his way back downstairs,

He was disappointed to discover that Dumbledore was not waiting in the hall, which meant that he had to return to the living room.

Nobody was talking. Dumbledore was humming quietly, apparently quite at his ease, but the atmosphere was thicker than cold custard, and Harry did not dare look at the Dursleys as he said, “Professor — I’m ready now.”

“Good,” said Dumbledore. “Just one last thing, then.” And he turned to speak to the Dursleys once more.

“As you will no doubt be aware, Harry comes of age in a year’s time —”

“No,” said Aunt Petunia, speaking for the first time since Dumbledore’s arrival.

“I’m sorry?” said Dumbledore politely.

“No, he doesn’t. He’s a month younger than Dudley, and Dudders doesn’t turn eighteen until the year after next.”

“Ah,” said Dumbledore pleasantly, “but in the Wizarding world, we come of age at seventeen.”

Uncle Vernon muttered, “Preposterous,” but Dumbledore ignored him,

“Now, as you already know, the wizard called Lord Voldemort has returned to this country. The Wizarding community is currently in a state of open warfare. Harry, whom Lord Voldemort has already attempted to kill on a number of occasions, is in even greater danger now than the day when I left him upon your doorstep fifteen years ago, with a letter explaining about his parents’ murder and expressing the hope that you would care for him as though he were your own.”

Dumbledore paused, and although his voice remained light and calm, and he gave no obvious sign of anger, Harry felt a kind of chill emanating from him and noticed that the Dursleys drew very slightly closer together.

“You did not do as I asked. You have never treated Harry as a son. He has known nothing but neglect and often cruelty at your hands. The best that can be said is that he has at least escaped the appalling damage you have inflicted upon the unfortunate boy sitting between you.”

Both Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon looked around instinctively, as though expecting to see someone other than Dudley squeezed between them.

“Us — mistreat Dudders? What d’you —?” began Uncle Vernon furiously, but Dumbledore raised his finger for silence, a silence which fell as though he had struck Uncle Vernon dumb.

“The magic I evoked fifteen years ago means that Harry has powerful protection while he can still call this house ‘home.’ However miserable he has been here, however unwelcome, however badly treated, you have at least, grudgingly, allowed him houseroom. This magic will cease to operate the moment that Harry turns seventeen; in other words, at the moment he becomes a man. I ask only this: that you allow Harry to return, once more, to this house, before his seventeenth birthday, which will ensure that the protection continues until that time.”

None of the Dursleys said anything. Dudley was frowning slightly, as though he was still trying to work out when he had ever been mistreated.

Uncle Vernon looked as though he had something stuck in his throat; Aunt Petunia, however, was oddly flushed.

“Well, Harry…time for us to be off,” said Dumbledore at last, standing up and straightening his long black cloak. “Until we meet again,” he said to the Dursleys, who looked as though that moment could wait forever as far as they were concerned, and after doffing his hat, he swept from the room.

“Bye,” said Harry hastily to the Dursleys, and followed Dumbledore, who paused beside Harry’s trunk, upon which Hedwig’s cage was perched.

“We do not want to be encumbered by these just now,” he said, pulling out his wand again. “I shall send them to the Burrow to await us there. However, I would like you to bring your Invisibility Cloak…just in case.”

Harry extracted his cloak from his trunk with some difficulty, trying not to show Dumbledore the mess within. When he had stuffed it into an inside pocket of his jacket, Dumbledore waved his wand and the trunk, cage, and Hedwig vanished. Dumbledore then waved his wand again, and the front door opened onto cool, misty darkness.

“And now, Harry, let us step out into the night and pursue that flighty temptress, adventure.”

CHAPTER FOUR

HORACE SLUGHORN

Despite the fact that he had spent every waking moment of the past few days hoping desperately that Dumbledore would indeed come to fetch him, Harry felt distinctly awkward as they set off down Privet Drive together. He had never had a proper conversation with the headmaster outside of Hogwarts before; there was usually a desk between them. The memory of their last face-to-face encounter kept intruding too, and it rather heightened Harry's sense of embarrassment; he had shouted a lot on that occasion, not to mention done his best to smash several of Dumbledore's most prized possessions.

Dumbledore, however, seemed completely relaxed.

"Keep your wand at the ready, Harry," he said brightly.

"But I thought I'm not allowed to use magic outside school, sir?"

"If there is an attack," said Dumbledore, "I give you permission to use any counterjinx or curse that might occur to you. However, I do not think you need worry about being attacked tonight."

"Why not, sir?"

"You are with me," said Dumbledore simply. "This will do, Harry."

He came to an abrupt halt at the end of Privet Drive.

"You have not, of course, passed your Apparition Test," he said.

"No," said Harry. "I thought you had to be seventeen?"

"You do," said Dumbledore. "So you will need to hold on to my arm very tightly. My left, if you don't mind — as you have noticed, my wand arm is a little fragile at the moment."

Harry gripped Dumbledore's proffered forearm.

"Very good," said Dumbledore. "Well, here we go."

Harry felt Dumbledore's arm twist away from him and redoubled his grip; the next thing he knew, everything went black; he was being pressed very hard from all directions; he could not breathe, there were iron bands tightening around his chest; his eyeballs were being forced back into his head; his eardrums were being pushed deeper into his skull and then —

He gulped great lungfulls of cold night air and opened his streaming eyes. He felt as though he had just been forced through a very tight rubber tube. It was a few seconds before he realized that Privet Drive had vanished. He and Dumbledore were now standing in what appeared to be a deserted village square, in the center of which stood an old war memorial and a few benches. His comprehension catching up with his senses, Harry realized that he had just Apparated for the first time in his life.

"Are you all right?" asked Dumbledore, looking down at him solicitously. "The sensation does take some getting used to."

"I'm fine," said Harry, rubbing his ears, which felt as though they had left Privet Drive rather reluctantly. "But I think I might prefer brooms…"

Dumbledore smiled, drew his traveling cloak a little more lightly around his neck, and said, "This way."

He set off at a brisk pace, past an empty inn and a few houses. According to a clock on a nearby church, it was almost midnight.

"So tell me, Harry," said Dumbledore. "Your scar…has it been hurting at all?"

Harry raised a hand unconsciously to his forehead and rubbed the lightning-shaped mark.

"No," he said, "and I've been wondering about that. I thought it would be burning all the time now Voldemort's getting so powerful again."

He glanced up at Dumbledore and saw that he was wearing a satisfied expression.

"I, on the other hand, thought otherwise," said Dumbledore. "Lord Voldemort has finally realized the dangerous access to his thoughts and feelings you have been enjoying. It appears that he is now employing Occlumency against you."

"Well, I'm not complaining," said Harry, who missed neither the disturbing dreams nor the startling flashes of insight into Voldemort's mind.

They turned a corner, passing a telephone box and a bus shelter. Harry looked sideways at Dumbledore again. "Professor?"

"Harry?"

"Er — where exactly are we?"

"This, Harry, is the charming village of Budleigh Babberton."

"And what are we doing here?"

"Ah yes, of course, I haven't told you," said Dumbledore. "Well, I have lost count of the number of times I have said this in recent years, but we are, once again, one member of staff short. We are here to persuade an old colleague of mine to come out of retirement and return to Hogwarts."

"How can I help with that, sir?"

"Oh, I think we'll find a use for you," said Dumbledore vaguely. "Left here, Harry."

They proceeded up a steep, narrow street lined with houses. All the windows were dark. The odd chill that had lain over Privet Drive for two weeks persisted here too. Thinking of dementors, Harry cast a look over his shoulder and grasped his wand reassuringly in his pocket.

“Professor, why couldn’t we just Apparate directly into your old colleague’s house?”

“Because it would be quite as rude as kicking down the front door,” said Dumbledore. “Courtesy dictates that we offer fellow wizards the opportunity of denying us entry. In any case, most Wizarding dwellings are magically protected from unwanted Apparators. At Hogwarts, for instance —”

“— you can’t Apparate anywhere inside the buildings or grounds,” said Harry quickly. “Hermione Granger told me.”

“And she is quite right. We turn left again.”

The church clock chimed midnight behind them. Harry wondered why Dumbledore did not consider it rude to call on his old colleague so late, but now that conversation had been established, he had more pressing questions to ask.

“Sir, I saw in the *Daily Prophet* that Fudge has been sacked…”

“Correct,” said Dumbledore, now turning up a steep side street. “He has been replaced, as I am sure you also saw, by Rufus Scrimgeour, who used to be Head of the Auror office.”

“Is he…Do you think he’s good?” asked Harry.

“An interesting question,” said Dumbledore. “He is able, certainly. A more decisive and forceful personality than Cornelius.”

“Yes, but I meant —”

“I know what you meant. Rufus is a man of action and, having fought Dark wizards for most of his working life, does not underestimate Lord Voldemort.”

Harry waited, but Dumbledore did not say anything about the disagreement with Scrimgeour that the *Daily Prophet* had reported, and he did not have the nerve to pursue the subject, so he changed it. “And…sir…I saw about Madam Bones.”

“Yes,” said Dumbledore quietly. “A terrible loss. She was a great witch. Just up here, I think — ouch.”

He had pointed with his injured hand.

“Professor, what happened to your…?”

“I have no time to explain now,” said Dumbledore. “It is a thrilling tale, I wish to do it justice.”

He smiled at Harry, who understood that he was not being snubbed, and that he had permission to keep asking questions.

“Sir — I got a Ministry of Magic leaflet by owl, about security measures we should all take against the Death Eaters…”

"Yes, I received one myself," said Dumbledore, still smiling. "Did you find it useful?"

"Not really."

"No, I thought not. You have not asked me, for instance, what is my favorite flavor of jam, to check that I am indeed Professor Dumbledore and not an impostor."

"I didn't…" Harry began, not entirely sure whether he was being reprimanded or not.

"For future reference, Harry, it is raspberry…although of course, if I were a Death Eater, I would have been sure to research my own jam preferences before impersonating myself."

"Er…right," said Harry. "Well, on that leaflet, it said something about Inferi. What exactly are they? The leaflet wasn't very clear."

"They are corpses," said Dumbledore calmly. "Dead bodies that have been bewitched to do a Dark wizard's bidding. Inferi have not been seen for a long time, however, not since Voldemort was last powerful…He killed enough people to make an army of them, of course. This is the place, Harry, just here…"

They were nearing a small, neat stone house set in its own garden. Harry was too busy digesting the horrible idea of Inferi to have much attention left for anything else, but as they reached the front gate, Dumbledore stopped dead and Harry walked into him.

"Oh dear. Oh dear, dear, dear."

Harry followed his gaze up the carefully tended front path and felt his heart sink. The front door was hanging off its hinges.

Dumbledore glanced up and down the street. It seemed quite deserted.

"Wand out and follow me, Harry," he said quietly.

He opened the gate and walked swiftly and silently up the garden path, Harry at his heels, then pushed the front door very slowly, his wand raised and at the ready.

"*Lumos*."

Dumbledore's wand tip ignited, casting its light up a narrow hallway. To the left, another door stood open. Holding his illuminated wand aloft, Dumbledore walked into the sitting room with Harry right behind him.

A scene of total devastation met their eyes. A grandfather clock lay splintered at their feet, its face cracked, its pendulum lying a little farther away like a dropped sword. A piano was on its side, its keys strewn across the floor. The wreckage of a fallen chandelier flittered nearby. Cushions lay deflated, feathers oozing from slashes in their sides; fragments of glass and china lay like powder over everything. Dumbledore raised his wand even higher, so that its light was thrown upon the walls,

where something darkly red and glutinous was spattered over the wallpaper. Harry's small intake of breath made Dumbledore look around.

"Not pretty, is it?" he said heavily. "Yes, something horrible has happened here."

Dumbledore moved carefully into the middle of the room, scrutinizing the wreckage at his feet. Harry followed, gazing around, half-scared of what he might see hidden behind the wreck of the piano or the overturned sofa, but there was no sign of a body.

"Maybe there was a fight and — and they dragged him off, Professor?" Harry suggested, trying not to imagine how badly wounded a man would have to be to leave those stains spattered halfway up the walls.

"I don't think so," said Dumbledore quietly, peering behind an overstuffed armchair lying on its side.

"You mean he's —?"

"Still here somewhere? Yes."

And without warning, Dumbledore swooped, plunging the tip of his wand into the seat of the overstuffed armchair, which yelled, "Ouch!"

"Good evening, Horace," said Dumbledore, straightening up again.

Harry's jaw dropped. Where a split second before there had been an armchair, there now crouched an enormously fat, bald, old man who was massaging his lower belly and squinting up at Dumbledore with an aggrieved and watery eye.

"There was no need to stick the wand in that hard," he said gruffly, clambering to his feet. "It hurt."

The wandlight sparkled on his shiny pate, his prominent eyes, his enormous, silver, walruslike mustache, and the highly polished buttons on the maroon velvet jacket he was wearing over a pair of lilac silk pajamas. The top of his head barely reached Dumbledore's chin.

"What gave it away?" he grunted as he staggered to his feet, still rubbing his lower belly. He seemed remarkably unabashed for a man who had just been discovered pretending to be an armchair.

"My dear Horace," said Dumbledore, looking amused, "if the Death Eaters really had come to call, the Dark Mark would have been set over the house."

The wizard clapped a pudgy hand to his vast forehead.

"The Dark Mark," he muttered. "Knew there was something…ah well. Wouldn't have had time anyway, I'd only just put the finishing touches to my upholstery when you entered the room."

He heaved a great sigh that made the ends of his mustache flutter.

“Would you like my assistance clearing up?” asked Dumbledore politely.

“Please,” said the other.

They stood back to back, the tall thin wizard and the short round one, and waved their wands in one identical sweeping motion.

The furniture flew back to its original places; ornaments re-formed in midair, feathers zoomed into their cushions; torn books repaired themselves as they landed upon their shelves; oil lanterns soared onto side tables and reignited; a vast collection of splintered silver picture frames flew glittering across the room and alighted, whole and untarnished, upon a desk; rips, cracks, and holes healed everywhere, and the walls wiped themselves clean.

“What kind of blood was that, incidentally?” asked Dumbledore loudly over the chiming of the newly unsmashed grandfather flock.

“On the walls? Dragon,” shouted the wizard called Horace, as, with a deafening grinding and tinkling, the chandelier screwed itself back into the ceiling.

There was a final plunk from the piano, and silence.

“Yes, dragon,” repeated the wizard conversationally. “My last bottle, and prices are sky-high at the moment. Still, it might be reusable.”

He stumped over to a small crystal bottle standing on top of a sideboard and held it up to the light, examining the thick liquid within.

“Hmm. Bit dusty.”

He set the bottle back on the sideboard and sighed. It was then that his gaze fell upon Harry.

“Oho,” he said, his large round eyes flying to Harry’s forehead and the lightning-shaped scar it bore. “Oho!”

“This,” said Dumbledore, moving forward to make the introduction, “is Harry Potter. Harry, this is an old Friend and colleague of mine, Horace Slughorn.”

Slughorn turned on Dumbledore, his expression shrewd. “So that’s how you thought you’d persuade me, is it? Well, the answer’s no, Albus.”

He pushed past Harry, his face turned resolutely away with the air of a man trying to resist temptation.

“I suppose we can have a drink, at least?” asked Dumbledore. “For old time’s sake?”

Slughorn hesitated.

“All right then, one drink,” he said ungraciously.

Dumbledore smiled at Harry and directed him toward a chair not unlike the one that Slughorn had so recently impersonated, which stood right beside the newly burning fire and a brightly glowing oil lamp. Harry took the seat with the distinct impression that Dumbledore, for some reason, wanted to keep him as visible as possible. Certainly when Slughorn, who had been busy with decanters and glasses, turned to face the room again, his eyes fell immediately upon Harry.

"Hmpf," he said, looking away quickly as though frightened of hurting his eyes. "Here —" He gave a drink to Dumbledore, who had sat down without invitation, thrust the tray at Harry, and then sank into the cushions of the repaired sofa and a disgruntled silence. His legs were so short they did not touch the floor.

"Well, how have you been keeping, Horace?" Dumbledore asked.

"Not so well," said Slughorn at once. "Weak chest. Wheezy. Rheumatism too. Can't move like I used to. Well, that's to be expected. Old age. Fatigue."

"And yet you must have moved fairly quickly to prepare such a welcome for us at such short notice," said Dumbledore. "You can't have had more than three minutes' warning?"

Slughorn said, half irritably, half proudly, "Two. Didn't hear my Intruder Charm go off, I was taking a bath. Still," he added sternly, seeming to pull himself back together again, "the fact remains that I'm an old man, Albus. A tired old man who's earned the right to a quiet life and a few creature comforts."

He certainly had those, thought Harry, looking around the room. It was stuffy and cluttered, yet nobody could say it was uncomfortable; there were soft chairs and footstools, drinks and books, boxes of chocolates and plump cushions. If Harry had not known who lived there, he would have guessed at a rich, fussy old lady.

"You're not yet as old as I am, Horace," said Dumbledore.

"Well, maybe you ought to think about retirement yourself," said Slughorn bluntly. His pale gooseberry eyes had found Dumbledore's injured hand. "Reactions not what they were, I see."

"You're quite right," said Dumbledore serenely, shaking back his sleeve to reveal the tips of those burned and blackened ringers; the sight of them made the back of Harry's neck prickle unpleasantly. "I am undoubtedly slower than I was. But on the other hand…"

He shrugged and spread his hands wide, as though to say that age had its compensations, and Harry noticed a ring on his uninjured hand that he had never seen Dumbledore wear before: It was large, rather clumsily made of what looked like gold, and was set with a heavy black stone that had

cracked down the middle. Slughorn's eyes lingered for a moment on the ring too, and Harry saw a tiny frown momentarily crease his wide forehead.

"So, all these precautions against intruders, Horace…are they for the Death Eaters' benefit, or mine?" asked Dumbledore.

"What would the Death Eaters want with a poor broken-down old buffer like me?" demanded Slughorn.

"I imagine that they would want you to turn your considerable talents to coercion, torture, and murder," said Dumbledore. "Are you really telling me that they haven't come recruiting yet?"

Slughorn eyed Dumbledore balefully for a moment, then muttered, "I haven't given them the chance. I've been on the move for a year. Never stay in one place more than a week. Move from Muggle house to Muggle house — the owners of this place are on holiday in the Canary Islands — it's been very pleasant, I'll be sorry to leave. It's quite easy once you know how, one simple Freezing Charm on these absurd burglar alarms they use instead of Sneako-scopes and make sure the neighbors don't spot you bringing in the piano."

"Ingenious," said Dumbledore. "But it sounds a rather tiring existence for a broken-down old buffer in search of a quiet life. Now, if you were to return to Hogwarts —"

"If you're going to tell me my life would be more peaceful at that pestilential school, you can save your breath, Albus! I might have been in hiding, but some funny rumors have reached me since Dolores Umbridge left! If that's how you treat teachers these days —"

"Professor Umbridge ran afoul of our centaur herd," said Dumbledore. "I think you, Horace, would have known better than to stride into the forest and call a horde of angry centaurs 'filthy half-breeds.'"

"That's what she did, did she?" said Slughorn. "Idiotic woman. Never liked her."

Harry chuckled and both Dumbledore and Slughorn looked round at him.

"Sorry," Harry said hastily. "It's just — I didn't like her either."

Dumbledore stood up rather suddenly.

"Are you leaving?" asked Slughorn at once, looking hopeful.

"No, I was wondering whether I might use your bathroom," said Dumbledore.

"Oh," said Slughorn, clearly disappointed. "Second on the left down the hall."

Dumbledore strode from the room. Once the door had closed behind him, there was silence. After a few moments, Slughorn got to his feet but seemed uncertain what to do with himself. He

shot a furtive look at Harry, then crossed to the fire and turned his back on it, warming his wide behind.

"Don't think I don't know why he's brought you," he said abruptly.

Harry merely looked at Slughorn. Slughorn's watery eyes slid over Harry's scar, this time taking in the rest of his face.

"You look very like your father."

"Yeah, I've been told," said Harry.

"Except for your eyes. You've got —"

"My mother's eyes, yeah." Harry had heard it so often he found it a bit wearing.

"Hmpf. Yes, well. You shouldn't have favorites as a teacher, of course, but she was one of mine. Your mother," Slughorn added, in answer to Harry's questioning look. "Lily Evans. One of the brightest I ever taught. Vivacious, you know. Charming girl. I used to tell her she ought to have been in my House. Very cheeky answers I used to get back too."

"Which was your House?"

"I was Head of Slytherin," said Slughorn. "Oh, now," he went on quickly, seeing the expression on Harry's face and wagging a stubby ringer at him, "don't go holding that against me! You'll be Gryffindor like her, I suppose? Yes, it usually goes in families. Not always, though. Ever heard of Sirius Black? You must have done — been in the papers for the last couple of years — died a few weeks ago —"

It was as though an invisible hand had twisted Harry's intestines and held them tight.

"Well, anyway, he was a big pal of your father's at school. The whole Black family had been in my House, but Sirius ended up in Gryffindor! Shame — he was a talented boy. I got his brother, Regulus, when he came along, but I'd have liked the set."

He sounded like an enthusiastic collector who had been outbid at auction. Apparently lost in memories, he gazed at the opposite wall, turning idly on the spot to ensure an even heat on his backside.

"Your mother was Muggle-born, of course. Couldn't believe it when I found out. Thought she must have been pure-blood, she was so good."

"One of my best friends is Muggle-born," said Harry, "and she's the best in our year."

"Funny how that sometimes happens, isn't it?" said Slughorn.

"Not really," said Harry coldly.

Slughorn looked down at him in surprise. "You mustn't think I'm prejudiced!" he said. "No, no, no! Haven't I just said your mother was one of my all-time favorite students? And there was Dirk Cresswell in the year after her too — now Head of the Goblin Liaison Office, of course — another Muggle-born, a very gifted student, and still gives me excellent inside information on the goings-on at Gringotts!"

He bounced up and down a little, smiling in a self-satisfied way, and pointed at the many glittering photograph frames on the dresser, each peopled with tiny moving occupants.

"All ex-students, all signed. You'll notice Barnabas Cuffe, editor of the *Daily Prophet*, he's always interested to hear my take on the day's news. And Ambrosius Flume, of Honeydukes — a hamper every birthday, and all because I was able to give him an introduction to Ciceron Harkisss who gave him his first job! And at the back — you'll see her if you just crane your neck — that's Gwenog Jones, who of course captains the Holyhead Harpies…People are always astonished to hear I'm on first-name terms with the Harpies, and free tickets whenever I want them!"

This thought seemed to cheer him up enormously.

"And all these people know where to find you, to send you stuff?" asked Harry, who could not help wondering why the Death Eaters had not yet tracked down Slughorn if hampers of sweets, Quidditch tickets, and visitors craving his advice and opinions could find him.

The smile slid from Slughorn's face as quickly as the blood from his walls.

"Of course not," he said, looking down at Harry. "I have been out of touch with everybody for a year."

Harry had the impression that the words shocked Slughorn himself; he looked quite unsettled for a moment. Then he shrugged.

"Still…the prudent wizard keeps his head down in such times. All very well for Dumbledore to talk, but taking up a post at Hogwarts just now would be tantamount to declaring my public allegiance to the Order of the Phoenix! And while I'm sure they're very admirable and brave and all the rest of it, I don't personally fancy the mortality rate —"

"You don't have to join the Order to teach at Hogwarts," said Harry, who could not quite keep a note of derision out of his voice: It was hard to sympathize with Slughorn's cosseted existence when he remembered Sirius, crouching in a cave and living on rats. "Most of the teachers aren't in it, and none of them has ever been killed — well, unless you count Quirrell, and he got what he deserved seeing as he was working with Voldemort."

Harry had been sure Slughorn would be one of those wizards who could not bear to hear Voldemort's name spoken aloud, and was not disappointed: Slughorn gave a shudder and a squawk of protest, which Harry ignored.

"I reckon the staff are safer than most people while Dumbledore's headmaster; he's supposed to be the only one Voldemort ever feared, isn't he?" Harry went on.

Slughorn gazed into space for a moment or two: He seemed to be thinking over Harry's words.

"Well, yes, it is true that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has never sought a fight with Dumbledore," he muttered grudgingly. "And I suppose one could argue that as I have not joined the Death Eaters, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named can hardly count me a friend…in which case, I might well be safer a little closer to Albus…I cannot pretend that Amelia Bones's death did not shake me…If she, with all her Ministry contacts and protection…"

Dumbledore reentered the room and Slughorn jumped as though he had forgotten he was in the house.

"Oh, there you are, Albus," he said. "You've been a very long lime. Upset stomach?"

"No, I was merely reading the Muggle magazines," said Dumbledore. "I do love knitting patterns. Well, Harry, we have trespassed upon Horace's hospitality quite long enough; I think it is time for us to leave."

Not at all reluctant to obey, Harry jumped to his feet. Slughorn sinned taken aback.

"You're leaving?"

"Yes, indeed. I think I know a lost cause when I see one."

"Lost…?"

Slughorn seemed agitated. He twiddled his fat thumbs and fidgeted as he watched Dumbledore fasten his traveling cloak, and Harry zip up his jacket.

"Well, I'm sorry you don't want the job, Horace," said Dumbledore, raising his uninjured hand in a farewell salute. "Hogwarts would have been glad to see you back again. Our greatly increased security notwithstanding, you will always be welcome to visit, should you wish to."

"Yes…well…very gracious…as I say…"

"Good-bye, then."

"Bye," said Harry.

They were at the front door when there was a shout from behind them.

"All right, all right, I'll do it!"

Dumbledore turned to see Slughorn standing breathless in the doorway to the sitting room.

“You will come out of retirement?”

“Yes, yes,” said Slughorn impatiently. “I must be mad, but yes.”

“Wonderful,” said Dumbledore, beaming. “Then, Horace, we shall see you on the first of September.”

“Yes, I daresay you will,” grunted Slughorn.

As they set off down the garden path, Slughorn’s voice floated after them, “I’ll want a pay rise, Dumbledore!”

Dumbledore chuckled. The garden gate swung shut behind them, and they set off back down the hill through the dark and the swirling mist.

“Well done, Harry,” said Dumbledore.

“I didn’t do anything,” said Harry in surprise.

“Oh yes you did. You showed Horace exactly how much he stands to gain by returning to Hogwarts. Did you like him?”

“Er…”

Harry wasn’t sure whether he liked Slughorn or not. He supposed he had been pleasant in his way, but he had also seemed vain and, whatever he said to the contrary, much too surprised that a Muggle-born should make a good witch.

“Horace,” said Dumbledore, relieving Harry of the responsibility to say any of this, “likes his comfort. He also likes the company of the famous, the successful, and the powerful. He enjoys the feeling that he influences these people. He has never wanted to occupy the throne himself; he prefers the backseat — more room to spread out, you see. He used to handpick favorites at Hogwarts, sometimes for their ambition or their brains, sometimes for their charm or their talent, and he had an uncanny knack for choosing those who would go on to become outstanding in their various fields. Horace formed a kind of club of his favorites with himself at the center, making introductions, forging useful contacts between members, and always reaping some kind of benefit in return, whether a free box of his favorite crystallized pineapple or the chance to recommend the next junior member of the Goblin liaison Office.”

Harry had a sudden and vivid mental image of a great swollen spider, spinning a web around it, twitching a thread here and there to bring its large and juicy flies a little closer.

“I tell you all this,” Dumbledore continued, “not to turn you against Horace — or, as we must now call him, Professor Slughorn — but to put you on your guard. He will undoubtedly try to

collect you, Harry. You would be the jewel of his collection; 'the Boy Who Lived'…or, as they call you these days, 'the Chosen One.'"

At these words, a chill that had nothing to do with the surrounding mist stole over Harry. He was reminded of words he had heard a few weeks ago, words that had a horrible and particular meaning to him: Neither can live while the other survives…

Dumbledore had stopped walking, level with the church they had passed earlier.

"This will do, Harry. If you will grasp my arm."

Braced this time, Harry was ready for the Apparition, but still found it unpleasant. When the pressure disappeared and he found himself able to breathe again, he was standing in a country lane beside Dumbledore and looking ahead to the crooked silhouette of his second favorite building in the world: the Burrow. In spite of the feeling of dread that had just swept through him, his spirits could not help but lift at the sight of it. Ron was in there…and so was Mrs. Weasley, who could cook better than anyone he knew…

"If you don't mind, Harry," said Dumbledore, as they passed through the gate, "I'd like a few words with you before we part. In private. Perhaps in here?"

Dumbledore pointed toward a run-down stone outhouse where the Weasleys kept their broomsticks. A little puzzled, Harry followed Dumbledore through the creaking door into a space a little smaller than the average cupboard. Dumbledore illuminated the tip of his wand, so that it glowed like a torch, and smiled down at Harry.

"I hope you will forgive me for mentioning it, Harry, but I am pleased and a little proud at how well you seem to be coping after everything that happened at the Ministry. Permit me to say that I think Sirius would have been proud of you."

Harry swallowed; his voice seemed to have deserted him. He did not think he could stand to discuss Sirius; it had been painful enough to hear Uncle Vernon say "His godfather's dead?" and even worse to hear Sirius's name thrown out casually by Slughorn.

"It was cruel," said Dumbledore softly, "that you and Sirius had such a short time together. A brutal ending to what should have been a long and happy relationship."

Harry nodded, his eyes fixed resolutely on the spider now climbing Dumbledore's hat. He could tell that Dumbledore understood, that he might even suspect that until his letter arrived, Harry had spent nearly all his time at the Dursleys' lying on his bed, refusing meals, and staring at the misted window, full of the chill emptiness that he had come to associate with dementors.

"It's just hard," Harry said finally, in a low voice, "to realize he won't write to me again."

His eyes burned suddenly and he blinked. He felt stupid for admitting it, but the fact that he had had someone outside Hogwarts who cared what happened to him, almost like a parent, had been one of the best things about discovering his godfather…and now the post owls would never bring him that comfort again…

"Sirius represented much to you that you had never known before," said Dumbledore gently. "Naturally, the loss is devastating…"

"But while I was at the Dursleys'…" interrupted Harry, his voice growing stronger, "I realized I can't shut myself away or — or crack up. Sirius wouldn't have wanted that, would he? And anyway, life's too short…Look at Madam Bones, look at Emmeline Vance…It could be me next, couldn't it? But if it is," he said fiercely, now looking straight into Dumbledore's blue eyes gleaming in the wandlight, "I'll make sure I take as many Death Eaters with me as I can, and Voldemort too if I can manage it."

"Spoken both like your mother and father's son and Sirius's true godson!" said Dumbledore, with an approving pat on Harry's back. "I take my hat off to you — or I would, if I were not afraid of showering you in spiders.

"And now, Harry, on a closely related subject…I gather that you have been taking the *Daily Prophet* over the last two weeks?"

"Yes," said Harry, and his heart beat a little faster.

"Then you will have seen that there have been not so much leaks as floods concerning your adventure in the Hall of Prophecy?"

"Yes," said Harry again. "And now everyone knows that I'm the one —"

"No, they do not," interrupted Dumbledore. "There are only two people in the whole world who know the full contents of the prophecy made about you and Lord Voldemort, and they are both standing in this smelly, spidery broom shed. It is true, however, that many have guessed, correctly, that Voldemort sent his Death Eaters to steal a prophecy, and that the prophecy concerned you.

"Now, I think I am correct in saying that you have not told anybody that you know what the prophecy said?"

"No," said Harry.

"A wise decision, on the whole," said Dumbledore. "Although I think you ought to relax it in favor of your friends, Mr. Ronald Weasley and Miss Hermione Granger. Yes," he continued, when Harry looked startled, "I think they ought to know. You do them a disservice by not confiding something this important to them."

"I didn't want —"

"— to worry or frighten them?" said Dumbledore, surveying Harry over the top of his half-moon spectacles. "Or perhaps, to confess that you yourself are worried and frightened? You need your friends, Harry. As you so rightly said, Sirius would not have wanted you to shut yourself away."

Harry said nothing, but Dumbledore did not seem to require an answer. He continued, "On a different, though related, subject, it is my wish that you take private lessons with me this year."

"Private — with you?" said Harry, surprised out of his preoccupied silence.

"Yes. I think it is time that I took a greater hand in your education."

"What will you be teaching me, sir?"

"Oh, a little of this, a little of that," said Dumbledore airily.

Harry waited hopefully, but Dumbledore did not elaborate, so ho asked something else that had been bothering him slightly.

"If I'm having lessons with you, I won't have to do Occlumency lessons with Snape, will I?"

"Professor Snape, Harry — and no, you will not."

"Good," said Harry in relief, "because they were a —"

He stopped, careful not to say what he really thought.

"I think the word 'fiasco' would be a good one here," said Dumbledore, nodding.

Harry laughed.

"Well, that means I won't see much of Professor Snape from now on," he said, "because he won't let me carry on Potions unless I get 'Outstanding' in my OWL., which I know I haven't."

"Don't count your owls before they are delivered," said Dumbledore gravely. "Which, now I think of it, ought to be some time later today. Now, two more things, Harry, before we part.

"Firstly, I wish you to keep your Invisibility Cloak with you at all times from this moment onward. Even within Hogwarts itself. Just in case, you understand me?"

Harry nodded.

"And lastly, while you stay here, the Burrow has been given the highest security the Ministry of Magic can provide. These measures have caused a certain amount of inconvenience to Arthur and Molly — all their post, for instance, is being searched at the Ministry before being sent on. They do not mind in the slightest, for their only concern is your safety. However, it would be poor repayment if you risked your neck while staying with them."

"I understand," said Harry quickly.

“Very well, then,” said Dumbledore, pushing open the broom shed door and stepping out into the yard. “I see a light in the kitchen. Let us not deprive Molly any longer of the chance to deplore how thin you are.”

CHAPTER FIVE

AN EXCESS OF PHLEGM

Harry and Dumbledore approached the back door of the Burrow, which was surrounded by the familiar litter of old Wellington boots and rusty cauldrons; Harry could hear the soft clucking of sleepy chickens coming from a distant shed. Dumbledore knocked three times and Harry saw sudden movement behind the kitchen window.

"Who's there?" said a nervous voice he recognized as Mrs. Weasley's. "Declare yourself!"

"It is I, Dumbledore, bringing Harry."

The door opened at once. There stood Mrs. Weasley, short, plump, and wearing an old green dressing gown.

"Harry, dear! Gracious, Albus, you gave me a fright, you said not to expect you before morning!"

"We were lucky," said Dumbledore, ushering Harry over the threshold. "Slughorn proved much more persuadable than I had expected. Harry's doing, of course. Ah, hello, Nymphadora!"

Harry looked around and saw that Mrs. Weasley was not alone, despite the lateness of the hour. A young witch with a pale, heart-shaped face and mousy brown hair was sitting at the table clutching a large mug between her hands.

"Hello, Professor," she said. "Wotcher, Harry."

"Hi, Tonks."

Harry thought she looked drawn, even ill, and there was something forced in her smile. Certainly her appearance was less colorful than usual without her customary shade of bubble-gum-pink hair.

"I'd better be off," she said quickly, standing up and pulling her cloak around her shoulders. "Thanks for the tea and sympathy, Molly"

"Please don't leave on my account," said Dumbledore courteously, "I cannot stay, I have urgent matters to discuss with Rufus Scrimgeour."

"No, no, I need to get going," said Tonks, not meeting Dumbledore's eyes. "'Night…"

"Dear, why not come to dinner at the weekend, Remus and Mad-Eye are coming…?"

"No, really, Molly…thanks anyway…Good night, everyone."

Tonks hurried past Dumbledore and Harry into the yard; a few paces beyond the doorstep, she turned on the spot and vanished into thin air. Harry noticed that Mrs. Weasley looked troubled.

"Well, I shall see you at Hogwarts, Harry," said Dumbledore. "Take care of yourself. Molly, your servant."

He made Mrs. Weasley a bow and followed Tonks, vanishing at precisely the same spot. Mrs. Weasley closed the door on the empty yard and then steered Harry by the shoulders into the full glow of the lantern on the table to examine his appearance.

"You're like Ron," she sighed, looking him up and down. "Both of you look as though you've had Stretching jinxes put on you. I swear Ron's grown four inches since I last bought him school robes. Are you hungry, Harry?"

"Yeah, I am," said Harry, suddenly realizing just how hungry he was,

"Sit down, dear, I'll knock something up."

As Harry sat down, a furry ginger cat with a squashed face lumped onto his knees and settled there, purring.

"So Hermione's here?" he asked happily as he tickled Crookshanks behind the ears.

"Oh yes, she arrived the day before yesterday," said Mrs. Weasley, rapping a large iron pot with her wand. It bounced onto the stove with a loud clang and began to bubble at once. "Everyone's in bed, of course, we didn't expect you for hours. Here you are…"

She tapped the pot again; it rose into the air, flew toward Harry, and tipped over; Mrs. Weasley slid a bowl nearly beneath it just in lime to catch the stream of thick, steaming onion soup.

"Bread, dear?"

"Thanks, Mrs. Weasley."

She waved her wand over her shoulder; a loaf of bread and a knife soared gracefully onto the table; as the loaf sliced itself and the soup pot dropped back onto the stove, Mrs. Weasley sat down opposite him.

"So you persuaded Horace Slughorn to take the job?"

Harry nodded, his mouth so full of hot soup that he could not speak.

"He taught Arthur and me," said Mrs. Weasley. "He was at Hogwarts for ages, started around the same time as Dumbledore, I think. Did you like him?"

His mouth now full of bread, Harry shrugged and gave a noncommittal jerk of the head.

"I know what you mean," said Mrs. Weasley, nodding wisely. "Of course he can be charming when he wants to be, but Arthur's never liked him much. The Ministry's littered with Slughorn's old favorites, he was always good at giving leg ups, but he never had much time for Arthur…didn't seem to think he was enough of a highflier. Well, that just shows you, even Slughorn makes mistakes. I don't know whether Ron's told you in any of his letters…it's only just happened…but Arthur's been promoted!"

It could not have been clearer that Mrs. Weasley had been bursting to say this.

Harry swallowed a large amount of very hot soup and thought he could feel his throat blistering.

"That's great!" he gasped.

"You are sweet," beamed Mrs. Weasley, possibly taking his watering eyes for emotion at the news. "Yes, Rufus Scrimgeour has set up several new offices in response to the present situation, and Arthur's heading the Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects. It's a big job, he's got ten people reporting to him now!"

"What exactly?"

"Well, you see, in all the panic about You-Know-Who, odd things have been cropping up for sale everywhere, things that are supposed to guard against You-Know-Who and the Death Eaters. You can imagine the kind of thing…so-called protective potions that are really gravy with a bit of bubotuber pus added, or instructions for defensive jinxes that actually make your ears fall off…Well, in the main the perpetrators are just people like Mundungus Fletcher, who've never done an honest day's work in their lives and are taking advantage of how frightened everybody is, but every now and then something really nasty turns up. The other day Arthur confiscated a box of cursed Sneakoscopes that were almost certainly planted by a Death Eater. So you see, it's a very important job, and I tell him it's just silly to miss dealing with spark plugs and toasters and all the rest of that Muggle rubbish." Mrs. Weasley ended her speech with a stern look, as if it had been Harry suggesting that it was natural to miss spark plugs.

"Is Mr. Weasley still at work?" Harry asked.

"Yes, he is. As a matter of fact, he's a tiny bit late…He said he'd be back around midnight…"

She turned to look at a large clock that was perched awkwardly on top of a pile of sheets in the washing basket at the end of the table. Harry recognized it at once: It had nine hands, each inscribed with the name of a family member, and usually hung on the Weasleys' sitting room wall, though its current position suggested that Mrs. Weasley had taken to carrying it around the house with her. Every single one of its nine hands was now pointing at "mortal peril."

"It's been like that for a while now," said Mrs. Weasley, in an unconvincingly casual voice, "ever since You-Know-Who came back into the open. I suppose everybody's in mortal danger now…I don't think it can be just our family…but I don't know anyone else who's got a clock like this, so I can't check. Oh!"

With a sudden exclamation she pointed at the clock's face. Mr. Weasley's hand had switched to "traveling."

"He's coming!"

And sure enough, a moment later there was a knock on the back door. Mrs. Weasley jumped up and hurried to it; with one hand on the doorknob and her face pressed against the wood she called softly, "Arthur, is that you?"

"Yes," came Mr. Weasley's weary voice. "But I would say that even if I were a Death Eater, dear. Ask the question!"

"Oh, honestly…"

"Molly!"

"All right, all right…What is your dearest ambition?"

"To find out how airplanes stay up."

Mrs. Weasley nodded and turned the doorknob, but apparently Mr. Weasley was holding tight to it on the other side, because the door remained firmly shut.

"Molly! I've got to ask you your question first!"

"Arthur, really, this is just silly…"

"What do you like me to call you when we're alone together?"

Even by the dim light of the lantern Harry could tell that Mrs. Weasley had turned bright red; he himself felt suddenly warm around the ears and neck, and hastily gulped soup, clattering his spoon as loudly as he could against the bowl.

"Mollywobbles," whispered a mortified Mrs. Weasley into the crack at the edge of the door.

"Correct," said Mr. Weasley. "Now you can let me in."

Mrs. Weasley opened the door to reveal her husband, a thin, balding, red-haired wizard wearing horn-rimmed spectacles and a long and dusty traveling cloak.

"I still don't see why we have to go through that every time you come home," said Mrs. Weasley, still pink in the face as she helped her husband out of his cloak. "I mean, a Death Eater might have forced the answer out of you before impersonating you!"

"I know, dear, but it's Ministry procedure, and I have to set an example. Something smells good…onion soup?"

Mr. Weasley turned hopefully in the direction of the table.

"Harry! We didn't expect you until morning!"

They shook hands, and Mr. Weasley dropped into the chair beside Harry as Mrs. Weasley set a bowl of soup in front of him too.

“Thanks, Molly. It’s been a tough night. Some idiot’s started selling Metamorph-Medals. Just sling them around your neck and you’ll be able to change your appearance at will. A hundred thousand disguises, all for ten Galleons!”

“And what really happens when you put them on?”

“Mostly you just turn a fairly unpleasant orange color, but a couple of people have also sprouted tentacle like warts all over their bodies. As if St. Mungo’s didn’t have enough to do already!”

“It sounds like the sort of thing Fred and George would find funny,” said Mrs. Weasley hesitantly. “Are you sure…?”

“Of course I am!” said Mr. Weasley. “The boys wouldn’t do anything like that now, not when people are desperate for protection!”

“So is that why you’re late, Metamorph-Medals?”

“No, we got wind of a nasty backfiring jinx down in Elephant and Castle, but luckily the Magical Law Enforcement Squad had sorted it out by the time we got there…”

Harry stifled a yawn behind his hand.

“Bed,” said an undeceived Mrs. Weasley at once. “I’ve got Fred and George’s room all ready for you, you’ll have it to yourself.”

“Why, where are they?”

“Oh, they’re in Diagon Alley, sleeping in the little flat over their joke shop as they’re so busy,” said Mrs. Weasley. “I must say, I didn’t approve at first, but they do seem to have a bit of a flair for business! Come on, dear, your trunks already up there.”

“‘Night, Mr. Weasley,” said Harry, pushing back his chair. Crookshanks leapt lightly from his lap and slunk out of the room.

“G’night, Harry,” said Mr. Weasley.

Harry saw Mrs. Weasley glance at the clock in the washing basket as they left the kitchen. All the hands were once again at “mortal peril.”

Fred and George’s bedroom was on the second floor. Mrs. Weasley pointed her wand at a lamp on the bedside table and it ignited at once, bathing the room in a pleasant golden glow. Though a large vase of flowers had been placed on a desk in front of the small window, their perfume could not disguise the lingering smell of what Harry thought was gunpowder. A considerable amount of floor space was devoted to a vast number of unmarked, sealed cardboard boxes, amongst which stood Harry’s school trunk. The room looked as though it was being used as a temporary warehouse.

Hedwig hooted happily at Harry from her perch on top of a large wardrobe, then took off through the window; Harry knew she had been waiting to see him before going hunting. Harry bade Mrs. Weasley good night, put on pajamas, and got into one of the beds. There was something hard inside the pillowcase. He groped inside it and pulled out a sticky purple-and-orange sweet, which he recognized as a Puking Pastille. Smiling to himself, he rolled over and was instantly asleep.

Seconds later, or so it seemed to Harry, he was awakened by what sounded like cannon fire as the door burst open. Sitting bolt upright, he heard the rasp of the curtains being pulled back: The dazzling sunlight seemed to poke him hard in both eyes. Shielding them with one hand, he groped hopelessly for his glasses with the other.

"Wuzzgoinon?"

"We didn't know you were here already!" said a loud and excited voice, and he received a sharp blow to the top of the head.

"Ron, don't hit him!" said a girl's voice reproachfully.

Harry's hand found his glasses and he shoved them on, though the light was so bright he could hardly see anyway. A long, looming shadow quivered in front of him for a moment; he blinked and Ron Weasley came into focus, grinning down at him.

"All right?"

"Never been better," said Harry, rubbing the top of his head and slumping back onto his pillows. "You?"

"Not bad," said Ron, pulling over a cardboard box and sitting on it. "When did you get here? Mum's only just told us!"

"About one o'clock this morning."

"Were the Muggles all right? Did they treat you okay?"

"Same as usual," said Harry, as Hermione perched herself on the edge of his bed, "they didn't talk to me much, but I like it better that way. How're you, Hermione?"

"Oh, I'm fine," said Hermione, who was scrutinizing Harry as though he was sickening for something. He thought he knew what was behind this, and as he had no wish to discuss Sirius's death or any other miserable subject at the moment, he said, "What's the time? Have I missed breakfast?"

"Don't worry about that, Mum's bringing you up a tray; she reckons you look underfed," said Ron, rolling his eyes. "So, what's been going on?"

"Nothing much, I've just been stuck at my aunt and uncle's, haven't I?"

“Come off it!” said Ron. “You’ve been off with Dumbledore!”

“It wasn’t that exciting. He just wanted me to help him persuade this old teacher to come out of retirement. His name’s Horace Slughorn.”

“Oh,” said Ron, looking disappointed. “We thought…”

Hermione flashed a warning look at Ron, and Ron changed tack at top speed.

“…we thought it’d be something like that.”

“You did?” said Harry, amused.

“Yeah…yeah, now Umbridge has left, obviously we need a new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, don’t we? So, er, what’s he like?”

“He looks a bit like a walrus, and he used to be Head of Slytherin,” said Harry. “Something wrong, Hermione?”

She was watching him as though expecting strange symptoms to manifest themselves at any moment. She rearranged her features hastily in an unconvincing smile.

“No, of course not! So, um, did Slughorn seem like he’ll be a good teacher?”

“Dunno,” said Harry. “He can’t be worse than Umbridge, can he?”

“I know someone who’s worse than Umbridge,” said a voice from the doorway. Ron’s younger sister slouched into the room, looking irritable. “Hi, Harry.”

“What’s up with you?” Ron asked.

“It’s her,” said Ginny, plonking herself down on Harry’s bed. “She’s driving me mad.”

“What’s she done now?” asked Hermione sympathetically.

“It’s the way she talks to me…you’d think I was about three!”

“I know,” said Hermione, dropping her voice. “She’s so full of herself.”

Harry was astonished to hear Hermione talking about Mrs. Weasley like this and could not blame Ron for saying angrily, “Can’t you two lay off her for five seconds?”

“Oh, that’s right, defend her,” snapped Ginny. “We all know you can’t get enough of her.”

This seemed an odd comment to make about Ron’s mother. Starting to feel that he was missing something, Harry said, “Who are you…?”

But his question was answered before he could finish it. The bedroom door flew open again, and Harry instinctively yanked the bedcovers up to his chin so hard that Hermione and Ginny slid off the bed onto the floor.

A young woman was standing in the doorway, a woman of such breathtaking beauty that the room seemed to have become strangely airless. She was tall and willowy with long blonde hair and

appeared to emanate a faint, silvery glow. To complete this vision of perfection, she was carrying a heavily laden breakfast tray.

"'Arry," she said in a throaty voice. "Eet 'as been too long!"

As she swept over the threshold toward him, Mrs. Weasley was revealed, bobbing along in her wake, looking rather cross.

"There was no need to bring up the tray, I was just about to do it myself!"

"Eet was no trouble," said Fleur Delacour, setting the tray across Harry's knees and then swooping to kiss him on each cheek: He felt the places where her mouth had touched him burn. "I 'ave been longing to see 'im. You remember my seester, Gabrielle? She never stops talking about 'Arry Potter. She will be delighted to see you again."

"Oh…is she here too?" Harry croaked.

"No, no, silly boy," said Fleur with a tinkling laugh, "I mean next summer, when we…but do you not know?"

Her great blue eyes widened and she looked reproachfully at Mrs. Weasley, who said,

"We hadn't got around to telling him yet."

Fleur turned back to Harry, swinging her silvery sheet of hair so that it whipped Mrs. Weasley across the face.

"Bill and I are going to be married!"

"Oh," said Harry blankly. He could not help noticing how Mrs. Weasley, Hermione, and Ginny were all determinedly avoiding one another's gaze. "Wow. Er…congratulations!"

She swooped down upon him and kissed him again.

"Bill is very busy at ze moment, working very 'ard, and I only work part-time at Gringotts for my Eenglish, so he brought me 'ere for a few days to get to know 'is family properly. I was so pleased to 'ear you would be coming…zere isn't much to do 'ere, unless you like cooking and chickens! Well…enjoy your breakfast, 'Arry!"

With these words she turned gracefully and seemed to float out of the room, closing the door quietly behind her.

Mrs. Weasley made a noise that sounded like, "tchah!"

"Mum hates her," said Ginny quietly.

"I do not hate her!" said Mrs. Weasley in a cross whisper. "I just think they've hurried into this engagement, that's all!"

“They’ve known each other a year,” said Ron, who looked oddly groggy and was staring at the closed door.

“Well, that’s not very long! I know why it’s happened, of course. Its all this uncertainty with You-Know-Who coming back, people think they might be dead tomorrow, so they’re rushing all sorts of decisions they’d normally take time over. It was the same last time he was powerful, people eloping left, right, and center…”

“Including you and Dad,” said Ginny slyly.

“Yes, well, your father and I were made for each other, what was the point in waiting?” said Mrs. Weasley. “Whereas Bill and Fleur…well…what have they really got in common? He’s a hardworking, down-to-earth sort of person, whereas she’s…”

“A cow,” said Ginny, nodding. “But Bill’s not that down-to-earth. He’s a Curse-Breaker, isn’t he, he likes a bit of adventure, a bit of glamour…I expect that’s why he’s gone for Phlegm.”

“Stop calling her that, Ginny,” said Mrs. Weasley sharply, as Harry and Hermione laughed. “Well, I’d better get on…Eat your eggs while they’re warm, Harry.”

Looking careworn, she left the room. Ron still seemed slightly punch-drunk; he was shaking his head experimentally like a dog trying to rid its ears of water.

“Don’t you get used to her if she’s staying in the same house?” Harry asked.

“Well, you do,” said Ron, “but if she jumps out at you unexpectedly, like then…”

“It’s pathetic,” said Hermione furiously, striding away from Ron as far as she could go and turning to face him with her arms folded once she had reached the wall.

“You don’t really want her around forever?” Ginny asked Ron incredulously. When he merely shrugged, she said, “Well, Mum’s going to put a stop to it if she can, I bet you anything.”

“How’s she going to manage that?” asked Harry.

“She keeps trying to get Tonks round for dinner. I think she’s hoping Bill will fall for Tonks instead. I hope he does, I’d much rather have her in the family.”

“Yeah, that’ll work,” said Ron sarcastically. “Listen, no bloke in his right mind’s going to fancy Tonks when Fleur’s around. I mean, Tonks is okay-looking when she isn’t doing stupid things to her hair and her nose, but…”

“She’s a damn sight nicer than Phlegm?” said Ginny.

“And she’s more intelligent, she’s an Auror!” said Hermione from the corner.

“Fleur’s not stupid, she was good enough to enter the Triwizard Tournament,” said Harry.

“Not you as well!” said Hermione bitterly.

“I suppose you like the way Phlegm says ‘’Arry,’ do you?” asked Ginny scornfully.

“No,” said Harry, wishing he hadn’t spoken, “I was just saying, Phlegm…I mean, Fleur…”

“I’d much rather have Tonks in the family,” said Ginny. “At least she’s a laugh.”

“She hasn’t been much of a laugh lately,” said Ron. “Every time I’ve seen her she’s looked more like Moaning Myrtle.”

“That’s not fair,” snapped Hermione. “She still hasn’t got over what happened…you know…I mean, he was her cousin!”

Harry’s heart sank. They had arrived at Sirius. He picked up a fork and began shoveling scrambled eggs into his mouth, hoping to deflect any invitation to join in this part of the conversation.

“Tonks and Sirius barely knew each other!” said Ron. “Sirius was in Azkaban half her life and before that their families never met…”

“That’s not the point,” said Hermione. “She thinks it was her fault he died!”

“How does she work that one out?” asked Harry, in spite of himself.

“Well, she was fighting Bellatrix Lestrange, wasn’t she? I think she feels that if only she had finished her off, Bellatrix couldn’t have killed Sirius.”

“That’s stupid,” said Ron.

“It’s survivor’s guilt,” said Hermione. “I know Lupin’s tried to talk her round, but she’s still really down. She’s actually having trouble with her Metamorphosing!”

“With her…?”

“She can’t change her appearance like she used to,” explained Hermione. “I think her powers must have been affected by shock, or something.”

“I didn’t know that could happen,” said Harry.

“Nor did I,” said Hermione, “but I suppose if you’re really depressed…”

The door opened again and Mrs. Weasley popped her head in. “Ginny,” she whispered, “come downstairs and help me with the lunch.”

“I’m talking to this lot!” said Ginny, outraged.

“Now!” said Mrs. Weasley, and withdrew.

“She only wants me there so she doesn’t have to be alone with Phlegm!” said Ginny crossly. She swung her long red hair around in a very good imitation of Fleur and pranced across the room with her arms held aloft like a ballerina.

“You lot had better come down quickly too,” she said as she left.

Harry took advantage of the temporary silence to eat more breakfast. Hermione was peering into Fred and George's boxes, though every now and then she cast sideways looks at Harry. Ron, who was now helping himself to Harry's toast, was still gazing dreamily at the door.

"What's this?" Hermione asked eventually, holding up what looked like a small telescope.

"Dunno," said Ron, "but if Fred and George left it here, it's probably not ready for the joke shop yet, so be careful"

"Your mum said the shop's going well," said Harry. "Said Fred and George have got a real flair for business."

"That's an understatement," said Ron. "They're raking in the Galleons! I can't wait to see the place, we haven't been to Diagon Alley yet, because Mum says Dad's got to be there for extra security and he's been really busy at work, but it sounds excellent."

"And what about Percy?" asked Harry; the third-eldest Weasley brother had fallen out with the rest of the family. "Is he talking to your mum and dad again?"

"Nope," said Ron.

"But he knows your dad was right all along now about Voldemort being back —"

"Dumbledore says people find it far easier to forgive others for being wrong than being right," said Hermione. "I heard him telling your mum, Ron."

"Sounds like the sort of mental thing Dumbledore would say," said Ron.

"He's going to be giving me private lessons this year," said Harry conversationally.

Ron choked on his bit of toast, and Hermione gasped.

"You kept that quiet!" said Ron.

"I only just remembered," said Harry honestly. "He told me last night in your broom shed."

"Blimey…private lessons with Dumbledore!" said Ron, looking impressed. "I wonder why he's…?"

His voice tailed away. Harry saw him and Hermione exchange looks. Harry laid down his knife and fork, his heart beating rather fast considering that all he was doing was sitting in bed. Dumbledore had said to do it…Why not now? He fixed his eyes on his fork, which was gleaming in the sunlight streaming into his lap, and said, "I don't know exactly why he's going to be giving me lessons, but I think it must be because of the prophecy."

Neither Ron nor Hermione spoke. Harry had the impression that both had frozen. He continued, still speaking to his fork, "You know, the one they were trying to steal at the Ministry."

"Nobody knows what it said, though," said Hermione quickly. "It got smashed."

“Although the *Prophet* says…” began Ron, but Hermione said, “Shh!”

“The *Prophet’s* got it right,” said Harry, looking up at them both with a great effort: Hermione seemed frightened and Ron amazed. “That glass ball that smashed wasn’t the only record of the prophecy. I heard the whole thing in Dumbledore’s office, he was the one the prophecy was made to, so he could tell me. From what it said,” Harry took a deep breath, “it looks like I’m the one who’s got to finish off Voldemort…At least, it said neither of us could live while the other survives.”

The three of them gazed at one another in silence for a moment. Then there was a loud bang and Hermione vanished behind a puff of black smoke.

“Hermione!” shouted Harry and Ron; the breakfast tray slid to the floor with a crash.

Hermione emerged, coughing, out of the smoke, clutching the telescope and sporting a brilliantly purple black eye.

“I squeezed it and it…it punched me!” she gasped.

And sure enough, they now saw a tiny fist on a long spring protruding from the end of the telescope.

“Don’t worry,” said Ron, who was plainly trying not to laugh, “Mum’ll fix that, she’s good at healing minor injuries…”

“Oh well, never mind that now!” said Hermione hastily. “Harry, oh, Harry…”

She sat down on the edge of his bed again.

“We wondered, after we got back from the Ministry…Obviously, we didn’t want to say anything to you, but from what Lucius Malfoy said about the prophecy, how it was about you and Voldemort, well, we thought it might be something like this…Oh, Harry…” She stared at him, then whispered, “Are you scared?”

“Not as much as I was,” said Harry. “When I first heard it, I was…but now, it seems as though I always knew I’d have to face him in the end…”

“When we heard Dumbledore was collecting you in person, we thought he might be telling you something or showing you something to do with the prophecy,” said Ron eagerly. “And we were kind of right, weren’t we? He wouldn’t be giving you lessons if he thought you were a goner, wouldn’t waste his time — he must think you’ve got a chance!”

“That’s true,” said Hermione. “I wonder what he’ll teach you, Harry? Really advanced defensive magic, probably…powerful countercurses…anti-jinxes…”

Harry did not really listen. A warmth was spreading through him that had nothing to do with the sunlight; a tight obstruction in his chest seemed to be dissolving. He knew that Ron and

Hermione were more shocked than they were letting on, but the mere fact that they were still there on either side of him, speaking bracing words of comfort, not shrinking from him as though he were contaminated or dangerous, was worth more than he could ever tell them.

"…and evasive enchantments generally," concluded Hermione. "Well, at least you know one lesson you'll be having this year, that's one more than Ron and me. I wonder when our OWL results will come?"

"Can't be long now, it's been a month," said Ron.

"Hang on," said Harry, as another part of last night's conversation came back to him. "I think Dumbledore said our OWL results would be arriving today!"

"Today?" shrieked Hermione. "Today? But why didn't you…oh my God…you should have said…"

She leapt to her feet.

"I'm going to see whether any owls have come…"

But when Harry arrived downstairs ten minutes later, fully dressed and carrying his empty breakfast tray, it was to find Hermione sitting at the kitchen table in great agitation, while Mrs. Weasley tried to lessen her resemblance to half a panda.

"It just won't budge," Mrs. Weasley was saying anxiously, standing over Hermione with her wand in her hand and a copy of The Healer's Helpmate open at "Bruises, Cuts, and Abrasions." "This has always worked before, I just can't understand it."

"It'll be Fred and George's idea of a funny joke, making sure it can't come off," said Ginny.

"But it's got to come off!" squeaked Hermione. "I can't go around looking like this forever!"

"You won't, dear, we'll find an antidote, don't worry," said Mrs. Weasley soothingly.

"Bill told me Fred and George are very amusing!" said Fleur, smiling serenely.

"Yes, I can hardly breathe for laughing," snapped Hermione.

She jumped up and started walking round and round the kitchen, twisting her fingers together.

"Mrs. Weasley, you're quite, quite sure no owls have arrived this morning?"

"Yes, dear, I'd have noticed," said Mrs. Weasley patiently. "But it's barely nine, there's still plenty of time…"

"I know I messed up Ancient Runes," muttered Hermione feverishly, "I definitely made at least one serious mistranslation. And the Defense Against the Dark Arts practical was no good at all. I thought Transfiguration went all right at the time, but looking back —"

“Hermione, will you shut up, you’re not the only one who’s nervous!” barked Ron. “And when you’ve got your eleven ‘Outstanding’ OWLs…”

“Don’t, don’t, don’t!” said Hermione, flapping her hands hysterically. “I know I’ve failed everything!”

“What happens if we fail?” Harry asked the room at large, but it was again Hermione who answered.

“We discuss our options with our Head of House, I asked Professor McGonagall at the end of last term.”

Harry’s stomach squirmed. He wished he had eaten less breakfast.

“At Beauxbatons,” said Fleur complacently, “we ‘ad a different way of doing things. I think eet was better. We sat our examinations after six years of study, not five, and then…”

Fleur’s words were drowned in a scream. Hermione was pointing through the kitchen window. Three black specks were clearly visible in the sky, growing larger all the time.

“They’re definitely owls,” said Ron hoarsely, jumping up to join Hermione at the window.

“And there are three of them,” said Harry, hastening to her other side.

“One for each of us,” said Hermione in a terrified whisper. “Oh no…oh no…oh no…”

She gripped both Harry and Ron tightly around the elbows.

The owls were flying directly at the Burrow, three handsome tawnies, each of which, it became clear as they flew lower over the path leading up to the house, was carrying a large square envelope.

“Oh no!” squealed Hermione.

Mrs. Weasley squeezed past them and opened the kitchen window. One, two, three, the owls soared through it and landed on the table in a neat line. All three of them lifted their right legs.

Harry moved forward. The letter addressed to him was tied to the leg of the owl in the middle. He untied it with fumbling fingers. To his left, Ron was trying to detach his own results; to his right, Hermione’s hands were shaking so much she was making her whole owl tremble.

Nobody in the kitchen spoke. At last, Harry managed to detach the envelope. He slit it open quickly and unfolded the parchment inside.

Ordinary Wizarding Level Results

Pass Grades:

Outstanding (O)

Exceeds Expectations (E)

Acceptable (A)

Fail Grades:

Poor (P)

Dreadful (D)

Troll (T)

Harry James Potter has achieved:

Astronomy: A

Care of Magical Creatures: E

Charms: E

Defense Against the Dark Arts: O

Divination: P

Herbology: E

History of Magic: D

Potions: E

Transfiguration: E

Harry read the parchment through several times, his breathing becoming easier with each reading. It was all right: He had always known that he would fail Divination, and he had had no chance of passing History of Magic, given that he had collapsed halfway through the examination, but he had passed everything else! He ran his finger down the grades…he had passed well in Transfiguration and Herbology, he had even exceeded expectations at Potions! And best of all, he had achieved "Outstanding" at Defense Against the Dark Arts!

He looked around. Hermione had her back to him and her head bent, but Ron was looking delighted.

"Only failed Divination and History of Magic, and who cares about them?" he said happily to Harry. "Here…swap…"

Harry glanced down Ron's grades: There were no "Outstandings" there…

"Knew you'd be top at Defense Against the Dark Arts," said Ron, punching Harry on the shoulder. "We've done all right, haven't we?"

"Well done!" said Mrs. Weasley proudly, ruffling Ron's hair. "Seven OWLs, that's more than Fred and George got together!"

"Hermione?" said Ginny tentatively, for Hermione still hadn't turned around. "How did you do?"

"I — not bad," said Hermione in a small voice.

“Oh, come off it,” said Ron, striding over to her and whipping her results out of her hand. “Yep — nine ‘Outstandings’ and one ‘Exceeds Expectations’ at Defense Against the Dark Arts.” He looked down at her, half-amused, half-exasperated. “You’re actually disappointed, aren’t you?”

Hermione shook her head, but Harry laughed.

“Well, we’re N.E.W.T. students now!” grinned Ron. “Mum, are there any more sausages?”

Harry looked back down at his results. They were as good as he could have hoped for. He felt just one tiny twinge of regret…This was the end of his ambition to become an Auror. He had not secured the required Potions grade. He had known all along that he wouldn’t, but he still felt a sinking in his stomach as he looked again at that small black E.

It was odd, really, seeing that it had been a Death Eater in disguise who had first told Harry he would make a good Auror, but somehow the idea had taken hold of him, and he couldn’t really think of anything else he would like to be. Moreover, it had seemed the right destiny for him since he had heard the prophecy a few weeks ago…*Neither can live while the other survives*…Wouldn’t he be living up to the prophecy, and giving himself the best chance of survival, if he joined those highly trained wizards whose job it was to find and kill Voldemort?

CHAPTER SIX

DRACO'S DETOUR

Harry remained within the confines of the Burrow's garden over the next few weeks. He spent most of his days playing two-a-side Quidditch in the Weasleys' orchard (he and Hermione against Ron and Ginny; Hermione was dreadful and Ginny good, so they were reasonably well matched) and his evenings eating triple helpings of everything Mrs. Weasley put in front of him.

It would have been a happy, peaceful holiday had it not been for the stones of disappearances, odd accidents, even of deaths now appearing almost daily in the *Prophet*. Sometimes Bill and Mr. Weasley brought home news before it even reached the paper. To Mrs. Weasley's displeasure, Harry's sixteenth birthday celebrations were marred by grisly tidings brought to the party by Remus Lupin, who was looking gaunt and grim, his brown hair streaked liberally with gray, his clothes more ragged and patched than ever.

"There have been another couple of dementor attacks," he announced, as Mrs. Weasley passed him a large slice of birthday cake. "And they've found Igor Karkaroff's body in a shack up north. The Dark Mark had been set over it…well, frankly, I'm surprised he stayed alive for even a year after deserting the Death Eaters; Sirius's brother, Regulus, only managed a few days as far as I can remember."

"Yes, well," said Mrs. Weasley, frowning, "perhaps we should talk about something diff…"

"Did you hear about Florean Fortescue, Remus?" asked Bill, who was being plied with wine by Fleur. "The man who ran…"

"— the ice-cream place in Diagon Alley?" Harry interrupted, with an unpleasant, hollow sensation in the pit of his stomach. "He used to give me free ice creams. What's happened to him?"

"Dragged off, by the look of his place."

"Why?" asked Ron, while Mrs. Weasley pointedly glared at Bill.

"Who knows? He must've upset them somehow. He was a good man, Florean."

"Talking of Diagon Alley," said Mr. Weasley, "looks like Ollivander's gone too."

"The wandmaker?" said Ginny, looking startled.

"That's the one. Shop's empty. No sign of a struggle. No one knows whether he left voluntarily or was kidnapped."

"But what'll people do for wands?"

"They'll make do with other makers," said Lupin. "But Ollivander was the best, and if the other side have got him it's not so good for us."

The day after this rather gloomy birthday tea, their letters and booklists arrived from Hogwarts. Harry's included a surprise: he had been made Quidditch Captain.

"That gives you equal status with prefects!" cried Hermione happily. "You can use our special bathroom now and everything!"

"Wow, I remember when Charlie wore one of these," said Ron, examining the badge with glee. "Harry, this is so cool, you're my Captain…if you let me back on the team, I suppose, ha ha…"

"Well, I don't suppose we can put off a trip to Diagon Alley much longer now you've got these," sighed Mrs. Weasley, looking down Ron's booklist. "We'll go on Saturday as long as your father doesn't have to go into work again. I'm not going there without him."

"Mum, d'you honestly think You-Know-Who's going to be hiding behind a bookshelf in Flourish and Blotts?" sniggered Ron.

"Fortescue and Ollivander went on holiday, did they?" said Mrs. Weasley, firing up at once. "If you think security's a laughing matter you can stay behind and I'll get your things myself…"

"No, I wanna come, I want to see Fred and George's shop!" said Ron hastily.

"Then you just buck up your ideas, young man, before I decide you're too immature to come with us!" said Mrs. Weasley angrily, snatching up her clock, all nine hands of which were still pointing at "mortal peril," and balancing it on top of a pile of just-laundered towels. "And that goes for returning to Hogwarts as well!"

Ron turned to stare incredulously at Harry as his mother hoisted the laundry basket and the teetering clock into her arms and stormed out of the room.

"Blimey…you can't even make a joke round here anymore…"

But Ron was careful not to be flippant about Voldemort over the next few days. Saturday dawned without any more outbursts from Mrs. Weasley, though she seemed very tense at breakfast. Bill, who would be staying at home with Fleur (much to Hermione and Ginny's pleasure), passed a full money bag across the table to Harry.

"Where's mine?" demanded Ron at once, his eyes wide.

"That's already Harry's, idiot," said Bill. "I got it out of your vault for you, Harry, because it's taking about five hours for the public to get to their gold at the moment, the goblins have tightened security so much. Two days ago Arkie Philpott had a Probity Probe stuck up his…Well, trust me, this way's easier."

"Thanks, Bill," said Harry, pocketing his gold.

"'E is always so thoughtful," purred Fleur adoringly, stroking Bill's nose. Ginny mimed vomiting into her cereal behind Fleur. Harry choked over his cornflakes, and Ron thumped him on the back.

It was an overcast, murky day. One of the special Ministry of Magic cars, in which Harry had ridden once before, was awaiting them in the front yard when they emerged from the house, pulling on their cloaks.

"It's good Dad can get us these again," said Ron appreciatively, stretching luxuriously as the car moved smoothly away from the Burrow, Bill and Fleur waving from the kitchen window. He, Harry, Hermione, and Ginny were all sitting in roomy comfort in the wide backseat.

"Don't get used to it, it's only because of Harry," said Mr. Weasley over his shoulder. He and Mrs. Weasley were in front with the Ministry driver; the front passenger seat had obligingly stretched into what resembled a two-seater sofa. "He's been given top-grade security status. And we'll be joining up with additional security at the Leaky Cauldron too."

Harry said nothing; he did not much fancy doing his shopping while surrounded by a battalion of Aurors. He had stowed his Invisibility Cloak in his backpack and felt that, if that was good enough for Dumbledore, it ought to be good enough for the Ministry, though now he came to think of it, he was not sure the Ministry knew about his cloak.

"Here you are, then," said the driver, a surprisingly short while later, speaking for the first time as he slowed in Charing Cross Road and stopped outside the Leaky Cauldron. "I'm to wait for you, any idea how long you'll be?"

"A couple of hours, I expect," said Mr. Weasley. "Ah, good, he's here!"

Harry imitated Mr. Weasley and peered through the window; his heart leapt. There were no Aurors waiting outside the inn, but instead the gigantic, black-bearded form of Rubeus Hagrid, the Hogwarts gamekeeper, wearing a long beaverskin coat, beaming at the sight of Harry's face and oblivious to the startled stares of passing Muggles.

"Harry!" he boomed, sweeping Harry into a bone-crushing hug the moment Harry had stepped out of the car. "Buckbeak…Witherwings, I mean…yeh should see him, Harry, he's so happy ter be back in the open air…"

"Glad he's pleased," said Harry, grinning as he massaged his ribs. "We didn't know 'security' meant you!"

"I know, jus' like old times, innit? See, the Ministry wanted ter send a bunch o' Aurors, but Dumbledore said I'd do," said Hagrid proudly, throwing out his chest and tucking his thumbs into his pockets. "Lets get goin' then…after yeh, Molly, Arthur…"

The Leaky Cauldron was, for the first time in Harry's memory, completely empty. Only Tom the landlord, wizened and toothless, remained of the old crowd. He looked up hopefully as they entered, but before he could speak, Hagrid said importantly, "Jus' passin' through today, Tom, sure yeh understand, Hogwarts business, yeh know."

Tom nodded gloomily and returned to wiping glasses; Harry, Hermione, Hagrid, and the Weasleys walked through the bar and out into the chilly little courtyard at the back where the dustbins stood. Hagrid raised his pink umbrella and rapped a certain brick in the wall, which opened at once to form an archway onto a winding cobbled street. They stepped through the entrance and paused, looking around.

Diagon Alley had changed. The colorful, glittering window displays of spellbooks, potion ingredients, and cauldrons were lost to view, hidden behind the large Ministry of Magic posters that had been pasted over them. Most of these somber purple posters carried blown-up versions of the security advice on the Ministry pamphlets that had been sent out over the summer, but others bore moving black-and-white photographs of Death Eaters known to be on the loose. Bellatrix Lestrange was sneering from the front of the nearest apothecary. A few windows were boarded up, including those of Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor. On the other hand, a number of shabby-looking stalls had sprung up along the street. The nearest one, which had been erected outside Flourish and Blotts, under a striped, stained awning, had a cardboard sign pinned to its front:

AMULETS

Effective Against Werewolves, Dementors, and Inferi!

A seedy-looking little wizard was rattling armfuls of silver symbols on chains at passersby.

"One for your little girl, madam?" he called at Mrs. Weasley as they passed, leering at Ginny. "Protect her pretty neck?"

"If I were on duty…" said Mr. Weasley, glaring angrily at the amulet seller.

"Yes, but don't go arresting anyone now, dear, we're in a hurry," said Mrs. Weasley, nervously consulting a list. "I think we'd better do Madam Malkin's first, Hermione wants new dress robes, and Ron's showing much too much ankle in his school robes, and you must need new ones too, Harry, you've grown so much…come on, everyone…"

"Molly, it doesn't make sense for all of us to go to Madam Malkin's," said Mr. Weasley. "Why don't those three go with Hagrid, and we can go to Flourish and Blotts and get everyone's schoolbooks?"

"I don't know," said Mrs. Weasley anxiously, clearly torn between a desire to finish the shopping quickly and the wish to stick together in a pack. "Hagrid, do you think —?"

"Don't fret, they'll be fine with me, Molly," said Hagrid soothingly, waving an airy hand the size of a dustbin lid. Mrs. Weasley did not look entirely convinced, but allowed the separation, scurrying off toward Flourish and Blotts with her husband and Ginny while Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Hagrid set off for Madam Malkin's.

Harry noticed that many of the people who passed them had the same harried, anxious look as Mrs. Weasley, and that nobody was stopping to talk anymore; the shoppers stayed together in their

own tightly knit groups, moving intently about their business. Nobody seemed to be shopping alone.

"Migh' be a bit of a squeeze in there with all of us," said Hagrid, stopping outside Madam Malkin's and bending down to peer through the window. "I'll stand guard outside, all right?"

So Harry, Ron, and Hermione entered the little shop together. It appeared, at first glance, to be empty, but no sooner had the door swung shut behind them than they heard a familiar voice issuing from behind a rack of dress robes in spangled green and blue.

"…not a child, in case you haven't noticed, Mother. I am perfectly capable of doing my shopping alone."

There was a clucking noise and a voice Harry recognized as that of Madam Malkin, the owner, said, "Now, dear, your mother's quite right, none of us is supposed to go wandering around on our own anymore, it's nothing to do with being a child…"

"Watch where you're sticking that pin, will you!"

A teenage boy with a pale, pointed face and white-blond hair appeared from behind the rack, wearing a handsome set of dark green robes that glittered with pins around the hem and the edges of the sleeves. He strode to the mirror and examined himself; it was a few moments before he noticed Harry, Ron, and Hermione reflected over his shoulder. His light gray eyes narrowed.

"If you're wondering what the smell is, Mother, a Mudblood just walked in," said Draco Malfoy.

"I don't think there's any need for language like that!" said Madam Malkin, scurrying out from behind the clothes rack holding a tape measure and a wand. "And I don't want wands drawn in my shop either!" she added hastily, for a glance toward the door had shown her Harry and Ron both standing there with their wands out and pointing at Malfoy. Hermione, who was standing slightly behind them, whispered, "No, don't, honestly, it's not worth it. "

"Yeah, like you'd dare do magic out of school," sneered Malfoy. "Who blacked your eye, Granger? I want to send them flowers."

"That's quite enough!" said Madam Malkin sharply, looking over her shoulder for support. "Madam, please!"

Narcissa Malfoy strolled out from behind the clothes rack.

"Put those away," she said coldly to Harry and Ron. "If you attack my son again, I shall ensure that it is the last thing you ever do."

"Really?" said Harry, taking a step forward and gazing into the smoothly arrogant face that, for all its pallor, still resembled her sister's. He was as tall as she was now. "Going to get a few Death Eater pals to do us in, are you?"

Madam Malkin squealed and clutched at her heart.

"Really, you shouldn't accuse…dangerous thing to say…wands away, please!"

But Harry did not lower his wand. Narcissa Malfoy smiled unpleasantly.

"I see that being Dumbledore's favorite has given you a false sense of security, Harry Potter. But Dumbledore won't always be there to protect you."

Harry looked mockingly all around the shop. "Wow…look at that…he's not here now! So why not have a go? They might be able to find you a double cell in Azkaban with your loser of a husband!"

Malfoy made an angry movement toward Harry, but stumbled over his overlong robe. Ron laughed loudly.

"Don't you dare talk to my mother like that, Potter!" Malfoy snarled.

"It's all right, Draco," said Narcissa, restraining him with her thin white fingers upon his shoulder. "I expect Potter will be reunited with dear Sirius before I am reunited with Lucius."

Harry raised his wand higher.

"Harry, no!" moaned Hermione, grabbing his arm and attempting to push it down by his side. "Think…You mustn't…You'll be in such trouble…"

Madam Malkin dithered for a moment on the spot, then seemed to decide to act as though nothing was happening in the hope that it wouldn't. She bent toward Malfoy, who was still glaring at Harry.

"I think this left sleeve could come up a little bit more, dear, let me just…"

"Ouch!" bellowed Malfoy, slapping her hand away. "Watch where you're putting your pins, woman! Mother, I don't think I want these anymore."

He pulled the robes over his head and threw them onto the floor at Madam Malkin's feet.

"You're right, Draco," said Narcissa, with a contemptuous glance at Hermione, "now I know the kind of scum that shops here…We'll do better at Twilfitt and Tatting's."

And with that, the pair of them strode out of the shop, Malfoy taking care to bang as hard as he could into Ron on the way out.

"Well, really?" said Madam Malkin, snatching up the fallen robes and moving the tip of her wand over them like a vacuum cleaner, so that it removed all the dust.

She was distracted all through the fitting of Ron's and Harry's new robes, tried to sell Hermione wizard's dress robes instead of witch's, and when she finally bowed them out of the shop it was with an air of being glad to see the back of them.

"Got ev'rything?" asked Hagrid brightly when they reappeared at his side.

"Just about," said Harry. "Did you see the Malfoys?"

"Yeah," said Hagrid, unconcerned. "Bu they wouldn' dare make trouble in the middle o' Diagon Alley, Harry. Don' worry about them."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione exchanged looks, but before they could disabuse Hagrid of this comfortable notion, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Ginny appeared, all clutching heavy packages of books.

"Everyone all right?" said Mrs. Weasley. "Got your robes? Right then, we can pop in at the Apothecary and Eeylops on the way to Fred and George's…stick close, now…"

Neither Harry nor Ron bought any ingredients at the Apothecary, seeing that they were no longer studying Potions, but both bought large boxes of owl nuts for Hedwig and Pigwidgeon at Eeylops Owl Emporium. Then, with Mrs. Weasley checking her watch every minute or so, they headed farther along the street in search of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, the joke shop run by Fred and George.

"We really haven't got too long," Mrs. Weasley said. "So we'll just have a quick look around and then back to the car. We must be close, that's number ninety-two…ninety-four…"

"Whoa," said Ron, stopping in his tracks.

Set against the dull, poster-muffled shop Fronts around them, Fred and Georges windows hit the eye like a firework display. Casual passersby were looking back over their shoulders at the windows, and a few rather stunned-looking people had actually come to a halt, transfixed. The left-hand window was dazzlingly full of an assortment of goods that revolved, popped, flashed, bounced, and shrieked; Harry's eyes began to water just looking at it. The right-hand window was covered with a gigantic poster, purple like those of the Ministry, but emblazoned with flashing yellow letters:

WHY ARE YOU WORRYING ABOUT
YOU-KNOW-WHO?
YOU SHOULD BE WORRYING ABOUT
U-NO-POO —
THE CONSTIPATION SENSATION
THAT'S GRIPPING THE NATION!

Harry started to laugh. He heard a weak sort of moan beside him and looked around to see Mrs. Weasley gazing, dumbfounded, at the poster. Her lips moved silently, mouthing the name "U-No-Poo."

"They'll be murdered in their beds!" she whispered.

"No they won't!" said Ron, who, like Harry, was laughing. "This is brilliant!"

And he and Harry led the way into the shop. It was packed with customers; Harry could not get near the shelves. He stared around, looking up at the boxes piled to the ceiling: Here were the Skiving Snackboxes that the twins had perfected during their last, unfinished year at Hogwarts; Harry noticed that the Nosebleed Nougat was most popular, with only one battered box left on the shelf. There were bins full of trick wands, the cheapest merely turning into rubber chickens or pairs

of briefs when waved, the most expensive beating the unwary user around the head and neck, and boxes of quills, which came in Self-Inking, Spell-Checking, and Smart-Answer varieties. A space cleared in the crowd, and Harry pushed his way toward the counter, where a gaggle of delighted ten-year-olds was watching a tiny little wooden man slowly ascending the steps to a real set of gallows, both perched on a box that read: *Reusable hangman - spell it or he'll swing!*

"'*Patented Daydream Charms…*'"

Hermione had managed to squeeze through to a large display near the counter and was reading the information on the back of a box bearing a highly colored picture of a handsome youth and a swooning girl who were standing on the deck of a pirate ship.

"'One simple incantation and you will enter a top-quality, highly realistic, thirty-minute daydream, easy to fit into the average school lesson and virtually undetectable (side effects include vacant expression and minor drooling). Not for sale to under-sixteens.' "You know," said Hermione, looking up at Harry, "that really is extraordinary magic!"

"For that, Hermione," said a voice behind them, "you can have one for free."

A beaming Fred stood before them, wearing a set of magenta robes that clashed magnificently with his flaming hair.

"How are you, Harry?" They shook hands. "And what's happened to your eye, Hermione?"

"Your punching telescope," she said ruefully.

"Oh blimey, I forgot about those," said Fred. "Here —"

He pulled a tub out of his pocket and handed it to her; she unscrewed it gingerly to reveal a thick yellow paste.

"Just dab it on, that bruise'll be gone within the hour," said Fred. "We had to find a decent bruise remover. We're testing most of our products on ourselves."

Hermione looked nervous. "It is safe, isn't it?" she asked.

"Course it is," said Fred bracingly. "Come on, Harry, I'll give you a tour."

Harry left Hermione dabbing her black eye with paste and followed Fred toward the back of the shop, where he saw a stand of card and rope tricks.

"Muggle magic tricks!" said Fred happily, pointing them out. "For freaks like Dad, you know, who love Muggle stuff. It's not a big earner, but we do fairly steady business, they're great novelties…Oh, here's George…"

Fred's twin shook Harry's hand energetically.

"Giving him the tour? Come through the back, Harry, that's where we're making the real money…pocket anything, you, and you'll pay in more than Galleons!" he added warningly to a small boy who hastily whipped his hand out of the tub labeled *EDIBLE DARK MARKS —THEY'LL MAKE ANYONE SICK!*

George pushed back a curtain beside the Muggle tricks and Harry saw a darker, less crowded room. The packaging on the products lining these shelves was more subdued.

"We've just developed this more serious line," said Fred. "Funny how it happened…"

"You wouldn't believe how many people, even people who work at the Ministry, can't do a decent Shield Charm," said George. "'Course, they didn't have you teaching them, Harry."

"That's right…Well, we thought Shield Hats were a bit of a laugh, you know, challenge your mate to jinx you while wearing it and watch his face when the jinx just bounces off. But the Ministry bought five hundred for all its support staff! And we're still getting massive orders!"

"So we've expanded into a range of Shield Cloaks, Shield Gloves…"

"…I mean, they wouldn't help much against the Unforgivable Curses, but for minor to moderate hexes or jinxes…"

"And then we thought we'd get into the whole area of Defense Against the Dark Arts, because it's such a money spinner," continued George enthusiastically. "This is cool. Look, Instant Darkness Powder, we're importing it from Peru. Handy if you want to make a quick escape."

"And our Decoy Detonators are just walking off the shelves, look," said Fred, pointing at a number of weird-looking black horn-type objects that were indeed attempting to scurry out of sight. "You just drop one surreptitiously and it'll run off and make a nice loud noise out of sight, giving you a diversion if you need one.

"Handy," said Harry, impressed.

"Here," said George, catching a couple and throwing them to Harry.

A young witch with short blonde hair poked her head around the curtain; Harry saw that she too was wearing magenta staff robes.

"There's a customer out here looking for a joke cauldron, Mr. Weasley and Mr. Weasley," she said.

Harry found it very odd to hear Fred and George called "Mr. Weasley," but they took it in their stride.

"Right you are, Verity, I'm coming," said George promptly. "Harry, you help yourself to anything you want, all right? No charge."

"I can't do that!" said Harry, who had already pulled out his money bag to pay for the Decoy Detonators.

"You don't pay here," said Fred firmly, waving away Harry's gold.

"But…"

"You gave us our start-up loan, we haven't forgotten," said George sternly "Take whatever you like, and just remember to tell people where you got it, if they ask."

George swept off through the curtain to help with the customers, and Fred led Harry back into the main part of the shop to find Hermione and Ginny still poring over the Patented Daydream Charms.

"Haven't you girls found our special WonderWitch products yet?" asked Fred. "Follow me, ladies…"

Near the window was an array of violently pink products around which a cluster of excited girls was giggling enthusiastically. Hermione and Ginny both hung back, looking wary.

"There you go," said Fred proudly. "Best range of love potions you'll find anywhere."

Ginny raised an eyebrow skeptically. "Do they work?" she asked.

"Certainly they work, for up to twenty-four hours at a time depending on the weight of the boy in question…"

"…and the attractiveness of the girl," said George, reappearing suddenly at their side. "But we're not selling them to our sister," he added, becoming suddenly stern, "not when she's already got about five boys on the go from what we've…"

"Whatever you've heard from Ron is a big fat lie," said Ginny calmly, leaning forward to take a small pink pot off the shelf. "What's this?"

"Guaranteed ten-second pimple vanisher," said Fred. "Excellent on everything from boils to blackheads, but don't change the subject. Are you or are you not currently going out with a boy called Dean Thomas?"

"Yes, I am," said Ginny. "And last time I looked, he was definitely one boy, not five. What are those?"

She was pointing at a number of round balls of fluff in shades of pink and purple, all rolling around the bottom of a cage and emitting high-pitched squeaks.

"Pygmy Puffs," said George. "Miniature puffskeins, we can't breed them fast enough. So what about Michael Corner?"

"I dumped him, he was a bad loser," said Ginny, putting a finger through the bars of the cage and watching the Pygmy Puffs crowd around it. "They're really cute!"

"They're fairly cuddly, yes," conceded Fred. "But you're moving through boyfriends a bit fast, aren't you?"

Ginny turned to look at him, her hands on her hips. There was such a Mrs. Weasley-ish glare on her face that Harry was surprised Fred didn't recoil.

"It's none of your business. And I'll thank you" she added angrily to Ron, who had just appeared at George's elbow, laden with merchandise, "not to tell tales about me to these two!"

"That's three Galleons, nine Sickles, and a Knut," said Fred, examining the many boxes in Ron's arms. "Cough up."

“I’m your brother!”

“And that’s our stuff you’re nicking. Three Galleons, nine Sickles. I’ll knock off the Knut.”

“But I haven’t got three Galleons, nine Sickles!”

“You’d better put it back then, and mind you put it on the right shelves.”

Ron dropped several boxes, swore, and made a rude hand gesture at Fred that was unfortunately spotted by Mrs. Weasley, who had chosen that moment to appear.

“If I see you do that again I’ll jinx your fingers together,” she said sharply.

“Mum, can I have a Pygmy Puff?” said Ginny at once.

“A what?” said Mrs. Weasley warily.

“Look, they’re so sweet…”

Mrs. Weasley moved aside to look at the Pygmy Puffs, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione momentarily had an unimpeded view out of the window. Draco Malfoy was hurrying up the street alone. As he passed Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes, he glanced over his shoulder. Seconds later, he moved beyond the scope of the window and they lost sight of him.

“Wonder where his mummy is?” said Harry, frowning.

“Given her the slip by the looks of it,” said Ron.

“Why, though?” said Hermione.

Harry said nothing; he was thinking too hard. Narcissa Malfoy would not have let her precious son out of her sight willingly; Malfoy must have made a real effort to free himself from her clutches.

Harry, knowing and loathing Malfoy, was sure the reason could not be innocent.

He glanced around. Mrs. Weasley and Ginny were bending over the Pygmy Puffs. Mr. Weasley was delightedly examining a pack of Muggle marked playing cards. Fred and George were both helping customers. On the other side of the glass, Hagrid was standing with his back to them, looking up and down the street.

“Get under here, quick,” said Harry, pulling his Invisibility Cloak out of his bag.

“Oh — I don’t know, Harry,” said Hermione, looking uncertainly toward Mrs. Weasley.

“Come on,” said Ron.

She hesitated for a second longer, then ducked under the cloak with Harry and Ron. Nobody noticed them vanish; they were all too interested in Fred and George’s products. Harry, Ron, and Hermione squeezed their way out of the door as quickly as they could, but by the time they gained the street, Malfoy had disappeared just as successfully as they had.

“He was going in that direction,” murmured Harry as quietly as possible, so that the humming Hagrid would not hear them. “C’mon.”

They scurried along, peering left and right, through shop windows and doors, until Hermione pointed ahead.

"That's him, isn't it?" she whispered. "Turning left?"

"Big surprise," whispered Ron.

For Malfoy had glanced around, then slid into Knockturn Alley and out of sight.

"Quick, or we'll lose him," said Harry, speeding up.

"Our feet'll be seen!" said Hermione anxiously, as the cloak flapped a little around their ankles; it was much more difficult hiding all three of them under the cloak nowadays.

"It doesn't matter," said Harry impatiently. "Just hurry!"

But Knockturn Alley, the side street devoted to the Dark Arts, looked completely deserted. They peered into windows as they passed, but none of the shops seemed to have any customers at all. Harry supposed it was a bit of a giveaway in these dangerous and suspicious times to buy Dark artifacts — or at least, to be seen buying them.

Hermione gave his arm a hard pinch.

"Ouch!"

"Shh! Look! He's in there!" she breathed in Harry's ear.

They had drawn level with the only shop in Knockturn Alley that Harry had ever visited, Borgin and Burkes, which sold a wide variety of sinister objects. There in the midst of the cases full of skulls and old bottles stood Draco Malfoy with his back to them, just visible beyond the very same large black cabinet in which Harry had once hidden to avoid Malfoy and his father. Judging by the movements of Malfoy's hands, he was talking animatedly. The proprietor of the shop, Mr. Borgin, an oily-haired, stooping man, stood facing Malfoy. He was wearing a curious expression of mingled resentment and fear.

"If only we could hear what they're saying!" said Hermione.

"We can!" said Ron excitedly. "Hang on, damn."

He dropped a couple more of the boxes he was still clutching as he fumbled with the largest.

"Extendable Ears, look!"

"Fantastic!" said Hermione, as Ron unraveled the long, flesh-colored strings and began to feed them toward the bottom of the door. "Oh, I hope the door isn't Imperturbable…"

"No!" said Ron gleefully. "Listen!"

They put their heads together and listened intently to the ends of the strings, through which Malfoy's voice could be heard loud and clear, as though a radio had been turned on.

"…you know how to fix it?"

"Possibly," said Borgin, in a tone that suggested he was unwilling to commit himself. "I'll need to see it, though. Why don't you bring it into the shop?"

"I can't," said Malfoy. "It's got to stay put. I just need you to tell me how to do it."

Harry saw Borgin lick his lips nervously.

“Well, without seeing it, I must say it will be a very difficult job, perhaps impossible. I couldn’t guarantee anything.”

“No?” said Malfoy, and Harry knew, just by his tone, that Malfoy was sneering. “Perhaps this will make you more confident.”

He moved toward Borgin and was blocked from view by the cabinet. Harry, Ron, and Hermione shuffled sideways to try and keep him in sight, but all they could see was Borgin, looking very frightened.

“Tell anyone,” said Maifoy, “and there will be retribution. You know Fenrir Greyback? He’s a family friend. He’ll be dropping in from time to time to make sure you’re giving the problem your full attention.”

“There will be no need for…”

“I’ll decide that,” said Malfoy. “Well, I’d better be off. And don’t forget to keep that one safe, I’ll need it.”

“Perhaps you’d like to take it now?”

“No, of course I wouldn’t, you stupid, little man, how would I look carrying that down the street? Just don’t sell it.”

“Of course not…sir.”

Borgin made a bow as deep as the one Harry had once seen him give Lucius Malfoy.

“Not a word to anyone, Borgin, and that includes my mother, understand?”

“Naturally, naturally,” murmured Borgin, bowing again.

Next moment, the bell over the door tinkled loudly as Malfoy stalked out of the shop looking very pleased with himself. He passed so close to Harry, Ron, and Hermione that they felt the cloak flutter around their knees again. Inside the shop, Borgin remained frozen; his unctuous smile had vanished; he looked worried.

“What was that about?” whispered Ron, reeling in the Extendable Ears.

“Dunno,” said Harry, thinking hard. “He wants something mended…and he wants to reserve something in there…Could you see what he pointed at when he said ‘that one’?”

“No, he was behind that cabinet…”

“You two stay here,” whispered Hermione.

“What are you…?”

But Hermione had already ducked out from under the cloak. She checked her hair in the reflection in the glass, then marched into the shop, setting the bell tinkling again. Ron hastily fed the Extendable Ears back under the door and passed one of the strings to Harry.

“Hello, horrible morning, isn’t it?” Hermione said brightly to Borgin, who did not answer, but cast her a suspicious look. Humming cheerily, Hermione strolled through the jumble of objects on display.

“Is this necklace for sale?” she asked, pausing beside a glass-fronted case.

“If you’ve got one and a half thousand Galleons,” said Mr. Borgin coldly.

“Oh…er…no, I haven’t got quite that much,” said Hermione, walking on. “And…what about this lovely…um…skull?”

“Sixteen Galleons.”

“So it’s for sale, then? It isn’t being…kept for anyone?”

Mr. Borgin squinted at her. Harry had the nasty feeling he knew exactly what Hermione was up to. Apparently Hermione felt she had been rumbled too because she suddenly threw caution to the winds.

“The thing is, that…er…boy who was in here just now, Draco Malfoy, well, he’s a friend of mine, and I want to get him a birthday present, but if he’s already reserved anything, I obviously don’t want to get him the same thing, so…um…”

It was a pretty lame story in Harry’s opinion, and apparently Borgin thought so too.

“Out,” he said sharply. “Get out!”

Hermione did not wait to be asked twice, but hurried to the door with Borgin at her heels. As the bell tinkled again, Borgin slammed the door behind her and put up the closed sign.

“Ah well,” said Ron, throwing the cloak back over Hermione. “Worth a try, but you were a bit obvious…”

“Well, next time you can show me how it’s done, Master of Mystery!” she snapped.

Ron and Hermione bickered all the way back to Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes, where they were forced to stop so that they could dodge undetected around a very anxious-looking Mrs. Weasley and Hagrid, who had clearly noticed their absence. Once in the shop, Harry whipped off the Invisibility Cloak, hid it in his bag, and joined in with the other two when they insisted, in answer to Mrs. Weasleys accusations, that they had been in the back room all along, and that she could not have looked properly.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE SLUG CLUB

Harry spent a lot of the last week of the holidays pondering the meaning of Malfoy's behavior in Knockturn Alley. What disturbed him most was the satisfied look on Malfoy's face as he had left the shop. Nothing that made Malfoy look that happy could be good news. To his slight annoyance, however, neither Ron nor Hermione seemed quite as curious about Malfoy's activities as he was; or at least, they seemed to get bored of discussing it after a few days.

"Yes, I've already agreed it was fishy, Harry," said Hermione a little impatiently. She was sitting on the windowsill in Fred and George's room with her feet up on one of the cardboard boxes and had only grudgingly looked up from her new copy of *Advanced Rune Translation*. "But haven't we agreed there could be a lot of explanations?"

"Maybe he's broken his Hand of Glory" said Ron vaguely, as he attempted to straighten his broomstick's bent tail twigs. "Remember that shriveled-up arm Malfoy had?"

"But what about when he said, 'Don't forget to keep that one safe'?" asked Harry for the umpteenth time. "That sounded to me like Borgin's got another one of the broken objects, and Malfoy wants both."

"You reckon?" said Ron, now trying to scrape some dirt off his broom handle.

"Yeah, I do," said Harry. When neither Ron nor Hermione answered, he said, "Malfoy's father's in Azkaban. Don't you think Malfoy'd like revenge?"

Ron looked up, blinking.

"Malfoy, revenge? What can he do about it?"

"That's my point, I don't know!" said Harry, frustrated. "But he's up to something and I think we should take it seriously. His father's a Death Eater and…"

Harry broke off, his eyes fixed on the window behind Hermione, his mouth open. A startling thought had just occurred to him.

"Harry?" said Hermione in an anxious voice. "What's wrong?"

"Your scar's not hurting again, is it?" asked Ron nervously.

"He's a Death Eater," said Harry slowly. "He's replaced his father as a Death Eater!"

There was a silence; then Ron erupted in laughter. "Malfoy? He's sixteen, Harry! You think You-Know-Who would let Malfoy join?"

"It seems very unlikely, Harry," said Hermione in a repressive sort of voice. "What makes you think —?"

“In Madam Malkin’s. She didn’t touch him, but he yelled and jerked his arm away from her when she went to roll up his sleeve. It was his left arm. He’s been branded with the Dark Mark.”

Ron and Hermione looked at each other.

“Well…” said Ron, sounding thoroughly unconvinced.

“I think he just wanted to get out of there, Harry,” said Hermione.

“He showed Borgin something we couldn’t see,” Harry pressed on stubbornly. “Something that seriously scared Borgin. It was the Mark, I know it…he was showing Borgin who he was dealing with, you saw how seriously Borgin took him!”

Ron and Hermione exchanged another look.

“I’m not sure, Harry…”

“Yeah, I still don’t reckon You-Know-Who would let Malfoy join…”

Annoyed, but absolutely convinced he was right, Harry snatched up a pile of filthy Quidditch robes and left the room; Mrs. Weasley had been urging them for days not to leave their washing and packing until the last moment. On the landing he bumped into Ginny, who was returning to her room carrying a pile of freshly laundered clothes.

“I wouldn’t go in the kitchen just now,” she warned him. “There’s a lot of Phlegm around.”

“I’ll be careful not to slip in it.” Harry smiled.

Sure enough, when he entered the kitchen it was to find Fleur sitting at the kitchen table, in full flow about plans for her wedding to Bill, while Mrs. Weasley kept watch over a pile of self-peeling sprouts, looking bad-tempered.

“…Bill and I ‘ave almost decided on only two bridesmaids, Ginny and Gabrielle will look very sweet togezzer. I am theenking of dressing zem in pale gold, pink would of course be ‘orrible with Ginny’s ‘air!”

“Ah, Harry!” said Mrs. Weasley loudly, cutting across Fleur’s monologue. “Good, I wanted to explain about the security arrangements for the journey to Hogwarts tomorrow. We’ve got Ministry cars again, and there will be Aurors waiting at the station.”

“Is Tonks going to be there?” asked Harry, handing over his Quidditch things.

“No, I don’t think so, she’s been stationed somewhere else from what Arthur said.”

“She has let ‘erself go, zat Tonks,” Fleur mused, examining her own stunning reflection in the back of a teaspoon. “A big mistake if you ask.”

“Yes, thank you,” said Mrs. Weasley tartly, cutting across Fleur again. “You’d better get on, Harry, I want the trunks ready tonight, if possible, so we don’t have the usual last-minute scramble.”

And in fact, their departure the following morning was smoother than usual. The Ministry cars glided up to the front of the Burrow to find them waiting, trunks packed; Hermione's cat, Crookshanks, safely enclosed in his traveling basket; and Hedwig; Ron's owl, Pigwidgeon; and Ginny's new purple Pygmy Puff, Arnold, in cages.

"Aurevoir, 'Arry," said Fleur throatily, kissing him good-bye. Ron hurried forward, looking hopeful, but Ginny stuck out her foot and Ron fell, sprawling in the dust at Fleur's feet. Furious, red-faced, and dirt-spattered, he hurried into the car without saying good-bye.

There was no cheerful Hagrid waiting for them at King's Cross Station. Instead, two grim-faced, bearded Aurors in dark Muggle suits moved forward the moment the cars stopped and, flanking the party, marched them into the station without speaking.

"Quick, quick, through the barrier," said Mrs. Weasley, who seemed a little flustered by this austere efficiency. "Harry had better go first, with…"

She looked inquiringly at one of the Aurors, who nodded briefly, seized Harry's upper arm, and attempted to steer him toward the barrier between platforms nine and ten.

"I can walk, thanks," said Harry irritably, jerking his arm out of the Auror's grip. He pushed his trolley directly at the solid barrier, ignoring his silent companion, and found himself, a second later, standing on platform nine and three-quarters, where the scarlet Hogwarts Express stood belching steam over the crowd.

Hermione and the Weasleys joined him within seconds. Without waiting to consult his grim-faced Auror, Harry motioned to Ron and Hermione to follow him up the platform, looking for an empty compartment.

"We can't, Harry," said Hermione, looking apologetic. "Ron and I've got to go to the prefects' carriage first and then patrol the corridors for a bit."

"Oh yeah, I forgot," said Harry.

"You'd better get straight on the train, all of you, you've only got a few minutes to go," said Mrs. Weasley, consulting her watch. "Well, have a lovely term, Ron…"

"Mr. Weasley, can I have a quick word?" said Harry, making up his mind on the spur of the moment.

"Of course," said Mr. Weasley, who looked slightly surprised, but followed Harry out of earshot of the others nevertheless.

Harry had thought it through carefully and come to the conclusion that, if he was to tell anyone, Mr. Weasley was the right person; firstly, because he worked at the Ministry and was therefore in the

best position to make further investigations, and secondly, because he thought that there was not too much risk of Mr. Weasley exploding with anger.

He could see Mrs. Weasley and the grim-faced Auror casting the pair of them suspicious looks as they moved away.

"When we were in Diagon Alley," Harry began, but Mr. Weasley forestalled him with a grimace.

"Am I about to discover where you, Ron, and Hermione disappeared to while you were supposed to be in the back room of Fred and George's shop?"

"How did you…?"

"Harry, please. You're talking to the man who raised Fred and George."

"Er…yeah, all right, we weren't in the back room."

"Very well, then, let's hear the worst."

"Well, we followed Draco Malfoy. We used my Invisibility Cloak."

"Did you have any particular reason for doing so, or was it a mere whim?"

"Because I thought Malfoy was up to something," said Harry, disregarding Mr. Weasley's look of mingled exasperation and amusement. "He'd given his mother the slip and I wanted to know why."

"Of course you did," said Mr. Weasley, sounding resigned. "Well? Did you find out why?"

"He went into Borgin and Burkes," said Harry, "and started bullying the bloke in there, Borgin, to help him fix something. And he said he wanted Borgin to keep something else for him. He made it sound like it was the same kind of thing that needed fixing. Like they were a pair. And…"

Harry took a deep breath.

"There's something else. We saw Malfoy jump about a mile when Madam Malkin tried to touch his left arm. I think he's been branded with the Dark Mark. I think he's replaced his father as a Death Eater."

Mr. Weasley looked taken aback. After a moment he said, "Harry, I doubt whether You-Know-Who would allow a sixteen-year-old…"

"Does anyone really know what You-Know-Who would or wouldn't do?" asked Harry angrily. "Mr. Weasley, I'm sorry, but isn't it worth investigating? If Malfoy wants something fixing, and he needs to threaten Borgin to get it done, it's probably something Dark or dangerous, isn't it?"

"I doubt it, to be honest, Harry," said Mr. Weasley slowly. "You see, when Lucius Malfoy was arrested, we raided his house. We took away everything that might have been dangerous."

"I think you missed something," said Harry stubbornly.

“Well, maybe,” said Mr. Weasley, but Harry could tell that Mr. Weasley was humoring him.

There was a whistle behind them; nearly everyone had boarded the train and the doors were closing.

“You’d better hurry!” said Mr. Weasley, as Mrs. Weasley cried, “Harry, quickly!”

He hurried forward and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley helped him load his trunk onto the train.

“Now, dear, you’re coming to us for Christmas, it’s all fixed with Dumbledore, so we’ll see you quite soon,” said Mrs. Weasley through the window, as Harry slammed the door shut behind him and the train began to move. “You make sure you look after yourself and…”

The train was gathering speed.

“…be good and…” She was jogging to keep up now.

“…stay safe!”

Harry waved until the train had turned a corner and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were lost to view, then turned to see where the others had got to. He supposed Ron and Hermione were cloistered in the prefects’ carriage, but Ginny was a little way along the corridor, chatting to some friends. He made his way toward her, dragging his trunk.

People stared shamelessly as he approached. They even pressed their faces against the windows of their compartments to get a look at him. He had expected an upswing in the amount of gaping and gawping he would have to endure this term after all the “Chosen One” rumors in the *Daily Prophet*, but he did not enjoy the sensation of standing in a very bright spotlight. He tapped Ginny on the shoulder.

“Fancy trying to find a compartment?”

“I can’t, Harry, I said I’d meet Dean,” said Ginny brightly. “See you later.”

“Right,” said Harry. He felt a strange twinge of annoyance as she walked away, her long red hair dancing behind her; he had become so used to her presence over the summer that he had almost forgotten that Ginny did not hang around with him, Ron, and Hermione while at school. Then he blinked and looked around: He was surrounded by mesmerized girls.

“Hi, Harry!” said a familiar voice from behind him.

“Neville!” said Harry in relief, turning to see a round-faced boy struggling toward him.

“Hello, Harry,” said a girl with long hair and large misty eyes, who was just behind Neville.

“Luna, hi, how are you?”

“Very well, thank you,” said Luna. She was clutching a magazine to her chest; large letters on the front announced that there was a pair of free Spectrespecs inside.

"*Quibbler* still going strong, then?" asked Harry, who felt a certain fondness for the magazine, having given it an exclusive interview the previous year.

"Oh yes, circulation's well up," said Luna happily.

"Let's find seats," said Harry, and the three of them set off along the train through hordes of silently staring students. At last they found an empty compartment, and Harry hurried inside gratefully.

"They're even staring at us?" said Neville, indicating himself and Luna. "Because we're with you!"

"They're staring at you because you were at the Ministry too," said Harry, as he hoisted his trunk into the luggage rack. "Our little adventure there was all over the *Daily Prophet*, you must've seen it."

"Yes, I thought Gran would be angry about all the publicity," said Neville, "but she was really pleased. Says I'm starting to live up to my dad at long last. She bought me a new wand, look!"

He pulled it out and showed it to Harry.

"Cherry and unicorn hair," he said proudly. "We think it was one of the last Ollivander ever sold, he vanished next day…oy, come back here, Trevor!"

And he dived under the seat to retrieve his toad as it made one of its frequent bids for freedom.

"Are we still doing D.A. meetings this year, Harry?" asked Luna, who was detaching a pair of psychedelic spectacles from the middle of *The Quibbler*.

"No point now we've got rid of Umbridge, is there?" said Harry, sitting down. Neville bumped his head against the seat as he emerged from under it. He looked most disappointed.

"I liked the D.A.! I learned loads with you!"

"I enjoyed the meetings too," said Luna serenely. "It was like having friends."

This was one of those uncomfortable things Luna often said and which made Harry feel a squirming mixture of pity and embarrassment. Before he could respond, however, there was a disturbance outside their compartment door; a group of fourth-year girls was whispering and giggling together on the other side of the glass.

"You ask him!"

"No, you! "

"I'll do it!"

And one of them, a bold-looking girl with large dark eyes, a prominent chin, and long black hair pushed her way through the door.

"Hi, Harry, I'm Romilda, Romilda Vane," she said loudly and confidently. "Why don't you join us in our compartment? You don't have to sit with them," she added in a stage whisper, indicating Neville's bottom, which was sticking out from under the seat again as he groped around for Trevor, and Luna, who was now wearing her free Spectrespecs, which gave her the look of a demented, multicolored owl.

"They're friends of mine," said Harry coldly.

"Oh," said the girl, looking very surprised. "Oh. Okay."

And she withdrew, sliding the door closed behind her.

"People expect you to have cooler friends than us," said Luna, once again displaying her knack for embarrassing honesty.

"You are cool," said Harry shortly. "None of them was at the Ministry. They didn't fight with me."

"That's a very nice thing to say," beamed Luna. Then she pushed her Spectrespecs farther up her nose and settled down to read *The Quibbler*.

"We didn't face him, though," said Neville, emerging from under the seat with fluff and dust in his hair and a resigned-looking Trevor in his hand. "You did. You should hear my gran talk about you. *'That Harry Potter's got more backbone than the whole Ministry of Magic put together!'* She'd give anything to have you as a grandson…"

Harry laughed uncomfortably and changed the subject to OWL. results as soon as he could. While Neville recited his grades and wondered aloud whether he would be allowed to take a Transfiguration NEWT, with only an "Acceptable," Harry watched him without really listening.

Neville's childhood had been blighted by Voldemort just as much as Harry's had, but Neville had no idea how close he had come to having Harry's destiny. The prophecy could have referred to either of them, yet, for his own inscrutable reasons, Voldemort had chosen to believe that Harry was the one meant.

Had Voldemort chosen Neville, it would be Neville sitting opposite Harry bearing the lightning-shaped scar and the weight of the prophecy…Or would it? Would Neville's mother have died to save him, as Lily had died for Harry? Surely she would…But what if she had been unable to stand between her son and Voldemort? Would there then have been no "Chosen One" at all? An empty seat where Neville now sat and a scarless Harry who would have been kissed good-bye by his own mother, not Ron's?

"You all right, Harry? You look funny," said Neville.

Harry started. “Sorry…I…”

“Wrackspurt got you?” asked Luna sympathetically, peering at Harry through her enormous colored spectacles.

“I…what?”

“A Wrackspurt…They’re invisible. They float in through your ears and make your brain go fuzzy,” she said. “I thought I felt one zooming around in here.”

She flapped her hands at thin air, as though beating off large invisible moths. Harry and Neville caught each other’s eyes and hastily began to talk of Quidditch.

The weather beyond the train windows was as patchy as it had been all summer; they passed through stretches of the chilling mist, then out into weak, clear sunlight. It was during one of the clear spells, when the sun was visible almost directly overhead, that Ron and Hermione entered the compartment at last.

“Wish the lunch trolley would hurry up, I’m starving,” said Ron longingly, slumping into the seat beside Harry and rubbing his stomach. “Hi, Neville. Hi, Luna. Guess what?” he added, turning to Harry. “Malfoys not doing prefect duty. He’s just sitting in his compartment with the other Slytherins, we saw him when we passed.”

Harry sat up straight, interested. It was not like Malfoy to pass up the chance to demonstrate his power as prefect, which he had happily abused all the previous year.

“What did he do when he saw you?”

“The usual,” said Ron indifferently, demonstrating a rude hand gesture. “Not like him, though, is it? Well…that is”— he did the hand gesture again — “but why isn’t he out there bullying first years?”

“Dunno,” said Harry, but his mind was racing. Didn’t this look as though Malfoy had more important things on his mind than bullying younger students?

“Maybe he preferred the Inquisitorial Squad,” said Hermione. “Maybe being a prefect seems a bit tame after that.”

“I don’t think so,” said Harry. “I think he’s —”

But before he could expound on his theory, the compartment door slid open again and a breathless third-year girl stepped inside.

“I’m supposed to deliver these to Neville Longbottom and Harry P-Potter,” she faltered, as her eyes met Harry’s and she turned scarlet. She was holding out two scrolls of parchment tied with

violet ribbon. Perplexed, Harry and Neville took the scroll addressed to each of them and the girl stumbled back out of the compartment.

“What is it?” Ron demanded, as Harry unrolled his.

“An invitation,” said Harry.

Harry,

I would be delighted if you would join me for a bite of lunch in compartment C.

Sincerely,

Professor H. E. F. Slughorn

“But what does he want me for?” asked Neville nervously, as though he was expecting detention.

“No idea,” said Harry, which was not entirely true, though he had no proof yet that his hunch was correct. “Listen,” he added, seized by a sudden brain wave, “let’s go under the Invisibility Cloak, then we might get a good look at Malfoy on the way, see what he’s up to.”

This idea, however, came to nothing: The corridors, which were packed with people on the lookout for the lunch trolley, were impossible to negotiate while wearing the cloak. Harry stowed it regretfully back in his bag, reflecting that it would have been nice to wear it just to avoid all the staring, which seemed to have increased in intensity even since he had last walked down the train. Every now and then, students would hurtle out of their compartments to get a better look at him. The exception was Cho Chang, who darted into her compartment when she saw Harry coming. As Harry passed the window, he saw her deep in determined conversation with her friend Marietta, who was wearing a very thick layer of makeup that did not entirely obscure the odd formation of pimples still etched across her face. Smirking slightly, Harry pushed on.

When they reached compartment C, they saw at once that they were not Slughorn’s only invitees, although judging by the enthusiasm of Slughorn’s welcome, Harry was the most warmly anticipated.

“Harry, m’boy!” said Slughorn, jumping up at the sight of him so that his great velvet-covered belly seemed to fill all the remaining space in the compartment. His shiny bald head and great silvery mustache gleamed as brightly in the sunlight as the golden buttons on his waistcoat. “Good to see you, good to see you! And you must be Mr. Longbottom!”

Neville nodded, looking scared. At a gesture from Slughorn, they sat down opposite each other in the only two empty seats, which were nearest the door. Harry glanced around at their fellow guests. He recognized a Slytherin from their year, a tall black boy with high cheekbones and long,

slanting eyes; there were also two seventh-year boys Harry did not know and, squashed in the corner beside Slughorn and looking as though she was not entirely sure how she had got there, Ginny.

"Now, do you know everyone?" Slughorn asked Harry and Neville. "Blaise Zabini is in your year, of course —"

Zabini did not make any sign of recognition or greeting, nor did Harry or Neville: Gryffindor and Slytherin students loathed each other on principle.

"This is Cormac McLaggen, perhaps you've come across each other —? No?"

McLaggen, a large, wiry-haired youth, raised a hand, and Harry and Neville nodded back at him.

"—and this is Marcus Belby, I don't know whether —?"

Belby, who was thin and nervous-looking, gave a strained smile.

"— and this charming young lady tells me she knows you!" Slughorn finished.

Ginny grimaced at Harry and Neville from behind Slughorn's back.

"Well now, this is most pleasant," said Slughorn cozily. "A chance to get to know you all a little better. Here, take a napkin. I've packed my own lunch; the trolley, as I remember it, is heavy on licorice wands, and a poor old man's digestive system isn't quite up to such things…Pheasant, Belby?"

Belby started and accepted what looked like half a cold pheasant.

"I was just telling young Marcus here that I had the pleasure of teaching his Uncle Damocles," Slughorn told Harry and Neville, now passing around a basket of rolls. "Outstanding wizard, outstanding, and his Order of Merlin most well-deserved. Do you see much of your uncle, Marcus?"

Unfortunately, Beiby had just taken a large mouthful of pheasant; in his haste to answer Slughorn he swallowed too fast, turned purple, and began to choke.

"*Anapneo*," said Slughorn calmly, pointing his wand at Belby, whose airway seemed to clear at once.

"Not…not much of him, no," gasped Belby, his eyes streaming.

"Well, of course, I daresay he's busy," said Slughorn, looking questioningly at Belby. "I doubt he invented the Wolfsbane Potion without considerable hard work!"

"I suppose…" said Belby, who seemed afraid to take another bite of pheasant until he was sure that Slughorn had finished with him. "Er…he and my dad don't get on very well, you see, so I don't really know much about…"

His voice tailed away as Slughorn gave him a cold smile and turned to McLaggen instead.

“Now, you, Cormac,” said Slughorn, “I happen to know you see a lot of your Uncle Tiberius, because he has a rather splendid picture of the two of you hunting nogtails in, I think, Norfolk?”

“Oh, yeah, that was fun, that was,” said McLaggen. “We went with Bertie Higgs and Rufus Scrimgeour; this was before he became Minister, obviously —”

“Ah, you know Bertie and Rufus too?” beamed Slughorn, now offering around a small tray of pies; somehow, Belby was missed out. “Now tell me…”

It was as Harry had suspected. Everyone here seemed to have been invited because they were connected to somebody well-known or influential — everyone except Ginny. Zabini, who was interrogated after McLaggen, turned out to have a famously beautiful witch for a mother (from what Harry could make out, she had been married seven times, each of her husbands dying mysteriously and leaving her mounds of gold). It was Neville’s turn next: This was a very uncomfortable ten minutes, for Neville’s parents, well-known Aurors, had been tortured into insanity by Bellatrix Lestrange and a couple of Death Eater cronies. At the end of Neville’s interview, Harry had the impression that Slughorn was reserving judgment on Neville, yet to see whether he had any of his parents’ flair.

“And now,” said Slughorn, shifting massively in his seat with the air of a compere introducing his star act. “Harry Potter! Where to begin? I feel I barely scratched the surface when we met over the summer!” He contemplated Harry for a moment as though he was a particularly large and succulent piece of pheasant, then said, “‘The Chosen One,’ they’re calling you now!”

Harry said nothing. Belby, McLaggen, and Zabini were all staring at him.

“Of course,” said Slughorn, watching Harry closely, “there have been rumors for years…I remember when…well — after that terrible night — Lily — James — and you survived — and the word was that you must have powers beyond the ordinary —”

Zabini gave a tiny little cough that was clearly supposed to indicate amused skepticism. An angry voice burst out from behind Slughorn.

“Yeah, Zabini, because you’re so talented…at posing…”

“Oh dear!” chuckled Slughorn comfortably, looking around at Ginny, who was glaring at Zabini around Slughorn’s great belly. “You want to be careful, Blaise! I saw this young lady perform the most marvelous Bat-Bogey Hex as I was passing her carriage! I wouldn’t cross her!”

Zabini merely looked contemptuous.

“Anyway,” said Slughorn, turning back to Harry. “Such rumors this summer. Of course, one doesn’t know what to believe, the *Prophet* has been known to print inaccuracies, make mistakes —

but there seems little doubt, given the number of witnesses, that there was quite a disturbance at the Ministry and that you were there in the thick of it all!"

Harry, who could not see any way out of this without flatly lying, nodded but still said nothing. Slughorn beamed at him.

"So modest, so modest, no wonder Dumbledore is so fond — you were there, then? But the rest of the stories — so sensational, of course, one doesn't know quite what to believe — this fabled prophecy, for instance —"

"We never heard a prophecy," said Neville, turning geranium pink as he said it.

"That's right," said Ginny staunchly. "Neville and I were both there too, and all this 'Chosen One' rubbish is just the *Prophet* making things up as usual."

"You were both there too, were you?" said Slughorn with great interest, looking from Ginny to Neville, but both of them sat clam-like before his encouraging smile.

"Yes…well…it is true that the *Prophet* often exaggerates, of course…" Slughorn said, sounding a little disappointed. "I remember dear Gwenog telling me (Gwenog Jones, I mean, of course, Captain of the Holyhead Harpies) —"

He meandered off into a long-winded reminiscence, but Harry had the distinct impression that Slughorn had not finished with him, and that he had not been convinced by Neville and Ginny.

The afternoon wore on with more anecdotes about illustrious wizards Slughorn had taught, all of whom had been delighted to join what he called the "Slug Club" at Hogwarts. Harry could not wait to leave, but couldn't see how to do so politely. Finally the train emerged from yet another long misty stretch into a red sunset, and Slughorn looked around, blinking in the twilight.

"Good gracious, it's getting dark already! I didn't notice that they'd lit the lamps! You'd better go and change into your robes, all of you. McLaggen, you must drop by and borrow that book on nogtails. Harry, Blaise — any time you're passing. Same goes for you, miss," he twinkled at Ginny. "Well, off you go, off you go!"

As he pushed past Harry into the darkening corridor, Zabini shot him a filthy look that Harry returned with interest. He, Ginny, and Neville followed Zabini back along the train.

"I'm glad that's over," muttered Neville. "Strange man, isn't he?"

"Yeah, he is a bit," said Harry, his eyes on Zabini. "How come you ended up in there, Ginny?"

"He saw me hex Zacharias Smith," said Ginny. "You remember that idiot from Hufflepuff who was in the D.A.? He kept on and on asking about what happened at the Ministry and in the end he

annoyed me so much I hexed him — when Slughorn came in I thought I was going to get detention, but he just thought it was; it really good hex and invited me to lunch! Mad, eh?"

"Better reason for inviting someone than because their mother's famous," said Harry, scowling at the back of Zabini's head, "or because their uncle —"

But he broke off. An idea had just occurred to him, a reckless but potentially wonderful idea…In a minute's time, Zabini was going to reenter the Slytherin sixth-year compartment and Malfoy would be sitting there, thinking himself unheard by anybody except fellow Slytherins…If Harry could only enter, unseen, behind him, what might he not see or hear? True, there was little of the journey left…Hogsmeade Station had to be less than half an hour away, judging by the wildness of the scenery flashing by the windows…but nobody else seemed prepared to take Harry's suspicions seriously, so it was down to him to prove them.

"I'll see you two later," said Harry under his breath, pulling out his Invisibility Cloak and flinging it over himself.

"But what're you —?" asked Neville.

"Later!" whispered Harry, darting after Zabini as quietly as possible, though the rattling of the train made such caution almost pointless.

The corridors were almost completely empty now. Nearly everyone had returned to their carriages to change into their school robes and pack up their possessions. Though he was as close as he could get to Zabini without touching him, Harry was not quick enough to slip into the compartment when Zabini opened the door. Zabini was already sliding it shut when Harry hastily stuck out his foot to prevent it closing.

"What's wrong with this thing?" said Zabini angrily as he smashed the sliding door repeatedly into Harry's foot.

Harry seized the door and pushed it open, hard; Zabini, still clinging on to the handle, toppled over sideways into Gregory Goyle's lap, and in the ensuing ruckus, Harry darted into the compartment, leapt onto Zabini's temporarily empty seat, and hoisted himself up into the luggage rack. It was fortunate that Goyle and Zabini were snarling at each other, drawing all eyes onto them, for Harry was quite sure his feet and ankles had been revealed as the cloak had flapped around them; indeed, for one horrible moment he thought he saw Malfoy's eyes follow his trainer as it whipped upward out of sight. But then Goyle slammed the door shut and flung Zabini off him; Zabini collapsed into his own seat looking ruffled, Vincent Crabbe returned to his comic, and Malfoy, sniggering, lay back down across two seats with his head in Pansy Parkinsons lap. Harry lay curled

uncomfortably under the cloak to ensure that every inch of him remained hidden, and watched Pansy stroke the sleek blond hair off Malfoy's forehead, smirking as she did so, as though anyone would have loved to have been in her place. The lanterns swinging from the carriage ceiling cast a bright light over the scene: Harry could read every word of Crabbe's comic directly below him.

"So, Zabini," said Malfoy, "what did Slughorn want?"

"Just trying to make up to well-connected people," said Zabini, who was still glowering at Goyle. "Not that he managed to find many."

This information did not seem to please Malfoy. "Who else had he invited?" he demanded.

"McLaggen from Gryffindor," said Zabini.

"Oh yeah, his uncle's big in the Ministry," said Malfoy.

"— someone else called Belby, from Ravenclaw…"

"Not him, he's a prat!" said Pansy.

"— and Longbottom, Potter, and that Weasley girl," finished Zabini.

Malfoy sat up very suddenly, knocking Pansy's hand aside.

"He invited Longbottom?"

"Well, I assume so, as Longbottom was there," said Zabini indifferently.

"What's Longbottom got to interest Slughorn?" Zabini shrugged.

"Potter, precious Potter, obviously he wanted a look at 'the Chosen One,'" sneered Malfoy, "but that Weasley girl! What's so special about her?"

"A lot of boys like her," said Pansy, watching Malfoy out of the corner of her eyes for his reaction. "Even you think she's good-looking, don't you, Blaise, and we all know how hard you are to please!

"I wouldn't touch a filthy little blood traitor like her whatever she looked like," said Zabini coldly, and Pansy looked pleased. Malfoy sank back across her lap and allowed her to resume the stroking of his hair.

"Well, I pity Slughorn's taste. Maybe he's going a bit senile. Shame, my father always said he was a good wizard in his day. My father used to be a bit of a favorite of his. Slughorn probably hasn't heard I'm on the train, or —"

"I wouldn't bank on an invitation," said Zabini. "He asked me about Notts father when I first arrived. They used to be old friends, apparently, but when he heard he'd been caught at the Ministry he didn't look happy, and Nott didn't get an invitation, did he? I don't think Slughorn's interested in Death Eaters."

Malfoy looked angry, but forced out a singularly humorless laugh.

"Well, who cares what he's interested in? What is he, when you come down to it? Just some stupid teacher." Malfoy yawned ostentatiously. "I mean, I might not even be at Hogwarts next year, what's it matter to me if some fat old has-been likes me or not?"

"What do you mean, you might not be at Hogwarts next year?" said Pansy indignantly, ceasing grooming Malfoy at once.

"Well, you never know," said Malfoy with the ghost of a smirk. "I might have — er — moved on to bigger and better things."

Crouched in the luggage rack under his cloak, Harry's heart began to race. What would Ron and Hermione say about this? Crabbe and Goyle were gawping at Malfoy; apparently they had had no inkling of any plans to move on to bigger and better things. Even Zabini had allowed a look of curiosity to mar his haughty features. Pansy resumed the slow stroking of Malfoy s hair, looking dumbfounded.

"Do you mean — *Him*?"

Malfoy shrugged.

"Mother wants me to complete my education, but personally, I don't see it as that important these days. I mean, think about it…When the Dark Lord takes over, is he going to care how many O.W.L.s or N.E.W.T.s anyone's got? Of course he isn't. It'll be all about the kind of service he received, the level of devotion he was shown."

"And you think you'll be able to do something for him?" asked Zabini scathingly. "Sixteen years old and not even fully qualified yet?"

"I've just said, haven't I? Maybe he doesn't care if I'm qualified. Maybe the job he wants me to do isn't something that you need to be qualified for," said Malfoy quietly.

Crabbe and Goyle were both sitting with their mouths open like gargoyles. Pansy was gazing down at Malfoy as though she had never seen anything so awe-inspiring.

"I can see Hogwarts," said Malfoy, clearly relishing the effect he had created as he pointed out of the blackened window. "We'd better get our robes on."

Harry was so busy staring at Malfoy, he did not notice Goyle reaching up for his trunk; as he swung it down, it hit Harry hard on the side of the head. He let out an involuntary gasp of pain, and Malfoy looked up at the luggage rack, frowning.

Harry was not afraid of Malfoy, but he still did not much like the idea of being discovered hiding under his Invisibility Cloak by a group of unfriendly Slytherins. Eyes still watering and head

still throbbing, he drew his wand, careful not to disarrange the cloak, and waited, breath held. To his relief, Malfoy seemed to decide that he had imagined the noise; he pulled on his robes like the others, locked his trunk, and as the train slowed to a jerky crawl, fastened a thick new traveling cloak round his neck.

Harry could see the corridors filling up again and hoped that Hermione and Ron would take his things out onto the platform for him; he was stuck where he was until the compartment had quite emptied. At last, with a final lurch, the train came to a complete halt. Goyle threw the door open and muscled his way out into a crowd of second years, punching them aside; Crabbe and Zabini followed.

"You go on," Malfoy told Pansy, who was waiting for him with her hand held out as though hoping he would hold it. "I just want to check something."

Pansy left. Now Harry and Malfoy were alone in the compartment. People were filing past, descending onto the dark platform. Malfoy moved over to the compartment door and let down the blinds, so that people in the corridor beyond could not peer in. He then bent down over his trunk and opened it again.

Harry peered down over the edge of the luggage rack, his heart pumping a little faster. What had Malfoy wanted to hide from Pansy? Was he about to see the mysterious broken object it was so important to mend?

"*Petrificus Totalus!*"

Without warning, Malfoy pointed his wand at Harry, who was instantly paralyzed. As though in slow motion, he toppled out of the luggage rack and fell, with an agonizing, floor-shaking crash, at Malfoy's feet, the Invisibility Cloak trapped beneath him, his whole body revealed with his legs still curled absurdly into the cramped kneeling position. He couldn't move a muscle; he could only gaze up at Malfoy, who smiled broadly.

"I thought so," he said jubilantly. "I heard Goyle's trunk hit you. And I thought I saw something white flash through the air after Zabini came back…"

His eyes lingered for a moment upon Harry's trainers.

"You didn't hear anything I care about, Potter. But while I've got you here…"

And he stamped, hard, on Harry's face. Harry felt his nose break; blood spurted everywhere.

"That's from my father. Now, let's see…"

Malfoy dragged the cloak out from under Harry's immobilized body and threw it over him.

"I don't reckon they'll find you till the trains back in London," he said quietly. "See you around, Potter…or not."

And taking care to tread on Harry's fingers, Malfoy left the compartment.

Chapter Eight

Snape Victorious

Harry could not move a muscle. He lay there beneath the Invisibility Cloak feeling the blood from his nose flow, hot and wet, over his face, listening to the voices and footsteps in the corridor beyond. His immediate thought was that someone would, surely check the compartments before the train departed again. But at once came the dispiriting realization that even if somebody looked into the compartment, he would be neither seen nor heard. His best hope was that somebody else would walk in and step on him.

Harry had never hated Malfoy more than as he lay there, like an absurd turtle on its back, blood dripping sickeningly into his open mouth. What a stupid situation to have landed himself in…and now the last few footsteps were dying away; everyone was shuffling along the dark platform outside; he could hear the scraping of trunks and loud babble of talk.

Ron and Hermione would think that he had left the train without them. Once they arrived at Hogwarts and took their places in the Great Hall, looked up and down the Gryffindor table a few times, and finally realized that he was not there, he, no doubt, would be halfway back to London.

He tried to make a sound, even a grunt, but it was impossible. Then he remembered that some wizards, like Dumbledore, could perform spells without speaking, so he tried to summon his wand, which had fallen out of his hand, by saying the words "*Accio Wand!*" over and over again in his head, but nothing happened.

He thought he could hear the rustling of the trees that surrounded the lake, and the far-off hoot of an owl, but no hint of a search being made or even (he despised himself slightly for hoping it) panicked voices wondering where Harry Potter had gone. A feeling of hopelessness spread through him as he imagined the convoy of thestral-drawn carriages trundling up to the school and the muffled yells of laughter issuing from whichever carriage Malfoy was riding in, where he could be recounting his attack on Harry to Crabbe, Goyle, Zabini, and Pansy Parkinson.

The train lurched, causing Harry to roll over onto his side. Now he was staring at the dusty underside of the seats instead of the ceiling. The floor began to vibrate as the engine roared into life. The Express was leaving and nobody knew he was still on it…

Then he felt his Invisibility Cloak fly off him and a voice overhead said, "Wotcher, Harry."

There was a flash of red light and Harry's body unfroze; he was able to push himself into a more dignified sitting position, hastily wipe the blood off his bruised race with the back of his hand, and raise his head to look up at Tonks, who was holding the Invisibility Cloak she had just pulled away.

“We’d better get out of here, quickly,” she said, as the train windows became obscured with steam and they began to move out of the station. “Come on, we’ll jump.”

Harry hurried after her into the corridor. She pulled open the train door and leapt onto the platform, which seemed to be sliding underneath them as the train gathered momentum. He followed her, staggered a little on landing, then straightened up in time to see the gleaming scarlet steam engine pick up speed, round the corner, and disappear from view.

The cold night air was soothing on his throbbing nose. Tonks was looking at him; he felt angry and embarrassed that he had been discovered in such a ridiculous position. Silently she handed him back the Invisibility Cloak.

“Who did it?”

“Draco Malfoy,” said Harry bitterly. “Thanks for…well…”

“No problem,” said Tonks, without smiling. From what Harry could see in the darkness, she was as mousy-haired and miserable-looking as she had been when he had met her at the Burrow. “I can fix your nose if you stand still.”

Harry did not think much of this idea; he had been intending to visit Madam Pomfrey, the matron, in whom he had a little more confidence when it came to Healing Spells, but it seemed rude to say this, so he stayed stock-still and closed his eyes, “*Episkey*” said Tonks.

Harry’s nose felt very hot, and then very cold. He raised a hand and felt gingerly. It seemed to be mended.

“Thanks a lot!”

“You’d better put that cloak back on, and we can walk up to the school,” said Tonks, still unsmiling. As Harry swung the cloak back over himself, she waved her wand; an immense silvery four-legged creature erupted from it and streaked off into the darkness.

“Was that a Patronus?” asked Harry, who had seen Dumbledore send messages like this.

“Yes, I’m sending word to the castle that I’ve got you or they’ll worry. Come on, we’d better not dawdle.”

They set off toward the lane that led to the school.

“How did you find me?”

“I noticed you hadn’t left the train and I knew you had that cloak. I thought you might be hiding for some reason. When I saw the blinds were drawn down on that compartment I thought I’d check.”

“But what are you doing here, anyway?” Harry asked.

“I’m stationed in Hogsmeade now, to give the school extra protection,” said Tonks.

“Is it just you who’s stationed up here, or —?”

“No, Proudfoot, Savage, and Dawlish are here too.”

“Dawlish, that Auror Dumbledore attacked last year?”

“That’s right.”

They trudged up the dark, deserted lane, following the freshly made carriage tracks. Harry looked sideways at Tonks under his cloak. Last year she had been inquisitive (to the point of being a little annoying at times), she had laughed easily, she had made jokes. Now she seemed older and much more serious and purposeful. Was this all the effect of what had happened at the Ministry? He reflected uncomfortably that Hermione would have suggested he say something consoling about Sirius to her, that it hadn’t been her fault at all, but he couldn’t bring himself to do it. He was far from blaming her for Sirius’s death; it was no more her fault than anyone else’s (and much less than his), but he did not like talking about Sirius if he could avoid it. And so they tramped on through the cold night in silence, Tonks’s long cloak whispering on the ground behind them.

Having always traveled there by carriage, Harry had never before appreciated just how far Hogwarts was from Hogsmeade Station. With great relief he finally saw the tall pillars on either side of the gates, each topped with a winged boar. He was cold, he was hungry and he was quite keen to leave this new, gloomy Tonks behind. But when he put out a hand to push open the gates, he found them chained shut.

“Alohomora!” he said confidently, pointing his wand at the padlock, but nothing happened.

“That won’t work on these,” said Tonks. “Dumbledore bewitched them himself.”

Harry looked around, “I could climb a wall,” he suggested.

“No, you couldn’t,” said Tonks flatly. “Anti-intruder jinxes on all of them. Security’s been tightened a hundredfold this summer.”

“Well then,” said Harry, starting to feel annoyed at her lack of helpfulness, “I suppose I’ll just have to sleep out here and wait for morning. “

“Someone’s coming down for you,” said Tonks, “Look.”

A lantern was bobbing at the distant foot of the castle. Harry was so pleased to see it he felt he could even endure Filch’s wheezy criticisms of his tardiness and rants about how his timekeeping would improve with the regular application of thumbscrews. It was not until the glowing yellow light was ten feet away from them, and had pulled off his Invisibility Cloak so that he could be seen,

that he recognized, with a rush of pure loathing, the uplit hooked nose and long, black, greasy hair of Severus Snape.

"Well, well, well," sneered Snape, taking out his wand and tapping the padlock once, so that the chains snaked backward and the gates creaked open. "Nice of you to turn up, Potter, although you have evidently decided that the wearing of school robes would detract from your appearance."

"I couldn't change, I didn't have my —" Harry began, but Snape cut across him.

"There is no need to wait, Nymphadora, Potter is quite — ah — safe in my hands."

"I meant Hagrid to get the message," said Tonks, frowning.

"Hagrid was late for the start-of-term feast, just like Potter here, so I took it instead. And incidentally," said Snape, standing back to allow Harry to pass him, "I was interested to see your new Patronus."

He shut the gates in her face with a loud clang and tapped the chains with his wand again, so that they slithered, clinking, back into place.

"I think you were better off with the old one," said Snape, the malice in his voice unmistakable. "The new one looks weak."

As Snape swung the lantern about, Harry saw, fleetingly, a look of shock and anger on Tonks's face. Then she was covered in darkness once more.

"Good night," Harry called to her over his shoulder, as he began the walk up to the school with Snape. "Thanks for…everything,"

"See you, Harry."

Snape did not speak for a minute or so. Harry felt as though his body was generating waves of hatred so powerful that it seemed incredible that Snape could not feel them burning him. He had loathed Snape from their first encounter, but Snape had placed himself forever and irrevocably beyond the possibility of Harry's forgiveness by his attitude toward Sirius. Whatever Dumbledore said, Harry had had time to think over the summer, and had concluded that Snape's snide remarks to Sirius about remaining safely hidden while the rest of the Order of the Phoenix were off fighting Voldemort had probably been a powerful factor in Sirius rushing off to the Ministry the night that he had died. Harry clung to this notion, because it enabled him to blame Snape, which felt satisfying, and also because he knew that if anyone was not sorry that Sirius was dead, it was the man now striding next to him in the darkness.

“Fifty points from Gryffindor for lateness, I think,” said Snape. “And, let me see, another twenty for your Muggle attire. You know, I don’t believe any House has ever been in negative figures this early in the term: We haven’t even started pudding. You might have set a record, Potter.”

The fury and hatred bubbling inside Harry seemed to blaze white-hot, but he would rather have been immobilized all the way back to London than tell Snape why he was late.

“I suppose you wanted to make an entrance, did you?” Snape continued. “And with no flying car available you decided that bursting into the Great Hall halfway through the feast ought to create a dramatic effect.”

Still Harry remained silent, though he thought his chest might explode. He knew that Snape had come to fetch him for this, for the few minutes when he could needle and torment Harry without anyone else listening.

They reached the castle steps at last and as the great oaken front doors swung open into the vast flagged entrance hall, a burst of talk and laughter and of tinkling plates and glasses greeted them through the doors standing open into the Great Hail. Harry wondered whether he could slip his Invisibility Cloak back on, thereby gaining his seat at the long Gryffindor table (which, inconveniently, was the farthest from the entrance hall) without being noticed. As though he had read Harry’s mind, however, Snape said, “No cloak. You can walk in so that everyone sees you, which is what you wanted, I’m sure.”

Harry turned on the spot and marched straight through the open doors: anything to get away from Snape. The Great Hall with its four long House tables and its staff table set at the top of the room was decorated as usual with floating candles that made the plates below glitter and glow. It was all a shimmering blur to Harry, however, who walked so fast that he was passing the Hufflepuff table before people really started to stare, and by the time they were standing up to get a good look at him, he had spotted Ron and Hermione, sped along the benches toward them, and forced his way in between them.

“Where’ve you — blimey, what’ve you done to your face?” said Ron, goggling at him along with everyone else in the vicinity.

“Why, what’s wrong with it?” said Harry, grabbing a spoon and squinting at his distorted reflection.

“You’re covered in blood!” said Hermione. “Come here —”

She raised her wand, said “*Tergeo!*” and siphoned off the dried blood.

“Thanks,” said Harry, feeling his now clean face. “How’s my nose looking?

"Normal," said Hermoine anxiously. "Why shouldn't it? Harry, what happened? We've been terrified!"

"I'll tell you later," said Harry curtly. He was very conscious that Ginny, Neville, Dean, and Seamus were listening in; even Nearly Headless Nick, the Gryffindor ghost, had come floating along the bench to eavesdrop.

"But —" said Hermione.

"Not now, Hermione," said Harry, in a darkly significant voice. He hoped very much that they would all assume he had been involved in something heroic, preferably involving a couple of Death Eaters and a dementor. Of course, Malfoy would spread the story as wide as he could, but there was always a chance it wouldn't reach too many Gryffindor ears.

He reached across Ron for a couple of chicken legs and a handful of chips, but before he could take them they vanished, to be replaced with puddings.

"You missed the Sorting, anyway," said Hermione, as Ron dived for a large chocolate gateau.

"Hat say anything interesting?" asked Harry, taking a piece of treacle tart.

"More of the same, really…advising us all to unite in the face enemies, you know."

"Dumbledore mentioned Voldemort at all?"

"Not yet, but he always saves his proper speech for after the the feast doesn't he? It can't be long now."

"Snape said Hagrid was late for the feast —"

"You've seen Snape? How come?" said Ron between frenzied mouthfuls of gateau.

"Bumped into him," said Harry evasively.

"Hagrid was only a few minutes late," said Hermione. "Look, he's waving at you, Harry."

Harry looked up at the staff table and grinned at Hagrid, who was indeed waving at him. Hagrid had never quite managed to comport himself with the dignity of Professor McGonagall, Head of Gryffindor House, the top of whose head came up to somewhere between Hagrid's elbow and shoulder as they were sitting side by side, and who was looking disapprovingly at this enthusiastic greeting. Harry was surprised to see the Divination teacher, Professor Trelawney, sitting on Hagrid's other side; she rarely left her tower room, and he had never seen her at the start-of-term feast before. She looked as odd as ever, glittering with beads and trailing shawls, her eyes magnified to enormous size by her spectacles. Having always considered her a bit of a fraud, Harry had been shocked to discover at the end of the previous term that it had been she who had made the prediction that caused Lord Voldemort to kill Harry's parents and attack Harry himself. The knowledge made him

even less eager to find himself in her company, thankfully, this year he would be dropping Divination. Her great beaconlike eyes swiveled in his direction; he hastily looked away toward the Slytherin table. Draco Malfoy was miming the shatterering of a nose to raucous laughter and applause. Harry dropped his gaze to his treacle tart, his insides burning again. What he would give to fight Malfoy one-on-one…

"So what did Professor Slughorn want?" Hermione asked.

"To know what really happened at the Ministry." said Harry.

"Him and everyone else here," sniffed Hermione. "People were interrogating us about it on the train, weren't they, Ron?"

"Yeah," said Ron. "All wanting to know if you really are 'the Chosen One' —"

"There has been much talk on that very subject even amongst the ghosts," interrupted Nearly Headless Nick, inclining his barely connected head toward Harry so that it wobbled dangerously on its ruff. "I am considered something of a Potter authority; it is widely known that we are friendly. I have assured the spirit community that I will not pester you for information, however. 'Harry Potter knows that he can confide in me with complete confidence,' I told them. 'I would rather die than betray his trust.'"

"That's not saying much, seeing as you're already dead," Ron observed.

"Once again, you show all the sensitivity of a blunt axe," said Nearly Headless Nick in affronted tones, and he rose into the air and glided back toward the far end of the Gryffindor table just as Dumbledore got to his feet at the staff table. The talk and laughter echoing around the Hall died away almost instantly.

"The very best of evenings to you!" he said, smiling broadly, his arms opened wide as though to embrace the whole room.

"What happened to his hand?" gasped Hermione.

She was not the only one who had noticed. Dumbledore's right hand was as blackened and dead-looking as it had been on the night he had come to fetch Harry from the Dursleys. Whispers it the room; Dumbledore, interpreting them correctly, merely smiled and shook his purple-and-gold sleeve over his injury.

"Nothing to worry about," he said airily. "Now…to our new students, welcome, to our old students, welcome back! Another year full of magical education awaits you…"

"His hand was like that when I saw him over the summer," Harry whispered to Hermione. "I thought he'd have cured it by now, though…or Madam Pomfrey would've done."

“It looks as if it’s died,” said Hermione, with a nauseated expression. “But there are some injuries you can’t cure…old curses…and there are poisons without antidotes…”

“…and Mr. Filch, our caretaker, has asked me to say that there is a blanket ban on any joke items bought at the shop called Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes.

“Those wishing to play for their House Quidditch teams should give their names to their Heads of House as usual. We are also looking for new Quidditch commentators, who should do likewise.

“We are pleased to welcome a new member of staff this year, Professor Slughorn”— Slughorn stood up, his bald head gleaming in the candlelight, his big waistcoated belly casting the table into shadow — “is a former colleague of mine who has agreed to resume his old post of Potions master.”

“Potions?”

“Potions?”

The word echoed all over the Hall as people wondered wheel they had heard right.

“Potions?” said Ron and Hermione together, turning to stare Harry. “But you said —”

“Professor Snape, meanwhile,” said Dumbledore, raising voice so that it carried over all the muttering, “will be taking the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher.”

“No!” said Harry, so loudly that many heads turned in his direction. He did not care; he was staring up at the staff table, incensed. How could Snape be given the Defense Against the Dark Arts job after all this time? Hadn’t it been widely known for years that Dumbledore did not trust him to do it?

“But Harry, you said that Slughorn was going to be teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts!” said Hermione.

“I thought he was!” said Harry, racking his brains to remember when Dumbledore had told him this, but now that he came to think of it, he was unable to recall Dumbledore ever telling him what Slughorn would be teaching.

Snape, who was sitting on Dumbledore’s right, did not stand up his mention of his name; he merely raised a hand in lazy acknowledgment of the applause from the Slytherin table, yet Harry was sure he could detect a look of triumph on the features he loathed so much.

“Well, there’s one good thing,” he said savagely. “Snape’ll be gone by the end of the year.”

“What do you mean?” asked Ron.

“That job’s jinxed. No ones lasted more than a year…Quirrell actually died doing it…Personally, I’m going to keep my fingers crossed for another death…”

“Harry!” said Hermione, shocked and reproachful.

“He might just go back to teaching Potions at the end of the year,” said Ron reasonably. “That Slughorn bloke might not want to stay long-term. Moody didn’t.”

Dumbledore cleared his throat. Harry, Ron, and Hermione were not the only ones who had been talking; the whole Hall had erupted in a buzz of conversation at the news that Snape had finally achieved his heart’s desire. Seemingly oblivious to the sensational nature of the news he had just imparted, Dumbledore said nothing more about staff appointments, but waited a few seconds to ensure that the silence was absolute before continuing.

“Now, as everybody in this Hall knows, Lord Voldemort and his followers are once more at large and gaining in strength.”

The silence seemed to tauten and strain as Dumbledore spoke. Harry glanced at Malfoy. Malfoy was not looking at Dumbledore, but making his fork hover in midair with his wand, as though he found the headmaster’s words unworthy of his attention.

“I cannot emphasize strongly enough how dangerous the present situation is, and how much care each of us at Hogwarts must take to ensure that we remain safe. The castle’s magical fortifications have been strengthened over the summer, we are protected in new and more powerful ways, but we must still guard scrupulously against carelessness on the part of any student or member of staff. I urge you, therefore, to abide by any security restrictions that you teachers might impose upon you, however irksome you might find them — in particular, the rule that you are not to be out of after hours. I implore you, should you notice anything strange or suspicious within or outside the castle, to report it to a member of staff immediately. I trust you to conduct yourselves, always, with the utmost regard for your own and others’ safety.”

Dumbledore’s blue eyes swept over the students before he smiled once more.

“But now, your beds await, as warm and comfortable as you could possibly wish, and I know that your top priority is to be well-rested for your lessons tomorrow. Let us therefore say good night. Pip pip!”

With the usual deafening scraping noise, the benches moved back and the hundreds of students began to file out of the Great Hall toward their dormitories. Harry, who was in no hurry at all to leave with the gawping crowd, nor to get near enough to Malfoy to allow him to retell the story of the nose-stamping, lagged behind, pretending to retie the lace on his trainer, allowing most of Gryffindors to draw ahead of him. Hermione had darted ahead to fulfill her prefect’s duty of shepherding the first years, but Ron remained with Harry.

“What really happened to your nose?” he asked, once they were at the very back of the throng pressing out of the Hall, and out of earshot of anyone else.

Harry told him. It was a mark of the strength of their friendship that Ron did not laugh.

“I saw Malfoy miming something to do with a nose,” he said darkly.

“Yeah, well, never mind that,” said Harry bitterly. “Listen to what he was saying before he found out I was there…”

Harry had expected Ron to be stunned by Malfoys boasts. With what Harry considered pure pigheadedness, however, Ron was unimpressed.

“Come on, Harry, he was just showing off for Parkinson…What kind of mission would You-Know-Who have given him?”

“How d’you know Voldemort doesn’t need someone at Hogwarts? It wouldn’t be the first -”

“I wish yeh’d stop sayin’ tha name, Harry,” said a reproachful voice behind them. Harry looked over his shoulder to see Hagrid shaking his head.

“Dumbledore uses that name,” said Harry stubbornly

“Yeah, well, tha’s Dumbledore, innit?” said Hagrid mysteriously. “So how come yeh were late, Harry? I was worried.”

“Got held up on the train,” said Harry. “Why were you late?”

“I was with Grawp,” said Hagrid happily. “Los’ track o’ the time. He’s got a new home up in the mountains now, Dumbledore fixed it — nice big cave. He’s much happier than he was in the forest. We were havin’ a good chat.”

“Really?” said Harry, taking care not to catch Ron’s eye; the last time he had met Hagrid’s half-brother, a vicious giant with a talent for ripping up trees by the roots, his vocabulary had comprised five words, two of which he was unable to pronounce properly.

“Oh yeah, he’s really come on,” said Hagrid proudly. “Yeh’ll be amazed. I’m thinkin’ o’ trainin’ him up as me assistant.”

Ron snorted loudly, but managed to pass it off as a violent sneeze. They were now standing beside the oak front doors.

“Anyway, I’ll see yeh tomorrow, firs’ lesson’s straight after lunch. Come early an’ yeh can say hello ter Buck — I mean, Witherwings!”

Raising an arm in cheery farewell, he headed out of the doors into the darkness.

Harry and Ron looked at each other. Harry could tell that Ron was experiencing the same sinking feeling as himself.

“You’re not taking Care of Magical Creatures, are you?”

Ron shook his head. “And you’re not either, are you?”

Harry shook his head too.

“And Hermione,” said Ron, “she’s not, is she?”

Harry shook his head again. Exactly what Hagrid would say when he realized his three favorite students had given up his subject, he did not like to think.

CHAPTER NINE

THE HALF-BLOOD PRINCE

Harry and Ron met Hermione in the common room before breakfast next morning. Hoping for some support in his theory, Harry lost no time in telling Hermione what he had overheard Malfoy saying on the Hogwarts Express.

"But he was obviously showing off for Parkinson, wasn't he?" interjected Ron quickly, before Hermione could say anything.

"Well," she said uncertainly, "I don't know…It would be like Malfoy to make himself seem more important than he is…but that's a big lie to tell…"

"Exactly," said Harry, but he could not press the point, because so many people were trying to listen in to his conversation, not to mention staring at him and whispering behind their hands.

"It's rude to point," Ron snapped at a particularly minuscule first-year boy as they joined the queue to climb out of the portrait hole. The boy, who had been muttering something about Harry behind his hand to his friend, promptly turned scarlet and toppled out of the hole in alarm. Ron sniggered. "I love being a sixth year. And were going to be getting free time this year. Whole periods when we can just sit up here and relax."

"We're going to need that time for studying, Ron!" said Hermione, as they set off down the corridor.

"Yeah, but not today," said Ron. "Today's going to be a real loss, I reckon."

"Hold it!" said Hermione, throwing out an arm and halting a passing fourth year, who was attempting to push past her with a lime-green disk clutched tightly in his hand. "Fanged Frisbees banned, hand it over," she told him sternly. The scowling boy handed over the snarling Frisbee, ducked under her arm, and took off after his friends. Ron waited for him to vanish, then tugged the Frisbee from Hermione's grip.

"Excellent, I've always wanted one of these."

Hermione's remonstration was drowned by a loud giggle; Lavender Brown had apparently found Ron's remark highly amusing. She continued to laugh as she passed them, glancing back at Ron over her shoulder. Ron looked rather pleased with himself.

The ceiling of the Great Hall was serenely blue and streaked with frail, wispy clouds, just like the squares of sky visible through the high mullioned windows. While they tucked into porridge and eggs and bacon, Harry and Ron told Hermione about their embarassing conversation with Hagrid the previous evening.

"But he can't really think we'd continue Care of Magical Creatures!" she said, looking distressed. "I mean, when has any of us expressed…you know…any enthusiasm?"

"That's it, though, innit?" said Ron, swallowing an entire fried egg whole. "We were the ones who made the most effort in classes because we like Hagrid. But he thinks we liked the stupid subject. D'ya reckon anyone's going to go on to N.E.W.T.?"

Neither Harry nor Hermione answered; there was no need. They knew perfectly well that nobody in their year would want to continue Care of Magical Creatures. They avoided Hagrid's eye and returned his cheery wave only half-heartedly when he left the staff table ten minutes later.

After they had eaten, they remained in their places, awaiting Professor McGonagall's descent from the staff table. The distribution of class schedules was more complicated than usual this year, for Professor McGonagall needed first to confirm that everybody had achieved the necessary O.W.L. grades to continue with their chosen N.E.W.T.s.

Hermione was immediately cleared to continue with Charms, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Transfiguration, Herbology, Arithmancy, Ancient Runes, and Potions, and shot off to a first period Ancient Runes class without further ado. Neville took a little longer to sort out; his round face was anxious as Professor McGonagall looked down his application and then consulted his O.W.L results.

"Herbology, fine," she said. "Professor Sprout will be delighted to see you back with an 'Outstanding' O.W.L. And you qualify for Defense Against the Dark Arts with 'Exceeds Expectations.' But the problem is Transfiguration. I'm sorry, Longbottom, but an 'Acceptable' really isn't good enough to continue to N.E.W.T. level. Just don't think you'd be able to cope with the coursework."

Neville hung his head. Professor McGonagall peered at him through her square spectacles.

"Why do you want to continue with Transfiguration, anyway? I've never had the impression that you particularly enjoyed it."

Neville looked miserable and muttered something about "my grandmother wants."

"Hmph," snorted Professor McGonagall. "It's high time your grandmother learned to be proud of the grandson she's got, rather than the one she thinks she ought to have - particularly after what happened at the Ministry."

Neville turned very pink and blinked confusedly; Professor McGonagall had never paid him a compliment before.

"I'm sorry, Longbottom, but I cannot let you into my N.E.W.T. class. I see that you have an 'Exceeds Expectations' in Charm however - why not try for a N.E.W.T. in Charms?"

“My grandmother thinks Charms is a soft option,” mumbled Neville.

“Take Charms,” said Professor McGonagall, “and I shall drop Augusta a line reminding her that just because she failed her Charms O.W.L., the subject is not necessarily worthless.” Smiling slightly at the look of delighted incredulity on Neville’s face, Professor McGonagall tapped a blank schedule with the tip of her wand and handed it, now carrying details of his new classes, to Neville.

Professor McGonagall turned next to Parvati Patil, whose first question was whether Firenze, the handsome centaur, was still teaching Divination.

“He and Professor Trelawney are dividing classes between them this year,” said Professor McGonagall, a hint of disapproval in her voice; it was common knowledge that she despised the subject of Divination. “The sixth year is being taken by Professor Trelawney.”

Parvati set off for Divination five minutes later looking slightly crestfallen.

“So, Potter, Potter…” said Professor McGonagall, consulting her notes as she turned to Harry. “Charms, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Herbology, Transfiguration…all fine. I must say, I was pleased with your Transfiguration mark, Potter, very pleased. Now, why haven’t you applied to continue with Potions? I thought it was your ambition to become an Auror?”

“It was, but you told me I had to get an ‘Outstanding’ in my O.W.L., Professor.”

“And so you did when Professor Snape was teaching the subject. Professor Slughorn, however, is perfectly happy to accept N.E.W.T. students with ‘Exceeds Expectations’ at O.W.L. Do you wish to proceed with Potions?”

“Yes,” said Harry, “but I didn’t buy the books or any ingredients or anything-”

“I’m sure Professor Slughorn will be able to lend you some,” said Professor McGonagall. “Very well, Potter, here is your schedule. Oh, by the way- twenty hopefuls have already put down their names for the Gryffindor Quidditch team. I shall pass the list to you in due course and you can fix up trials at your leisure.”

A few minutes later, Ron was cleared to do the same subjects as Harry, and the two of them left the table together.

“Look,” said Ron delightedly, gazing ar his schedule, “we’ve got a free period now…and a free period after break…and after lunch…excellent.”

They returned to the common room, which was empty apart from a half dozen seventh years, including Katie Bell, the only remaining member of the original Gryffindor Quidditch team that Harry had joined in his first year.

“I thought you’d get that, well done,” she called over, pointing at the Captains badge on Harry’s chest. “Tell me when you call trials!”

“Don’t be stupid,” said Harry, “you don’t need to try out, I watched you play for five years…”

“You mustn’t start off like that,” she said warningly. “For all you know, there’s someone much better than me out there. Good teams have been ruined before now because Captains just kept playing the old faces, or letting in their friends…”

Ron looked a little uncomfortable and began playing with the Fanged Frisbee Hermione had taken from the fourth-year student. It zoomed around the common room, snarling and attempting to take bites of the tapestry. Crookshanks’s yellow eyes followed it and he hissed when it came too close.

An hour later they reluctantly left the sunlit common room for the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom four floors below. Hermione was already queuing outside, carrying an armful of heavy books and looking put-upon.

“We got so much homework for Runes,” she said anxiously when Harry and Ron joined her. “A fifteen-inch essay, two translations, and I’ve got to read these by Wednesday!”

“Shame,” yawned Ron.

“You wait,” she said resentfully. “I bet Snape gives us loads.”

The classroom door opened as she spoke, and Snape stepped into the corridor, his sallow face framed as ever by two curtains of greasy black hair. Silence fell over the queue immediately.

“Inside,” he said.

Harry looked around as they entered. Snape had imposed his personality upon the room already; it was gloomier than usual, as curtains had been drawn over the windows, and was lit by candlelight. New pictures adorned the walls, many of them showing people who appeared to be in pain, sporting grisly injuries or strangely contorted body parts. Nobody spoke as they settled down, looking around at the shadowy, gruesome pictures.

“I have not asked you to take out your books,” said Snape, closing the door and moving to face the class from behind his desk; Hermione hastily dropped her copy of Confronting the Faceless back into her bag and stowed it under her chair. “I wish to speak to you, and I want your fullest attention.”

His black eyes roved over their upturned faces, lingering for a fraction of a second longer on Harry’s than anyone else’s.

“You have had five teachers in this subject so far, I believe.”

You believe…like you haven't watched them all come and go, hoping you'd be next, thought Harry scathingly.

"Naturally, these teachers will all have had their own methods and priorities. Given this confusion I am surprised so many of you scraped an O.W.L. in this subject. I shall be even more surprised if all of you manage to keep up with the N.E.W.T. work, which will be more advanced."

Snape set off around the edge of the room, speaking now in a lower voice; the class craned their necks to keep him in view. "The Dark Arts," said Snape, "are many, varied, ever-changing, and eternal. Fighting them is like fighting a many-headed monster, which, each time a neck is severed, sprouts a head even fiercer and cleverer than before. You are fighting that which is unfixed, mutating, indestructible."

Harry stared at Snape. It was surely one thing to respect the Dark Arts as a dangerous enemy, another to speak of them, as Snape was doing, with a loving caress in his voice?

"Your defenses," said Snape, a little louder, "must therefore be as flexible and inventive as the arts you seek to undo. These pictures" - he indicated a few of them as he swept past - "give a fair representation of what happens to those who suffer, for instance, the Cruciatus Curse" - he waved a hand toward a witch who was clearly shrieking in agony - "feel the Dementor's Kiss" - a wizard lying huddled and blank-eyed, slumped against a wall - "or provoke the aggression of the Inferius" - a bloody mass upon ground.

"Has an Inferius been seen, then?" said Parvati Patil in a high pitched voice. "Is it definite, is he using them?"

"The Dark Lord has used Inferi in the past," said Snape, "which means you would be well-advised to assume he might use them again. Now…"

He set off again around the other side of the classroom toward his desk, and again, they watched him as he walked, his dark robes billowing behind him.,

"…you are, I believe, complete novices in the use of nonverbal spells. What is the advantage of a nonverbal spell?"

Hermione's hand shot into the air. Snape took his time looking around at everybody else, making sure he had no choice, before saying curtly, "Very well - Miss Granger?"

"Your adversary has no warning about what kind of magic you're about to perform," said Hermione, "which gives you a split-second advantage."

"An answer copied almost word for word from The Standard Book of Spells, Grade Six," said Snape dismissively (over in the corner, Malfoy sniggered), "but correct in essentials. Yes, those who

progress in using magic without shouting incantations gain an element of surprise in their spell-casting. Not all wizards can do this, of course; it is a question of concentration and mind power which some" - his gaze lingered maliciously upon Harry once more - "lack."

Harry knew Snape was thinking of their disastrous Occlumency lessons of the previous year. He refused to drop his gaze, but glowered at Snape until Snape looked away.

"You will now divide," Snape went on, "into pairs. One partner will attempt to jinx the other without speaking. The other will attempt to repel the jinx in equal silence. Carry on."

Although Snape did not know it, Harry had taught at least half the class (everyone who had been a member of the D.A.) how to perform a Shield Charm the previous year. None of them had ever cast the charm without speaking, however. A reasonable amount of cheating ensued; many people were merely whispering the incantation instead of saying it aloud. Typically, ten minutes into the lesson Hermione managed to repel Neville's muttered Jelly-Legs Jinx without uttering a single word, a feat that would surely have earned her twenty points for Gryffindor from any reasonable teacher, thought Harry bitterly, but which Snape ignored. He swept between them as they practiced, looking just as much like an overgrown bat as ever, lingering to watch Harry and Ron struggling with the task.

Ron, who was supposed to be jinxing Harry, was purple in the face, his lips tightly compressed to save himself from the temptation of muttering the incantation. Harry had his wand raised, waiting on tenterhooks to repel a jinx that seemed unlikely ever to come.

"Pathetic, Weasley," said Snape, after a while. "Here — let me show you —"

He turned his wand on Harry so fast that Harry reacted instinctively; all thought of nonverbal spells forgotten, he yelled, "*Protego!*"

His Shield Charm was so strong Snape was knocked off-balance and hit a desk. The whole class had looked around and now watched as Snape righted himself, scowling.

"Do you remember me telling you we are practicing nonverbal spells, Potter?"

"Yes," said Harry stiffly.

"Yes, sir."

"There's no need to call me 'sir,' Professor." The words had escaped him before he knew what he was saying. Several people gasped, including Hermione. Behind Snape, however, Ron, Dean, and Seamus grinned appreciatively.

"Detention, Saturday night, my office," said Snape. "I do not take cheek from anyone, Potter…not even 'the Chosen One.'"

“That was brilliant, Harry!” chortled Ron, once they were safely on their way to break a short while later.

“You really shouldn’t have said it,” said Hermione, frowning at Ron. “What made you?”

“He tried to jinx me, in case you didn’t notice!” fumed Harry. “I had enough of that during those Occlumency lessons! Why doesn’t he use another guinea pig for a change? What’s Dumbledore playing at, anyway, letting him teach Defense? Did you hear him talking about the Dark Arts? He loves them! All that unfixed, indestructble stuff —”

“Well,” said Hermione, “I thought he sounded a bit like you.”

“Like me?”

“Yes, when you were telling us what it’s like to face Voldemort. You said it wasn’t just memorizing a bunch of spells, you said it was just you and your brains and your guts - well, wasn’t that what Snape was saying? That it really comes down to being brave and quick-thinking?”

Harry was so disarmed that she had thought his words as well worth memorizing as The Standard Book of Spells that he did not argue.

“Harry! Hey, Harry!”

Harry looked around; Jack Sloper, one of the Beaters on last year’s Gryffindor Quidditch team, was hurrying toward him holding a roll of parchment.

“For you,” panted Sloper. “Listen, I heard you’re the new Captain. When’re you holding trials?”

“I’m not sure yet,” said Harry, thinking privately that Sloper would be very lucky to get back on the team. “I’ll let you know.”

“Oh, right. I was hoping it’d be this weekend —”

But Harry was not listening; he had just recognized the thin, slanting writing on the parchment. Leaving Sloper in mid-sentence, he hurried away with Ron and Hermione, unrolling the parchment as he went.

Dear Harry,

I would like to start our private lessons this Saturday. Kindly come along to my office at 8 P.M. I hope you are enjoying your first day back at school.

Yours sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

P.S. I enjoy Acid Pops.

“He enjoys Acid Pops?” said Ron, who had read the message over Harry’s shoulder and was looking perplexed.

“It’s the password to get past the gargoyle outside his study,” said Harry in a low voice. “Ha! Snape’s not going to be pleased…I won’t be able to do his detention!”

He, Ron, and Hermione spent the whole of break speculating on what Dumbledore would teach Harry. Ron thought it most likely to be spectacular jinxes and hexes of the type the Death Eaters would not know. Hermione said such things were illegal, and thought it much more likely that Dumbledore wanted to teach Harry advanced Defensive magic. After break, she went off to Arithmancy while Harry and Ron returned to the common room where they grudgingly started Snape’s homework. This turned out to be so complex that they still had not finished when Hermione joined them for their after-lunch free period (though she considerably speeded up the process). They had only just finished when the bell rang for the afternoon’s double Potions and they beat the familiar path down to the dungeon classroom that had, for so long, been Snape’s.

When they arrived in the corridor they saw that there were only a dozen people progressing to N.E.W.T. level. Crabbe and Goyle had evidently failed to achieve the required O.W.L. grade, but four Slytherins had made it through, including Malfoy. Four Ravenclaws were there, and one Hufflepuff, Ernie Macmillan, whom Harry liked despite his rather pompous manner.

“Harry,” Ernie said portentously, holding out his hand as Harry approached, “didn’t get a chance to speak in Defense Against The Dark Arts this morning. Good lesson, I thought, but Shield Charms are old hat, of course, for us old D.A. lags…And how are you, Ron — Hermione?”

Before they could say more than “fine,” the dungeon door opened and Slughorn’s belly preceded him out of the door. As they filed into the room, his great walrus mustache curved above his beaming mouth, and he greeted Harry and Zabini with particular enthusiasm.

The dungeon was, most unusually, already full of vapors and odd smells. Harry, Ron, and Hermione sniffed interestedly as they passed large, bubbling cauldrons. The four Slytherins took a table together, as did the four Ravenclaws. This left Harry, Ron, and Hermione to share a table with Ernie. They chose the one nearest a gold-colored cauldron that was emitting one of the most seductive scents Harry had ever inhaled: Somehow it reminded him simultaneously of treacle tart, the woody smell of a broomstick handle, and something flowery he thought he might have smelled at the Burrow. He found that he was breathing very slowly and deeply and that the potion’s fumes seemed to be filling him up like drink. A great contentment stole over him; he grinned across at Ron, who grinned back lazily.

"Now then, now then, now then," said Slughorn, whose massive outline was quivering through the many shimmering vapors. "Scales out, everyone, and potion kits, and don't forget your copies of *Advanced Potion-Making*…"

"Sir?" said Harry, raising his hand.

"Harry, m'boy?"

"I haven't got a book or scales or anything — nor's Ron — we didn't realize we'd be able to do the N.E.W.T., you see —"

"Ah, yes, Professor McGonagall did mention…not to worry, my dear boy, not to worry at all. You can use ingredients from the store cupboard today, and I'm sure we can lend you some scales, and we've got a small stock of old books here, they'll do until you can write to Flourish and Blotts…" Slughorn strode over to a corner cupboard and, after a moment's foraging, emerged with two very battered-looking copies of *Advanced Potion-Making* by Libatius Borage, which he gave to Harry and Ron along with two sets of tarnished scales.

"Now then," said Slughorn, returning to the front of the class and inflating his already bulging chest so that the buttons on his waistcoat threatened to burst off, "I've prepared a few potions for you to have a look at, just out of interest, you know. These are the kind of thing you ought to be able to make after completing your N.E.W.T.s. You ought to have heard of 'em, even if you haven't made 'em yet. Anyone tell me what this one is?"

He indicated the cauldron nearest the Slytherin table. Harry raised himself slighty in his seat and saw what looked like plain water boiling away inside it.

Hermione's well-practiced hand hit the air before anybody else's; Slughorn pointed at her.

"It's Veritaserum, a colorless, odorless potion that forces the drinker to tell the truth," said Hermione.

"Very good, very good!" said Slughorn happily. "Now," he continued, pointing at the cauldron nearest the Ravenclaw table, "this one here is pretty well known…Featured in a few Ministry leaflets lately too…Who can —?"

Hermione's hand was fastest once more.

"lt's Polyjuice Potion, sir," she said.

Harry too had recognized the slow-bubbling, mudlike substance the second cauldron, but did not resent Hermione getting the credit for answering the question; she, after all, was the one who had succeeded in making it, back in their second year. "Excellent, excellent! Now, this one

here…yes, my dear?" said Slughorn, now looking slightly bemused, as Hermione's hand punched the air again.

"It's Amortentia!"

"It is indeed. It seems almost foolish to ask," said Slughorn, who was looking mightily impressed, "but I assume you know what it does?"

"It's the most powerful love potion in the world!" said Hermione.

"Quite right! You recognized it, I suppose, by its distinctive mother-of-pearl sheen?"

"And the steam rising in characteristic spirals," said Hermione enthusiastically, "and it's supposed to smell differently to each of according to what attracts us, and I can smell freshly mown grass and new parchment and-"

But she turned slightly pink and did not complete the sentence.

"May I ask your name, my dear?" said Slughorn, ignoring Hermione's embarrassment.

"Hermione Granger, sir."

"Granger? Granger? Can you possibly be related to Hector Dagworth-Granger, who founded the Most Extraordinary Society of Potioneers?"

"No. I don't think so, sir. I'm Muggle-born, you see."

Harry saw Malfoy lean close to Nott and whisper something; both of them sniggered, but Slughorn showed no dismay; on the contrary, he beamed and looked from Hermione to Harry, who was sitting next to her.

"Oho! 'One of my best friends is Muggle-born, and she's the best in our year!' I'm assuming this is the very friend of whom you spoke, Harry?"

"Yes, sir," said Harry.

"Well, well, take twenty well-earned points for Gryffindor, Miss Granger," said Slughorn genially.

Malfoy looked rather as he had done the time Hermione had punched him in the face. Hermione turned to Harry with a radiant expression and whispered, "Did you really tell him I'm the best in the year? Oh, Harry!"

"Well, what's so impressive about that?" whispered Ron, who for some reason looked annoyed. "You are the best in the year — I'd've told him so if he'd asked me!"

Hermione smiled but made a "shhing" gesture, so that they could hear what Slughorn was saying. Ron looked slightly disgruntled.

"Amortentia doesn't really create love, of course. It is impossible to manufacture or imitate love. No, this will simply cause a powerful infatuation or obsession. It is probably the most dangerous and powerful potion in this room — oh yes," he said, nodding gravely at Malfoy and Nott, both of whom were smirking skeptically. "When you have seen as much of life as I have, you will not underestimate the power of obsessive love."

"And now," said Slughorn, "it is time for us to start work."

"Sir, you haven't told us what's in this one," said Ernie Macmillan, pointing at a small black cauldron standing on Slughorn's desk. The potion within was splashing about merrily; it was the color of molten gold, and large drops were leaping like goldfish above the surface, though not a particle had spilled.

"Oho," said Slughorn again. Harry was sure that Slughorn had not forgotten the potion at all, but had waited to be asked for dramatic effect. "Yes. That. Well, that one, ladies and gentlemen, is a most curious little potion called Felix Felicis. I take it," he turned, smiling, to look at Hermione, who had let out an audible gasp, "that you know what Felix Felicis does, Miss Granger?"

"It's liquid luck," said Hermione excitedly. "It makes you lucky!"

The whole class seemed to sit up a little straighter. Now all Harry could see of Malfoy was the back of his sleek blond head, because he was at last giving Slughorn his full and undivided attention.

"Quite right, take another ten points for Gryffindor. Yes, it's a funny little potion, Felix Felicis," said Slughorn. "Desperately tricky to make, and disastrous to get wrong. However, if brewed correctly, as this has been, you will find that all your endeavors tend to succeed…at least until the effects wear off."

"Why don't people drink it all the time, sir?" said Terry Boot eagerly.

"Because if taken in excess, it causes giddiness, recklessness, and dangerous overconfidence," said Slughorn. "Too much of a good thing, you know…highly toxic in large quantities. But taken sparingly, and very occasionally…"

"Have you ever taken it, sir?" asked Michael Corner with great interest.

"Twice in my life," said Slughorn. "Once when I was twenty-four, once when I was fifty-seven. Two tablespoonfuls taken with breakfast. Two perfect days." He gazed dreamily into the distance. Whether he was playacting or not, thought Harry, the effect was good.

"And that," said Slughorn, apparently coming back to earth, "is what I shall be offering as a prize in this lesson."

There was silence in which every bubble and gurgle of the surrounding potions seemed magnified tenfold.

"One tiny bottle of Felix Felicis," said Slughorn, taking a minuscule glass bottle with a cork in it out of his pocket and showing it to them all. "Enough for twelve hours' luck. From dawn till dusk, you will be lucky in everything you attempt."

"Now, I must give you warning that Felix Felicis is a banned substance in organized competitions…sporting events, for instance, examinations, or elections. So the winner is to use it on an ordinary day only…and watch how that ordinary day becomes extraordinary!"

"So," said Slughorn, suddenly brisk, "how are you to win this fabulous prize? Well, by turning to page ten of Advanced Potion Making. We have a little over an hour left to us, which should be time for you to make a decent attempt at the Draught of Living Death. I know it is more complex than anything you have attempted before, and I do not expect a perfect potion from anybody. The person who does best, however, will win little Felix here. Off you go!"

There was a scraping as everyone drew their cauldrons toward them and some loud clunks as people began adding weights to their scales, but nobody spoke. The concentration within the room was almost tangible. Harry saw Malfoy riffling feverishly through his copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*. It could not have been clearer that Malfoy really wanted that lucky day. Harry bent swiftly over the tattered book Slughorn had lent him.

To his annoyance he saw that the previous owner had scribbled all over the pages, so that the margins were as black as the printed portions. Bending low to decipher the ingredients (even here, the previous owner had made annotations and crossed things out) Harry hurried off toward the store cupboard to find what he needed. As he dashed back to his cauldron, he saw Malfoy cutting up Valerian roots as fast as he could.

Everyone kept glancing around at what the rest of the class was doing; this was both an advantage and a disadvantage of Potions, that it was hard to keep your work private. Within ten minutes, the whole place was full of bluish steam. Hermione, of course, seemed to have progressed furthest. Her potion already resembled the "smooth, black currant-colored liquid" mentioned as the ideal halfway stage.

Having finished chopping his roots, Harry bent low over his book again. It was really very irritating, having to try and decipher the directions under all the stupid scribbles of the previous owner, who for some reason had taken issue with the order to cut up the sopophorous bean and had written in the alternative instruction:

Crush with flat side of silver dagger, releases juice better than cutting.

"Sir, I think you knew my grandfather, Abraxas Malfoy?" Harry looked up; Slughorn was just passing the Slytherin table.

"Yes," said Slughorn, without looking at Malfoy, "I was sorry to hear he had died, although of course it wasn't unexpected, dragon pox at his age…"

And he walked away. Harry bent back over his cauldron, smirking. He could tell that Malfoy had expected to be treated like Harry or Zabini; perhaps even hoped for some preferential treatment of the type he had learned to expect from Snape. It looked as though Malfoy would have to rely on nothing but talent to win the bottle of Felix Felicis.

The sopophorous bean was proving very difficult to cut up. Harry turned to Hermione.

"Can I borrow your silver knife?"

She nodded impatiently, not taking her eyes off her potion, which was still deep purple, though according to the book ought to be turning a light shade of lilac by now.

Harry crushed his bean with the flat side of the dagger. To his astonishment, it immediately exuded so much juice he was amazed the shriveled bean could have held it all.

Hastily scooping it all into the cauldron he saw, to his surprise, that the potion immediately turned exactly the shade of lilac described by the textbook.

His annoyance with the previous owner vanishing on the spot, Harry now squinted at the next line of instructions. According the book, he had to stir counterclockwise until the potion turned clear as water. According to the addition the previous owner made, however, he ought to add a clockwise stir after every seventh counterclockwise stir. Could the old owner be right twice?

Harry stirred counterclockwise, held his breath, and stirred once clockwise. The effect was immediate. The potion turned pale pink.

"How are you doing that?" demanded Hermione, who was redfaced and whose hair was growing bushier and bushier in the fumes from her cauldron; her potion was still resolutely purple.

"Add a clockwise stir —"

"No, no, the book says counterclockwise!" she snapped.

Harry shrugged and continued what he was doing. Seven stirs counterdockwise, one clockwise, pause…seven stirs counterclockwise, one stir clockwise…

Across the table, Ron was cursing fluently under his breath; his potion looked like liquid licorice. Harry glanced around. As far as he could see, no one else's potion had turned as pale as his. He felt elated, something that had certainly never happened before in this dungeon.

“And time’s…up!” called Slughorn. “Stop stirring, please!”

Slughorn moved slowly among the tables, peering into cauldrons. He made no comment, but occasionally gave the potions a stir or a sniff. At last he reached the table where Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ernie were sitting. He smiled ruefully at the tarlike substance in Ron’s cauldron. He passed over Ernie’s navy concoction. Hermione’s potion he gave an approving nod. Then he saw Harry’s, and a look of incredulous delight spread over his face.

“The clear winner!” he cried to the dungeon. “Excellent, excellent, Harry! Good lord, it’s clear you’ve inherited your mother’s talent. She was a dab hand at Potions, Lily was! Here you are, then, here you are — one bottle of Felix Felicis, as promised, and use it well!”

Harry slipped the tiny bottle of golden liquid into his inner pocket, feeling an odd combination of delight at the furious looks on the Slytherins’ faces and guilt at the disappointed expression on Hermione’s. Ron looked simply dumbfounded.

“How did you do that?” he whispered to Harry as they left the dungeon.

“Got lucky, I suppose,” said Harry, because Malfoy was within earshot.

Once they were securely ensconced at the Gryffindor table for dinner, however, he felt safe enough to tell them. Hermione’s face became stonier with every word he uttered.

“I s’pose you think I cheated?” he finished, aggravated by her expression.

“Well, it wasn’t exactly your own work, was it?” she said stiffly.

“He only followed different instructions to ours,” said Ron, “Could’ve been a catastrophe, couldn’t it? But he took a risk and it paid off.” He heaved a sigh. “Slughorn could’ve handed me that book, but no, I get the one no one’s ever written on. Puked on, by the look of page fifty-two, but—”

“Hang on,” said a voice close by Harry’s left ear and he caught a sudden waft of that flowery smell he had picked up in Slughorn’s dungeon. He looked around and saw that Ginny had joined them. “Did I hear right? You’ve been taking orders from something someone wrote in a book, Harry?”

She looked alarmed and angry. Harry knew what was on her mind at once.

“It’s nothing,” he said reassuringly, lowering his voice. “It’s not like, you know, Riddle’s diary. It’s just an old textbook someone’s scribbled on.”

“But you’re doing what it says?”

“I just tried a few of the tips written in the margins, honestly, Ginny, there’s nothing funny-”

“Ginny’s got a point,” said Hermione, perking up at once. “We ought to check that there’s nothing odd about it. I mean, all these funny instructions, who knows?”

“Hey!” said Harry indignantly, as she pulled his copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* out of his bag and raised her wand. “*Specialis Revelio!*” she said, rapping it smartly on the front cover. Nothing whatsoever happened. The book simply lay there, looking old and dirty and dog-eared.

“Finished?” said Harry irritably. “Or d’you want to wait and see if it does a few backflips?”

“It seems all right,” said Hermione, still staring at the book suspiciously. “I mean, it really does seem to be…just a textbook.”

“Good. Then I’ll have it back,” said Harry, snatching it off the table, but it slipped from his hand and landed open on the floor.

Nobody else was looking. Harry bent low to retrieve the book, and as he did so, he saw something scribbled along the bottom of the back cover in the same small, cramped handwriting as the instructions that had won him his bottle of Felix Felicis, now safely hidden inside a pair of socks in his trunk upstairs.

This book is the property of the Half Blood Prince.

CHAPTER TEN

THE HOUR OF GAUNT

For or the rest of the week's Potions lessons Harry continued to follow the Half-Blood Prince's instructions wherever they deviated from Libatius Borage's, with the result that by their fourth lesson Slughorn was raving about Harry's abilities, saying that he had rarely taught anyone so talented. Neither Ron nor Hermione was delighted by this. Although Harry had offered to share his book with both of them, Ron had more difficulty deciphering the handwriting than Harry did, and could not keep asking Harry to read aloud or it might look suspicious. Hermione, meanwhile, was resolutely plowing on with what she called the "official" instructions, but becoming increasingly bad-tempered as they yielded poorer results than the Prince's.

Harry wondered vaguely who the Half-Blood Prince had been. Although the amount of homework they had been given prevented him from reading the whole of his copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*, he had skimmed through it sufficiently to see that there was barely a page on which the Prince had not made additional notes, not all of them concerned with potion-making. Here and there were directions for what looked like spells that the Prince had made up himself.

"Or herself," said Hermione irritably, overhearing Harry pointing some of these out to Ron in the common room on Saturday evening. "It might have been a girl. I think the handwriting looks more like a girl's than a boy's."

"The Half-Blood *Prince*, he was called," Harry said. "How many girls have been Princes?"

Hermione seemed to have no answer to this. She merely scowled and twitched her essay on *The Principles of Rematerialization* away from Ron, who was trying to read it upside down.

Harry looked at his watch and hurriedly put the old copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* back into his bag.

"It's five to eight, I'd better go, I'll be late for Dumbledore."

"Ooooh!" gasped Hermione, looking up at once. "Good luck! We'll wait up, we want to hear what he teaches you!"

"Hope it goes okay," said Ron, and the pair of them watched Harry leave through the portrait hole.

Harry proceeded through deserted corridors, though he had to step hastily behind a statue when Professor Trelawney appeared around a corner, muttering to herself as she shuffled a pack of dirty-looking playing cards, reading them as she walked.

“Two of spades: conflict,” she murmured, as she passed the place where Harry crouched, hidden. “Seven of spades: an ill omen. Ten of spades: violence. Knave of spades: a dark young man, possibly troubled, one who dislikes the questioner —”

She stopped dead, right on the other side of Harry’s statue.

“Well, that can’t be right,” she said, annoyed, and Harry heard her reshuffling vigorously as she set off again, leaving nothing but a whiff of cooking sherry behind her. Harry waited until he was quite sure she had gone, then hurried off again until he reached the spot in the seventh-floor corridor where a single gargoyle stood against the wall.

“Acid Pops,” said Harry, and the gargoyle leapt aside; the wall behind it slid apart, and a moving spiral stone staircase was revealed, onto which Harry stepped, so that he was carried in smooth circles up to the door with the brass knocker that led to Dumbledore’s Office.

Harry knocked.

“Come in,” said Dumbledore s voice.

“Good evening, sir,” said Harry, walking into the headmaster’s office.

“Ah, good evening, Harry. Sit down,” said Dumbledore, smiling. “I hope you’ve had an enjoyable first week back at school?”

“Yes, thanks, sir,” said Harry.

“You must have been busy, a detention under your belt already!”

“Er,” began Harry awkwardly, but Dumbledore did not look too stern.

“I have arranged with Professor Snape that you will do your detention next Saturday instead.”

“Right,” said Harry, who had more pressing matters on his mind than Snapes detention, and now looked around surreptitiously for some indication of what Dumbledore was planning to do with him this evening. The circular office looked just as it always did; the delicate silver instruments stood on spindle-legged tables, puff-ing smoke and whirring; portraits of previous headmasters and headmistresses dozed in their frames, and Dumbledore’s magnificent phoenix, Fawkes, stood on his perch behind the door, watching Harry with bright interest. It did not even look as though Dumbledore had cleared a space for dueling practice.

“So, Harry,” said Dumbledore, in a businesslike voice. “You have been wondering, I am sure, what I have planned for you during these — for want of a better word — lessons?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, I have decided that it is time, now that you know what prompted Lord Voldemort to try and kill you fifteen years ago, for you to be given certain information.” There was a pause.

“You said, at the end of last term, you were going to tell me everything,” said Harry. It was hard to keep a note of accusation from his voice. “Sir,” he added.

“And so I did,” said Dumbledore placidly. “I told you everything I know. From this point forth, we shall be leaving the firm foundation of fact and journeying together through the murky marshes of memory into thickets of wildest guesswork. From here on in, Harry, I may be as woefully wrong as Humphrey Belcher, who believed the time was ripe for a cheese cauldron.”

“But you think you’re right?” said Harry.

“Naturally I do, but as I have already proven to you, I make mistakes like the next man. In fact, being — forgive me — rather cleverer than most men, my mistakes tend to be correspondingly huger.”

“Sir,” said Harry tentatively, “does what you’re going to tell me have anything to do with the prophecy? Will it help me…survive?”

“It has a very great deal to do with the prophecy,” said Dumbledore, as casually as if Harry had asked him about the next days weather, “and I certainly hope that it will help you to survive.”

Dumbledore got to his feet and walked around the desk, past Harry, who turned eagerly in his seat to watch Dumbledore bending over the cabinet beside the door. When Dumbledore straightened up, he was holding a familiar shallow stone basin etched with odd markings around its rim. He placed the Pensieve on the desk in front of Harry.

“You look worried.”

Harry had indeed been eyeing the Pensieve with some apprehension. His previous experiences with the odd device that stored and revealed thoughts and memories, though highly instructive, had also been uncomfortable. The last time he had disturbed its contents, he had seen much more than he would have wished. But Dumbledore was smiling.

“This time, you enter the Pensieve with me…and, even more unusually, with permission.”

“Where are we going, sir?”

“For a trip down Bob Ogden’s memory lane,” said Dumbledore, pulling from his pocket a crystal bottle containing a swirling silvery-white substance.

“Who was Bob Ogden?”

“He was employed by the Department of Magical Law Enforcement,” said Dumbledore. “He died some time ago, but not before I had tracked him down and persuaded him to confide these recollections to me. We are about to accompany him on a visit he made in the course of his duties. If you will stand, Harry…”

But Dumbledore was having difficulty pulling out the stopper of the crystal bottle: His injured hand seemed stiff and painful.

"Shall — shall I, sir?"

"No matter, Harry —"

Dumbledore pointed his wand at the bottle and the cork flew out.

"Sir — how did you injure your hand?" Harry asked again, looking at the blackened fingers with a mixture of revulsion and pity.

"Now is not the moment for that story, Harry. Not yet. We have an appointment with Bob Ogden."

Dumbledore tipped the silvery contents of the bottle into the Pensieve, where they swirled and shimmered, neither liquid nor gas. "After you," said Dumbledore, gesturing toward the bowl. Harry bent forward, took a deep breath, and plunged his face into the silvery substance. He felt his feet leave the office floor; he was falling, falling through whirling darkness and then, quite sud-denly, he was blinking in dazzling sunlight. Before his eyes had adjusted, Dumbledore landed beside him.

They were standing in a country lane bordered by high, tangled hedgerows, beneath a summer sky as bright and blue as a forget-me-not. Some ten feet in front of them stood a short, plump man wearing enormously thick glasses that reduced his eyes to molelike specks. He was reading a wooden signpost that was sticking out of the brambles on the left-hand side of the road. Harry knew this must be Ogden; he was the only person in sight, and he was also wearing the strange assortment of clothes so often chosen by inexperienced wizards trying to look like Muggles: in this case, a frock coat and spats over a striped one-piece bathing costume. Before Harry had time to do more than register his bizarre appearance, however, Ogden had set off at a brisk walk down the lane.

Dumbledore and Harry followed. As they passed the wooden sign, Harry looked up at its two arms. The one pointing back the way they had come read: Great Hangleton, 5 miles. The arm pointing after Ogden said Little Hangleton, 1 mile.

They walked a short way with nothing to see but the hedgerows, the wide blue sky overhead and the swishing, frock-coated figure ahead. Then the lane curved to the left and fell away, sloping steeply down a hillside, so that they had a sudden, unexpected view of a whole valley laid out in front of them. Harry could see a village, undoubtedly Little Hangleton, nestled between two steep hills, its church and graveyard clearly visible. Across the valley, set on the opposite hillside, was a handsome manor house surrounded by a wide expanse of velvety green lawn.

Ogden had broken into a reluctant trot due to the steep downward slope. Dumbledore lengthened his stride, and Harry hurried to keep up. He thought Little Hangleton must be their final destination and wondered, as he had done on the night they had found Slughorn, why they had to approach it from such a distance. He soon discovered that he was mistaken in thinking that they were going to the village, however. The lane curved to the right and when they rounded the corner, it was to see the very edge of Ogden's frock coat vanishing through a gap in the hedge.

Dumbledore and Harry followed him onto a narrow dirt track bordered by higher and wilder hedgerows than those they had left behind. The path was crooked, rocky, and potholed, sloping down-hill like the last one, and it seemed to be heading for a patch of dark trees a little below them. Sure enough, the track soon opened up at the copse, and Dumbledore and Harry came to a halt behind Ogden, who had stopped and drawn his wand.

Despite the cloudless sky, the old trees ahead cast deep, dark, cool shadows, and it was a few seconds before Harry's eyes discerned the building half-hidden amongst the tangle of trunks. It seemed to him a very strange location to choose for a house, or else an odd decision to leave the trees growing nearby, blocking all light and the view of the valley below. He wondered whether it was inhabited; its walls were mossy and so many tiles had fallen off the roof that the rafters were visible in places. Nettles grew all around it, their tips reaching the windows, which were tiny and thick with grime. Just as he had concluded that nobody could possibly live there, however, one of the windows was thrown open with a clatter, and a thin trickle of steam or smoke issued from it, as though somebody was cooking.

Ogden moved forward quietly and, it seemed to Harry, rather cautiously. As the dark shadows of the trees slid over him, he stopped again, staring at the front door, to which somebody had nailed a dead snake.

Then there was a rustle and a crack, and a man in rags dropped from the nearest tree, landing on his feet right in front of Ogden, who leapt backward so fast he stood on the tails of his frock coat and stumbled.

"You're not welcome."

The man standing before them had thick hair so matted with dirt it could have been any color. Several of his teeth were missing. His eyes were small and dark and stared in opposite directions. He might have looked comical, but he did not; the effect was frighten-ing, and Harry could not blame Ogden for backing away several more paces before he spoke.

"Er — good morning. I'm from the Ministry of Magic —"

"You're not welcome."

"Er — I'm sorry — I don't understand you," said Ogden nervously.

Harry thought Ogden was being extremely dim; the stranger was making himself very clear in Harry's opinion, particularly as he was brandishing a wand in one hand and a short and rather bloody knife in the other.

"You understand him, I'm sure, Harry?" said Dumbledore quietly.

"Yes, of course," said Harry, slightly nonplussed. "Why can't Ogden —?"

But as his eyes found the dead snake on the door again, he suddenly understood.

"He's speaking Parseltongue?"

"Very good," said Dumbledore, nodding and smiling.

The man in rags was now advancing on Ogden, knife in one hand, wand in the other.

"Now, look —" Ogden began, but too late: There was a bang, and Ogden was on the ground, clutching his nose, while a nasty yellowish goo squirted from between his fingers.

"Morfin!" said a loud voice.

An elderly man had come hurrying out of the cottage, banging the door behind him so that the dead snake swung pathetically. This man was shorter than the first, and oddly proportioned; his shoulders were very broad and his arms overlong, which, with his bright brown eyes, short scrubby hair, and wrinkled face, gave him the look of a powerful, aged monkey. He came to a halt beside the man with the knife, who was now cackling with laughter at the sight of Ogden on the ground.

"Ministry, is it?" said the older man, looking down at Ogden.

"Correct!" said Ogden angrily, dabbing his face. "And you, I take it, are Mr. Gaunt?"

"S'right," said Gaunt. "Got you in the face, did he?"

"Yes, he did!" snapped Ogden.

"Should've made your presence known, shouldn't you?" said Gaunt aggressively. "This is private property. Can't just walk in here and not expect my son to defend himself."

"Defend himself against what, man?" said Ogden, clambering back to his feet.

"Busybodies. Intruders. Muggles and filth." Ogden pointed his wand at his own nose, which was still issuing large amounts of what looked like yellow pus, and the flow stopped at once. Mr. Gaunt spoke out of the corner of his mouth to Morfin.

"Get in the house. Don't argue."

This time, ready for it, Harry recognized Parseltongue; even while he could understand what was being said, he distinguished the weird hissing noise that was all Ogden could hear. Morfin seemed to

be on the point of disagreeing, but when his father cast him a threatening look he changed his mind, lumbering away to the cottage with an odd rolling gait and slamming the front door behind him, so that the snake swung sadly again.

"It's your son I'm here to see, Mr. Gaunt," said Ogden, as he mopped the last of the pus from the front of his coat. "That was Morfin, wasn't it?"

"Ah, that was Morfin," said the old man indifferently. "Are you pure-blood?" he asked, suddenly aggressive.

"That's neither here nor there," said Ogden coldly, and Harry felt his respect for Ogden rise. Apparently Gaunt felt rather differently. He squinted into Ogden's face and muttered, in what was clearly supposed to be an offensive tone, "Now I come to think about it, I've seen noses like yours down in the village."

"I don't doubt it, if your son's been let loose on them," said Ogden. "Perhaps we could continue this discussion inside?"

"Inside?"

"Yes, Mr. Gaunt. I've already told you. I'm here about Morfin. We sent an owl —"

"I've no use for owls," said Gaunt. "I don't open letters."

"Then you can hardly complain that you get no warning of visitors," said Ogden tartly. "I am here following a serious breach of Wizarding law, which occurred here in the early hours of this morning —"

"All right, all right, all right!" bellowed Gaunt. "Come in the bleeding house, then, and much good it'll do you!"

The house seemed to contain three tiny rooms. Two doors led off the main room, which served as kitchen and living room com-bined. Morfin was sitting in a filthy armchair beside the smoking fire, twisting a live adder between his thick fingers and crooning softly at it in Parseltongue:

Hissy, hissy, little snakey,

Slither on the floor

You be good to Morfin

Or he'll nail you to the door.

There was a scuffling noise in the corner beside the open window, and Harry realized that there was somebody else in the room, a girl whose ragged gray dress was the exact color of the dirty stone wall behind her. She was standing beside a steaming pot on a grimy black stove, and was fiddling around with the shelf of squalid-looking pots and pans above it. Her hair was lank and dull and she

had a plain, pale, rather heavy face. Her eyes, like her brother's, stared in opposite directions. She looked a little cleaner than the two men, but Harry thought he had never seen a more defeated-looking person.

"M'daughter, Merope," said Gaunt grudgingly, as Ogden looked inquiringly toward her.

"Good morning," said Ogden.

She did not answer, but with a frightened glance at her father turned her back on the room and continued shifting the pots on the shelf behind her.

"Well, Mr. Gaunt," said Ogden, "to get straight to the point, we have reason to believe that your son, Morfin, performed magic in front of a Muggle late last night."

There was a deafening clang. Merope had dropped one of the pots.

"Pick it up!" Gaunt bellowed at her. "That's it, grub on the floor like some filthy Muggle, what's your wand for, you useless sack of muck?"

"Mr. Gaunt, please!" said Ogden in a shocked voice, as Merope, who had already picked up the pot, flushed blotchily scarlet, lost her grip on the pot again, drew her wand shakily from her pocket, pointed it at the pot, and muttered a hasty, inaudible spell that caused the pot to shoot across the floor away from her, hit the opposite wall, and crack in two.

Morfin let out a mad cackle of laughter. Gaunt screamed, "Mend it, you pointless lump, mend it!"

Merope stumbled across the room, but before she had time to raise her wand, Ogden had lifted his own and said firmly, "*Reparo*." The pot mended itself instantly.

Gaunt looked for a moment as though he was going to shout at Ogden, but seemed to think better of it: Instead, he jeered at his daughter, "Lucky the nice man from the Ministry's here, isn't it? Perhaps he'll take you off my hands, perhaps he doesn't mind dirty Squibs…"

Without looking at anybody or thanking Ogden, Merope picked up the pot and returned it, hands trembling, to its shelf. She then stood quite still, her back against the wall between the filthy window and the stove, as though she wished for nothing more than to sink into the stone and vanish.

"Mr. Gaunt," Ogden began again, "as I've said: the reason for my visit —"

"I heard you the first time!" snapped Gaunt. "And so what? Morfin gave a Muggle a bit of what was coming to him — what about it, then?"

"Morfin has broken Wizarding law," said Ogden sternly.

"'Morfin has broken Wizarding law.'" Gaunt imitated Ogden's voice, making it pompous and singsong. Morfin cackled again. "He taught a filthy Muggle a lesson, that's illegal now, is it?"

"Yes," said Ogden. "I'm afraid it is."

He pulled from an inside pocket a small scroll of parchment and unrolled it.

"What's that, then, his sentence?" said Gaunt, his voice rising angrily.

"It is a summons to the Ministry for a hearing —"

"Summons! Summons? Who do you think you are, summoning my son anywhere?"

"I'm Head of the Magical Law Enforcement Squad," said Ogden.

"And you think we're scum, do you?" screamed Gaunt, advancing on Ogden now, with a dirty yellow-nailed finger pointing at his chest. "Scum who'll come running when the Ministry tells 'em to? Do you know who you're talking to, you filthy little Mudblood, do you?"

"I was under the impression that I was speaking to Mr. Gaunt," said Ogden, looking wary, but standing his ground.

"That's right!" roared Gaunt. For a moment, Harry thought Gaunt was making an obscene hand gesture, but then realized that he was showing Ogden the ugly, black-stoned ring he was wearing on his middle finger, waving it before Ogden's eyes. "See this? See this? Know what it is? Know where it came from? Centuries it's been in our family, that's how far back we go, and pure-blood all the way! Know how much I've been offered for this, with the Peverell coat of arms engraved on the stone?"

"I've really no idea," said Ogden, blinking as the ring sailed within an inch of his nose, "and it's quite beside the point, Mr. Gaunt. Your son has committed —"

With a howl of rage, Gaunt ran toward his daughter. For a split second, Harry thought he was going to throttle her as his hand flew to her throat; next moment, he was dragging her toward Ogden by a gold chain around her neck.

"See this?" he bellowed at Ogden, shaking a heavy gold locket at him, while Merope spluttered and gasped for breath.

"I see it, I see it!" said Ogden hastily.

"Slytherins!" yelled Gaunt. "Salazar Slytherin's! We're his last living descendants, what do you say to that, eh?"

"Mr. Gaunt, your daughter!" said Ogden in alarm, but Gaunt had already released Merope; she staggered away from him, back to her corner, massaging her neck and gulping for air.

“So!” said Gaunt triumphantly, as though he had just proved a complicated point beyond all possible dispute. “Don’t you go talking to us as if we’re dirt on your shoes! Generations of pure-bloods, wizards all — more than you can say, I don’t doubt!”

And he spat on the floor at Ogdens feet. Morfin cackled again. Merope, huddled beside the window, her head bowed and her face hidden by her lank hair, said nothing.

“Mr. Gaunt,” said Ogden doggedly, “I am afraid that neither your ancestors nor mine have anything to do with the matter in hand. I am here because of Morfin, Morfin and the Muggle he accosted late last night. Our information”— he glanced down at his scroll of parchment — “is that Morfin performed a jinx or hex on the said Muggle, causing him to erupt in highly painful hives.”

Morfin giggled.

“*Be quiet, boy,*” snarled Gaunt in Parseltongue, and Morfin fell silent again.

“And so what if he did, then?” Gaunt said defiantly to Ogden, “I expect you’ve wiped the Muggle’s filthy face clean for him, and his memory to boot —”

“That’s hardly the point, is it, Mr. Gaunt?” said Ogden. “This was an unprovoked attack on a defenseless —”

“Ar, I had you marked out as a Muggle-lover the moment I saw you,” sneered Gaunt, and he spat on the floor again.

“This discussion is getting us nowhere,” said Ogden firmly. “It is clear from your son’s attitude that he feels no remorse for his actions.” He glanced down at his scroll of parchment again. “Morfin will attend a hearing on the fourteenth of September to answer the charges of using magic in front of a Muggle and causing harm and distress to that same Mugg —”

Ogden broke off. The jingling, clopping sounds of horses and loud, laughing voices were drifting in through the open window. Apparently the winding lane to the village passed very close to the copse where the house stood. Gaunt froze, listening, his eyes wide. Morfin hissed and turned his face toward the sounds, his expression hungry. Merope raised her head. Her face, Harry saw, was starkly white.

“My God, what an eyesore!” rang out a girl’s voice, as clearly audible through the open window as if she had stood in the room beside them. “Couldn’t your father have that hovel cleared away, Tom?”

“It’s not ours,” said a young man’s voice. “Everything on the other side of the valley belongs to us, but that cottage belongs to an old tramp called Gaunt, and his children. The son’s quite mad, you should hear some of the stories they tell in the village —”

The girl laughed. The jingling, clopping noises were growing louder and louder. Morfin made to get out of his armchair.

"Keep your seat," said his father warningly, in Parseltongue.

"Tom," said the girl's voice again, now so close they were clearly right beside the house,

"I might be wrong — but has somebody nailed a snake to that door?"

"Good lord, you're right!" said the man's voice. "That'll be the son, I told you he's not right in the head. Don't look at it, Cecilia, darling."

The jingling and clopping sounds were now growing faint again.

"'Darling,'" whispered Morfin in Parseltongue, looking at his sister. *"'Darling, he called her. So he wouldn't have you anyway."*

Merope was so white Harry felt sure she was going to faint.

"What's that?" said Gaunt sharply, also in Parseltongue, looking from his son to his daughter. *"What did you say, Morfin?"*

"She likes looking at that Muggle," said Morfin, a vicious expression on his face as he stared at his sister, who now looked terrified. *"Always in the garden when he passes, peering through the hedge at him, isn't she? And last night —"*

Merope shook her head jerkily, imploringly, but Morfin went on ruthlessly, *"Hanging out of the window waiting for him to ride home, wasn't she?"*

"Hanging out of the window to look at a Muggle?" said Gaunt quietly.

All three of the Gaunts seemed to have forgotten Ogden, who was looking both bewildered and irritated at this renewed outbreak of incomprehensible hissing and rasping.

"Is it true?" said Gaunt in a deadly voice, advancing a step or two toward the terrified girl. *"My daughter — pure-blooded descendant of Salazar Slytherin — hankering after a filthy, dirt-veined Muggle?"*

Merope shook her head frantically, pressing herself into the wall, apparently unable to speak.

"But I got him, Father!" cackled Morfin. *"I got him as he went by and he didn't look so pretty with hives all over him, did he, Merope?"*

"You disgusting little Squib, you filthy little blood traitor!" roared Gaunt, losing control, and his hands closed around his daughter's throat.

Both Harry and Ogden yelled "No!" at the same time; Ogden raised his wand and cried, "*Relashio!*"

Gaunt was thrown backward, away from his daughter; he tripped over a chair and fell flat on his back. With a roar of rage, Morfin leapt out of his chair and ran at Ogden, brandishing his bloody knife and firing hexes indiscriminately from his wand.

Ogden ran for his life. Dumbledore indicated that they ought to follow and Harry obeyed, Merope's screams echoing in his ears.

Ogden hurtled up the path and erupted onto the main lane, his arms over his head, where he collided with the glossy chestnut horse ridden by a very handsome, dark-haired young man. Both he and the pretty girl riding beside him on a gray horse roared with laughter at the sight of Ogden, who bounced off the horse's flank and set off again, his frock coat flying, covered from head to foot in dust, running pell-mell up the lane.

"I think that will do, Harry," said Dumbledore. He took Harry by the elbow and tugged. Next moment, they were both soaring weightlessly through darkness, until they landed squarely on their feet, back in Dumbledore's now twilit office.

"What happened to the girl in the cottage?" said Harry at once, as Dumbledore lit extra lamps with a flick of his wand. "Merope, or whatever her name was?"

"Oh, she survived," said Dumbledore, reseating himself behind his desk and indicating that Harry should sit down too. "Ogden Apparated back to the Ministry and returned with reinforcements within fifteen minutes. Morfin and his father attempted to fight, but both were overpowered, removed from the cottage, and subsequently convicted by the Wizengamot. Morfin, who already had a record of Muggle attacks, was sentenced to three years in Azkaban. Marvolo, who had injured several Ministry employees in addition to Ogden, received six months."

"Marvolo?" Harry repeated wonderingly.

"That's right," said Dumbledore, smiling in approval. "I am glad to see you're keeping up."

"That old man was —?"

"Voldemort's grandfather, yes," said Dumbledore. "Marvolo, his son, Morfin, and his daughter, Merope, were the last of the Gaunts, a very ancient Wizarding family noted for a vein of instability and violence that flourished through the generations due to their habit of marrying their own cousins. Lack of sense coupled with a great liking for grandeur meant that the family gold was squandered several generations before Marvolo was born. He, as you saw, was left in squalor and poverty, with a very nasty temper, a fantastic amount of arrogance and pride, and a couple of family heirlooms that he treasured just as much as his son, and rather more than his daughter."

"So Merope," said Harry, leaning forward in his chair and star-ing at Dumbledore, "so Merope was…Sir, does that mean she was…*Voldemort's mother*?"

"It does," said Dumbledore. "And it so happens that we also had a glimpse of Voldemort's father. I wonder whether you noticed?"

"The Muggle Morfin attacked? The man on the horse?"

"Very good indeed," said Dumbledore, beaming. "Yes, that was Tom Riddle senior, the handsome Muggle who used to go riding past the Gaunt cottage and for whom Merope Gaunt cherished a secret, burning passion."

"And they ended up married?" Harry said in disbelief, unable to imagine two people less likely to fall in love.

"I think you are forgetting," said Dumbledore, "that Merope was a witch. I do not believe that her magical powers appeared to their best advantage when she was being terrorized by her father. Once Marvolo and Morfin were safely in Azkaban, once she was alone and free for the first time in her life, then, I am sure, she was able to give full rein to her abilities and to plot her escape from the desperate life she had led for eighteen years.

"Can you not think of any measure Merope could have taken to make Tom Riddle forget his Muggle companion, and fall in love with her instead?"

"The Imperius Curse?" Harry suggested. "Or a love potion?"

"Very good. Personally, I am inclined to think that she used a love potion. I am sure it would have seemed more romantic to her, and I do not think it would have been very difficult, some hot day, when Riddle was riding alone, to persuade him to take a drink of water. In any case, within a few months of the scene we have just witnessed, the village of Little Hangleton enjoyed a tremendous scandal. You can imagine the gossip it caused when the squire's son ran off with the tramp's daughter, Merope.

"But the villagers' shock was nothing to Marvolo's. He returned from Azkaban, expecting to find his daughter dutifully awaiting his return with a hot meal ready on his table. Instead, he found a clear inch of dust and her note of farewell, explaining what she had done.

"From all that I have been able to discover, he never mentioned her name or existence from that time forth. The shock of her desertion may have contributed to his early death — or perhaps he had simply never learned to feed himself. Azkaban had greatly weakened Marvolo, and he did not live to see Morfin return to the cottage."

"And Merope? She…she died, didn't she? Wasn't Voldemort brought up in an orphanage?"

"Yes, indeed," said Dumbledore. "We must do a certain amount of guessing here, although I do not think it is difficult to deduce what happened. You see, within a few months of their runaway marriage, Tom Riddle reappeared at the manor house in Little Hangleton without his wife. The rumor flew around the neighborhood that he was talking of being 'hoodwinked' and 'taken in.' What he meant, I am sure, is that he had been under an enchantment that had now lifted, though I daresay he did not dare use those precise words for fear of being thought insane. When they heard what he was saying, however, the villagers guessed that Merope had lied to Tom Riddle, pretending that she was going to have his baby, and that he had married her for this reason."

"But she did have his baby."

"But not until a year after they were married. Tom Riddle left her while she was still pregnant."

"What went wrong?" asked Harry. "Why did the love potion stop working?"

"Again, this is guesswork," said Dumbledore, "but I believe that Merope, who was deeply in love with her husband, could not bear to continue enslaving him by magical means. I believe that she made the choice to stop giving him the potion. Perhaps, besotted as she was, she had convinced herself that he would by now have fallen in love with her in return. Perhaps she thought he would stay for the baby's sake. If so, she was wrong on both counts. He left her, never saw her again, and never troubled to discover what became of his son."

The sky outside was inky black and the lamps in Dumbledore's office seemed to glow more brightly than before.

"I think that will do for tonight, Harry," said Dumbledore after a moment or two.

"Yes, sir," said Harry.

He got to his feet, but did not leave.

"Sir…is it important to know all this about Voldemort's past?"

"Very important, I think," said Dumbledore.

"And it…it's got something to do with the prophecy?"

"It has everything to do with the prophecy."

"Right," said Harry, a little confused, but reassured all the same.

He turned to go, then another question occurred to him, and he turned back again. "Sir, am I allowed to tell Ron and Hermione everything you've told me?"

Dumbledore considered him for a moment, then said, "Yes, I think Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger have proved themselves trust-worthy. But Harry, I am going to ask you to ask them not to

repeat any of this to anybody else. It would not be a good idea if word got around how much I know, or suspect, about Lord Voldemort's secrets."

"No, sir, I'll make sure it's just Ron and Hermione. Good night."

He turned away again, and was almost at the door when he saw it. Sitting on one of the little spindle-legged tables that supported so many frail-looking silver instruments, was an ugly gold ring set with a large, cracked, black stone.

"Sir," said Harry, staring at it. "That ring —"

"Yes?" said Dumbledore.

"You were wearing it when we visited Professor Slughorn that night."

"So I was," Dumbledore agreed.

"But isn't it…sir, isn't it the same ring Marvolo Gaunt showed Ogden?"

Dumbledore bowed his head. "The very same."

"But how come —? Have you always had it?"

"No, I acquired it very recently," said Dumbledore. "A few days before I came to fetch you from your aunt and uncle's, in fact."

"That would be around the time you injured your hand, then, sir?"

"Around that time, yes, Harry."

Harry hesitated. Dumbledore was smiling.

"Sir, how exactly —?"

"Too late, Harry! You shall hear the story another time. Good night."

"Good night, sir."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

HERMIONE'S HELPING HAND

As Hermione had predicted, the sixth years' free periods were not the hours of blissful relaxation Ron had anticipated, but times in which to attempt to keep up with the vast amount of homework they were being set. Not only were they studying as though they had exams every day, but the lessons themselves had become more demanding than ever before. Harry barely understood half of what Professor McGonagall said to them these days; even Hermione had had to ask her to repeat instructions once or twice. Incredibly, and to Hermione's increasing resentment, Harry's best subject had suddenly become Potions, thanks to the Half-Blood Prince.

Nonverbal spells were now expected, not only in Defense Against the Dark Arts, but in Charms and Transfiguration too. Harry frequently looked over at his classmates in the common room or at mealtimes to see them purple in the face and straining as though they had overdosed on U-No-Poo; but he knew that they were really struggling to make spells work without saying incantations aloud. It was a relief to get outside into the greenhouses; they were dealing with more dangerous plants than ever in Herbology, but at least they were still allowed to swear loudly if the Venomous Tentacula seized them unexpectedly from behind.

One result of their enormous workload and the frantic hours of practicing nonverbal spells was that Harry, Ron, and Hermione had so far been unable to find time to go and visit Hagrid. He had stopped coming to meals at the staff table, an ominous sign, and on the few occasions when they had passed him in the corridors or out in the grounds, he had mysteriously failed to notice them or hear their greetings.

"We've got to go and explain," said Hermione, looking up at Hagrid's huge empty chair at the staff table the following Saturday at breakfast.

"We've got Quidditch tryouts this morning!" said Ron. "And we're supposed to be practicing that Aguamenti Charm from Flitwick! Anyway, explain what? How are we going to tell him we hated his stupid subject?"

"We didn't hate it!" said Hermione.

"Speak for yourself, I haven't forgotten the skrewts," said Ron darkly. "And I'm telling you now, we've had a narrow escape. You didn't hear him going on about his gormless brother — we'd have been teaching Grawp how to tie his shoelaces if we'd stayed."

"I hate not talking to Hagrid," said Hermione, looking upset.

"We'll go down after Quidditch," Harry assured her. He too was missing Hagrid, although like Ron he thought that they were better off without Grawp in their lives. "But trials might take all

morning, the number of people who have applied." He felt slightly nervous at confronting the first hurdle of his Captaincy. "I dunno why the team's this popular all of a sudden."

"Oh, come on, Harry," said Hermione, suddenly impatient. "It's not Quidditch that's popular, it's you! You've never been more interesting, and frankly, you've never been more fanciable."

Ron gagged on a large piece of kipper. Hermione spared him one look of disdain before turning back to Harry.

"Everyone knows you've been telling the truth now, don't they? The whole Wizarding world has had to admit that you were right about Voldemort being back and that you really have fought him twice in the last two years and escaped both times. And now they're calling you 'the Chosen One' — well, come on, can't you see why people are fascinated by you?"

Harry was finding the Great Hall very hot all of a sudden, even though the ceiling still looked cold and rainy.

"And you've been through all that persecution from the Ministry when they were trying to make out you were unstable and a liar. You can still see the marks on the back of your hand where that evil woman made you write with your own blood, but you stuck to your story anyway…"

"You can still see where those brains got hold of me in the Ministry, look," said Ron, shaking back his sleeves.

"And it doesn't hurt that you've grown about a foot over the summer either," Hermione finished, ignoring Ron.

"I'm tall," said Ron inconsequentially.

The post owls arrived, swooping down through rain-flecked windows, scattering everyone with droplets of water. Most people were receiving more post than usual; anxious parents were keen to hear from their children and to reassure them, in turn, that all was well at home. Harry had received no mail since the start of term; his only regular correspondent was now dead and although he had hoped that Lupin might write occasionally, he had so far been disappointed. He was very surprised, therefore, to see the snowy white Hedwig circling amongst all the brown and gray owls. She landed in front of him carrying a large, square package. A moment later, an identical package landed in front of Ron, crushing beneath it his minuscule and exhausted owl, Pigwidgeon.

"Ha!" said Harry, unwrapping the parcel to reveal a new copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*, fresh from Flourish and Blotts.

"Oh good," said Hermione, delighted. "Now you can give that graffitied copy back."

"Are you mad?" said Harry. "I'm keeping it! Look, I've thought it out —"

He pulled the old copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* out of his bag and tapped the cover with his wand, muttering, "*Diffindo!*" The cover fell off. He did the same thing with the brand-new book (Hermione looked scandalized). He then swapped the covers, tapped each, and said, "*Reparo!*"

There sat the Prince's copy, disguised as a new book, and there sat the fresh copy from Flourish and Blotts, looking thoroughly secondhand.

"I'll give Slughorn back the new one, he can't complain, it cost nine Galleons."

Hermione pressed her lips together, looking angry and disapproving, but was distracted by a third owl landing in front of her carrying that day's copy of the *Daily Prophet*. She unfolded it hastily and scanned the front page.

"Anyone we know dead?" asked Ron in a determinedly casual voice; he posed the same question every time Hermione opened her paper.

"No, but there have been more dementor attacks," said Hermione. "And an arrest."

"Excellent, who?" said Harry, thinking of Bellatrix Lestrange.

"Stan Shunpike," said Hermione.

"What?" said Harry, startled.

"'Stanley Shunpike, conductor on the popular Wizarding conveyance the Knight Bus, has been arrested on suspicion of Death Eater activity. Mr. Shunpike, 21, was taken into custody late last night after a raid on his Clapham home…'"

"Stan Shunpike, a Death Eater?" said Harry, remembering the spotty youth he had first met three years before. "No way!"

"He might have been put under the Imperius Curse," said Ron reasonably. "You never can tell."

"It doesn't look like it," said Hermione, who was still reading. "It says here he was arrested after he was overheard talking about the Death Eaters' secret plans in a pub." She looked up with a troubled expression on her face. "If he was under the Imperius Curse, he'd hardly stand around gossiping about their plans, would he?"

"It sounds like he was trying to make out he knew more than he did," said Ron. "Isn't he the one who claimed he was going to become Minister of Magic when he was trying to chat up those veela?"

"Yeah, that's him," said Harry. "I dunno what they're playing at, taking Stan seriously."

"They probably want to look as though they're doing something," said Hermione, frowning. "People are terrified — you know the Patil twins' parents want them to go home? And Eloise Midgen has already been withdrawn. Her father picked her up last night."

“What!” said Ron, goggling at Hermione. “But Hogwarts is safer than their homes, bound to be! We’ve got Aurors, and all those extra protective spells, and we’ve got Dumbledore!”

“I don’t think we’ve got him all the time,” said Hermione very quietly, glancing toward the staff table over the top of the *Prophet*. “Haven’t you noticed? His seat’s been empty as often as Hagrid’s this past week.”

Harry and Ron looked up at the staff table. The headmaster’s chair was indeed empty. Now Harry came to think of it, he had not seen Dumbledore since their private lesson a week ago.

“I think he’s left the school to do something with the Order,” said Hermione in a low voice. “I mean…it’s all looking serious, isn’t it?”

Harry and Ron did not answer, but Harry knew that they were all thinking the same thing. There had been a horrible incident the day before, when Hannah Abbott had been taken out of Herbology to be told her mother had been found dead. They had not seen Hannah since.

When they left the Gryffindor table five minutes later to head down to the Quidditch pitch, they passed Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil. Remembering what Hermione had said about the Patil twins’ parents wanting them to leave Hogwarts, Harry was unsurprised to see that the two best friends were whispering together, looking distressed. What did surprise him was that when Ron drew level with them, Parvati suddenly nudged Lavender, who looked around and gave Ron a wide smile. Ron blinked at her, then returned the smile uncertainly. His walk instantly became something more like a strut. Harry resisted the temptation to laugh, remembering that Ron had refrained from doing so after Malfoy had broken Harry’s nose; Hermione, however, looked cold and distant all the way down to the stadium through the cool, misty drizzle, and departed to find a place in the stands without wishing Ron good luck.

As Harry had expected, the trials took most of the morning. Half of Gryffindor House seemed to have turned up, from first years who were nervously clutching a selection of the dreadful old school brooms, to seventh years who towered over the rest, looking coolly intimidating. The latter included a large, wiry-haired boy Harry recognized immediately from the Hogwarts Express.

“We met on the train, in old Sluggy’s compartment,” he said confidently, stepping out of the crowd to shake Harry’s hand. “Cormac McLaggen, Keeper.”

“You didn’t try out last year, did you?” asked Harry, taking note of the breadth of McLaggen and thinking that he would probably block all three goal hoops without even moving.

“I was in the hospital wing when they held the trials,” said McLaggen, with something of a swagger. “Ate a pound of doxy eggs for a bet.”

“Right,” said Harry. “Well…if you wait over there…”

He pointed over to the edge of the pitch, close to where Hermione was sitting. He thought he saw a flicker of annoyance pass over McLaggen’s face and wondered whether McLaggen expected preferential treatment because they were both “old Sluggy’s” favorites.

Harry decided to start with a basic test, asking all applicants for the team to divide into groups of ten and fly once around the pitch. This was a good decision: the first ten was made up of first years, and it could not have been plainer that they had hardly ever flown before. Only one boy managed to remain airborne for more than a few seconds, and he was so surprised he promptly crashed into one of the goal posts.

The second group was comprised of ten of the silliest girls Harry had ever encountered, who, when he blew his whistle, merely fell about giggling and clutching one another. Romilda Vane was amongst them. When he told them to leave the pitch, they did so quite cheerfully and went to sit in the stands to heckle everyone else.

The third group had a pileup halfway around the pitch. Most of the fourth group had come without broomsticks. The fifth group were Hufflepuffs.

“If there’s anyone else here who’s not from Gryffindor,” roared Harry, who was starting to get seriously annoyed, “leave now, please!

There was a pause, then a couple of little Ravenclaws went sprinting off the pitch, snorting with laughter.

After two hours, many complaints, and several tantrums, one involving a crashed Comet Two Sixty and several broken teeth, Harry had found himself three Chasers: Katie Bell, returned to the team after an excellent trial; a new find called Demelza Robins, who was particularly good at dodging Bludgers; and Ginny Weasley, who had outflown all the competition and scored seventeen goals to boot. Pleased though he was with his choices,

Harry had also shouted himself hoarse at the many complainers and was now enduring a similar battle with the rejected Beaters.

“That’s my final decision and if you don’t get out of the way of the Keepers I’ll hex you,” he bellowed.

Neither of his chosen Beaters had the old brilliance of Fred and George, but he was still reasonably pleased with them: Jimmy Peakes, a short but broad-chested third-year boy who had managed to raise a lump the size of an egg on the back of Harry’s head with a ferociously hit

Bludger, and Ritchie Coote, who looked weedy but aimed well. They now joined Katie, Demelza, and Ginny in the stands to watch the selection of their last team member.

Harry had deliberately left the trial of the Keepers until last, hoping for an emptier stadium and less pressure on all concerned. Unfortunately, however, all the rejected players and a number of people who had come down to watch after a lengthy breakfast had joined the crowd by now, so that it was larger than ever. As each Keeper flew up to the goal hoops, the crowd roared and jeered in equal measure. Harry glanced over at Ron, who had always had a problem with nerves; Harry had hoped that winning their final match last term might have cured it, but apparently not: Ron was a delicate shade of green.

None of the first five applicants saved more than two goals apiece. To Harry's great disappointment, Cormac McLaggen saved four penalties out of five. On the last one, however, he shot off in completely the wrong direction; the crowd laughed and booed and McLaggen returned to the ground grinding his teeth.

Ron looked ready to pass out as he mounted his Cleansweep Eleven. "Good luck!" cried a voice from the stands. Harry looked around, expecting to see Hermione, but it was Lavender Brown. He would have quite liked to have hidden his face in his hands, as she did a moment later, but thought that as the Captain he ought to show slightly more grit, and so turned to watch Ron do his trial.

Yet he need not have worried: Ron saved one, two, three, four, five penalties in a row. Delighted, and resisting joining in the cheers of the crowd with difficulty, Harry turned to McLaggen to tell him that, most unfortunately, Ron had beaten him, only to find McLaggen's red face inches from his own. He stepped back hastily.

"His sister didn't really try," said McLaggen menacingly. There was a vein pulsing in his temple like the one Harry had often ad-mired in Uncle Vernon's. "She gave him an easy save."

"Rubbish," said Harry coldly. "That was the one he nearly missed."

McLaggen took a step nearer Harry, who stood his ground this time.

"Give me another go."

"No," said Harry. "You've had your go. You saved four. Ron saved five. Ron's Keeper, he won it fair and square. Get out of my way."

He thought for a moment that McLaggen might punch him, but he contented himself with an ugly grimace and stormed away, growling what sounded like threats to thin air.

Harry turned around to find his new team beaming at him.

"Well done," he croaked. "You flew really well —"

“You did brilliantly, Ron!”

This time it really was Hermione running toward them from the stands; Harry saw Lavender walking off the pitch, arm in arm with Parvati, a rather grumpy expression on her face. Ron looked extremely pleased with himself and even taller than usual as he grinned at the team and at Hermione.

After fixing the time of their first full practice for the following Thursday, Harry, Ron, and Hermione bade good-bye to the rest of the team and headed off toward Hagrid’s. A watery sun was trying to break through the clouds now and it had stopped drizzling at last. Harry felt extremely hungry; he hoped there would be some-thing to eat at Hagrid’s.

“I thought I was going to miss that fourth penalty,” Ron was saying happily. “Tricky shot from Demelza, did you see, had a bit of spin on it —”

“Yes, yes, you were magnificent,” said Hermione, looking amused.

“I was better than that McLaggen anyway,” said Ron in a highly satisfied voice. “Did you see him lumbering off in the wrong direction on his fifth? Looked like he’d been Confunded…”

To Harry’s surprise, Hermione turned a very deep shade of pink at these words. Ron noticed nothing; he was too busy describing each of his other penalties in loving detail.

The great gray hippogriff, Buckbeak, was tethered in front of Hagrid’s cabin. He clicked his razor-sharp beak at their approach and turned his huge head toward them.

“Oh dear,” said Hermione nervously. “He’s still a bit scary, isn’t he?”

“Come off it, you’ve ridden him, haven’t you?” said Ron. Harry stepped forward and bowed low to the hippogriff without breaking eye contact or blinking. After a few seconds, Buckbeak sank into a bow too.

“How are you?” Harry asked him in a low voice, moving forward to stroke the feathery head. “Missing him? But you’re okay here with Hagrid, aren’t you?”

“Oi!” said a loud voice.

Hagrid had come striding around the corner of his cabin wearing a large flowery apron and carrying a sack of potatoes. His enormous boarhound, Fang, was at his heels; Fang gave a booming bark and bounded forward.

“Git away from him! He’ll have yer fingers — oh. It’s yeh lot.”

Fang was jumping up at Hermione and Ron, attempting to lick their ears. Hagrid stood and looked at them all for a split second, then turned and strode into his cabin, slamming the door behind him.

"Oh dear!" said Hermione, looking stricken.

"Don't worry about it," said Harry grimly. He walked over to the door and knocked loudly. "Hagrid! Open up, we want to talk to you!"

There was no sound from within.

"If you don't open the door, we'll blast it open!" Harry said, pulling out his wand.

"Harry!" said Hermione, sounding shocked. "You can't possibly —"

"Yeah, I can!" said Harry. "Stand back —"

But before he could say anything else, the door flew open again as Harry had known it would, and there stood Hagrid, glowering down at him and looking, despite the flowery apron, positively alarming.

"I'm a teacher!" he roared at Harry. "A teacher, Potter! How dare yeh threaten ter break down my door!"

"I'm sorry, sir" said Harry, emphasizing the last word as he stowed his wand inside his robes.

Hagrid looked stunned. "Since when have yeh called me 'sir'?"

"Since when have you called me 'Potter'?"

"Oh, very clever," growled Hagrid. "Very amusin'. That's me outsmarted, innit? All righ', come in then, yeh ungrateful little…"

Mumbling darkly, he stood back to let them pass. Hermione scurried in after Harry, looking rather frightened.

"Well?" said Hagrid grumpily, as Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat down around his enormous wooden table, Fang laying his head immediately upon Harry's knee and drooling all over his robes. "What's this? Feelin' sorry for me? Reckon I'm lonely or summat?"

"No," said Harry at once. "We wanted to see you."

"We've missed you!" said Hermione tremulously.

"Missed me, have yeh?" snorted Hagrid. "Yeah. Righ'."

He stomped around, brewing up tea in his enormous copper kettle, muttering all the while. Finally he slammed down three bucket-sized mugs of mahogany-brown tea in front of them and a plate of his rock cakes. Harry was hungry enough even for Hagrid's cooking, and took one at once.

"Hagrid," said Hermione timidly, when he joined them at the table and started peeling his potatoes with a brutality that suggested that each tuber had done him a great personal wrong, "we really wanted to carry on with Care of Magical Creatures, you know." Hagrid gave another great

snort. Harry rather thought some bogeys landed on the potatoes, and was inwardly thankful that they were not staying for dinner.

"We did!" said Hermione. "But none of us could fit it into our schedules!"

"Yeah. Righ'," said Hagrid again.

There was a funny squelching sound and they all looked around: Hermione let out a tiny shriek, and Ron leapt out of his seat and hurried around the table away from the large barrel standing in the corner that they had only just noticed. It was full of what looked like foot-long maggots, slimy, white, and writhing.

"What are they, Hagrid?" asked Harry, trying to sound interested rather than revolted, but putting down his rock cake all the same.

"Jus' giant grubs," said Hagrid.

"And they grow into…?" said Ron, looking apprehensive.

"They won' grow inter nuthin'," said Hagrid. "I got 'em ter feed ter Aragog."

And without warning, he burst into tears.

"Hagrid!" cried Hermione, leaping up, hurrying around the table the long way to avoid the barrel of maggots, and putting an arm around his shaking shoulders. "What is it?"

"It's…him…" gulped Hagrid, his beetle-black eyes stream-ing as he mopped his face with his apron. "It's…Aragog…I think he's dyin'…He got ill over the summer an' he's not gettin' better…I don' know what I'll do if he…if he…We've bin tergether so long…"

Hermione patted Hagrid's shoulder, looking at a complete loss for anything to say. Harry knew how she felt. He had known Hagrid to present a vicious baby dragon with a teddy bear, seen him croon over giant scorpions with suckers and stingers, attempt to reason with his brutal giant of a half-brother, but this was perhaps the most incomprehensible of all his monster fancies: the gigantic talking spider, Aragog, who dwelled deep in the Forbidden Forest and which he and Ron had only narrowly escaped four years previously.

"Is there — is there anything we can do?" Hermione asked, ignoring Ron's frantic grimaces and head-shakings.

"I don' think there is, Hermione," choked Hagrid, attempting to stem the flood of his tears. "See, the rest o' the tribe…Aragog's family…they're gettin' a bit funny now he's ill…bit restive…"

"Yeah, I think we saw a bit of that side of them," said Ron in an undertone.

"…I don' reckon it'd be safe fer anyone but me ter go near the colony at the mo'," Hagrid finished, blowing his nose hard on his apron and looking up. "But thanks fer offerin', Hermione…It means a lot."

After that, the atmosphere lightened considerably, for although neither Harry nor Ron had shown any inclination to go and feed giant grubs to a murderous, gargantuan spider, Hagrid seemed to take it for granted that they would have liked to have done and became his usual self once more.

"Ar, I always knew yeh'd find it hard ter squeeze me inter yer timetables," he said gruffly, pouring them more tea. "Even if yeh applied fer Time-Turners —"

"We couldn't have done," said Hermione. "We smashed the entire stock of Ministry Time-Turners when we were there last summer. It was in the *Daily Prophet*."

"Ar, well then," said Hagrid. "There's no way yeh could've done it…I'm sorry I've bin — yeh know — I've jus' bin worried about Aragog…an I did wonder whether, if Professor Grubbly-Plank had bin teachin' yeh —"

At which all three of them stated categorically and untruthfully that Professor Grubbly-Plank, who had substituted for Hagrid a few times, was a dreadful teacher, with the result that by the time Hagrid waved them off the premises at dusk, he looked quite cheerful.

"I'm starving," said Harry, once the door had closed behind them and they were hurrying through the dark and deserted grounds; he had abandoned the rock cake after an ominous cracking noise from one of his back teeth. "And I've got that detention with Snape tonight, I haven't got much time for dinner."

As they came into the castle they spotted Cormac McLaggen entering the Great Hall. It took him two attempts to get through the doors; he ricocheted off the frame on the first attempt. Ron merely guffawed gloatingly and strode off into the Hall after him, but Harry caught Hermione's arm and held her back.

"What?" said Hermione defensively.

"If you ask me," said Harry quietly, "McLaggen looks like he was Confunded this morning. And he was standing right in front of where you were sitting."

Hermione blushed.

"Oh, all right then, I did it," she whispered. "But you should have heard the way he was talking about Ron and Ginny! Anyway, he's got a nasty temper, you saw how he reacted when he didn't get in — you wouldn't have wanted someone like that on the team."

"No," said Harry. "No, I suppose that's true. But wasn't that dishonest, Hermione? I mean, you're a prefect, aren't you?"

"Oh, be quiet," she snapped, as he smirked.

"What are you two doing?" demanded Ron, reappearing in the doorway to the Great Hall and looking suspicious.

"Nothing," said Harry and Hermione together, and they hurried after Ron. The smell of roast beef made Harry's stomach ache with hunger, but they had barely taken three steps toward the Gryffindor table when Professor Slughorn appeared in front of them, blocking their path.

"Harry, Harry, just the man I was hoping to see!" he boomed genially, twiddling the ends of his walrus mustache and puffing out his enormous belly, "I was hoping to catch you before dinner! What do you say to a spot of supper tonight in my rooms instead? We're having a little party, just a few rising stars, I've got McLaggen coming and Zabini, the charming Melinda Bobbin — I don't know whether you know her? Her family owns a large chain of apothecaries — and, of course, I hope very much that Miss Granger will favor me by coming too."

Slughorn made Hermione a little bow as he finished speaking. It was as though Ron was not present; Slughorn did not so much as look at him.

"I can't come, Professor," said Harry at once. "I've got a detention with Professor Snape."

"Oh dear!" said Slughorn, his face falling comically. "Dear, dear, I was counting on you, Harry! Well, now, I'll just have to have a word with Severus and explain the situation. I'm sure I'll be able to persuade him to postpone your detention. Yes, I'll see you both later!" He bustled away out of the Hall.

"He's got no chance of persuading Snape," said Harry, the moment Slughorn was out of earshot. "This detention's already been postponed once; Snape did it for Dumbledore, but he won't do it for anyone else."

"Oh, I wish you could come, I don't want to go on my own!" said Hermione anxiously; Harry knew that she was thinking about McLaggen.

"I doubt you'll be alone, Ginny'll probably be invited," snapped Ron, who did not seem to have taken kindly to being ignored by Slughorn.

After dinner they made their way back to Gryffindor Tower. The common room was very crowded, as most people had finished dinner by now, but they managed to find a free table and sat down; Ron, who had been in a bad mood ever since the encounter with Slughorn, folded his arms

and frowned at the ceiling. Hermione reached out for a copy of the *Evening Prophet*, which somebody had left abandoned on a chair.

"Anything new?" said Harry.

"Not really…" Hermione had opened the newspaper and was scanning the inside pages. "Oh, look, your dad's in here, Ron — he's all right!" she added quickly, for Ron had looked around in alarm. "It just says he's been to visit the Malfoys' house. *'This second search of the Death Eaters residence does not seem to have yielded any results. Arthur Weasley of the Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects said that his team had been acting upon a confidential tip-off.'*"

"Yeah, mine!" said Harry. "I told him at Kings Cross about Malfoy and that thing he was trying to get Borgin to fix! Well, if it's not at their house, he must have brought whatever it is to Hogwarts with him —" "But how can he have done, Harry?" said Hermione, putting down the newspaper with a surprised look. "We were all searched when we arrived, weren't we?"

"Were you?" said Harry, taken aback. "I wasn't!"

"Oh no, of course you weren't, I forgot you were late. Well, Filch ran over all of us with Secrecy Sensors when we got into the entrance hall. Any Dark object would have been found, I know for a fact Crabbe had a shrunken head confiscated. So you see, Malfoy can't have brought in anything dangerous!"

Momentarily stymied, Harry watched Ginny Weasley playing with Arnold the Pygmy Puff for a while before seeing a way around this objection.

"Someone's sent it to him by owl, then," he said. "His mother or someone."

"All the owls are being checked too," said Hermione. "Filch told us so when he was jabbing those Secrecy Sensors everywhere he could reach."

Really stumped this time, Harry found nothing else to say. There did not seem to be any way Malfoy could have brought a dangerous or Dark object into the school. He looked hopefully at Ron, who was sitting with his arms folded, staring over at Lavender Brown.

"Can you think of any way Malfoy —?"

"Oh, drop it, Harry," said Ron.

"Listen, it's not my fault Slughorn invited Hermione and me to his stupid party, neither of us wanted to go, you know!" said Harry, firing up.

"Well, as I'm not invited to any parties," said Ron, getting to his feet again, "I think I'll go to bed."

He stomped off toward the door to the boys' dormitories, leaving Harry and Hermione staring after him.

"Harry?" said the new Chaser, Demelza Robins, appearing suddenly at his shoulder. "I've got a message for you."

"From Professor Slughorn?" asked Harry, sitting up hopefully.

"No…from Professor Snape," said Demelza. Harry's heart sank. "He says you're to come to his office at half past eight tonight to do your detention— er— no matter how many party invitations you've received. And he wanted you to know you'll be sorting out rotten flobberworms from good ones, to use in Potions and — and he says there's no need to bring protective gloves."

"Right," said Harry grimly. "Thanks a lot, Demelza."

CHAPTER TWELVE

SILVER AND OPALS

Where was Dumbledore, and what was he doing?

Harry caught sight of the headmaster only twice over the next few weeks. He rarely appeared at meals anymore, and Harry was sure Hermione was right in thinking that he was leaving the school for days at a time. Had Dumbledore forgotten the lessons he was supposed to be giving Harry? Dumbledore had said that the lessons were leading to something to do with the prophecy; Harry had felt bolstered, comforted, and now he felt slightly abandoned.

Halfway through October came their first trip of the term to Hogsmeade. Harry had wondered whether these trips would still be allowed, given the increasingly tight security measures around the school, but was pleased to know that they were going ahead; it was always good to get out of the castle grounds for a few hours.

Harry woke early on the morning of the trip, which was proving stormy, and whiled away the time until breakfast by reading his copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*. He did not usually lie in bed reading his textbooks; that sort of behavior, as Ron rightly said, was indecent in anybody except Hermione, who was simply weird that way. Harry felt, however, that the Half-Blood Princes copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* hardly qualified as a textbook. The more Harry pored over the book, the more he realized how much was in there, not only the handy hints and shortcuts on potions that was earning him such a glowing reputation with Slughorn, but also the imaginative little jinxes and hexes scribbled in the margins, which Harry was sure, judging by the crossings-out and revisions, that the Prince had invented himself.

Harry had already attempted a few of the Prince's self-invented spells. There had been a hex that caused toenails to grow alarmingly fast (he had tried this on Crabbe in the corridor, with very entertaining results); a jinx that glued the tongue to the roof of the mouth (which he had twice used, to general applause, on an unsuspecting Argus Filch); and, perhaps most useful of all, *Muffliato*, a spell that filled the ears of anyone nearby with an unidentifiable buzzing, so that lengthy conversations could be held in class without being overheard. The only person who did not find these charms amusing was Hermione, who maintained a rigidly disapproving expression throughout and refused to talk at all if Harry had used the Muffliato spell on anyone in the vicinity.

Sitting up in bed, Harry turned the book sideways so as to examine more closely the scribbled instructions for a spell that seemed to have caused the Prince some trouble. There were many crossings-out and alterations, but finally, crammed into a corner of the page, the scribble:

Levicorpus (nvbl)

While the wind and sleet pounded relentlessly on the windows, and Neville snored loudly, Harry stared at the letters in brackets. *Nvbl*…that had to mean "nonverbal." Harry rather doubted he would be able to bring off this particular spell; he was still having difficulty with nonverbal spells, something Snape had been quick to comment on in every D.A.D.A. class. On the other hand, the Prince had proved a much more effective teacher than Snape so far.

Pointing his wand at nothing in particular, he gave it an upward flick and said *Levicorpus!* inside his head.

"Aaaaaaaargh!"

There was a flash of light and the room was full of voices: Everyone had woken up as Ron had let out a yell. Harry sent *Advanced Potion-Making* flying in panic; Ron was dangling upside down in midair as though an invisible hook had hoisted him up by the ankle.

"Sorry!" yelled Harry, as Dean and Seamus roared with laughter, and Neville picked himself up from the floor, having fallen out of Bed. "Hang on — I'll let you down —"

He groped for the potion book and riffled through it in a panic, trying to find the right page; at last he located it and deciphered the cramped word underneath the spell: Praying that this was the counter-jinx, Harry thought *Liberacorpus!* with all his might. There was another flash of light, and Ron fell in a heap onto his mattress.

"Sorry," repeated Harry weakly, while Dean and Seamus continued to roar with laughter.

"Tomorrow," said Ron in a muffled voice, "I'd rather you set the alarm clock."

By the time they had got dressed, padding themselves out with several of Mrs. Weasleys hand-knitted sweaters and carrying cloaks, scarves, and gloves, Ron's shock had subsided and he had decided that Harry's new spell was highly amusing; so amusing, in fact, that he lost no time in regaling Hermione with the story as they sat down for breakfast.

"…and then there was another flash, of light and I landed on the bed again!" Ron grinned, helping himself to sausages.

Hermione had not cracked a smile during this anecdote, and now turned an expression of wintry disapproval upon Harry.

"Was this spell, by any chance, another one from that potion book of yours?" she asked.

Harry frowned at her.

"Always jump to the worst conclusion, don't you?"

"Was it?"

"Well…yeah, it was, but so what?"

“So you just decided to try out an unknown, handwritten incantation and see what would happen?”

“Why does it matter if it’s handwritten?” said Harry, preferring not to answer the rest of the question.

“Because it’s probably not Ministry of Magic approved,” said Hermione. “And also,” she added, as Harry and Ron rolled their eyes, “because I’m starting to think this Prince character was a bit dodgy.”

Both Harry and Ron shouted her down at once.

“It was a laugh!” said Ron, upending a ketchup bottle over his sausages. “Just a laugh, Hermione, that’s all!”

“Dangling people upside down by the ankle?” said Hermione. “Who puts their time and energy into making up spells like that?”

“Fred and George,” said Ron, shrugging, “it’s their kind of thing. And, er —”

“My dad,” said Harry. He had only just remembered.

“What?” said Ron and Hermione together.

“My dad used this spell,” said Harry. “I — Lupin told me.”

This last part was not true; in fact, Harry had seen his father use the spell on Snape, but he had never told Ron and Hermione about that particular excursion into the Pensieve. Now, however, a wonderful possibility occurred to him. Could the Half-Blood Prince possibly be —?

“Maybe your dad did use it, Harry,” said Hermione, “but he’s not the only one. We’ve seen a whole bunch of people use it, in case you’ve forgotten. Dangling people in the air. Making them float along, asleep, helpless.”

Harry stared at her. With a sinking feeling, he too remembered the behavior of the Death Eaters at the Quidditch World Cup. Ron came to his aid.

“That was different,” he said robustly. “They were abusing it. Harry and his dad were just having a laugh. You don’t like the Prince, Hermione,” he added, pointing a sausage at her sternly, “because he’s better than you at Potions —”

“It’s got nothing to do with that!” said Hermione, her cheeks reddening. “I just think it’s very irresponsible to start performing spells when you don’t even know what they’re for, and stop talking about ‘the Prince’ as if it’s his title, I bet it’s just a stupid nickname, and it doesn’t seem as though he was a very nice person to me!”

"I don't see where you get that from," said Harry heatedly. "If he'd been a budding Death Eater he wouldn't have been boasting about being 'half-blood,' would he?"

Even as he said it, Harry remembered that his father had been pure-blood, but he pushed the thought out of his mind; he would worry about that later.

"The Death Eaters can't all be pure-blood, there aren't enough pure-blood wizards left," said Hermione stubbornly. "I expect most of them are half-bloods pretending to be pure. It's only Muggle-borns they hate, they'd be quite happy to let you and Ron join up."

"There is no way they'd let me be a Death Eater!" said Ron indignantly, a bit of sausage flying off the fork he was now brandishing at Hermione and hitting Ernie Macmillan on the head. "My whole family are blood traitors! That's as bad as Muggle-borns to Death Eaters!"

"And they'd love to have me," said Harry sarcastically. "We'd be best pals if they didn't keep trying to do me in."

This made Ron laugh; even Hermione gave a grudging smile, and a distraction arrived in the shape of Ginny.

"Hey, Harry, I'm supposed to give you this."

It was a scroll of parchment with Harry's name written upon it in familiar thin, slanting writing.

"Thanks, Ginny…It's Dumbledore's next lesson!" Harry told Ron and Hermione, pulling open the parchment and quickly reading its contents.

"Monday evening!" He felt suddenly light and happy. "Want to join us in Hogsmeade, Ginny?" he asked.

"I'm going with Dean — might see you there," she replied, waving at them as she left.

Filch was standing at the oak front doors as usual, checking off the names of people who had permission to go into Hogsmeade. The process took even longer than normal as Filch was triple-checking everybody with his Secrecy Sensor.

"What does it matter if we're smuggling Dark stuff OUT?" demanded Ron, eyeing the long thin Secrecy Sensor with apprehension. "Surely you ought to be checking what we bring back IN?"

His cheek earned him a few extra jabs with the Sensor, and he was still wincing as they stepped out into the wind and sleet.

The walk into Hogsmeade was not enjoyable. Harry wrapped his scarf over his lower face; the exposed part soon felt both raw and numb. The road to the village was full of students bent double against the bitter wind. More than once Harry wondered whether they might not have had a better time in the warm common room, and when they finally reached Hogsmeade and saw that Zonko's

Joke Shop had been boarded up, Harry took it as confirmation that this trip was not destined to be fun. Ron pointed, with a thickly gloved hand, toward Honeydukes, which was mercifully open, and Harry and Hermione staggered in his wake into the crowded shop.

"Thank God," shivered Ron as they were enveloped by warm, toffee-scented air. "Let's stay here all afternoon."

"Harry, m'boy!" said a booming voice from behind them.

"Oh no," muttered Harry. The three of them turned to see Professor Slughorn, who was wearing an enormous furry hat and an overcoat with matching fur collar, clutching a large bag of crystalized pineapple, and occupying at least a quarter of the shop.

"Harry, that's three of my little suppers you've missed now!" said Slughorn, poking him genially in the chest. "It won't do, m'boy, I'm determined to have you! Miss Granger loves them, don't you?"

"Yes," said Hermione helplessly, "they're really —"

"So why don't you come along, Harry?" demanded Slughorn.

"Well, I've had Quidditch practice, Professor," said Harry, who had indeed been scheduling practices every time Slughorn had sent him a little, violet ribbon-adorned invitation. This strategy meant that Ron was not left out, and they usually had a laugh with Ginny, imagining Hermione shut up with McLaggen and Zabini.

"Well, I certainly expect you to win your first match after all the hard work!" said Slughorn. "But a little recreation never hurt any body. Now, how about Monday night, you can't possibly want to practice in this weather…"

"I can't, Professor, I've got — er — an appointment with Professor Dumbledore that evening."

"Unlucky again!" cried Slughorn dramatically. "Ah, well…you can't evade me forever, Harry!"

And with a regal wave, he waddled out of the shop, taking as little notice of Ron as though he had been a display of Cockroach Clusters.

"I can't believe you've wriggled out of another one," said Hermione, shaking her head. "They're not that bad, you know…They're even quite fun sometimes…" But then she caught sight of Ron's expression. "Oh, look — they've got deluxe sugar quills — those would last hours!"

Glad that Hermione had changed the subject, Harry showed much more interest in the new extra-large sugar quills than he would normally have done, but Ron continued to look moody and merely shrugged when Hermione asked him where he wanted to go next.

"Let's go to the Three Broomsticks," said Harry. "It'll be warm."

They bundled their scarves back over their faces and left the sweetshop. The bitter wind was like knives on their faces after the sugary warmth of Honeydukes. The street was not very busy; nobody was lingering to chat, just hurrying toward their destinations. The exceptions were two men a little ahead of them, standing just outside the Three Broomsticks. One was very tall and thin; squinting through his rain-washed glasses Harry recognized the barman who worked in the other Hogsmeade pub, the Hog's Head. As Harry, Ron, and Hermione drew closer, the barman drew his cloak more tightly around his neck and walked away, leaving the shorter man to fumble with something in his arms. They were barely feet from him when Harry realized who the man was.

"Mundungus!"

The squat, bandy-legged man with long, straggly, ginger hair jumped and dropped an ancient suitcase, which burst open, releasing what looked like the entire contents of a junk shop window.

"Oh, 'ello, 'Arry," said Mundungus Fletcher, with a most unconvincing stab at airiness. "Well, don't let me keep ya."

And he began scrabbling on the ground to retrieve the contents of his suitcase with every appearance of a man eager to be gone.

"Are you selling this stuff?" asked Harry, watching Mundungus grab an assortment of grubby-looking objects from the ground.

"Oh, well, gotta scrape a living," said Mundungus. "Gimme that!"

Ron had stooped down and picked up something silver.

"Hang on," Ron said slowly. "This looks familiar —"

"Thank you!" said Mundungus, snatching the goblet out of Ron's hand and stuffing it back into the case. "Well, I'll see you all — OUCH!"

Harry had pinned Mundungus against the wall of the pub by the throat. Holding him fast with one hand, he pulled out his wand.

"Harry!" squealed Hermione.

"You took that from Sirius's house," said Harry, who was almost nose to nose with Mundungus and was breathing in an unpleasant smell of old tobacco and spirits. "That had the Black family crest on it."

"I — no — what —?" spluttered Mundungus, who was slowly turning purple.

"What did you do, go back the night he died and strip the place?" snarled Harry.

"I — no —"

"Give it to me!"

"Harry, you mustn't!" shrieked Hermione, as Mundungus started to turn blue.

There was a bang, and Harry felt his hands fly off Mundungus's throat. Gasping and spluttering, Mundungus seized his fallen case, then — CRACK — he Disapparated.

Harry swore at the top of his voice, spinning on the spot to see where Mundungus had gone.

"COME BACK, YOU THIEVING —!"

"There's no point, Harry." Tonks had appeared out of nowhere, her mousy hair wet with sleet.

"Mundungus will probably be in London by now. There's no point yelling."

"He's nicked Sirius's stuff! Nicked it!"

"Yes, but still," said Tonks, who seemed perfectly untroubled by this piece of information. "You should get out of the cold."

She watched them go through the door of the Three Broom-sticks. The moment he was inside, Harry burst out, "He was nicking Sirius's stuff!"

"I know, Harry, but please don't shout, people are staring," whispered Hermione. "Go and sit down, I'll get you a drink."

Harry was still fuming when Hermione returned to their table a few minutes later holding three bottles of butterbeer.

"Can't the Order control Mundungus?" Harry demanded of the other two in a furious whisper. "Can't they at least stop him stealing everything that's not fixed down when he's at headquarters?"

"Shh!" said Hermione desperately, looking around to make sure nobody was listening; there were a couple of warlocks sitting close by who were staring at Harry with great interest, and Zabini was lolling against a pillar not far away. "Harry, I'd be annoyed too, I know it's your things he's stealing —"

Harry gagged on his butterbeer; he had momentarily forgotten that he owned number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

"Yeah, it's my stuff!" he said. "No wonder he wasn't pleased to see me! Well, I'm going to tell Dumbledore what's going on, he's the only one who scares Mundungus."

"Good idea," whispered Hermione, clearly pleased that Harry was calming down. "Ron, what are you staring at?"

"Nothing," said Ron, hastily looking away from the bar, but Harry knew he was trying to catch the eye of the curvy and attractive barmaid, Madam Rosmerta, for whom he had long nursed a soft spot.

"I expect 'nothing's' in the back getting more firewhisky," said Hermione waspishly.

Ron ignored this jibe, sipping his drink in what he evidently considered to be a dignified silence. Harry was thinking about Sirius, and how he had hated those silver goblets anyway. Hermione drummed her fingers on the table, her eyes flickering between Ron and the bar. The moment Harry drained the last drops in his bottle she said, "Shall we call it a day and go back to school, then?"

The other two nodded; it had not been a fun trip and the weather was getting worse the longer they stayed. Once again they drew their cloaks tightly around them, rearranged their scarves, pulled on their gloves, then followed Katie Bell and a friend out of the pub and back up the High Street. Harry's thoughts strayed to Ginny as they trudged up the road to Hogwarts through the frozen slush. They had not met up with her, undoubtedly, thought Harry, because she and Dean were cozily closeted in Madam Puddifoot's Tea Shop, that haunt of happy couples. Scowling, he bowed his head against the swirling sleet and trudged on.

It was a little while before Harry became aware that the voices of Katie Bell and her friend, which were being carried back to him on the wind, had become shriller and louder. Harry squinted at their indistinct figures. The two girls were having an argument about something Katie was holding in her hand. "It's nothing to do with you, Leanne!" Harry heard Katie say.

They rounded a corner in the lane, sleet coming thick and fast, blurring Harry's glasses. Just as he raised a gloved hand to wipe them, Leanne made to grab hold of the package Katie was holding; Katie tugged it back and the package fell to the ground.

At once, Katie rose into the air, not as Ron had done, suspended comically by the ankle, but gracefully, her arms outstretched, as though she was about to fly. Yet there was something wrong, something eerie…Her hair was whipped around her by the fierce wind, but her eyes were closed and her face was quite empty of expression. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Leanne had all halted in their tracks, watching.

Then, six feet above the ground, Katie let out a terrible scream. Her eyes flew open but whatever she could see, or whatever she was feeling, was clearly causing her terrible anguish. She screamed and screamed; Leanne started to scream too and seized Katie's ankles, trying to tug her back to the ground. Harry, Ron, and Hermione rushed forward to help, but even as they grabbed Katie's legs, she fell on top of them; Harry and Ron managed to catch her but she was writhing so much they could hardly hold her. Instead they lowered her to the ground where she thrashed and screamed, apparently unable to recognize any of them.

Harry looked around; the landscape seemed deserted.

"Stay there!" he shouted at the others over the howling wind. "I'm going for help!"

He began to sprint toward the school; he had never seen anyone behave as Katie had just behaved and could not think what had caused it; he hurtled around a bend in the lane and collided with what seemed to be an enormous bear on its hind legs.

"Hagrid!" he panted, disentangling himself from the hedgerow into which he had fallen.

"Harry!" said Hagrid, who had sleet trapped in his eyebrows and beard, and was wearing his great, shaggy beaverskin coat. "Jus' bin visitin' Grawp, he's comin' on so well yeh wouldn' —"

"Hagrid, someone's hurt back there, or cursed, or something —"

"Wha?" said Hagrid, bending lower to hear what Harry was saying over the raging wind.

"Someone's been cursed!" bellowed Harry.

"Cursed? Who's bin cursed — not Ron? Hermione?"

"No, it's not them, it's Katie Bell — this way…"

Together they ran back along the lane. It took them no time to find the little group of people around Katie, who was still writhing and screaming on the ground; Ron, Hermione, and Leanne were all trying to quiet her.

"Get back!" shouted Hagrid. "Lemme see her!"

"Something's happened to her!" sobbed Leanne. "I don't know what —"

Hagrid stared at Katie for a second, then without a word, bent down, scooped her into his arms, and ran off toward the castle with her. Within seconds, Katie's piercing screams had died away and the only sound was the roar of the wind.

Hermione hurried over to Katie's wailing friend and put an arm around her.

"It's Leanne, isn't it?"

The girl nodded.

"Did it just happen all of a sudden, or —?"

"It was when that package tore," sobbed Leanne, pointing at the now sodden brown-paper package on the ground, which had split open to reveal a greenish glitter. Ron bent down, his hand out-stretched, but Harry seized his arm and pulled him back.

"Don't touch it!"

He crouched down. An ornate opal necklace was visible, poking out of the paper.

"I've seen that before," said Harry, staring at the thing. "It was on display in Borgin and Burkes ages ago. The label said it was cursed. Katie must have touched it." He looked up at Leanne, who had started to shake uncontrollably. "How did Katie get hold of this?"

“Well, that’s why we were arguing. She came back from the bathroom in the Three Broomsticks holding it, said it was a surprise for somebody at Hogwarts and she had to deliver it. She looked all funny when she said it…Oh no, oh no, I bet she’d been Imperiused and I didn’t realize!”

Leanne shook with renewed sobs. Hermione patted her shoulder gently.

“She didn’t say who’d given it to her, Leanne?”

“No…she wouldn’t tell me…and I said she was being stupid and not to take it up to school, but she just wouldn’t listen and…and then I tried to grab it from her…and — and —”

Leanne let out a wail of despair.

“We’d better get up to school,” said Hermione, her arm still around Leanne. “We’ll be able to find out how she is. Come on…”

Harry hesitated for a moment, then pulled his scarf from around his face and, ignoring Ron’s gasp, carefully covered the necklace in it and picked it up.

“We’ll need to show this to Madam Pomfrey,” he said.

As they followed Hermione and Leanne up the road, Harry was thinking furiously. They had just entered the grounds when he spoke, unable to keep his thoughts to himself any longer.

“Malfoy knows about this necklace. It was in a case at Borgin and Burkes four years ago, I saw him having a good look at it while I was hiding from him and his dad. This is what he was buying that day when we followed him! He remembered it and he went back for it!”

“I — I dunno, Harry,” said Ron hesitantly. “Loads of people go to Borgin and Burkes…and didn’t that girl say Katie got it in the girls’ bathroom?”

“She said she came back from the bathroom with it, she didn’t necessarily get it in the bathroom itself —”

“McGonagall!” said Ron warningly.

Harry looked up. Sure enough, Professor McGonagall was hurrying down the stone steps through swirling sleet to meet them.

“Hagrid says you four saw what happened to Katie Bell — upstairs to my office at once, please! What’s that you’re holding, Potter?”

“It’s the thing she touched,” said Harry.

“Good lord,” said Professor McGonagall, looking alarmed as she took the necklace from Harry. “No, no, Filch, they’re with me!” she added hastily, as Filch came shuffling eagerly across the entrance hall holding his Secrecy Sensor aloft. “Take this necklace to Professor Snape at once, but be sure not to touch it, keep it wrapped in the scarf!”

Harry and the others followed Professor McGonagall upstairs and into her office. The sleet-spattered windows were rattling in their frames, and the room was chilly despite the fire crackling in the grate. Professor McGonagall closed the door and swept around her desk to face Harry, Ron, Hermione, and the still sobbing Leanne.

"Well?" she said sharply. "What happened?"

Haltingly, and with many pauses while she attempted to control her crying, Leanne told Professor McGonagall how Katie had gone to the bathroom in the Three Broomsticks and returned holding the unmarked package, how Katie had seemed a little odd, and how they had argued about the advisability of agreeing to deliver unknown objects, the argument culminating in the tussle over the parcel, which tore open. At this point, Leanne was so overcome, there was no getting another word out of her.

"All right," said Professor McGonagall, not unkindly, "go up to the hospital wing, please, Leanne, and get Madam Pomfrey to give you something for shock."

When she had left the room, Professor McGonagall turned back to Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

"What happened when Katie touched the necklace?"

"She rose up in the air," said Harry, before either Ron or Hermione could speak, "and then began to scream, and collapsed. Professor, can I see Professor Dumbledore, please?"

"The headmaster is away until Monday, Potter," said Professor McGonagall, looking surprised.

"Away?" Harry repeated angrily.

"Yes, Potter, away!" said Professor McGonagall tartly. "But anything you have to say about this horrible business can be said to me, I'm sure!"

For a split second, Harry hesitated. Professor McGonagall did not invite confidences; Dumbledore, though in many ways more intimidating, still seemed less likely to scorn a theory, however wild. This was a life-and-death matter, though, and no moment to worry about being laughed at.

"I think Draco Malfoy gave Katie that necklace, Professor."

On one side of him, Ron rubbed his nose in apparent embarrassment; on the other, Hermione shuffled her feet as though quite keen to put a bit of distance between herself and Harry.

"That is a very serious accusation, Potter," said Professor McGonagall, after a shocked pause. "Do you have any proof?"

"No," said Harry, "but…" and he told her about following Malfoy to Borgin and Burkes and the conversation they had over-heard between him and Mr. Borgin.

When he had finished speaking, Professor McGonagall looked slightly confused.

"Malfoy took something to Borgin and Burkes for repair?"

"No, Professor, he just wanted Borgin to tell him how to mend something, he didn't have it with him. But that's not the point, the thing is that he bought something at the same time, and I think it was that necklace —"

"You saw Malfoy leaving the shop with a similar package?"

"No, Professor, he told Borgin to keep it in the shop for him —"

"But Harry," Hermione interrupted, "Borgin asked him if he wanted to take it with him, and Malfoy said no —"

"Because he didn't want to touch it, obviously!" said Harry angrily.

"What he actually said was, 'How would I look carrying that down the street?'" said Hermione.

"Well, he would look a bit of a prat carrying a necklace," interjected Ron.

"Oh, Ron," said Hermione despairingly, "it would be all wrapped up, so he wouldn't have to touch it, and quite easy to hide inside a cloak, so nobody would see it! I think whatever he reserved at Borgin and Burkes was noisy or bulky, something he knew would draw attention to him if he carried it down the street — and in any case," she pressed on loudly, before Harry could interrupt, "I asked Borgin about the necklace, don't you remember? When I went in to try and find out what Malfoy had asked him to keep, I saw it there. And Borgin just told me the price, he didn't say it was already sold or anything —"

"Well, you were being really obvious, he realized what you were up to within about five seconds, of course he wasn't going to tell you — anyway, Malfoy could've sent off for it since—"

"That's enough!" said Professor McGonagall, as Hermione opened her mouth to retort, looking furious. "Potter, I appreciate you telling me this, but we cannot point the finger of blame at Mr. Malfoy purely because he visited the shop where this necklace might have been purchased. The same is probably true of hundreds of people —"

"— that's what I said —" muttered Ron.

"— and in any case, we have put stringent security measures in place this year. I do not believe that necklace can possibly have entered this school without our knowledge —"

"But —"

"— and what is more," said Professor McGonagall, with an air of awful finality, "Mr. Malfoy was not in Hogsmeade today."

Harry gaped at her, deflating.

“How do you know, Professor?”

“Because he was doing detention with me. He has now failed to complete his Transfiguration homework twice in a row. So, thank you for telling me your suspicions, Potter,” she said as she marched past them, “but I need to go up to the hospital wing now to check on Katie Bell. Good day to you all.”

She held open her office door. They had no choice but to file past her without another word.

Harry was angry with the other two for siding with McGonagall; nevertheless, he felt compelled to join in once they started discussing what had happened.

“So who do you reckon Katie was supposed to give the necklace to?” asked Ron, as they climbed the stairs to the common room.

“Goodness only knows,” said Hermione. “But whoever it was has had a narrow escape. No one could have opened that package without touching the necklace.”

“It could’ve been meant for loads of people,” said Harry. “Dumbledore — the Death Eaters would love to get rid of him, he must be one of their top targets. Or Slughorn — Dumbledore reckons Voldemort really wanted him and they can’t be pleased that he’s sided with Dumbledore. Or —”

“Or you,” said Hermione, looking troubled.

“Couldn’t have been,” said Harry, “or Katie would’ve just turned around in the lane and given it to me, wouldn’t she? I was behind her all the way out of the Three Broomsticks. It would have made much more sense to deliver the parcel outside Hogwarts, what with Filch searching everyone who goes in and out. I wonder why Malfoy told her to take it into the castle?”

“Harry, Malfoy wasn’t in Hogsmeade!” said Hermione, actually stamping her foot in frustration.

“He must have used an accomplice, then,” said Harry. “Crabbe or Goyle — or, come to think of it, another Death Eater, he’ll have loads better cronies than Crabbe and Goyle now he’s joined up—”

Ron and Hermione exchanged looks that plainly said *There’s no point arguing with him.*

“Dilligrout,” said Hermione firmly as they reached the Fat Lady.

The portrait swung open to admit them to the common room. It was quite full and smelled of damp clothing; many people seemed to have returned from Hogsmeade early because of the bad weather. There was no buzz of fear or speculation, however: Clearly, the news of Katie’s fate had not yet spread.

“It wasn’t a very slick attack, really, when you stop and think about it,” said Ron, casually turfing a first year out of one of the good armchairs by the fire so that he could sit down. “The curse didn’t even make it into the castle. Not what you’d call foolproof.”

“You’re right,” said Hermione, prodding Ron out of the chair with her foot and offering it to the first year again. “It wasn’t very well thought-out at all.”

“But since when has Malfoy been one of the world’s great thinkers?” asked Harry.

Neither Ron nor Hermione answered him.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE SECRET RIDDLE

Katie was removed to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries the following day, by which time the news that she had been cursed had spread all over the school, though the details were confused and nobody other than Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Leanne seemed to know that Katie herself had not been the intended target.

"Oh, and Malfoy knows, of course," said Harry to Ron and Hermione, who continued their new policy of feigning deafness whenever Harry mentioned his Malfoy-Is-a-Death-Eater theory.

Harry had wondered whether Dumbledore would return from wherever he had been in time for Monday night's lesson, but having had no word to the contrary, he presented himself outside Dumbledore's office at eight o'clock, knocked, and was told to enter. There sat Dumbledore looking unusually tired; his hand was as black and burned as ever, but he smiled when he gestured to Harry to sit down. The Pensieve was sitting on the desk again, casting silvery specks of light over the ceiling.

"You have had a busy time while I have been away," Dumbledore said. "I believe you witnessed Katie's accident."

"Yes, sir. How is she?"

"Still very unwell, although she was relatively lucky. She appears to have brushed the necklace with the smallest possible amount of skin; there was a tiny hole in her glove. Had she put it on, had she even held it in her ungloved hand, she would have died, perhaps instantly. Luckily Professor Snape was able to do enough to prevent a rapid spread of the curse —"

"Why him?" asked Harry quickly. "Why not Madam Pomfrey?"

"Impertinent," said a soft voice from one of the portraits on the wall, and Phineas Nigellus Black, Sirius's great-great-grandfather, raised his head from his arms where he had appeared to be sleeping. "I would not have permitted a student to question the way Hogwarts operated in my day."

"Yes, thank you, Phineas," said Dumbledore quellingly. "Professor Snape knows much more about the Dark Arts than Madam Pomfrey, Harry. Anyway, the St. Mungo's staff are sending me hourly reports, and I am hopeful that Katie will make a full recovery in time."

"Where were you this weekend, sir?" Harry asked, disregarding a strong feeling that he might be pushing his luck, a feeling apparently shared by Phineas Nigellus, who hissed softly.

"I would rather not say just now," said Dumbledore. "However, I shall tell you in due course."

"You will?" said Harry, startled.

"Yes, I expect so," said Dumbledore, withdrawing a fresh bottle of silver memories from inside his robes and uncorking it with a prod of his wand.

"Sir," said Harry tentatively, "I met Mundungus in Hogsmeade."

"Ah yes, I am already aware that Mundungus has been treating your inheritance with light-fingered contempt," said Dumbledore, frowning a little. "He has gone to ground since you accosted him outside the Three Broomsticks; I rather think he dreads facing me. However, rest assured that he will not be making away with any more of Sirius's old possessions."

"That mangy old half-blood has been stealing Black heirlooms?" said Phineas Nigellus, incensed; and he stalked out of his frame, undoubtedly to visit his portrait in number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

"Professor," said Harry, after a short pause, "did Professor McGonagall tell you what I told her after Katie got hurt? About Draco Malfoy?"

"She told me of your suspicions, yes," said Dumbledore.

"And do you —?"

"I shall take all appropriate measures to investigate anyone who might have had a hand in Katie's accident," said Dumbledore. "But what concerns me now, Harry, is our lesson."

Harry felt slightly resentful at this: If their lessons were so very important, why had there been such a long gap between the first and second? However, he said no more about Draco Malfoy, but watched as Dumbledore poured the fresh memories into the Pensieve and began swirling the stone basin once more between his long-fingered hands.

"You will remember, I am sure, that we left the tale of Lord Voldemort's beginnings at the point where the handsome Muggle, Tom Riddle, had abandoned his witch wife, Merope, and returned to his family home in Little Hangleton. Merope was left alone in London, expecting the baby who would one day become Lord Voldemort."

"How do you know she was in London, sir?"

"Because of the evidence of one Caractacus Burke," said Dumbledore, "who, by an odd coincidence, helped found the very shop whence came the necklace we have just been discussing."

He swilled the contents of the Pensieve as Harry had seen him swill them before, much as a gold prospector sifts for gold. Up out of the swirling, silvery mass rose a little old man revolving slowly in the Pensieve, silver as a ghost but much more solid, with a thatch of hair that completely covered his eyes.

“Yes, we acquired it in curious circumstances. It was brought in by a young witch just before Christmas, oh, many years ago now. She said she needed the gold badly, well, that much was obvious. Covered in rags and pretty far along…Going to have a baby, see. She said the locket had been Slytherin’s. Well, we hear that sort of story all the time, ‘Oh, this was Merlin’s, this was, his favorite teapot,’ but when I looked at it, it had his mark all right, and a few simple spells were enough to tell me the truth. Of course, that made it near enough priceless. She didn’t seem to have any idea how much it was worth. Happy to get ten Galleons for it. Best bargain we ever made!”

Dumbledore gave the Pensieve an extra-vigorous shake and Caractacus Burke descended back into the swirling mass of memory from whence he had come.

“He only gave her ten Galleons?” said Harry indignantly.

“Caractacus Burke was not famed for his generosity,” said Dumbledore. “So we know that, near the end of her pregnancy, Merope was alone in London and in desperate need of gold, desperate enough to sell her one and only valuable possession, the locket that was one of Marvolo’s treasured family heirlooms.”

“But she could do magic!” said Harry impatiently. “She could have got food and everything for herself by magic, couldn’t she?”

“Ah,” said Dumbledore, “perhaps she could. But it is my belief — I am guessing again, but I am sure I am right — that when her husband abandoned her, Merope stopped using magic. I do not think that she wanted to be a witch any longer. Of course, it is also possible that her unrequited love and the attendant despair sapped her of her powers; that can happen. In any case, as you are about to see, Merope refused to raise her wand even to save her own life.”

“She wouldn’t even stay alive for her son?”

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. “Could you possibly be feeling sorry for Lord Voldemort?”

“No,” said Harry quickly, “but she had a choice, didn’t she, not like my mother —”

“Your mother had a choice too,” said Dumbledore gently. “Yes, Merope Riddle chose death in spite of a son who needed her, but do not judge her too harshly, Harry. She was greatly weakened by long suffering and she never had your mother’s courage. And now, if you will stand…”

“Where are we going?” Harry asked, as Dumbledore joined him at the front of the desk.

“This time,” said Dumbledore, “we are going to enter my memory. I think you will find it both rich in detail and satisfyingly accurate. After you, Harry…”

Harry bent over the Pensieve; his face broke the cool surface of the memory and then he was falling through darkness again…Seconds later, his feet hit firm ground; he opened his eyes and found that he and Dumbledore were standing in a bustling, old-fashioned London street.

“There I am,” said Dumbledore brightly, pointing ahead of them to a tall figure crossing the road in front of a horse-drawn milk cart.

This younger Albus Dumbledore’s long hair and beard were auburn. Having reached their side of the street, he strode off along the pavement, drawing many curious glances due to the flamboyantly cut suit of plum velvet that he was wearing.

“Nice suit, sir,” said Harry, before he could stop himself, but Dumbledore merely chuckled as they followed his younger self a short distance, finally passing through a set of iron gates into a bare courtyard that fronted a rather grim, square building surrounded by high railings. He mounted the few steps leading to the front door and knocked once. After a moment or two, the door was opened by a scruffy girl wearing an apron.

“Good afternoon. I have an appointment with a Mrs. Cole, who, I believe, is the matron here?”

“Oh,” said the bewildered-looking girl, taking in Dumbledore’s eccentric appearance. “Um…just a mo’…MRS. COLE!” she bellowed over her shoulder.

Harry heard a distant voice shouting something in response. The girl turned back to Dumbledore. “Come in, she’s on ‘er way.”

Dumbledore stepped into a hallway tiled in black and white; the whole place was shabby but spotlessly clean. Harry and the older Dumbledore followed. Before the front door had closed behind them, a skinny, harassed-looking woman came scurrying toward them. She had a sharp-featured face that appeared more anxious than unkind, and she was talking over her shoulder to another aproned helper as she walked toward Dumbledore.

“…and take the iodine upstairs to Martha, Billy Stubbs has been picking his scabs and Eric Whalley’s oozing all over his sheets — chicken pox on top of everything else,” she said to nobody in particular, and then her eyes fell upon Dumbledore and she stopped dead in her tracks, looking as astonished as if a giraffe had just crossed her threshold.

“Good afternoon,” said Dumbledore, holding out his hand. Mrs. Cole simply gaped.

“My name is Albus Dumbledore. I sent you a letter requesting an appointment and you very kindly invited me here today.”

Mrs. Cole blinked. Apparently deciding that Dumbledore was not a hallucination, she said feebly, “Oh yes. Well — well then — you’d better come into my room. Yes.”

She led Dumbledore into a small room that seemed part sitting room, part office. It was as shabby as the hallway and the furniture was old and mismatched. She invited Dumbledore to sit on a rickety chair and seated herself behind a cluttered desk, eyeing him nervously.

"I am here, as I told you in my letter, to discuss Tom Riddle and arrangements for his future," said Dumbledore.

"Are you family?" asked Mrs. Cole.

"No, I am a teacher," said Dumbledore. "I have come to offer Tom a place at my school."

"What school's this, then?"

"It is called Hogwarts," said Dumbledore.

"And how come you're interested in Tom?"

"We believe he has qualities we are looking for."

"You mean he's won a scholarship? How can he have done? He's never been entered for one."

"Well, his name has been down for our school since birth —"

"Who registered him? His parents?"

There was no doubt that Mrs. Cole was an inconveniently sharp woman. Apparently Dumbledore thought so too, for Harry now saw him slip his wand out of the pocket of his velvet suit, at the same time picking up a piece of perfectly blank paper from Mrs. Cole's desktop.

"Here," said Dumbledore, waving his wand once as he passed her the piece of paper, "I think this will make everything clear."

Mrs. Cole's eyes slid out of focus and back again as she gazed intently at the blank paper for a moment.

"That seems perfectly in order," she said placidly, handing it back. Then her eyes fell upon a bottle of gin and two glasses that had certainly not been present a few seconds before.

"Er — may I offer you a glass of gin?" she said in an extra-refined voice.

"Thank you very much," said Dumbledore, beaming.

It soon became clear that Mrs. Cole was no novice when it came to gin drinking. Pouring both of them a generous measure, she drained her own glass in one gulp. Smacking her lips frankly, she smiled at Dumbledore for the first time, and he didn't hesitate to press his advantage.

"I was wondering whether you could tell me anything of Tom Riddle's history? I think he was born here in the orphanage?"

"That's right," said Mrs. Cole, helping herself to more gin. "I remember it clear as anything, because I'd just started here myself. New Year's Eve and bitter cold, snowing, you know. Nasty

night. And this girl, not much older than I was myself at the time, came staggering up the front steps. Well, she wasn't the first. We took her in, and she had the baby within the hour. And she was dead in another hour."

Mrs. Cole nodded impressively and took another generous gulp of gin.

"Did she say anything before she died?" asked Dumbledore. "Anything about the boy's father, for instance?"

"Now, as it happens, she did," said Mrs. Cole, who seemed to be rather enjoying herself now, with the gin in her hand and an eager audience for her story. "I remember she said to me, 'I hope he looks like his papa,' and I won't lie, she was right to hope it, because she was no beauty — and then she told me he was to be named Tom, for his father, and Marvolo, for her father — yes, I know, funny name, isn't it? We wondered whether she came from a circus — and she said the boy's surname was to be Riddle. And she died soon after that without another word.

"Well, we named him just as she'd said, it seemed so important to the poor girl, but no Tom nor Marvolo nor any kind of Riddle ever came looking for him, nor any family at all, so he stayed in the orphanage and he's been here ever since."

Mrs. Cole helped herself, almost absentmindedly, to another healthy measure of gin. Two pink spots had appeared high on her cheekbones. Then she said, "He's a funny boy."

"Yes," said Dumbledore. "I thought he might be."

"He was a funny baby too. He hardly ever cried, you know. And then, when he got a little older, he was…odd."

"Odd in what way?" asked Dumbledore gently.

"Well, he —"

But Mrs. Cole pulled up short, and there was nothing blurry or vague about the inquisitorial glance she shot Dumbledore over her gin glass.

"He's definitely got a place at your school, you say?"

"Definitely," said Dumbledore.

"And nothing I say can change that?"

"Nothing," said Dumbledore.

"You'll be taking him away, whatever?"

"Whatever," repeated Dumbledore gravely.

She squinted at him as though deciding whether or not to trust him. Apparently she decided she could, because she said in a sudden rush, "He scares the other children."

"You mean he is a bully?" asked Dumbledore.

"I think he must be," said Mrs. Cole, frowning slightly, "but it's very hard to catch him at it. There have been incidents…Nasty things…"

Dumbledore did not press her, though Harry could tell that he was interested. She took yet another gulp of gin and her rosy cheeks grew rosier still.

"Billy Stubbs's rabbit…well, Tom said he didn't do it and I don't see how he could have done, but even so, it didn't hang itself from the rafters, did it?"

"I shouldn't think so, no," said Dumbledore quietly.

"But I'm jiggered if I know how he got up there to do it. All I know is he and Billy had argued the day before. And then"— Mrs. Cole took another swig of gin, slopping a little over her chin this time — "on the summer outing — we take them out, you know, once a year, to the countryside or to the seaside — well, Amy Benson and Dennis Bishop were never quite right afterwards, and all we ever got out of them was that they'd gone into a cave with Tom Riddle. He swore they'd just gone exploring, but something happened in there, I'm sure of it. And, well, there have been a lot of things, funny things…"

She looked around at Dumbledore again, and though her cheeks were flushed, her gaze was steady. "I don't think many people will be sorry to see the back of him."

"You understand, I'm sure, that we will not be keeping him permanently?" said Dumbledore. "He will have to return here, at the very least, every summer."

"Oh, well, that's better than a whack on the nose with a rusty poker," said Mrs. Cole with a slight hiccup. She got to her feet, and Harry was impressed to see that she was quite steady, even though two-thirds of the gin was now gone. "I suppose you'd like to see him?"

"Very much," said Dumbledore, rising too.

She led him out of her office and up the stone stairs, calling out instructions and admonitions to helpers and children as she passed. The orphans, Harry saw, were all wearing the same kind of grayish tunic. They looked reasonably well-cared for, but there was no denying that this was a grim place in which to grow up.

"Here we are," said Mrs. Cole, as they turned off the second landing and stopped outside the first door in a long corridor. She knocked twice and entered.

"Tom? You've got a visitor. This is Mr. Dumberton — sorry, Dunderbore. He's come to tell you — well, I'll let him do it."

Harry and the two Dumbledores entered the room, and Mrs. Cole closed the door on them. It was a small bare room with nothing in it except an old wardrobe, a wooden chair, and an iron bedstead. A boy was sitting on top of the gray blankets, his legs stretched out in front of him, holding a book.

There was no trace of the Gaunts in Tom Riddle's face. Merope had got her dying wish: He was his handsome father in miniature, tall for eleven years old, dark-haired, and pale. His eyes narrowed slightly as he took in Dumbledore's eccentric appearance. There was a moment's silence.

"How do you do, Tom?" said Dumbledore, walking forward and holding out his hand.

The boy hesitated, then took it, and they shook hands. Dumbledore drew up the hard wooden chair beside Riddle, so that the pair of them looked rather like a hospital patient and visitor.

"I am Professor Dumbledore."

"'Professor'?" repeated Riddle. He looked wary. "Is that like 'doctor'? What are you here for? Did she get you in to have a look at me?"

He was pointing at the door through which Mrs. Cole had just left.

"No, no," said Dumbledore, smiling.

"I don't believe you," said Riddle. "She wants me looked at, doesn't she? Tell the truth!"

He spoke the last three words with a ringing force that was almost shocking. It was a command, and it sounded as though he had given it many times before. His eyes had widened and he was glaring at Dumbledore, who made no response except to continue smiling pleasantly. After a few seconds Riddle stopped glaring, though he looked, if anything, warier still.

"Who are you?"

"I have told you. My name is Professor Dumbledore and I work at a school called Hogwarts. I have come to offer you a place at my school — your new school, if you would like to come."

Riddle's reaction to this was most surprising. He leapt from the bed and backed away from Dumbledore, looking furious.

"You can't kid me! The asylum, that's where you're from, isn't it? 'Professor,' yes, of course — well, I'm not going, see? That old cat's the one who should be in the asylum. I never did anything to little Amy Benson or Dennis Bishop, and you can ask them, they'll tell you!"

"I am not from the asylum," said Dumbledore patiently. "I am a teacher and, if you will sit down calmly, I shall tell you about Hogwarts. Of course, if you would rather not come to the school, nobody will force you —"

"I'd like to see them try," sneered Riddle.

“Hogwarts,” Dumbledore went on, as though he had not heard Riddle’s last words, “is a school for people with special abilities —”

“I’m not mad!”

“I know that you are not mad. Hogwarts is not a school for mad people. It is a school of magic.”

There was silence. Riddle had frozen, his face expressionless, but his eyes were flickering back and forth between each of Dumbledore’s, as though trying to catch one of them lying.

“Magic?” he repeated in a whisper.

“That’s right,” said Dumbledore.

“It’s…it’s magic, what I can do?”

“What is it that you can do?”

“All sorts,” breathed Riddle. A flush of excitement was rising up his neck into his hollow cheeks; he looked fevered. “I can make filings move without touching them. I can make animals do what I want them to do, without training them. I can make bad things happen to people who annoy me. I can make them hurt if I want to.”

His legs were trembling. He stumbled forward and sat down on the bed again, staring at his hands, his head bowed as though in prayer.

“I knew I was different,” he whispered to his own quivering fingers. “I knew I was special. Always, I knew there was something.”

“Well, you were quite right,” said Dumbledore, who was no longer smiling, but watching Riddle intently. “You are a wizard.”

Riddle lifted his head. His face was transfigured: There was a wild happiness upon it, yet for some reason it did not make him better looking; on the contrary, his finely carved features seemed somehow rougher, his expression almost bestial.

“Are you a wizard too?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Prove it,” said Riddle at once, in the same commanding tone he had used when he had said, “Tell the truth.”

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. “If, as I take it, you are accepting your place at Hogwarts -”

“Of course I am!”

“Then you will address me as ‘Professor’ or ‘sir.’“

Riddle’s expression hardened for the most fleeting moment before he said, in an unrecognizably polite voice, “I’m sorry, sir. I meant — please, Professor, could you show me—?”

Harry was sure that Dumbledore was going to refuse, that he would tell Riddle there would be plenty of time for practical demonstrations at Hogwarts, that they were currently in a building full of Muggles and must therefore be cautious. To his great surprise, however, Dumbledore drew his wand from an inside pocket of his suit jacket, pointed it at the shabby wardrobe in the corner, and gave the wand a casual flick.

The wardrobe burst into flames.

Riddle jumped to his feet; Harry could hardly blame him for howling in shock and rage; all his worldly possessions must be in there. But even as Riddle rounded on Dumbledore, the flames vanished, leaving the wardrobe completely undamaged.

Riddle stared from the wardrobe to Dumbledore; then, his expression greedy, he pointed at the wand. "Where can I get one of them?"

"All in good time," said Dumbledore. "I think there is something trying to get out of your wardrobe."

And sure enough, a faint rattling could be heard from inside it. For the first time, Riddle looked frightened.

"Open the door," said Dumbledore.

Riddle hesitated, then crossed the room and threw open the wardrobe door. On the topmost shelf, above a rail of threadbare clothes, a small cardboard box was shaking and rattling as though there were several frantic mice trapped inside it.

"Take it out," said Dumbledore.

Riddle took down the quaking box. He looked unnerved.

"Is there anything in that box that you ought not to have?" asked Dumbledore.

Riddle threw Dumbledore a long, clear, calculating look. "Yes, I suppose so, sir," he said finally, in an expressionless voice.

"Open it," said Dumbledore.

Riddle took off the lid and tipped the contents onto his bed without looking at them. Harry, who had expected something much more exciting, saw a mess of small, everyday objects: a yo-yo, a silver thimble, and a tarnished mouth organ among them. Once free of the box, they stopped quivering and lay quite still upon the thin blankets.

"You will return them to their owners with your apologies," said Dumbledore calmly, putting his wand back into his jacket. "I shall know whether it has been done. And be warned: Thieving is not tolerated at Hogwarts."

Riddle did not look remotely abashed; he was still staring coldly and appraisingly at Dumbledore. At last he said in a colorless voice, “Yes, sir.”

“At Hogwarts,” Dumbledore went on, “we teach you not only to use magic, but to control it. You have — inadvertently, I am sure — been using your powers in a way that is neither taught nor tolerated at our school. You are not the first, nor will you be the last, to allow your magic to run away with you. But you should know that Hogwarts can expel students, and the Ministry of Magic — yes, there is a Ministry — will punish lawbreakers still more severely. All new wizards must accept that, in entering our world, they abide by our laws.”

“Yes, sir,” said Riddle again.

It was impossible to tell what he was thinking; his face remained quite blank as he put the little cache of stolen objects back into the cardboard box. When he had finished, he turned to Dumbledore and said baldly, “I haven’t got any money.”

“That is easily remedied,” said Dumbledore, drawing a leather money-pouch from his pocket. “There is a fund at Hogwarts for those who require assistance to buy books and robes. You might have to buy some of your spellbooks and so on secondhand, but —”

“Where do you buy spellbooks?” interrupted Riddle, who had taken the heavy money bag without thanking Dumbledore, and was now examining a fat gold Galleon.

“In Diagon Alley,” said Dumbledore. “I have your list of books and school equipment with me. I can help you find everything —”

“You’re coming with me?” asked Riddle, looking up.

“Certainly, if you —”

“I don’t need you,” said Riddle. “I’m used to doing things for myself, I go round London on my own all the time. How do you get to this Diagon Alley — sir?” he added, catching Dumbledore’s eye.

Harry thought that Dumbledore would insist upon accompanying Riddle, but once again he was surprised. Dumbledore handed Riddle the envelope containing his list of equipment, and after telling Riddle exactly how to get to the Leaky Cauldron from the orphanage, he said, “You will be able to see it, although Muggles around you — non-magical people, that is — will not. Ask for Tom the barman — easy enough to remember, as he shares your name —”

Riddle gave an irritable twitch, as though trying to displace an irksome fly.

“You dislike the name ‘Tom’?”

"There are a lot of Toms," muttered Riddle. Then, as though he could not suppress the question, as though it burst from him in spite of himself, he asked, "Was my father a wizard? He was called Tom Riddle too, they've told me."

"I'm afraid I don't know," said Dumbledore, his voice gentle.

"My mother can't have been magic, or she wouldn't have died," said Riddle, more to himself than Dumbledore. "It must've been him. So — when I've got all my stuff — when do I come to this Hogwarts?"

"All the details are on the second piece of parchment in your envelope," said Dumbledore. "You will leave from King's Cross Station on the first of September. There is a train ticket in there too."

Riddle nodded. Dumbledore got to his feet and held out his hand again. Taking it, Riddle said, "I can speak to snakes. I found out when we've been to the country on trips — they find me, they whisper to me. Is that normal for a wizard?"

Harry could tell that he had withheld mention of this strangest power until that moment, determined to impress.

"It is unusual," said Dumbledore, after a moment's hesitation, "but not unheard of."

His tone was casual but his eyes moved curiously over Riddle's face. They stood for a moment, man and boy, staring at each other. Then the handshake was broken; Dumbledore was at the door.

"Good-bye, Tom. I shall see you at Hogwarts."

"I think that will do," said the white-haired Dumbledore at Harry's side, and seconds later, they were soaring weightlessly through darkness once more, before landing squarely in the present-day office.

"Sit down," said Dumbledore, landing beside Harry.

Harry obeyed, his mind still full of what he had just seen.

"He believed it much quicker than I did — I mean, when you told him he was a wizard," said Harry. "I didn't believe Hagrid at first, when he told me."

"Yes, Riddle was perfectly ready to believe that he was — to use his word — 'special,'" said Dumbledore.

"Did you know — then?" asked Harry.

"Did I know that I had just met the most dangerous Dark wizard of all time?" said Dumbledore. "No, I had no idea that he was to grow up to be what he is. However, I was certainly intrigued by him. I returned to Hogwarts intending to keep an eye upon him, something I should have done in

any case, given that he was alone and friendless, but which, already, I felt I ought to do for others' sake as much as his.

"His powers, as you heard, were surprisingly well-developed for such a young wizard and — most interestingly and ominously of all — he had already discovered that he had some measure of control over them, and begun to use them consciously. And as you saw, they were not the random experiments typical of young wizards: He was already using magic against other people, to frighten, to punish, to control. The little stories of the strangled rabbit and the young boy and girl he lured into a cave were most suggestive…'*I can make them hurt if I want to*…'"

"And he was a Parselmouth," interjected Harry.

"Yes, indeed; a rare ability, and one supposedly connected with the Dark Arts, although as we know, there are Parselmouths among the great and the good too. In fact, his ability to speak to serpents did not make me nearly as uneasy as his obvious instincts for cruelty, secrecy, and domination.

"Time is making fools of us again," said Dumbledore, indicating the dark sky beyond the windows. "But before we part, I want to draw your attention to certain features of the scene we have just witnessed, for they have a great bearing on the matters we shall be discussing in future meetings.

"Firstly, I hope you noticed Riddle's reaction when I mentioned that another shared his first name, 'Tom'?"

Harry nodded.

"There he showed his contempt for anything that tied him to other people, anything that made him ordinary. Even then, he wished to be different, separate, notorious. He shed his name, as you know, within a few short years of that conversation and created the mask of 'Lord Voldemort' behind which he has been hidden for so long.

"I trust that you also noticed that Tom Riddle was already highly self-sufficient, secretive, and, apparently, friendless? He did not want help or companionship on his trip to Diagon Alley. He preferred to operate alone. The adult Voldemort is the same. You will hear many of his Death Eaters claiming that they are in his confidence, that they alone are close to him, even understand him. They are deluded. Lord Voldemort has never had a friend, nor do I believe that he has ever wanted one.

"And lastly — I hope you are not too sleepy to pay attention to this, Harry — the young Tom Riddle liked to collect trophies. You saw the box of stolen articles he had hidden in his room. These were taken from victims of his bullying behavior, souvenirs, if you will, of particularly unpleasant bits of magic. Bear in mind this magpie-like tendency, for this, particularly, will be important later.

“And now, it really is time for bed.”

Harry got to his feet. As he walked across the room, his eyes fell I upon the little table on which Marvolo Gaunt’s ring had rested last I time, but the ring was no longer there.

“Yes, Harry?” said Dumbledore, for Harry had come to a halt.

“The ring’s gone,” said Harry, looking around. “But I thought I you might have the mouth organ or something.”

Dumbledore beamed at him, peering over the top of his half moon spectacles.

“Very astute, Harry, but the mouth organ was only ever a mouth organ.”

And on that enigmatic note he waved to Harry, who understood himself to be dismissed.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

FELIX FELICIS

Harry had Herbology first thing the following morning. He had been unable to tell Ron and Hermione about his lesson with Dumbledore over breakfast for fear of being over-heard, but he filled them in as they walked across the vegetable patch toward the greenhouses. The weekend's brutal wind had died out at last; the weird mist had returned and it took them a little longer than usual to find the correct greenhouse.

"Wow, scary thought, the boy You-Know-Who," said Ron quietly, as they took their places around one of the gnarled Snargaluff stumps that formed this terms project, and began pulling on their protective gloves. "But I still don't get why Dumbledore's showing you all this. I mean, it's really interesting and everything, but what's the point?"

"Dunno," said Harry, inserting a gum shield. "But he says it's all important and it'll help me survive."

"I think it's fascinating," said Hermione earnestly. "It makes absolute sense to know as much about Voldemort as possible. How else will you find out his weaknesses?"

"So how was Slughorn's latest party?" Harry asked her thickly through the gum shield.

"Oh, it was quite fun, really," said Hermione, now putting on protective goggles. "I mean, he drones on about famous exploits a bit, and he absolutely fawns on McLaggen because he's so well connected, but he gave us some really nice food and he introduced us to Gwenog Jones."

"Gwenog Jones?" said Ron, his eyes widening under his own goggles. "The Gwenog Jones? Captain of the Holyhead Harpies?"

"That's right," said Hermione. "Personally, I thought she was a bit full of herself, but —"

"Quite enough chat over here!" said Professor Sprout briskly, bustling over and looking stern. "You're lagging behind, everybody else has started, and Neville's already got his first pod!"

They looked around; sure enough, there sat Neville with a bloody lip and several nasty scratches along the side of his face, but clutching an unpleasantly pulsating green object about the size of a grapefruit.

"Okay, Professor, we're starting now!" said Ron, adding quietly, when she had turned away again, "should ve used Muffliato, Harry."

"No, we shouldn't!" said Hermione at once, looking, as she always did, intensely cross at the thought of the Half-Blood Prince and his spells. "Well, come on…we'd better get going…"

She gave the other two an apprehensive look; they all took deep breaths and then dived at the gnarled stump between them.

It sprang to life at once; long, prickly, bramblelike vines flew out of the top and whipped through the air. One tangled itself in Hermione's hair, and Ron beat it back with a pair of secateurs; Harry succeeded in trapping a couple of vines and knotting them together; a hole opened in the middle of all the tentaclelike branches; Hermione plunged her arm bravely into this hole, which closed like a trap around her elbow; Harry and Ron tugged and wrenched at the vines, forcing the hole to open again, and Hermione snatched her arm free, clutching in her fingers a pod just like Neville's. At once, the prickly vines shot back inside, and the gnarled stump sat there looking like an innocently dead lump of wood.

"You know, I don't think I'll be having any of these in my garden when I've got my own place," said Ron, pushing his goggles up onto his forehead and wiping sweat from his face.

"Pass me a bowl," said Hermione, holding the pulsating pod at arm's length; Harry handed one over and she dropped the pod into it with a look of disgust on her face.

"Don't be squeamish, squeeze it out, they're best when they're fresh!" called Professor Sprout.

"Anyway," said Hermione, continuing their interrupted conversation as though a lump of wood had not just attacked them, "Slughorn's going to have a Christmas party, Harry, and there's no way you'll be able to wriggle out of this one because he actually asked me to check your free evenings, so he could be sure to have it on a night you can come."

Harry groaned. Meanwhile, Ron, who was attempting to burst the pod in the bowl by putting both hands on it, standing up, and squashing it as hard as he could, said angrily, "And this is another party just for Slughorn's favorites, is it?"

"Just for the Slug Club, yes," said Hermione.

The pod flew out from under Ron's fingers and hit the green house glass, rebounding onto the back of Professor Sprout's head and knocking off her old, patched hat. Harry went to retrieve the pod; when he got back, Hermione was saying, "Look, I didn't make up the name 'Slug Club' —"

"'*Slug Club*,'"repeated Ron with a sneer worthy of Malfoy. "It's pathetic. Well, I hope you enjoy your party. Why don't you try hooking up with McLaggen, then Slughorn can make you King and Queen Slug —"

"We're allowed to bring guests," said Hermione, who for some reason had turned a bright, boiling scarlet, "and I was going to ask you to come, but if you think it's that stupid then I won't bother!"

Harry suddenly wished the pod had flown a little farther, so that he need not have been sitting here with the pair of them. Unnoticed by either, he seized the bowl that contained the pod and

began to try and open it by the noisiest and most energetic means he could think of; unfortunately, he could still hear every word of their conversation.

"You were going to ask me?" asked Ron, in a completely different voice.

"Yes," said Hermione angrily. "But obviously if you'd rather I *hooked up with McLaggen*…"

There was a pause while Harry continued to pound the resilient pod with a trowel.

"'No, I wouldn't,'" said Ron, in a very quiet voice.

Harry missed the pod, hit the bowl, and shattered it.

"*Reparo*," he said hastily, poking the pieces with his wand, and the bowl sprang back together again. The crash, however, appeared to have awoken Ron and Hermione to Harry's presence. Hermione looked flustered and immediately started fussing about for her copy of *Flesh-Eating Trees of the World* to find out the correct way to juice Snargaluff pods; Ron, on the other hand, looked sheepish but also rather pleased with himself.

"Hand that over, Harry," said Hermione hurriedly. "It says we're supposed to puncture them with something sharp…"

Harry passed her the pod in the bowl; he and Ron both snapped their goggles back over their eyes and dived, once more, for the stump. It was not as though he was really surprised, thought Harry, as he wrestled with a thorny vine intent upon throttling him; he had had an inkling that this might happen sooner or later. But he was not sure how he felt about it…He and Cho were now too embarrassed to look at each other, let alone talk to each other; what if Ron and Hermione started going out together, then split up? Could their friendship survive it? Harry remembered the few weeks when they had not been talking to each other in the third year; he had not enjoyed trying to bridge the distance between them. And then, what if they didn't split up? What if they became like Bill and Fleur, and it became excruciatingly embarrassing to be in their presence, so that he was shut out for good?

"Gotcha!" yelled Ron, pulling a second pod from the stump just as Hermione managed to burst the first one open, so that the bowl was full of tubers wriggling like pale green worms.

The rest of the lesson passed without further mention of Slughorn's party. Although Harry watched his two friends more closely over the next few days, Ron and Hermione did not seem any different except that they were a little politer to each other than usual. Harry supposed he would just have to wait to see what happened under the influence of butterbeer in Slughorn's dimly lit room on the night of the party. In the meantime, however, he had more pressing worries.

Katie Bell was still in St. Mungo's Hospital with no prospect of leaving, which meant that the promising Gryffindor team Harry had been training so carefully since September was one Chaser short. He kept putting off replacing Katie in the hope that she would return, but their opening match against Slytherin was looming, and he finally had to accept that she would not be back in time to play.

Harry did not think he could stand another full-House tryout. With a sinking feeling that had little to do with Quidditch, he cornered Dean Thomas after Transfiguration one day. Most of the class had already left, although several twittering yellow birds were still zooming around the room, all of Hermione's creation; nobody else had succeeded in conjuring so much as a feather from thin air.

"Are you still interested in playing Chaser?"

"Wha —? Yeah, of course!" said Dean excitedly. Over Dean's shoulder, Harry saw Seamus Finnegan slamming his books into his bag, looking sour. One of the reasons why Harry would have preferred not to have to ask Dean to play was that he knew Seamus would not like it. On the other hand, he had to do what was best for the team, and Dean had outflown Seamus at the tryouts.

"Well then, you're in," said Harry. "There's a practice tonight, seven o'clock."

"Right," said Dean. "Cheers, Harry! Blimey, I can't wait to tell Ginny!"

He sprinted out of the room, leaving Harry and Seamus alone together, an uncomfortable moment made no easier when a bird dropping landed on Seamus's head as one of Hermione's canaries whizzed over them.

Seamus was not the only person disgruntled by the choice of Katie's substitute. There was much muttering in the common room about the fact that Harry had now chosen two of his class-mates for the team. As Harry had endured much worse mutterings than this in his school career, he was not particularly bothered, but all the same, the pressure was increasing to provide a win in the upcoming match against Slytherin. If Gryffindor won, Harry knew that the whole House would forget that they had criticized him and swear that they had always known it was a great team. If they lost…well, Harry thought wryly, he had still endured worse mutterings…

Harry had no reason to regret his choice once he saw Dean fly that evening; he worked well with Ginny and Demelza. The Beaters, Peakes and Coote, were getting better all the time. The only problem was Ron.

Harry had known all along that Ron was an inconsistent player who suffered from nerves and a lack of confidence, and unfortunately, the looming prospect of the opening game of the season seemed to have brought out all his old insecurities. After letting in half a dozen goals, most of them

scored by Ginny, his technique became wilder and wilder, until he finally punched an oncoming Demelza Robins in the mouth.

"It was an accident, I'm sorry, Demelza, really sorry!" Ron shouted after her as she zigzagged back to the ground, dripping blood everywhere. "I just —"

"Panicked," Ginny said angrily, landing next to Demelza and examining her fat lip. "You prat, Ron, look at the state of her!"

"I can fix that," said Harry, landing beside the two girls, pointing his wand at Demelzas mouth, and saying "*Episkey*." "And Ginny, don't call Ron a prat, you're not the Captain of this team —"

"Well, you seemed too busy to call him a prat and I thought someone should —"

Harry forced himself not to laugh.

"In the air, everyone, let's go…"

Overall it was one of the worst practices they had had all term, though Harry did not feel that honesty was the best policy when they were this close to the match.

"Good work, everyone, I think we'll flatten Slytherin," he said bracingly, and the Chasers and Beaters left the changing room looking reasonably happy with themselves.

"I played like a sack of dragon dung," said Ron in a hollow voice when the door had swung shut behind Ginny.

"No, you didn't," said Harry firmly. "You're the best Keeper I tried out, Ron. Your only problem is nerves."

He kept up a relentless flow of encouragement all the way back to the castle, and by the time they reached the second floor, Ron was looking marginally more cheerful. When Harry pushed open the tapestry to take their usual shortcut up to Gryffindor Tower, however, they found themselves looking at Dean and Ginny, who were locked in a close embrace and kissing fiercely as though glued together.

It was as though something large and scaly erupted into life in Harry's stomach, clawing at his insides: Hot blood seemed to flood his brain, so that all thought was extinguished, replaced by a savage urge to jinx Dean into a jelly. Wrestling with this sudden madness, he heard Ron's voice as though from a great distance away.

"Oi!"

Dean and Ginny broke apart and looked around. "What?" said Ginny.

"I don't want to find my own sister snogging people in public!"

"This was a deserted corridor till you came butting in!" said Ginny.

Dean was looking embarrassed. He gave Harry a shifty grin that Harry did not return, as the newborn monster inside him was roaring for Dean's instant dismissal from the team.

"Er…c'mon, Ginny," said Dean, "let's go back to the common room…"

"You go!" said Ginny. "I want a word with my dear brother!" Dean left, looking as though he was not sorry to depart the scene.

"Right," said Ginny, tossing her long red hair out of her face and glaring at Ron, "let's get this straight once and for all. It is none of your business who I go out with or what I do with them, Ron —"

"Yeah, it is!" said Ron, just as angrily. "D' you think I want people saying my sister's a —"

"A what?" shouted Ginny, drawing her wand. "A what, exactly?"

"He doesn't mean anything, Ginny —" said Harry automatically, though the monster was roaring its approval of Ron's words.

"Oh yes he does!" she said, flaring up at Harry. "Just because he's never snogged anyone in his life, just because the best kiss he's ever had is from our Auntie Muriel —"

"Shut your mouth!" bellowed Ron, bypassing red and turning maroon.

"No, I will not!" yelled Ginny, beside herself. "I've seen you with Phlegm, hoping she'll kiss you on the cheek every time you see her, it's pathetic! If you went out and got a bit of snogging done your self, you wouldn't mind so much that everyone else does it!"

Ron had pulled out his wand too; Harry stepped swiftly between them.

"You don't know what you're talking about!" Ron roared, trying to get a clear shot at Ginny around Harry, who was now standing in front of her with his arms outstretched. "Just because I don't do it in public —!"

Ginny screamed with derisive laughter, trying to push Harry out of the way.

"Been kissing Pigwidgeon, have you? Or have you got a picture of Auntie Muriel stashed under your pillow?"

"You —"

A streak of orange light flew under Harry's left arm and missed Ginny by inches; Harry pushed Ron up against the wall.

"Don't be stupid —"

"Harry's snogged Cho Chang!" shouted Ginny, who sounded close to tears now. "And Hermione snogged Viktor Krum, it's only you who acts like it's something disgusting, Ron, and that's because you've got about as much experience as a twelve-year-old!"

And with that, she stormed away. Harry quickly let go of Ron; the look on his face was murderous. They both stood there, breathing heavily, until Mrs. Norris, Rich's cat, appeared around the corner, which broke the tension.

"C'mon," said Harry, as the sound of Filch's shuffling feet reached their ears.

They hurried up the stairs and along a seventh-floor corridor. "Oi, out of the way!" Ron barked at a small girl who jumped in fright and dropped a bottle of toadspawn.

Harry hardly noticed the sound of shattering glass; he felt disoriented, dizzy; being struck by a lightning bolt must be something like this. *It's just because she's Ron's sister,* he told himself. *You just didn't like seeing her kissing Dean because she's Ron's sister*…

But unbidden into his mind came an image of that same deserted corridor with himself kissing Ginny instead…The monster in his chest purred…but then he saw Ron ripping open the tapestry curtain and drawing his wand on Harry, shouting things like "betrayal of trust"…"supposed to be my friend"…

"D'you think Hermione did snog Krum?" Ron asked abruptly, as they approached the Fat Lady. Harry gave a guilty start and wrenched his imagination away from a corridor in which no Ron intruded, in which he and Ginny were quite alone —

"What?" he said confusedly. "Oh…er…" The honest answer was "yes," but he did not want to give it. However, Ron seemed to gather the worst from the look on Harry's face.

"Dilligrout," he said darkly to the Fat Lady, and they climbed through the portrait hole into the common room.

Neither of them mentioned Ginny or Hermione again; indeed, they barely spoke to each other that evening and got into bed in silence, each absorbed in his own thoughts, Harry lay awake for a long time, looking up at the canopy of his four-poster and trying to convince himself that his feelings for Ginny were entirely elder-brotherly. They had lived, had they not, like brother and sister all summer, playing Quidditch, teasing Ron, and having a laugh about Bill and Phlegm? He had known Ginny for years now…It was natural that he should feel protective…natural that he should want to look out for her…want to rip Dean limb from limb for kissing her…No…he would have to control that particular brotherly feeling…

Ron gave a great grunting snore.

She's Ron's sister, Harry told himself firmly. Ron's sister. *She's out-of-bounds*. He would not risk his friendship with Ron for anything. He punched his pillow into a more comfortable shape and waited for sleep to come, trying his utmost not to allow his thoughts to stray anywhere near Ginny.

Harry awoke next morning feeling slightly dazed and confused by a series of dreams in which Ron had chased him with a Beater's bat, but by midday he would have happily exchanged the dream Ron for the real one, who was not only cold-shouldering Ginny and Dean, but also treating a hurt and bewildered Hermione with an icy, sneering indifference. What was more, Ron seemed to have become, overnight, as touchy and ready to lash out as the average Blast-Ended Skrewt. Harry spent the day attempting to keep the peace between Ron and Hermione with no success; finally, Hermione departed for bed in high dudgeon, and Ron stalked off to the boys' dormitory after swearing angrily at several frightened first years for looking at him.

To Harry's dismay, Ron's new aggression did not wear off over the next few days. Worse still, it coincided with an even deeper dip in his Keeping skills, which made him still more aggressive, so that during the final Quidditch practice before Saturdays match, he failed to save every single goal the Chasers aimed at him, but bellowed at everybody so much that he reduced Demelza Robins to tears.

"You shut up and leave her alone!" shouted Peakes, who was about two-thirds Ron's height, though admittedly carrying a heavy bat.

"ENOUGH!" bellowed Harry, who had seen Ginny glowering in Ron's direction and, remembering her reputation as an accomplished caster of the Bat-Bogey Hex, soared over to intervene before things got out of hand. "Peakes, go and pack up the Bludgers. Demelza, pull yourself together, you played really well today, Ron…" he waited until the rest of the team were out of earshot before saying it, "you're my best mate, but carry on treating the rest of them like this and I'm going to kick you off the team."

He really thought for a moment that Ron might hit him, but then something much worse happened: Ron seemed to sag on his broom; all the fight went out of him and he said, "I resign. I'm pathetic."

"You're not pathetic and you're not resigning!" said Harry fiercely, seizing Ron by the front of his robes. "You can save anything when you're on form, it's a mental problem you've got!"

"You calling me mental?"

"Yeah, maybe I am!"

They glared at each other for a moment, then Ron shook his head wearily. "I know you haven't got any time to find another Keeper, so I'll play tomorrow, but if we lose, and we will, I'm taking myself off the team."

Nothing Harry said made any difference. He tried boosting Ron's confidence all through dinner, but Ron was too busy being grumpy and surly with Hermione to notice. Harry persisted in the common room that evening, but his assertion that the whole team would be devastated if Ron left was somewhat undermined by the fact that the rest of the team was sitting in a huddle in a distant corner, clearly muttering about Ron and casting him nasty looks. Finally Harry tried getting angry again in the hope of provoking Ron into a defiant, and hopefully goal-saving, attitude, but this strategy did not appear to work any better than encouragement; Ron went to bed as dejected and hopeless as ever.

Harry lay awake for a very long time in the darkness. He did not want to lose the upcoming match; not only was it his first as Captain, but he was determined to beat Draco Malfoy at Quidditch even if he could not yet prove his suspicions about him. Yet if Ron played as he had done in the last few practices, their chances of winning were very slim…

If only there was something he could do to make Ron pull himself together…make him play at the top of his form…something that would ensure that Ron had a really good day…

And the answer came to Harry in one, sudden, glorious stroke of inspiration.

Breakfast was the usual excitable affair next morning; the Slytherins hissed and booed loudly as every member of the Gryffindor team entered the Great Hall. Harry glanced at the ceiling and saw a clear, pale blue sky: a good omen.

The Gryffindor table, a solid mass of red and gold, cheered as Harry and Ron approached. Harry grinned and waved; Ron grimaced weakly and shook his head.

"Cheer up, Ron!" called Lavender. "I know you'll be brilliant!"

Ron ignored her.

"Tea?" Harry asked him. "Coffee? Pumpkin juice?"

"Anything," said Ron glumly, taking a moody bite of toast.

A few minutes later Hermione, who had become so tired of Ron's recent unpleasant behavior that she had not come down to breakfast with them, paused on her way up the table.

"How are you both feeling?" she asked tentatively, her eyes on the back of Ron's head.

"Fine," said Harry, who was concentrating on handing Ron a glass of pumpkin juice.

"There you go, Ron. Drink up."

Ron had just raised the glass to his lips when Hermione spoke sharply.

"Don't drink that, Ron!"

Both Harry and Ron looked up at her.

“Why not?” said Ron.

Hermione was now staring at Harry as though she could not believe her eyes.

“You just put something in that drink.”

“Excuse me?” said Harry.

“You heard me. I saw you. You just tipped something into Ron’s drink. You’ve got the bottle in your hand right now!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Harry, stowing the little bottle hastily in his pocket.

“Ron, I warn you, don’t drink it!” Hermione said again, alarmed, but Ron picked up the glass, drained it in one gulp, and said,

“Stop bossing me around, Hermione.”

She looked scandalized. Bending low so that only Harry could hear her, she hissed, “You should be expelled for that. I’d never have believed it of you, Harry!”

“Look who’s talking,” he whispered back. “Confunded anyone lately?”

She stormed up the table away from them. Harry watched her go without regret. Hermione had never really understood what a serious business Quidditch was. He then looked around at Ron, who was smacking his lips.

“Nearly time!’ said Harry blithely.

The frosty grass crunched underfoot as they strode down to the stadium.

“Pretty lucky the weathers this good, eh?” Harry asked Ron.

“Yeah,” said Ron, who was pale and sick-looking.

Ginny and Demelza were already wearing their Quidditch robes and waiting in the changing room.

“Conditions look ideal,” said Ginny, ignoring Ron. “And guess what? That Slytherin Chaser Vaisey — he took a Bludger in the head yesterday during their practice, and he’s too sore to play! And even better than that — Malfoy’s gone off sick too!”

“What?” said Harry, wheeling around to stare at her. “He’s ill? What’s wrong with him?”

“No idea, but it’s great for us,” said Ginny brightly. “They’re playing Harper instead; he’s in my year and he’s an idiot.”

Harry smiled back vaguely, but as he pulled on his scarlet robes his mind was far from Quidditch. Malfoy had once before claimed he could not play due to injury, but on that occasion he

had made sure the whole match was rescheduled for a time that suited the Slytherins better. Why was he now happy to let a substitute go on? Was he really ill, or was he faking?

"Fishy, isn't it?" he said in an undertone to Ron. "Malfoy not playing?"

"Lucky, I call it," said Ron, looking slightly more animated. "And Vaisey off too, he's their best goal scorer, I didn't fancy — hey!" he said suddenly, freezing halfway through pulling on his Keepers gloves and staring at Harry.

"What?"

"I…you…" Ron had dropped his voice, he looked both scared and excited. "My drink…my pumpkin juice…you didn't…?"

Harry raised his eyebrows, but said nothing except, "We'll be starting in about five minutes, you'd better get your boots on."

They walked out onto the pitch to tumultuous roars and boos. One end of the stadium was solid red and gold; the other, a sea of green and silver. Many Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws had taken sides too: Amidst all the yelling and clapping Harry could distinctly hear the roar of Luna Lovegood's famous lion-topped hat.

Harry stepped up to Madam Hooch, the referee, who was standing ready to release the balls from the crate.

"Captains shake hands," she said, and Harry had his hand crushed by the new Slytherin Captain, Urquhart. "Mount your brooms. On the whistle…three…two…one…"

The whistle sounded, Harry and the others kicked off hard from the frozen ground, and they were away.

Harry soared around the perimeter of the grounds, looking around for the Snitch and keeping one eye on Harper, who was zigzagging far below him. Then a voice that was jarringly different to the usual commentator's started up.

"Well, there they go, and I think we're all surprised to see the team that Potter's put together this year. Many thought, given Ronald Weasley's patchy performance as Keeper last year, that he might be off the team, but of course, a close personal friendship with the Captain does help…"

These words were greeted with jeers and applause from the Slytherin end of the pitch. Harry craned around on his broom to look toward the commentator's podium. A tall, skinny blond boy with an upturned nose was standing there, talking into the magical megaphone that had once been Lee Jordan's; Harry recognized Zacharias Smith, a Hufflepuff player whom he heartily disliked.

“Oh, and here comes Slytherin’s first attempt on goal, it’s Urquhart streaking down the pitch and —”

Harry’s stomach turned over.

“— Weasley saves it, well, he’s bound to get lucky sometimes, I suppose…”

“That’s right, Smith, he is,” muttered Harry, grinning to himself, as he dived amongst the Chasers with his eyes searching all around for some hint of the elusive Snitch.

With half an hour of the game gone, Gryffindor were leading sixty points to zero, Ron having made some truly spectacular saves, some by the very tips of his gloves, and Ginny having scored four of Gryffindor’s six goals. This effectively stopped Zacharias wondering loudly whether the two Weasleys were only there because Harry liked them, and he started on Peakes and Coote instead.

“Of course, Coote isn’t really the usual build for a Beater,” said Zacharias loftily, “they’ve generally got a bit more muscle —”

“Hit a Bludger at him!” Harry called to Coote as he zoomed past, but Coote, grinning broadly, chose to aim the next Bludger at Harper instead, who was just passing Harry in the opposite direction. Harry was pleased to hear the dull thunk that meant the Bludger had found its mark.

It seemed as though Gryffindor could do no wrong. Again and again they scored, and again and again, at the other end of the pitch, Ron saved goals with apparent ease. He was actually smiling now, and when the crowd greeted a particularly good save with a rousing chorus of the old favorite “Weasley Is Our King,” he pretended to conduct them from on high.

“Thinks he’s something special today, doesn’t he?” said a snide voice, and Harry was nearly knocked off his broom as Harper collided with him hard and deliberately. “Your blood-traitor pal…”

Madam Hooch’s back was turned, and though Gryffindors below shouted in anger, by the time she looked around, Harper had already sped off. His shoulder aching, Harry raced after him, determined to ram him back…

“And I think Harper of Slytherin’s seen the Snitch!” said Zacharias Smith through his megaphone. “Yes, he’s certainly seen something Potter hasn’t!”

Smith really was an idiot, thought Harry, hadn’t he noticed them collide? But next moment, his stomach seemed to drop out of the, sky — Smith was right and Harry was wrong: Harper had not sped upward at random; he had spotted what Harry had not: The Snitch was speeding along high above them, glinting brightly against the clear blue sky.

Harry accelerated; the wind was whistling in his ears so that it drowned all sound of Smith's commentary or the crowd, but Harper was still ahead of him, and Gryffindor was only a hundred points up; if Harper got there first Gryffindor had lost…and now Harper was feet from it, his hand outstretched…

"Oi, Harper!" yelled Harry in desperation. "How much did Malfoy pay you to come on instead of him?"

He did not know what made him say it, but Harper did a double-take; he fumbled the Snitch, let it slip through his fingers, and shot right past it. Harry made a great swipe for the tiny, fluttering ball and caught it.

"YES!" Hairy yelled. Wheeling around, he hurtled back toward the ground, the Snitch held high in his hand. As the crowd realized what had happened, a great shout went up that almost drowned the sound of the whistle that signaled the end of the game.

"Ginny, where're you going?" yelled Harry, who had found hint self trapped in the midst of a mass midair hug with the rest of the team, but Ginny sped right on past them until, with an almighty crash, she collided with the commentators podium. As the crowd shrieked and laughed, the Gryffindor team landed beside the wreckage of wood under which Zacharias was feebly stirring; Harry heard Ginny saying blithely to an irate Professor McGonagall, "Forgot to brake, Professor, sorry."

Laughing, Harry broke free of the rest of the team and hugged Ginny, but let go very quickly. Avoiding her gaze, he clapped cheering Ron on the back instead as, all enmity forgotten, the Gryffindor team left the pitch arm in arm, punching the air and waving to their supporters.

The atmosphere in the changing room was jubilant. "Party up in the common room, Seamus said!" yelled Dean exuberantly. "C'mon, Ginny, Demelza!"

Ron and Harry were the last two in the changing room. They were just about to leave when Hermione entered. She was twisting her Gryffindor scarf in her hands and looked upset but determined. "I want a word with you, Harry." She took a deep breath. "You shouldn't have done it. You heard Slughorn, its illegal."

"What are you going to do, turn us in?" demanded Ron.

"What are you two talking about?" asked Harry, turning away to hang up his robes so that neither of them would see him grinning,

"You know perfectly well what we're talking about!" said Hermione shrilly. "You spiked Ron's juice with lucky potion at breakfast! Felix Felicis!"

"No, I didn't," said Harry, turning back to face them both.

"Yes you did, Harry, and that's why everything went right, there were Slytherin players missing and Ron saved everything!"

"I didn't put it in!" said Harry, grinning broadly. He slipped his hand inside his jacket pocket and drew out the tiny bottle that Hermione had seen in his hand that morning. It was full of golden potion and the cork was still tightly sealed with wax. "I wanted Ron to think I'd done it, so I faked it when I knew you were looking." He looked at Ron. "You saved everything because you felt lucky. You did it all yourself."

He pocketed the potion again.

"There really wasn't anything in my pumpkin juice?" Ron said, astounded. "But the weather's good…and Vaisey couldn't play…I honestly haven't been given lucky potion?"

Harry shook his head. Ron gaped at him for a moment, then rounded on Hermione, imitating her voice. "*You added Felix Felicis to Ron's juice this morning, that's why he saved everything! See*! I can save goals without help, Hermione!"

"I never said you couldn't — Ron, you thought you'd been given it too!"

But Ron had already strode past her out of the door with his broomstick over his shoulder.

"Er," said Harry into the sudden silence; he had not expected his plan to backfire like this, "shall…shall we go up to the party, then?"

"You go!" said Hermione, blinking back tears. "I'm sick of Ron at the moment, I don't know what I'm supposed to have done…"

And she stormed out of the changing room too.

Harry walked slowly back up the grounds toward the castle through the crowd, many of whom shouted congratulations at him, but he felt a great sense of letdown; he had been sure that if Ron won the match, he and Hermione would be friends again immediately. He did not see how he could possibly explain to Hermione that what she had done to offend Ron was kiss Viktor Krum, not when the offense had occurred so long ago.

Harry could not see Hermione at the Gryffindor celebration party, which was in full swing when he arrived. Renewed cheers and clapping greeted his appearance, and he was soon surrounded by a mob of people congratulating him. What with trying to shake off the Creevey brothers, who wanted a blow-by-blow match analysis, and the large group of girls that encircled him, laughing at his least amusing comments and batting their eyelids, it was some time before he could try and find Ron. At last, he extricated himself from Romilda Vane, who was hinting heavily that she would like to go to

Slughorn's Christmas party with him. As he was ducking toward the drinks table, he walked straight into Ginny, Arnold the Pygmy Puff riding on her shoulder and Crookshanks mewing hopefully at her heels.

"Looking for Ron?" she asked, smirking. "He's over there, the filthy hypocrite."

Harry looked into the corner she was indicating. There, in full view of the whole room, stood Ron wrapped so closely around Lavender Brown it was hard to tell whose hands were whose.

"It looks like he's eating her face, doesn't it?" said Ginny dispassionately. "But I suppose he's got to refine his technique somehow. Good game, Harry."

She patted him on the arm; Harry felt a swooping sensation in his stomach, but then she walked off to help herself to more butterbeer. Crookshanks trotted after her, his yellow eyes fixed upon Arnold.

Harry turned away from Ron, who did not look like he would be surfacing soon, just as the portrait hole was closing. With a sinking feeling, he thought he saw a mane of bushy brown hair whipping out of sight.

He darted forward, sidestepped Romilda Vane again, and pushed open the portrait of the Fat Lady. The corridor outside, seemed to be deserted.

"Hermione?"

He found her in the first unlocked classroom he tried. She was sitting on the teacher's desk, alone except for a small ring of twittering yellow birds circling her head, which she had clearly just conjured out of midair. Harry could not help admiring her spell-work at a time like this.

"Oh, hello, Harry," she said in a brittle voice. "I was just practicing."

"Yeah…they're — er — really good…" said Harry.

He had no idea what to say to her. He was just wondering whether there was any chance that she had not noticed Ron, that she had merely left the room because the party was a little too rowdy, when she said, in an unnaturally high-pitched voice, "Ron seems to be enjoying the celebrations."

"Er…does he?" said Harry.

"Don't pretend you didn't see him," said Hermione. "He wasn't exactly hiding it, was —?"

The door behind them burst open. To Harry's horror, Ron came in, laughing, pulling Lavender by the hand.

"Oh," he said, drawing up short at the sight of Harry and Hermione.

"Oops!" said Lavender, and she backed out of the room, giggling. The door swung shut behind her.

There was a horrible, swelling, billowing silence. Hermione was staring at Ron, who refused to look at her, but said with an odd mixture of bravado and awkwardness, “Hi, Harry! Wondered where you’d got to!”

Hermione slid off the desk. The little flock of golden birds continued to twitter in circles around her head so that she looked like a strange, feathery model of the solar system.

“You shouldn’t leave Lavender waiting outside,” she said quietly. “She’ll wonder where you’ve gone.”

She walked very slowly and erectly toward the door. Harry glanced at Ron, who was looking relieved that nothing worse had happened.

“*Oppugno!*” came a shriek from the doorway.

Harry spun around to see Hermione pointing her wand at Ron, her expression wild: The little flock of birds was speeding like a hail of fat golden bullets toward Ron, who yelped and covered his face with his hands, but the birds attacked, pecking and clawing at every bit of flesh they could reach.

“Gerremoffme!” he yelled, but with one last look of vindictive fury, Hermione wrenched open the door and disappeared through it. Harry thought he heard a sob before it slammed.

Chapter Fifteen

The Unbreakable Vow

Snow was swirling against the icy windows once more; Christmas was approaching fast. Hagrid had already single-handedly delivered the usual twelve Christmas trees to the Great Hall; garlands of holly and tinsel had been twisted around the banisters of the stairs; everlasting candles glowed from inside the helmets of suits of armor and great bunches of mistletoe had been hung at intervals along the corridors. Large groups of girls tended to converge underneath the mistletoe bunches every time Harry went past, which caused blockages in the corridors; fortunately, however, Harry's frequent nighttime wanderings had given him an unusually good knowledge of the castle's secret passageways, so that he was often, without too much difficulty, to navigate mistletoe-free routes between classes.

Ron, who might once have found the necessity of these detours excuse for jealousy rather than hilarity, simply roared with laughter about it all. Although Harry much preferred this new laughing, joking Ron to the moody, aggressive model he had been enduring for the last few weeks, the improved Ron came at a heavy price. Firstly, Harry had to put up with the frequent presence of Lavender Brown, who seemed to regard any moment that she was not kissing Ron as a moment wasted; and secondly, Harry found himself once more the best friend of two people who seemed unlikely ever to speak to each other again.

Ron, whose hands and forearms still bore scratches and cuts from Hermione's bird attack, was taking a defensive and resentful tone.

"She can't complain," he told Harry. "She snogged Krum. So she's found out someone wants to snog me too. Well, it's a free country. I haven't done anything wrong."

Harry did not answer, but pretended to be absorbed in the book they were supposed to have read before Charms next morning (*Quintessence: A Quest*). Determined as he was to remain friends with both Ron and Hermione, he was spending a lot of time with his mouth shut tight.

"I never promised Hermione anything," Ron mumbled. "I mean, all right, I was going to go to Slughorn's Christmas party with her, but she never said…just as friends…I'm a free agent…"

Harry turned a page of *Quintessence*, aware that Ron was watching him. Ron's voice trailed away in mutters, barely audible over the loud crackling of the fire, though Harry thought he caught the words "Krum" and "Can't complain" again.

Hermione's schedule was so full that Harry could only talk to her properly in the evenings, when Ron was, in any case, so tightly wrapped around Lavender that he did not notice what Harry was doing. Hermione refused to sit in the common room while Ron was there, so Harry generally joined her in the library, which meant that their conversations were held in whispers.

“He’s at perfect liberty to kiss whomever he likes,” said Hermione, while the librarian, Madam Pince, prowled the shelves behind them. “I really couldn’t care less.”

She raised her quill and dotted an ‘i’ so ferociously that she punctured a hole in her parchment. Harry said nothing. He thought his voice might soon vanish from the lack of use. He bent a little lower over *Advanced Potion-Making* and continued to make notes on Everlasting Elixirs, occasionally pausing to decipher the prince’s useful additions to Libatius Borage’s text.

“And incidentally,” said Hermione, after a few moments, “you need to be careful.”

“For the last time,” said Harry, speaking in a slightly hoarse tone after three-quarters of an hour of silence, “I am not giving back this book. I’ve learned more from the Half-blood prince than Snape or Slughorn have taught me in —”

“I’m not talking about your stupid so-called prince,” said Hermione, giving his book a nasty look as though it had been rude to her. “I’m talking about earlier. I went into the girl’s bathroom just before I came in here and there were about a dozen girls in there, including that Romilda Vane, trying to decide how to slip you a love potion. They’re all hoping they’re going to get you to take them to Slughorn’s party, and they all seem to have bought Fred and George’s love potions, which I’m afraid to say probably work —”

“Why didn’t you confiscate them then?” demanded Harry, it seemed extraordinary that Hermione’s mania for upholding the rules could have abandoned her at this crucial juncture.

“They didn’t have the potions with them in the bathroom,” said Hermione scornfully, “They were just discussing tactics. As I doubt the Half-blood prince” she gave the book another scornful look “could dream up an antidote for a dozen different love potions at once, I’d just invite someone to go with you, that’ll stop all the others thinking they’ve still got a chance. It’s tomorrow night, they’re getting desperate.”

“There isn’t anyone I want to invite,” mumbled Harry, who was still not trying to think about Ginny any more than he could help, despite the fact the fact that she kept cropping up in his dreams in ways that made him devoutly thankful that Ron could not perform Legilimency.

“Well, just be careful what you drink, because Romilda Vane looked like she meant business.” said Hermione grimly.

She hitched up the long roll of parchment on which she was writing her Arithmancy essay and continued to scratch away with her quill. Harry watched her with his mind a long way away.

“Hang on a moment,” he said slowly. “I thought Filch had banned anything bought at Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes?”

“And when has anyone ever paid attention to what Filch has banned?” asked Hermione, still concentrating on her essay.

“But I thought all the owls were being searched. So how come these girls are able to bring love potions into the school?”

“Fred and George send them disguised as perfumes and cough potions,” said Hermione. “It’s part of their Owl order service.”

“You know a lot about it.”

Hermione gave him the kind of nasty look she had just given his copy of *Advanced Potion-Making.*

“It was all on the back of the bottles they showed Ginny and me in the summer,” she said coldly, “I don’t go around putting potions in people’s drinks…or pretending too either, which is just as bad…”

“Yeah, well, never mind that,” said Harry quickly. “The point is, Filch is being fooled isn’t he? These girls are getting stuff into the school disguised as something else! So why couldn’t Malfoy have brought the necklace into the school —?”

“Oh, Harry…not that again…”

“Come on, why not?” demanded Harry.

“Look,” sighed Hermione, “Secrecy Sensors detect jinxes, curses, and concealment charms, don’t they? They’re used to find dark magic and dark objects. They’d have picked up a powerful curse, like the one in the necklace, within seconds. But something that’s just been put in the wrong bottle wouldn’t register — anyway Love potions aren’t dark or dangerous -”

“Easy for you to say,” muttered Harry, thinking of Romilda Vane.

“— so it would be down to Filch to realize it wasn’t a cough potion, and he’s not a very good wizard, I doubt he can tell one potion from —”

Hermione stopped dead; Harry had heard it too. Somebody had moved close behind them among the dark bookshelves. They waited, and a moment later the vulturelike countenance of Madam Pince appeared around the corner, her sunken cheeks, her skin like parchment, and her long hooked nose illuminated unflatteringly by the lamp she was carrying.

“The library is now closed,” she said, “Mind you return anything you have borrowed to the correct — what have you been doing to that book, you depraved boy?”

“It isn’t the library’s, it’s mine!” said Harry hastily, snatching his copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* off the table as she lunged at it with a clawlike hand.

“Spoiled!” she hissed. “Desecrated, befouled!”

“It’s just a book that’s been written on!” said Harry, tugging it out of her grip.

She looked as though she might have a seizure; Hermione, who had hastily packed her things, grabbed Harry by the arm and frogmarched him away.

“She’ll ban you from the library if you’re not careful. Why did you have to bring that stupid book?”

“It’s not my fault she’s barking mad, Hermione. Or d’you think she overheard you being rude about Filch? I’ve always thought there might be something between them…”

“Oh, ha ha…”

Enjoying the fact that they could speak normally again, they made their way along the deserted lamp-lit corridors back to the common room, arguing whether or not Filch and Madam Pince were secretly in love with each other.

“Baubles” said Harry to the Fat Lady, this being the new, festive password.

“Same to you,” said the fat lady with a roguish grin, and she swung forward to admit them.

“Hi, Harry!” said Romilda Vane, the moment he had climbed through the portrait hole. “Fancy a gillywater?”

Hermione gave him a “what-did-I-tell-you?” look over her shoulder.

“No thanks,” said Harry quickly. “I don’t like it much.”

“Well, take these anyway,” said Romilda, thrusting a box into his hands. “Chocolate Cauldrons, they’ve got firewhiskey in them. My gran sent them to me, but I don’t like them.”

“Oh — right — thanks a lot.” said Harry, who could not think what else to say. “Er — I ‘ m just going over here with…”

He hurried off behind Hermione, his voice tailing away feebly.

“Told you,” said Hermione succinctly, “ Sooner you ask someone, sooner they’ll all leave you alone and you can —”

But her face suddenly turned blank; she had just spotted Ron and Lavender, who were intertwined in the same armchair.

“Well, good night, Harry” said Hermione, though it was only seven o’clock in the evening, and she left for the girl s’ dormitory without another word.

Harry went to bed comforting himself that there was only one more day of lessons to struggle through, plus Slughorn’s party, after which he and Ron would depart together for the Burrow. It now seemed impossible that Ron and Hermione would make up with each other before the holidays

began, but perhaps, somehow, the break would give them time to calm down, think better of their behavior…

But his hopes were not high, and they sank still lower after enduring a Transfiguration lesson with them both next day. They had just embarked upon the immensely difficult topic of human transfiguration; working in front of mirrors, they were supposed to be changing the color of their own eyebrows. Hermione laughed unkindly at Ron's disastrous first attempt, during which he somehow managed to give himself a spectacular handlebar mustache; Ron retaliated by doing a cruel but accurate impression of Hermione jumping up and down in her seat every time Professor McGonagall asked a question, which Lavender and Parvati found deeply amusing and which reduced Hermione to the verge of tears again. She raced out of the classroom on the bell, leaving half her things behind; Harry, deciding that her need was greater than Ron's just now, scooped up her remaining possessions and followed her.

He finally tracked her down as she emerged from a girl's bathroom on the floor below. She was accompanied by Luna Lovegood, who was patting her vaguely on the back.

"Oh, hello, Harry," said Luna. "Did you know one of your eyebrows is bright yellow?"

"Hi, Luna. Hermione, you left your stuff…"

He held out her books.

"Oh, yes," said Hermione in a choked voice, taking her things and turning away quickly to hide the fact she was wiping her eyes with her pencil case. "Thank you, Harry. Well, I'd better get going…"

And she hurried off, without ever giving Harry any time to offer words of comfort, though admittedly he could not think of any.

"She's a bit upset," said Luna. "I thought at first it was Moaning Myrtle in there, but it turned out to be Hermione. She said something about Ron Weasley…"

"Yeah, they've had a row," said Harry.

"He says funny things sometimes, doesn't he?" said Luna as they set off down the corridor together. "But he can be a bit unkind. I noticed that last year."

"I s'pose," said Harry. Luna was demonstrating her usual knack of speaking uncomfortable truths; he had never met anyone quite like her. "So have you had a good term?"

"Oh, it's been all right," said Luna. "A bit lonely without the D.A. Ginny's been nice, though. She stopped two boys in our Transfiguration class calling me 'Loony' the other day —"

"How would you like to come to Slughorn's party with me tonight?"

The words were out of Harry's mouth before he could stop them; he heard himself say them as though it were a stranger speaking.

Luna turned her protuberant eyes to him in surprise.

"Slughorn's party? With you?"

"Yeah," said Harry, "We're supposed to bring guests, so I thought you might like…I mean…" He was keen to make his intentions perfectly clear. "I mean, just as friends, you know. But if you don't want to…"

He was already half hoping that she didn't want to.

"Oh no, I'd love to go with you as friends!" said Luna, beaming as he had never seen her beam before. "Nobody's ever asked me to a party before, as a friend! Is that why you dyed your eyebrow, for the party? Should I dye mine too?"

"No" said Harry firmly, "That was a mistake. I'll get Hermione to put it right for me. So I'll meet you in the entrance hall at eight o'clock then."

"AHA!" screamed a voice from overhead and both of them jumped; unnoticed by either of them, they had just passed underneath Peeves, who was hanging upside down from a chandelier and grinning maliciously at them.

"Potty asked Loony to go to the party! Potty lurves Loony! Potty luuuuuurves Looooony!"

And he zoomed away cackling and shrieking, "Potty loves Loony!"

"Nice to keep these things private," said Harry. And sure enough, in no time at all the whole school seemed to know that Harry Potter was taking Luna Lovegood to Slughorn's party.

"You could've taken anyone!" said Ron in disbelief over dinner. "Anyone! And you chose Loony Lovegood?"

"Don't call her that, Ron!" snapped Ginny, pausing behind Harry on her way to join friends. "I'm really glad you're taking her Harry, she's so excited."

And she moved on down the table to sit with Dean. Harry tried to feel pleased that Ginny was glad he was taking Luna to the party but could not quite manage it. A long way along the table Hermione was sitting alone, playing with her stew. Harry noticed Ron looking at her furtively.

"You could say sorry," suggested Harry bluntly.

"What, and get attacked by another flock of canaries?" muttered Ron.

"What did you have to imitate her for?"

"She laughed at my mustache!"

"So did I, it was the stupidest thing I've ever seen."

But Ron did not seem to have heard; Lavender had just arrived with Parvati. Squeezing herself in between Harry and Ron, Lavender flung her arms around Ron's neck.

"Hi, Harry," said Parvati who, like Harry, looked faintly embarrassed and bored by the behavior of their two friends.

"Hi," said Harry, "How're you? You're staying at Hogwarts, then? I heard your parents wanted you to leave."

"I managed to talk them out of it for the time being," said Parvati. "That Katie thing really freaked them out, but as there hasn't been anything since…Oh, hi, Hermione!"

Parvati positively beamed. Harry could tell that she was feeling guilty for having laughed at Hermione in Transfiguration. He looked around and saw that Hermione was beaming back, if possible even more brightly. Girls were very strange sometimes.

"Hi, Parvati!" said Hermione, ignoring Ron and Lavender completely. "Are you going to Slughorn's party tonight?"

"No invite," said Parvati gloomily. "I'd love to go, though, it sounds like it's going to be really good…You're going, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm meeting Cormac at eight, and we're —"

There was a noise like a plunger being withdrawn from a blocked sink, and Ron surfaced. Hermione acted as though she had not seen or heard anything.

"— we're going up to the party together."

"Cormac?" said Parvati. "Cormac McLaggen, you mean?"

"That's right," said Hermione sweetly. "The one who *almost*" - she put a great deal of emphasis on the word — "became Gryffindor Keeper."

"Are you going out with him, then?" asked Parvati, wide-eyed.

"Oh - yes - didn't you know?" said Hermione, with a most un-Hermione-ish giggle.

"No!" said Parvati, looking positively agog at this piece of gossip. "Wow, you like your Quidditch players, don't you? First Krum, then McLaggen."

"I like *really good* Quidditch players," Hermione corrected her, still smiling. "Well, see you…Got to go and get ready for the party…"

She left. At once Lavender and Parvati put their heads together to discuss this new development, with everything they had ever heard about McLaggen, and all they had ever guessed about Hermione. Ron looked strangely blank and said nothing. Harry was left to ponder in silence the depths to which girls would sink to get revenge.

When he arrived in the entrance hall at eight o'clock that night, he found an unusually large number of girls lurking there, all of whom seemed to be staring at him resentfully as he approached Luna. She was wearing a set of spangled silver robes that were attracting a certain amount of giggles from the onlookers, but otherwise she looked quite nice. Harry was glad, in any case, that she had left off her radish earrings, her butterbeer cork necklace, and her Spectrespecs.

"Hi," he said. "Shall we get going then?"

"Oh yes," she said happily. "Where is the party?"

"Slughorn's office," said Harry, leading her up the marble staircase away from all the staring and muttering. "Did you hear, there's supposed to be a vampire coming?"

"Rufus Scrimgeour?" asked Luna.

"I - what?" said Harry, disconcerted. "You mean the Minister of Magic?"

"Yes, he's a vampire," said Luna matter-of-factly. "Father wrote a very long article about it when Scrimgeour first took over from Cornelius Fudge, but he was forced not to publish by somebody from the Ministry. Obviously, they didn't want the truth to get out!"

Harry, who thought it most unlikely that Rufus Scrimgeour was a vampire, but who was used to Luna repeating her father's bizarre views as though they were fact, did not reply; they were already approaching Slughorn's office and the sounds of laughter, music, and loud conversation were growing louder with every step they took.

Whether it had been built that way, or because he had used magical trickery to make it so, Slughorn's office was much larger than the usual teacher's study. The ceiling and walls had been draped with emerald, crimson, and gold hangings, so that it looked as though they were all inside a vast tent. The room was crowded and stuffy and bathed in the red light cast by an ornate golden lamp dangling from the center of the ceiling in which real fairies were fluttering, each a brilliant speck of light. Loud singing accompanied by what sounded like mandolins issued from a distant corner; a haze of pipe smoke hung over several elderly warlocks deep in conversation, and a number of house-elves were negotiating their way squeakily through the forest of knees, obscured by the heavy silver platters of food they were bearing, so that they looked like little roving tables.

"Harry, m'boy!" boomed Slughorn, almost as soon as Harry and Luna had squeezed in through the door. "Come in, come in, so many people I'd like you to meet!"

Slughorn was wearing a tasseled velvet hat to match his smoking jacket. Gripping Harry's arm so tightly he might have been hoping to Disapparate with him, Slughorn led him purposefully into the party; Harry seized Luna's hand and dragged her along with him.

“Harry, I’d like you to meet Eldred Worple, an old student of mine, author of *Blood Brothers: My Life Amongst the Vampires* — and, of course, his friend Sanguini.”

Worple, who was a small, stout, bespectacled man, grabbed Harry’s hand and shook it enthusiastically; the vampire Sanguini, who was tall and emaciated with dark shadows under his eyes, merely nodded. He looked rather bored. A gaggle of girls was standing close to him, looking curious and excited.

“Harry Potter, I am simply delighted!” said Worple, peering shortsightedly up into Harry’s face. “I was saying to Professor Slughorn only the other day, ‘Where is the biography of Harry Potter for which we have all been waiting?’“

“Er,” said Harry, “were you?”

“Just as modest as Horace described!” said Worple. “But seriously”— his manner changed; it became suddenly businesslike — “I would be delighted to write it myself — people are craving to know more about you, dear boy, craving! If you were prepared to grant me a few interviews, say in four- or five-hour sessions, why, we could have the book finished within months. And all with very little effort on your part, I assure you — ask Sanguini here if it isn’t quite — Sanguini, stay here!” added Worple, suddenly stern, for the vampire had been edging toward the nearby group of girls, a rather hungry look in his eye. “Here, have a pasty,” said Worple, seizing one from a passing elf and stuffing it into Sanguini’s hand before turning his attention back to Harry.

“My dear boy, the gold you could make, you have no idea —”

“I’m definitely not interested,” said Harry firmly, “and I’ve just seen a friend of mine, sorry.” He pulled Luna after him into the crowd; he had indeed just seen a long mane of brown hair disappear between what looked like two members of the Weird Sisters.

“Hermione! Hermione!”

“Harry! There you are, thank goodness! Hi, Luna!”

“What’s happened to you?” asked Harry, for Hermione looked distinctly disheveled, rather as though she had just fought her way out of a thicket of Devil’s Snare.

“Oh, I’ve just escaped — I mean, I’ve just left Cormac,” she said. “Under the mistletoe,” she added in explanation, as Harry continued to look questioningly at her.

“Serves you right for coming with him,” he told her severely.

“I thought he’d annoy Ron most,” said Hermione dispassionately. “I debated for a while about Zacharias Smith, but I thought, on the whole —”

“You considered Smith?” said Harry, revoked.

"Yes, I did, and I'm starting to wish I'd chosen him, McLaggen makes Grawp look a gentleman. Let's go this way, we'll be able to see him coming, he's so tall…" The three of them made their way over to the other side of the room, scooping up goblets of mead on the way, realizing too late that Professor Trelawney was standing there alone.

"Hello," said Luna politely to Professor Trelawney.

"Good evening, my dear," said Professor Trelawney, focusing upon Luna with some difficulty. Harry could smell cooking sherry again. "I haven't seen you in my classes lately…"

"No, I've got Firenze this year," said Luna.

"Oh, of course," said Professor Trelawney with an angry, drunken titter. "Or Dobbin, as I prefer to think of him. You would have thought, would you not, that now I am returned to the school Professor Dumbledore might have got rid of the horse? But no…we share classes…It's an insult, frankly, an insult. Do you know…"

Professor Trelawney seemed too tipsy to have recognized Harry. Under cover of her furious criticisms of Firenze, Harry drew closer to Hermione and said, "Let's get something straight. Are you planning to tell Ron that you interfered at Keeper tryouts?"

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "Do you really think I'd stoop that low?"

Harry looked at her shrewdly. "Hermione, if you can ask out McLaggen —"

"There's a difference," said Hermione with dignity. "I've got no plans to tell Ron anything about what might, or might not, have happened at Keeper tryouts."

"Good," said Harry fervently. "Because he'll just fall apart again, and we'll lose the next match —"

"Quidditch!" said Hermione angrily. "Is that all boys care about? Cormac hasn't asked me one single question about myself, no, I've just been treated to 'A Hundred Great Saves Made by Cormac McLaggen' nonstop ever since — oh no, here he comes!" She moved so fast it was as though she had Disapparated; one moment she was there, the next, she had squeezed between two guffawing witches and vanished.

"Seen Hermione?" asked McLaggen, forcing his way through the throng a minute later.

"No, sorry," said Harry, and he turned quickly to join in Luna's conversation, forgetting for a split second to whom she was talking.

"Harry Potter!" said Professor Trelawney in deep, vibrant tones, noticing him for the first time.

"Oh, hello," said Harry unenthusiastically.

“My dear boy!” she said in a very carrying whisper. “The rumors! The stories! ‘The Chosen One’! Of course, I have known for a very long time…The omens were never good, Harry…But why have you not returned to Divination? For you, of all people, the subject is of the utmost importance!”

“Ah, Sybill, we all think our subject’s most important!” said a loud voice, and Slughorn appeared at Professor Trelawney s other side, his face very red, his velvet hat a little askew, a glass of mead in one hand and an enormous mince pie in the other. “But I don’t think I’ve ever known such a natural at Potions!” said Slughorn, regarding Harry with a fond, if bloodshot, eye. “Instinctive, you know — like his mother! I’ve only ever taught a few with this kind of ability, I can tell you that, Sybill — why even Severus —”

And to Harry’s horror, Slughorn threw out an arm and seemed to scoop Snape out of thin air toward them.

“Stop skulking and come and join us, Severus!” hiccuped Slughorn happily. “I was just talking about Harry’s exceptional potion-making! Some credit must go to you, of course, you taught him for five years!”

Trapped, with Slughorns arm around his shoulders, Snape looked down his hooked nose at Harry, his black eyes narrowed.

“Funny, I never had the impression that I managed to teach Potter anything at all.”

“Well, then, it’s natural ability!” shouted Slughorn. “You should have seen what he gave me, first lesson, Draught of Living Death — never had a student produce finer on a first attempt, I don’t think even you, Severus —”

“Really?” said Snape quietly, his eyes still boring into Harry, who felt a certain disquiet. The last thing he wanted was for Snape to start investigating the source of his newfound brilliance at Potions.

“Remind me what other subjects you’re taking, Harry?” asked Slughorn.

“Defense Against the Dark Arts, Charms, Transfiguration, Herbology…”

“All the subjects required, in short, for an Auror,” said Snape with the faintest sneer.

“Yeah, well, that’s what I’d like to do,” said Harry defiantly.

“And a great one you’ll make too!” boomed Slughorn.

“I don’t think you should be an Auror, Harry,” said Luna unexpectedly. Everybody looked at her. “The Aurors are part of the Rotfang Conspiracy, I thought everyone knew that. They’re planning to bring down the Ministry of Magic from within using a combination of Dark Magic and gum disease.”

Harry inhaled half his mead up his nose as he started to laugh. Really, it had been worth bringing Luna just for this. Emerging from his goblet, coughing, sopping wet but still grinning, he saw something calculated to raise his spirits even higher: Draco Malfoy being dragged by the ear toward them by Argus Filch.

"Professor Slughorn," wheezed Filch, his jowls aquiver and the maniacal light of mischief-detection in his bulging eyes, "I discovered this boy lurking in an upstairs corridor. He claims to have been invited to your party and to have been delayed in setting out. Did you issue him with an invitation?"

Malfoy pulled himself free of Filchs grip, looking furious. "All right, I wasn't invited!" he said angrily. "I was trying to gate crash, happy?"

"No, I'm not!" said Filch, a statement at complete odds with the glee on his face. "You're in trouble, you are! Didn't the headmaster say that nighttime prowling's out, unless you've got permission, didn't he, eh?"

"That's all right, Argus, that's all right," said Slughorn, waving a hand. "It's Christmas, and it's not a crime to want to come to a party. Just this once, we'll forget any punishment; you may stay, Draco.

Filich's expression of outraged disappointment was perfectly predictable; but why, Harry wondered, watching him, did Malfoy look almost equally unhappy? And why was Snape looking at Malfoy as though both angry and…was it possible?…a little afraid?

But almost before Harry had registered what he had seen, Filch had turned and shuffled away, muttering under his breath; Malfoy had composed his face into a smile and was thanking Slughorn for his generosity, and Snape's face was smoothly inscrutable again.

"It's nothing, nothing," said Slughorn, waving away Malfoy's thanks. "I did know your grandfather, after all…"

"He always spoke very highly of you, sir," said Malfoy quickly. "Said you were the best potion-maker he'd ever known…"

Harry stared at Malfoy. It was not the sucking-up that intrigued him; he had watched Malfoy do that to Snape for a long time. It was the fact that Malfoy did, after all, look a little ill. This was the first time he had seen Malfoy close up for ages; he now saw that Malfoy had dark shadows under his eyes and a distinctly grayish tinge to his skin.

"I'd like a word with you, Draco," said Snape suddenly.

"Now, Severus," said Slughorn, hiccuping again, "it's Christmas, don't be too hard —"

“I am his Head of House, and I shall decide how hard, or otherwise, to be,” said Snape curtly. “Follow me, Draco.”

They left, Snape leading the way, Malfoy looking resentful. Harry stood there for a moment, irresolute, then said, “I’ll be back in a bit, Luna — er — bathroom.”

“All right,” she said cheerfully, and he thought he heard her, as he hurried off into the crowd, resume the subject of the Rotfang Conspiracy with Professor Trelawney, who seemed sincerely interested.

It was easy, once out of the party, to pull his Invisibility Cloak out of his pocket and throw it over himself, for the corridor was quite deserted. What was more difficult was finding Snape and Malfoy. Harry ran down the corridor, the noise of his feet masked by the music and loud talk still issuing from Slughorn’s office behind him. Perhaps Snape had taken Malfoy to his office in the dungeons…or perhaps he was escorting him back to the Slytherin common room…Harry pressed his ear against door after door as he dashed down the corridor until, with a great jolt of excitement, he crouched down to the keyhole of the last classroom in the corridor and heard voices.

“…cannot afford mistakes, Draco, because if you are expelled —”

“I didn’t have anything to do with it, all right?”

“I hope you are telling the truth, because it was both clumsy and foolish. Already you are suspected of having a hand in it.”

“Who suspects me?” said Malfoy angrily. “For the last time, I didn’t do it, okay? That Bell girl must’ve had an enemy noone knows about — don’t look at me like that! I know what you’re doing, I’m not stupid, but it won’t work — I can stop you!”

There was a pause and then Snape said quietly, “Ah…Aunt Bellatrix has been teaching you Occlumency, I see. What thoughts are you trying to conceal from your master, Draco?”

“I’m not trying to conceal anything from *him*, I just don’t want you butting in!” Harry pressed his ear still more closely against the keyhole…What had happened to make Malfoy speak to Snape like this — Snape, toward whom he had always shown respect, even liking?

“So that is why you have been avoiding me this term? You have feared my interference? You realize that, had anybody else failed to come to my office when I had told them repeatedly to be there, Draco —”

“So put me in detention! Report me to Dumbledore!” jeered Malfoy.

There was another pause. Then Snape said, “You know perfectly well that I do not wish to do either of those things.”

"You'd better stop telling me to come to your office then!"

"Listen to me," said Snape, his voice so low now that Harry had to push his ear very hard against the keyhole to hear. "I am trying to help you. I swore to your mother I would protect you. I made the Unbreakable Vow, Draco —"

"Looks like you'll have to break it, then, because I don't need your protection! It's my job, he gave it to me and I'm doing it, I've got a plan and it's going to work, it's just taking a bit longer than I thought it would!"

"What is your plan?"

"It's none of your business!"

"If you tell me what you are trying to do, I can assist you…"

"I have all the assistance I need, thanks, I'm not alone!"

"You were certainly alone tonight, which was foolish in the extreme, wandering the corridors without lookouts or backup, these are elementary mistakes —"

"I would've had Crabbe and Goyle with me if you hadn't put them in detention!"

"Keep your voice down!" spat Snape, for Malfoy's voice had risen excitedly. "If your friends Crabbe and Goyle intend to pass their Defense Against the Dark Arts O.W.L this time around, they will need to work a little harder than they are doing at pres —"

"What does it matter?" said Malfoy. "Defense Against the Dark Arts — its all just a joke, isn't it, an act? Like any of us need protecting against the Dark Arts —"

"It is an act that is crucial to success, Draco!" said Snape. "Where do you think I would have been all these years, if I had not known how to act? Now listen to me! You are being incautious, wandering around at night, getting yourself caught, and if you are placing your reliance in assistants like Crabbe and Goyle —"

"They're not the only ones, I've got other people on my side, better people!"

"Then why not confide in me, and I can —"

"I know what you're up to! You want to steal my glory!"

There was another pause, then Snape said coldly, "You are speaking like a child. I quite understand that your fathers capture and imprisonment has upset you, but —"

Harry had barely a second's warning; he heard Malfoy's footsteps on the other side of the door and flung himself out of the way just as it burst open. Malfoy was striding away down the corridor, past the open door of Slughorns office, around the distant corner, and out of sight.

Hardly daring to breathe, Harry remained crouched down as Snape emerged slowly from the classroom. His expression unfathomable, he returned to the party. Harry remained on the floor, hidden beneath the cloak, his mind racing.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A VERY FROSTY CHRISTMAS

"So Snape was offering to help him? He was definitely offering to help him?"

"If you ask that once more," said Harry, "I'm going to stick this sprout —"

"I'm only checking!" said Ron. They were standing alone at the Burrow's kitchen sink, peeling a mountain of sprouts for Mrs. Weasley. Snow was drifting past the window in front of them.

"Yes, Snape was offering to help him!" said Harry. "He said he'd promised Malfoy's mother to protect him, that he'd made an Unbreakable Oath or something —"

"An Unbreakable Vow?" said Ron, looking stunned. "Nah, he can't have…Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure," said Harry. "Why, what does it mean?"

"Well, you can't break an Unbreakable Vow…"

"I'd worked that much out for myself, funnily enough. What happens if you break it, then?"

"You die," said Ron simply. "Fred and George tried to get me to make one when I was about five. I nearly did too, I was holding hands with Fred and everything when Dad found us. He went mental," said Ron, with a reminiscent gleam in his eyes. "Only time I've ever seen Dad as angry as Mum, Fred reckons his left buttock has never been the same since."

"Yeah, well, passing over Fred's left buttock —"

"I beg your pardon?" said Fred's voice as the twins entered the kitchen.

"Aaah, George, look at this. They're using knives and everything. Bless them."

"I'll be seventeen in two and a bit months' time," said Ron grumpily, "and then I'll be able to do it by magic!"

"But meanwhile," said George, sitting down at the kitchen table and putting his feet up on it, "we can enjoy watching you demonstrate the correct use of a — whoops-a-daisy!"

"You made me do that!" said Ron angrily, sucking his cut thumb. "You wait, when I'm seventeen —"

"I'm sure you'll dazzle us all with hitherto unsuspected magical skills," yawned Fred.

"And speaking of hitherto unsuspected skills, Ronald," said George, "what is this we hear from Ginny about you and a young lady called — unless our information is faulty — Lavender Brown?"

Ron turned a little pink, but did not look displeased as he turned back to the sprouts.

"Mind your own business."

"What a snappy retort," said Fred. "I really don't know how you think of them. No, what we wanted to know was…how did it happen?"

"What d'you mean?"

“Did she have an accident or something?”

“What?”

“Well, how did she sustain such extensive brain damage? Careful, now!”

Mrs. Weasley entered the room just in time to see Ron throw the sprout knife at Fred, who had turned it into a paper airplane with one lazy flick of his wand,

“Ron!” she said furiously. “Don’t you ever let me see you throwing knives again!”

“I won’t,” said Ron, “let you see,” he added under his breath, as he turned back to the sprout mountain.

“Fred, George, I’m sorry, dears, but Remus is arriving tonight, so Bill will have to squeeze in with you two.”

“No problem,” said George.

“Then, as Charlie isn’t coming home, that just leaves Harry and Ron in the attic, and if Fleur shares with Ginny —”

“— that’ll make Ginny’s Christmas —” muttered Fred.

“— everyone should be comfortable. Well, they’ll have a bed, anyway,” said Mrs. Weasley, sounding slightly harassed.

“Percy definitely not showing his ugly face, then?” asked Fred. Mrs. Weasley turned away before she answered.

“No, he’s busy, I expect, at the Ministry.”

“Or he’s the world’s biggest prat,” said Fred, as Mrs. Weasley left the kitchen. “One of the two. Well, let’s get going, then, George.”

“What are you two up to?” asked Ron. “Cant you help us with these sprouts? You could just use your wand and then we’ll be free too!”

“No, I don’t think we can do that,” said Fred seriously. “It’s very character-building stuff, learning to peel sprouts without magic, makes you appreciate how difficult it is for Muggles and Squibs —”

“— and if you want people to help you, Ron,” added George, throwing the paper airplane at him, “I wouldn’t chuck knives at them. Just a little hint. We’re off to the village, there’s a very pretty girl working in the paper shop who thinks my card tricks are something marvelous…almost like real magic…”

“Gits,” said Ron darkly, watching Fred and George setting off across the snowy yard. “Would’ve only taken them ten seconds and then we could’ve gone too.”

“I couldn’t,” said Harry. “I promised Dumbledore I wouldn’t wander off while I’m staying here.”

“Oh yeah,” said Ron. He peeled a few more sprouts and then said, “Are you going to tell Dumbledore what you heard Snape and Malfoy saying to each other?”

“Yep,” said Harry. “I’m going to tell anyone who can put a stop to it, and Dumbledore’s top of the list. I might have another word with your dad too.”

“Pity you didn’t hear what Malfoy’s actually doing, though.”

“I couldn’t have done, could I? That was the whole point, he was refusing to tell Snape.”

There was silence for a moment or two, then Ron said, “Course, you know what they’ll all say? Dad and Dumbledore and all of them? They’ll say Snape isn’t really trying to help Malfoy, he was just trying to find out what Malfoy’s up to.”

“They didn’t hear him,” said Harry flatly. “No one’s that good an actor, not even Snape.”

“Yeah…I’m just saying, though” said Ron.

Harry turned to face him, frowning. “You think I’m right, though?”

“Yeah, I do!” said Ron hastily. “Seriously, I do! But they’re all convinced Snape’s in the Order, aren’t they?”

Harry said nothing. It had already occurred to him that this would be the most likely objection to his new evidence; he could hear Hermione now: *Obviously, Harry, he was pretending to offer help so he could trick Malfoy into telling him what he’s doing…*

This was pure imagination, however, as he had had no opportunity to tell Hermione what he had overheard. She had disappeared from Slughorn’s party before he returned to it, or so he had been informed by an irate McLaggen, and she had already gone to bed by the time he returned to the common room. As he and Ron had left for the Burrow early the next day, he had barely had time to wish her a happy Christmas and to tell her that he had some very important news when they got back from the holidays. He was not entirely sure that she had heard him, though; Ron and Lavender had been saying a thoroughly nonverbal good-bye just behind him at the time.

Still, even Hermione would not be able to deny one thing: Malfoy was definitely up to something, and Snape knew it, so Harry felt fully justified in saying “I told you so,” which he had done several times to Ron already.

Harry did not get the chance to speak to Mr. Weasley, who was working very long hours at the Ministry, until Christmas Eve night. The Weasleys and their guests were sitting in the living room, which Ginny had decorated so lavishly that it was rather like sitting in a paper-chain explosion. Fred,

George, Harry, and Ron were the only ones who knew that the angel on top of the tree was actually a garden gnome that had bitten Fred on the ankle as he pulled up carrots for Christmas dinner. Stupefied, painted gold, stuffed into a miniature tutu and with small wings glued to its back, it glowered down at them all, the ugliest angel Harry had ever seen, with a large bald head like a potato and rather hairy feet.

They were all supposed to be listening to a Christmas broadcast by Mrs. Weasleys favorite singer, Celestina Warbeck, whose voice was warbling out of the large wooden wireless set. Fleur, who seemed to find Celestina very dull, was talking so loudly in the corner that a scowling Mrs. Weasley kept pointing her wand at the volume control, so that Celestina grew louder and louder. Under cover of a particularly jazzy number called "A Cauldron Full of Hot, Strong Love," Fred and George started a game of Exploding Snap with Ginny. Ron kept shooting Bill and Fleur covert looks, as though hoping to pick up tips. Meanwhile, Remus Lupin, who was thinner and more ragged-looking than ever, was sitting beside the fire, staring into its depths as though he could not hear Celestinas voice.

Oh, come and stir my cauldron,

And if you do it right,

I'll boil you up some hot strong love

To keep you warm tonight.

"We danced to this when we were eighteen!" said Mrs. Weasley, wiping her eyes on her knitting. "Do you remember, Arthur?"

"Mphf?" said Mr. Weasley, whose head had been nodding over the satsuma he was peeling. "Oh yes…marvelous tune…"

With an effort, he sat up a little straighter and looked around at Harry, who was sitting next to him.

"Sorry about this," he said, jerking his head toward the wireless as Celestina broke into the chorus. "Be over soon."

"No problem," said Harry, grinning. "Has it been busy at the Ministry?"

"Very," said Mr. Weasley. "I wouldn't mind if we were getting anywhere, but of the three arrests we've made in the last couple of months, I doubt that one of them is a genuine Death Eater — only don't repeat that, Harry," he added quickly, looking much more awake all of a sudden.

"They're not still holding Stan Shunpike, are they?" asked Harry.

"I'm afraid so," said Mr. Weasley. "I know Dumbledore's tried appealing directly to Scrimgeour about Stan…I mean, anybody who has actually interviewed him agrees that he's about as much a Death Eater as this satsuma…but the top levels want to look as though they're making some progress, and 'three arrests' sounds better than 'three mistaken arrests and releases'…but again, this is all top secret…"

"I won't say anything," said Harry. He hesitated for a moment, wondering how best to embark on what he wanted to say; as he marshaled his thoughts, Celestina Warbeck began a ballad called "You Charmed the Heart Right Out of Me."

"Mr. Weasley, you know what I told you at the station when we were setting off for school?"

"I checked, Harry," said Mr. Weasley at once. "I went and searched the Malfoys' house. There was nothing, either broken or whole, that shouldn't have been there."

"Yeah, I know, I saw in the *Prophet* that you'd looked…but this is something different…Well, something more…"

And he told Mr. Weasley everything he had overheard between Malfoy and Snape, As Harry spoke, he saw Lupin's head turn a little toward him, taking in every word. When he had finished, there was silence, except for Celestina's crooning.

Oh, my poor heart, where has it gone?

It's left me for a spell…

"Has it occurred to you, Harry," said Mr. Weasley, "that Snape was simply pretending —?"

"Pretending to offer help, so that he could find out what Malfoy's up to?" said Harry quickly. "Yeah, I thought you'd say that. But how do we know?"

"It isn't our business to know," said Lupin unexpectedly. He had turned his back on the fire now and faced Harry across Mr. Weasley. "It's Dumbledore's business. Dumbledore trusts Severus, and that ought to be good enough for all of us."

"But," said Harry, "just say — just say Dumbledores wrong about Snape —"

"People have said it, many times. It comes down to whether or not you trust Dumbledore's judgment. I do; therefore, I trust Severus."

"But Dumbledore can make mistakes," argued Harry. "He says it himself. And you"— he looked Lupin straight in the eye — "do you honestly like Snape?"

"I neither like nor dislike Severus," said Lupin. "No, Harry, I am speaking the truth," he added, as Harry pulled a skeptical expression. "We shall never be bosom friends, perhaps; after all that happened between James and Sirius and Severus, there is too much bitterness there. But I do not

forget that during the year I taught at Hogwarts, Severus made the Wolfsbane Potion for me every month, made it perfectly, so that I did not have to suffer as I usually do at the full moon."

"But he 'accidentally' let it slip that you're a werewolf, so you had to leave!" said Harry angrily.

Lupin shrugged. "The news would have leaked out anyway. We both know he wanted my job, but he could have wreaked much worse damage on me by tampering with the potion. He kept me healthy. I must be grateful."

"Maybe he didn't dare mess with the potion with Dumbledore watching him!" said Harry.

"You are determined to hate him, Harry," said Lupin with a faint smile. "And I understand; with James as your father, with Sirius as your godfather, you have inherited an old prejudice. By all means tell Dumbledore what you have told Arthur and me, but do not expect him to share your view of the matter; do not even expect him to be surprised by what you tell him. It might have been on Dumbledore's orders that Severus questioned Draco."

…and now you've torn it quite apart

I'll thank you to give back my heart!

Celestina ended her song on a very long, high-pitched note and loud applause issued out of the wireless, which Mrs. Weasley joined in with enthusiastically.

"Eez eet over?" said Fleur loudly. "Thank goodness, what an 'orrible —"

"Shall we have a nightcap, then?" asked Mr. Weasley loudly, leaping to his feet. "Who wants eggnog?"

"What have you been up to lately?" Harry asked Lupin, as Mr, Weasley bustled off to fetch the eggnog, and everybody else stretched and broke into conversation.

"Oh, I've been underground," said Lupin. "Almost literally. That's why I haven't been able to write, Harry; sending letters to you would have been something of a giveaway."

"What do you mean?"

"I've been living among my fellows, my equals," said Lupin. "Werewolves," he added, at Harry's look of incomprehension. "Nearly all of them are on Voldemort's side. Dumbledore wanted a spy and here I was…ready-made."

He sounded a little bitter, and perhaps realized it, for he smiled more warmly as he went on, "I am not complaining; it is necessary work and who can do it better than I? However, it has been difficult gaining their trust. I bear the unmistakable signs of having tried to live among wizards, you see, whereas they have shunned normal society and live on the margins, stealing — and sometimes killing — to eat."

"How come they like Voldemort?"

"They think that, under his rule, they will have a better life," said Lupin. "And it is hard to argue with Greyback out there…"

"Who's Greyback?"

"You haven't heard of him?" Lupin's hands closed convulsively in his lap. "Fenrir Greyback is, perhaps, the most savage werewolf alive today. He regards it as his mission in life to bite and to contaminate as many people as possible; he wants to create enough werewolves to overcome the wizards. Voldemort has promised him prey in return for his services. Greyback specializes in children…Bite them young, he says, and raise them away from their parents, raise them to hate normal wizards. Voldemort has threatened to unleash him upon people's sons and daughters; it is a threat that usually produces good results."

Lupin paused and then said, "It was Greyback who bit me."

"What?" said Harry, astonished. "When — when you were a kid, you mean?"

"Yes. My father had offended him. I did not know, for a very long time, the identity of the werewolf who had attacked me; I even felt pity for him, thinking that he had had no control, knowing by then how it felt to transform. But Greyback is not like that. At the full moon, he positions himself close to victims, ensuring that he is near enough to strike. He plans it all. And this is the man Voldemort is using to marshal the werewolves. I cannot pretend that my particular brand of reasoned argument is making much headway against Greyback's insistence that we werewolves deserve blood, that we ought to revenge ourselves on normal people."

"But you are normal!" said Harry fiercely. "You've just got a — a problem —"

Lupin burst out laughing. "Sometimes you remind me a lot of James. He called it my 'furry little problem' in company. Many people were under the impression that I owned a badly behaved rabbit."

He accepted a glass of eggnog from Mr. Weasley with a word of thanks, looking slightly more cheerful, Harry, meanwhile, felt a rush of excitement: This last mention of his father had reminded him that there was something he had been looking forward to ask-ing Lupin.

"Have you ever heard of someone called the Half-Blood Prince?"

"The Half-Blood what?"

"Prince," said Harry, watching him closely for signs of recognition.

"There are no Wizarding princes," said Lupin, now smiling. "Is this a title you're thinking of adopting? I should have thought being 'the Chosen One' would be enough."

"It's nothing to do with me!" said Harry indignantly. "The Half-Blood Prince is someone who used to go to Hogwarts, I've got his old Potions book. He wrote spells all over it, spells he invented. One of them was Levicorpus —"

"Oh, that one had a great vogue during my time at Hogwarts," said Lupin reminiscently. "There were a few months in my fifth year when you couldn't move for being hoisted into the air by your ankle."

"My dad used it," said Harry. "I saw him in the Pensieve, he used it on Snape."

He tried to sound casual, as though this was a throwaway comment of no real importance, but he was not sure he had achieved the right effect; Lupins smile was a little too understanding.

"Yes," he said, "but he wasn't the only one. As I say, it was very popular…You know how these spells come and go…"

"But it sounds like it was invented while you were at school," Harry persisted.

"Not necessarily," said Lupin. "Jinxes go in and out of fashion like everything else."

He looked into Harry's face and then said quietly, "James was a pureblood, Harry, and I promise you, he never asked us to call him 'Prince.'"

Abandoning pretense, Harry said, "And it wasn't Sirius? Or you?"

"Definitely not."

"Oh." Harry stared into the fire. "I just thought — well, he's helped me out a lot in Potions classes, the Prince has."

"How old is this book, Harry?"

"I dunno, I've never checked."

"Well, perhaps that will give you some clue as to when the Prince was at Hogwarts," said Lupin.

Shortly after this, Fleur decided to imitate Celestina singing "A Cauldron Full of Hot, Strong Love," which was taken by everyone, once they had glimpsed Mrs. Weasley's expression, to be the cue to go to bed. Harry and Ron climbed all the way up to Ron's attic bedroom, where a camp bed had been added for Harry.

Ron fell asleep almost immediately, but Harry delved into his trunk and pulled out his copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* before getting into bed. There he turned its pages, searching, until he finally found, at the front of the book, the date that it had been pub-lished. It was nearly fifty years old. Neither his father, nor his father's friends, had been at Hogwarts fifty years ago. Feeling disappointed, Harry threw the book back into his trunk, turned off the lamp, and rolled over,

thinking of werewolves and Snape, Stan Shunpike and the Half-Blood Prince, and finally falling into an uneasy sleep full of creeping shadows and the cries of bitten children…

"She's got to be joking…"

Harry woke with a start to find a bulging stocking lying over the end of his bed. He put on his glasses and looked around; the tiny window was almost completely obscured with snow and, in front of it, Ron was sitting bolt upright in bed and examining what appeared to be a thick gold chain.

"What's that?" asked Harry.

"It's from Lavender," said Ron, sounding revolted. "She can't honestly think I'd wear…"

Harry looked more closely and let out a shout of laughter. Dangling from the chain in large gold letters were the words:

"My sweetheart"

"Nice," he said. "Classy. You should definitely wear it in front of Fred and George."

"If you tell them," said Ron, shoving the necklace out of sight under his pillow, "I — I — I'll—"

"Stutter at me?" said Harry, grinning. "Come on, would I?"

"How could she think I'd like something like that, though?" Ron demanded of thin air, looking rather shocked.

"Well, think back," said Harry. "Have you ever let it slip that you'd like to go out in public with the words 'My Sweetheart' round your neck?"

"Well…we don't really talk much," said Ron. "It's mainly…"

"Snogging," said Harry.

"Well, yeah," said Ron. He hesitated a moment, then said, "Is Hermione really going out with McLaggen?"

"I dunno," said Harry. "They were at Slughorn's party together, but I don't think it went that well."

Ron looked slightly more cheerful as he delved deeper into his stocking.

Harry's presents included a sweater with a large Golden Snitch worked onto the front, hand-knitted by Mrs. Weasley, a large box of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes products from the twins, and a slightly damp, moldy-smelling package that came with a label reading *To Master, From Kreacher*.

Harry stared at it. "D'you reckon this is safe to open?" he asked.

"Can't be anything dangerous, all our mail's still being searched at the Ministry," replied Ron, though he was eyeing the parcel suspiciously.

“I didn’t think of giving Kreacher anything. Do people usually give their house-elves Christmas presents?” asked Harry, prodding the parcel cautiously.

“Hermione would,” said Ron. “But let’s wait and see what it is before you start feeling guilty.”

A moment later, Harry had given a loud yell and leapt out of his camp bed; the package contained a large number of maggots. “Nice,” said Ron, roaring with laughter. “Very thoughtful.”

“I’d rather have them than that necklace,” said Harry, which sobered Ron up at once.

Everybody was wearing new sweaters when they all sat down for Christmas lunch, everyone except Fleur (on whom, it appeared, Mrs. Weasley had not wanted to waste one) and Mrs. Weasley herself, who was sporting a brand-new midnight blue witch’s hat glittering with what looked like tiny starlike diamonds, and a spectacular golden necklace.

“Fred and George gave them to me! Aren’t they beautiful?”

“Well, we find we appreciate you more and more, Mum, now we’re washing our own socks,” said George, waving an airy hand. “Parsnips, Remus?”

“Harry, you’ve got a maggot in your hair,” said Ginny cheerfully, leaning across the table to pick it out; Harry felt goose bumps erupt up his neck that had nothing to do with the maggot.

“‘Ow ‘orrible,” said Fleur, with an affected little shudder.

“Yes, isn’t it?” said Ron. “Gravy, Fleur?”

In his eagerness to help her, he knocked the gravy boat flying; Bill waved his wand and the gravy soared up in the air and returned meekly to the boat.

“You are as bad as zat Tonks,” said Fleur to Ron, when she had finished kissing Bill in thanks. “She is always knocking —”

“I invited dear Tonks to come along today,” said Mrs. Weasley, setting down the carrots with unnecessary force and glaring at Fleur. “But she wouldn’t come. Have you spoken to her lately, Remus?”

“No, I haven’t been in contact with anybody very much,” said Lupin. “But Tonks has got her own family to go to, hasn’t she?”

“Hmmm,” said Mrs. Weasley. “Maybe. I got the impression she was planning to spend Christmas alone, actually.”

She gave Lupin an annoyed look, as though it was all his fault she was getting Fleur for a daughter-in-law instead of Tonks, but Harry, glancing across at Fleur, who was now feeding Bill bits of turkey off her own fork, thought that Mrs. Weasley was fighting a long-lost battle. He was,

however, reminded of a question he had with regard to Tonks, and who better to ask than Lupin, the man who knew all about Patronuses?

"Tonks's Patronus has changed its form," he told him. "Snape said so anyway. I didn't know that could happen. Why would your Patronus change?"

Lupin took his time chewing his turkey and swallowing before saying slowly, "Sometimes…a great shock…an emotional up-heaval…"

"It looked big, and it had four legs," said Harry, struck by a sud-den thought and lowering his voice. "Hey…it couldn't be —?"

"Arthur!" said Mrs. Weasley suddenly. She had risen from her chair; her hand was pressed over her heart and she was staring out of the kitchen window. "Arthur — it's Percy!"

"What?"

Mr. Weasley looked around. Everybody looked quickly at the window; Ginny stood up for a better look. There, sure enough, was Percy Weasley, striding across the snowy yard, his horn-rimmed glasses glinting in the sunlight. He was not, however, alone.

"Arthur, he's — he's with the Minister!"

And sure enough, the man Harry had seen in the *Daily Prophet* was following along in Percy's wake, limping slightly, his mane of graying hair and his black cloak flecked with snow. Before any of, them could say anything, before Mr. and Mrs. Weasley could do more than exchange stunned looks, the back door opened and there stood Percy.

There was a moment's painful silence. Then Percy said rather stiffly, "Merry Christmas, Mother."

"Oh, Percy!" said Mrs. Weasley, and she threw herself into his arms.

Rufus Scrimgeour paused in the doorway, leaning on his walking stick and smiling as he observed this affecting scene.

"You must forgive this intrusion," he said, when Mrs. Weasley looked around at him, beaming and wiping her eyes. "Percy and I were in the vicinity — working, you know — and he couldn't resist dropping in and seeing you all."

But Percy showed no sign of wanting to greet any of the rest of the family. He stood, poker-straight and awkward-looking, and stared over everybody else's heads. Mr. Weasley, Fred, and George were all observing him, stony-faced.

"Please, come in, sit down, Minister!" fluttered Mrs. Weasley, straightening her hat. "Have a little purkey, or some tooding…I mean —"

"No, no, my dear Molly," said Scrimgeour. Harry guessed that he had checked her name with Percy before they entered the house. "I don't want to intrude, wouldn't be here at all if Percy hadn't wanted to see you all so badly…"

"Oh, Perce!" said Mrs. Weasley tearfully, reaching up to kiss him.

"…We've only looked in for five minutes, so I'll have a stroll around the yard while you catch up with Percy. No, no, I assure you I don't want to butt in! Well, if anybody cared to show me your charming garden…Ah, that young man's finished, why doesn't he take a stroll with me?"

The atmosphere around the table changed perceptibly. Everybody looked from Scrimgeour to Harry. Nobody seemed to find Scrimgeour's pretense that he did not know Harry's name convincing, or find it natural that he should be chosen to accompany the Minister around the garden when Ginny, Fleur, and George also had clean plates.

"Yeah, all right," said Harry into the silence.

He was not fooled; for all Scrimgeour's talk that they had just been in the area, that Percy wanted to look up his family, this must be the real reason that they had come, so that Scrimgeour could speak to Harry alone.

"It's fine," he said quietly, as he passed Lupin, who had half risen from his chair. "Fine," he added, as Mr. Weasley opened his mouth to speak.

"Wonderful!" said Scrimgeour, standing back to let Harry pass through the door ahead of him. "We'll just take a turn around the garden, and Percy and I'll be off. Carry on, everyone!"

Harry walked across the yard toward the Weasleys' overgrown, snow-covered garden, Scrimgeour limping slightly at his side. He had, Harry knew, been Head of the Auror office; he looked tough and battle-scarred, very different from portly Fudge in his bowler hat.

"Charming," said Scrimgeour, stopping at the garden fence and looking out over the snowy lawn and the indistinguishable plants. "Charming."

Harry said nothing. He could tell that Scrimgeour was watching him.

"I've wanted to meet you for a very long time," said Scrimgeour, after a few moments. "Did you know that?"

"No," said Harry truthfully.

"Oh yes, for a very long time. But Dumbledore has been very protective of you," said Scrimgeour. "Natural, of course, natural, after what you've been through…Especially what happened at the Ministry…"

He waited for Harry to say something, but Harry did not oblige, so he went on, "I have been hoping for an occasion to talk to you ever since I gained office, but Dumbledore has — most understandably, as I say — prevented this."

Still, Harry said nothing, waiting.

"The rumors that have flown around!" said Scrimgeour. "Well, of course, we both know how these stories get distorted…all these whispers of a prophecy…of you being 'the Chosen One'…"

They were getting near it now, Harry thought, the reason Scrimgeour was here.

"I assume that Dumbledore has discussed these matters with you?"

Harry deliberated, wondering whether he ought to lie or not. He looked at the little gnome prints all around the flowerbeds, ami the scuffed-up patch that marked the spot where Fred had caught the gnome now wearing the tutu at the top of the Christmas tree. Finally, he decided on the truth…or a bit of it.

"Yeah, we've discussed it."

"Have you, have you…" said Scrimgeour. Harry could see, out of the corner of his eye, Scrimgeour squinting at him, so he pretended to be very interested in a gnome that had just poked its head out from underneath a frozen rhododendron. "And what has Dumbledore told you, Harry?"

"Sorry, but that's between us," said Harry. He kept his voice as pleasant as he could, and Scrimgeour's tone, too, was light and friendly as he said,

"Oh, of course, if it's a question of confidences, I wouldn't want you to divulge…no, no…and in any case, does it really matter whether you are 'the Chosen One' or not?"

Harry had to mull that one over for a few seconds before re-sponding. "I don't really know what you mean, Minister."

"Well, of course, to you it will matter enormously," said Scrimgeour with a laugh. "But to the Wizarding community at large…it's all perception, isn't it? It's what people believe that's important."

Harry said nothing. He thought he saw, dimly, where they were heading, but he was not going to help Scrimgeour get there. The gnome under the rhododendron was now digging for worms at its roots, and Harry kept his eyes fixed upon it.

"People believe you are 'the Chosen One,' you see," said Scrimgeour. "They think you quite the hero — which, of course, you are, Harry, chosen or not! How many times have you faced He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named now? Well, anyway," he pressed on, without waiting for a reply, "the point is, you are a symbol of hope for many, Harry. The idea that there is somebody out there who might be

able, who might even be destined, to destroy He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named — well, naturally, it gives people a lift. And I can't help but feel that, once you realize this, you might consider it, well, almost a duty, to stand alongside the Ministry, and give everyone a boost."

The gnome had just managed to get hold of a worm. It was now tugging very hard on it, trying to get it out of the frozen ground. Harry was silent so long that Scrimgeour said, looking from Harry to the gnome, "Funny little chaps, aren't they? But what say you, Harry?"

"I don't exactly understand what you want," said Harry slowly. "'Stand alongside the Ministry'…What does that mean?"

"Oh, well, nothing at all onerous, I assure you," said Scrimgeour. "If you were to be seen popping in and out of the Ministry from time to time, for instance, that would give the right impression. And of course, while you were there, you would have ample opportunity to speak to Gawain Robards, my successor as Head of the Auror office. Dolores Umbridge has told me that you cherish an ambition to become an Auror. Well, that could be arranged very easily…"

Harry felt anger bubbling in the pit of his stomach: So Dolores Umbridge was still at the Ministry, was she?

"So basically," he said, as though he just wanted to clarify a few points, "you'd like to give the impression that I'm working for the Ministry?"

"It would give everyone a lift to think you were more involved, Harry," said Scrimgeour, sounding relieved that Harry had cottoned on so quickly. "'The Chosen One,' you know…It's all about giving people hope, the feeling that exciting things are happening…"

"But if I keep running in and out of the Ministry," said Harry, still endeavoring to keep his voice friendly, "won't that seem as though I approve of what the Ministry's up to?"

"Well," said Scrimgeour, frowning slightly, "well, yes, that's partly why we'd like —"

"No, I don't think that'll work," said Harry pleasantly. "You see, I don't like some of the things the Ministry's doing. Locking up Stan Shunpike, for instance."

Scrimgeour did not speak for a moment but his expression hardened instantly. "I would not expect you to understand," he said, and he was not as successful at keeping anger out of his voice as Harry had been. "These are dangerous times, and certain measures need to be taken. You are sixteen years old —"

"Dumbledore's a lot older than sixteen, and he doesn't think Stan should be in Azkaban either," said Harry. "You're making Stan a scapegoat, just like you want to make me a mascot."

They looked at each other, long and hard. Finally Scrimgeour said, with no pretense at warmth, "I see. You prefer — like your hero, Dumbledore — to disassociate yourself from the Ministry?"

"I don't want to be used," said Harry.

"Some would say it's your duty to be used by the Ministry!"

"Yeah, and others might say it's your duty to check that people really are Death Eaters before you chuck them in prison," said Harry, his temper rising now. "You're doing what Barty Crouch did. You never get it right, you people, do you? Either we've got Fudge, pretending everything's lovely while people get murdered right under his nose, or we've got you, chucking the wrong people into jail and trying to pretend you've got 'the Chosen One' working for you!" '

"So you're not 'the Chosen One'?" said Scrimgeour.

"I thought you said it didn't matter either way?" said Harry, with a bitter laugh. "Not to you anyway."

"I shouldn't have said that," said Scrimgeour quickly. "It was tactless —"

"No, it was honest," said Harry. "One of the only honest things you've said to me. You don't care whether I live or die, but you do care that I help you convince everyone you're winning the war against Voldemort. I haven't forgotten, Minister…"

He raised his right fist. There, shining white on the back of his cold hand, were the scars which Dolores Umbridge had forced him to carve into his own flesh: I must not tell lies.

"I don't remember you rushing to my defense when I was trying to tell everyone Voldemort was back. The Ministry wasn't so keen to be pals last year."

They stood in silence as icy as the ground beneath their feet. The gnome had finally managed to extricate his worm and was now sucking on it happily, leaning against the bottommost branches of the rhododendron bush.

"What is Dumbledore up to?" said Scrimgeour brusquely. "Where does he go when he is absent from Hogwarts?"

"No idea," said Harry.

"And you wouldn't tell me if you knew," said Scrimgeour, "would you?"

"No, I wouldn't," said Harry.

"Well, then, I shall have to see whether I can't find out by other means."

"You can try," said Harry indifferently. "But you seem cleverer than Fudge, so I'd have thought you'd have learned from his mistakes. He tried interfering at Hogwarts. You might have noticed he's

not Minister anymore, but Dumbledore's still headmaster. I'd leave Dumbledore alone, if I were you."

There was a long pause.

"Well, it is clear to me that he has done a very good job on you," said Scrimgeour, his eyes cold and hard behind his wire-rimmed glasses, "Dumbledore's man through and through, aren't you, Potter?"

"Yeah, I am," said Harry. "Glad we straightened that out."

And turning his back on the Minister of Magic, he strode back toward the house.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

A SLUGGISH MEMORY

Late in the afternoon, a few days after New Year, Harry, Ron, and Ginny lined up beside the kitchen fire to return to Hogwarts. The Ministry had arranged this one-off connection to the Floo Network to return students quickly and safely to the school. Only Mrs. Weasley was there to say good-bye, as Mr. Weasley, Fred, George, Bill, and Fleur were all at work. Mrs. Weasley dissolved into tears at the moment of parting. Admittedly, it took very little to set her off lately; she had been crying on and off ever since Percy had stormed from the house on Christmas Day with his glasses splattered with mashed parsnip (for which Fred, George, and Ginny all claimed credit).

"Don't cry, Mum," said Ginny, patting her on the back as Mrs. Weasley sobbed into her shoulder. "It's okay…"

"Yeah, don't worry about us," said Ron, permitting his mother to plant a very wet kiss on his cheek, "or about Percy. He's such a prat, it's not really a loss, is it?"

Mrs. Weasley sobbed harder than ever as she enfolded Harry in her arms.

"Promise me you'll look after yourself…Stay out of trouble…"

"I always do, Mrs. Weasley," said Harry. "I like a quiet life, you know me."

She gave a watery chuckle and stood back. "Be good, then, all of you…"

Harry stepped into the emerald fire and shouted "Hogwarts!" He had one last fleeting view of the Weasleys' kitchen and Mrs. Weasley's tearful face before the flames engulfed him; spinning very fast, he caught blurred glimpses of other Wizarding rooms, which were whipped out of sight before he could get a proper look; then he was slowing down, finally stopping squarely in the fireplace in Professor McGonagall's office. She barely glanced up from her work as he clambered out over the grate.

"Evening, Potter. Try not to get too much ash on the carpet."

"No, Professor."

Harry straightened his glasses and flattened his hair as Ron came spinning into view. When Ginny had arrived, all three of them trooped out of McGonagall's office and off toward Gryffindor Tower. Harry glanced out of the corridor windows as they passed; the sun was already sinking over grounds carpeted in deeper snow than had lain over the Burrow garden. In the distance, he could see Hagrid feeding Buckbeak in front of his cabin.

"Baubles," said Ron confidently, when they reached the Fat Lady, who was looking rather paler than usual and winced at his loud voice.

"No," she said.

"What d'you mean, 'no'?

"There is a new password," she said. "And please don't shout."

"But we've been away, how're we supposed to —?"

"Harry! Ginny!"

Hermione was hurrying toward them, very pink-faced and wearing a cloak, hat, and gloves.

"I got back a couple of hours ago, I've just been down to visit Hagrid and Buck — I mean Witherwings," she said breathlessly. "Did you have a good Christmas?"

"Yeah," said Ron at once, "pretty eventful, Rufus Scrim —"

"I've got something for you, Harry," said Hermione, neither looking at Ron nor giving any sign that she had heard him. "Oh, hang on — password. Abstinence."

"Precisely," said the Fat Lady in a feeble voice, and swung forward to reveal the portrait hole.

"What's up with her?" asked Harry.

"Overindulged over Christmas, apparently," said Hermione, rolling her eyes as she led the way into the packed common room. "She and her friend Violet drank their way through all the wine in that picture of drunk monks down by the Charms corridor. Anyway…"

She rummaged in her pocket for a moment, then pulled out a scroll of parchment with Dumbledore's writing on it.

"Great," said Harry, unrolling it at once to discover that his next lesson with Dumbledore was scheduled for the following night. "I've got loads to tell him — and you. Let's sit down —"

But at that moment there was a loud squeal of "Won-Won!" and Lavender Brown came hurtling out of nowhere and flung herself into Ron's arms. Several onlookers sniggered; Hermione gave a tinkling laugh and said, "There's a table over here…Coming, Ginny?"

"No, thanks, I said I'd meet Dean," said Ginny, though Harry could not help noticing that she did not sound very enthusiastic. Leaving Ron and Lavender locked in a kind of vertical wrestling, match, Harry led Hermione over to the spare table.

"So how was your Christmas?"

"Oh, fine," she shrugged. "Nothing special. How was it at Won-Won's?"

"I'll tell you in a minute," said Harry. "Look, Hermione, can't you —"

"No, I can't," she said flatly. "So don't even ask."

"I thought maybe, you know, over Christmas —"

"It was the Fat Lady who drank a vat of five-hundred-year-old wine, Harry, not me. So what was this important news you wanted to tell me?"

She looked too fierce to argue with at that moment, so Harry dropped the subject of Ron and recounted all that he had overheard between Malfoy and Snape. When he had finished, Hermione sat in thought for a moment and then said, “Don’t you think —?”

“— he was pretending to offer help so that he could trick Malfoy into telling him what he’s doing?”

“Well, yes,” said Hermione.

“Ron’s dad and Lupin think so,” Harry said grudgingly. “But this definitely proves Malfoy’s planning something, you can’t deny that.”

“No, I can’t,” she answered slowly.

“And he’s acting on Voldemort’s orders, just like I said!”

“Hmm…did either of them actually mention Voldemort’s name?”

Harry frowned, trying to remember. “I’m not sure…Snape definitely said ‘your master,’ and who else would that be?”

“I don’t know,” said Hermione, biting her lip. “Maybe his father?”

She stared across the room, apparently lost in thought, not even noticing Lavender tickling Ron. “How’s Lupin?”

“Not great,” said Harry, and he told her all about Lupin’s mission among the werewolves and the difficulties he was facing. “Have you heard of this Fenrir Greyback?”

“Yes, I have!” said Hermione, sounding startled. “And so have you, Harry!”

“When, History of Magic? You know full well I never listened…”

“No, no, not History of Magic — Malfoy threatened Borgin with him!” said Hermione. “Back in Knockturn Alley, don’t you remember? He told Borgin that Greyback was an old family friend and that he’d be checking up on Borgin’s progress!”

Harry gaped at her. “I forgot! But this proves Malfoys a Death Eater, how else could he be in contact with Greyback and telling him what to do?”

“It is pretty suspicious,” breathed Hermione. “Unless…”

“Oh, come on,” said Harry in exasperation, “you can’t get round this one!”

“Well…there is the possibility it was an empty threat.”

“You’re unbelievable, you are,” said Harry, shaking his head. “We’ll see who’s right…You’ll be eating your words, Hermione, just like the Ministry. Oh yeah, I had a row with Rufus Scrimgeour as well…”

And the rest of the evening passed amicably with both of them abusing the Minister of Magic, for Hermione, like Ron, thought that after all the Ministry had put Harry through the previous year, they had a great deal of nerve asking him for help now.

The new term started next morning with a pleasant surprise for the sixth years: a large sign had been pinned to the common room notice boards overnight.

APPARITION LESSONS

If you are seventeen years of age, or will turn seventeen on or before the 31st August next, you are eligible for a twelve-week course of Apparition Lessons from a Ministry of Magic Apparition instructor. Please sign below if you would like to participate. Cost: 12 Galleons.

Harry and Ron joined the crowd that was jostling around the notice and taking it in turns to write their names at the bottom. Ron was just taking out his quill to sign after Hermione when Lavender crept up behind him, slipped her hands over his eyes, and trilled, "Guess who, Won-Won?" Harry turned to see Hermione stalking off; he caught up with her, having no wish to stay behind with Ron and Lavender, but to his surprise, Ron caught up with them only a little way beyond the portrait hole, his ears bright red and his expression disgruntled. Without a word, Hermione sped up to walk with Neville.

"So — Apparition," said Ron, his tone making it perfectly plain that Harry was not to mention what had just happened. "Should be a laugh, eh?"

"I dunno," said Harry. "Maybe it's better when you do it yourself, I didn't enjoy it much when Dumbledore took me along for the ride."

"I forgot you'd already done it…I'd better pass my test first time," said Ron, looking anxious. "Fred and George did."

"Charlie failed, though, didn't he?"

"Yeah, but Charlie's bigger than me"— Ron held his arms out from his body as though he was a gorilla — "so Fred and George didn't go on about it much…not to his face anyway…"

"When can we take the actual test?"

"Soon as we're seventeen. That's only March for me!"

"Yeah, but you wouldn't be able to Apparate in here, not in the castle…"

"Not the point, is it? Everyone would know I could Apparate if I wanted."

Ron was not the only one to be excited at the prospect of Apparition. All that day there was much talk about the forthcoming, lessons; a great deal of store was set by being able to vanish and reappear at will.

“How cool will it be when we can just —” Seamus clicked his ringers to indicate disappearance. “Me cousin Fergus does it just to annoy me, you wait till I can do it back…He’ll never have another peaceful moment…”

Lost in visions of this happy prospect, he flicked his wand a little too enthusiastically, so that instead of producing the fountain of pure water that was the object of today’s Charms lesson, he let out a hoselike jet that ricocheted off the ceiling and knocked Professor Flitwick flat on his face.

“Harry’s already Apparated,” Ron told a slightly abashed Seamus, after Professor Flitwick had dried himself off with a wave of his wand and set Seamus lines: “I am a wizard, not a baboon brandishing a stick.” “Dum — er — someone took him. Side-Along-Apparition, you know.”

“Whoa!” whispered Seamus, and he, Dean, and Neville put their heads a little closer to hear what Apparition felt like. For the rest of the day, Harry was besieged with requests from the other sixth years to describe the sensation of Apparition. All of them seemed awed, rather than put off, when he told them how uncomfortable it was, and he was still answering detailed questions at ten to eight that evening, when he was forced to lie and say that he needed to return a book to the library, so as to escape in time for his lesson with Dumbledore.

The lamps in Dumbledore’s office were lit, the portraits of previous headmasters were snoring gently in their frames, and the Pen-sieve was ready upon the desk once more. Dumbledore’s hands lay on either side of it, the right one as blackened and burnt-looking as ever. It did not seem to have healed at all and Harry wondered, for perhaps the hundredth time, what had caused such a distinctive injury, but did not ask; Dumbledore had said that he would know eventually and there was, in any case, another subject he wanted to discuss. But before Harry could say anything about Snape and Malfoy, Dumbledore spoke.

“I hear that you met the Minister of Magic over Christmas?”

“Yes,” said Harry. “He’s not very happy with me.”

“No,” sighed Dumbledore. “He is not very happy with me either. We must try not to sink beneath our anguish, Harry, but battle on.”

Harry grinned.

“He wanted me to tell the Wizarding community that the Ministry’s doing a wonderful job.”

Dumbledore smiled.

“It was Fudge’s idea originally, you know. During his last days in office, when he was trying desperately to cling to his post, he sought a meeting with you, hoping that you would give him your support —”

“After everything Fudge did last year?” said Harry angrily. “After Umbridge?”

“I told Cornelius there was no chance of it, but the idea did not die when he left office. Within hours of Scrimgeour’s appointment we met and he demanded that I arrange a meeting with you —”

“So that’s why you argued!” Harry blurted out. “It was in the *Daily Prophet*”

“The *Prophet* is bound to report the truth occasionally,” said Dumbledore, “if only accidentally. Yes, that was why we argued. Well, it appears that Rufus found a way to corner you at last.”

“He accused me of being ‘Dumbledore’s man through and through.’”

“How very rude of him.”

“I told him I was.”

Dumbledore opened his mouth to speak and then closed it again. Behind Harry, Fawkes the phoenix let out a low, soft, musical cry. To Harry’s intense embarrassment, he suddenly realized that Dumbledore’s bright blue eyes looked rather watery, and stared hastily at his own knees. When Dumbledore spoke, however, his voice was quite steady.

“I am very touched, Harry.”

“Scrimgeour wanted to know where you go when you’re not at Hogwarts,” said Harry, still looking fixedly at his knees.

“Yes, he is very nosy about that,” said Dumbledore, now sounding cheerful, and Harry thought it safe to look up again. “He has even attempted to have me followed. Amusing, really. He set Dawlish to tail me. It wasn’t kind. I have already been forced to jinx Dawlish once; I did it again with the greatest regret.”

“So they still don’t know where you go?” asked Harry, hoping for more information on this intriguing subject, but Dumbledore merely smiled over the top of his half-moon spectacles.

“No, they don’t, and the time is not quite right for you to know either. Now, I suggest we press on, unless there’s anything else —?”

“There is, actually, sir,” said Harry. “It’s about Malfoy and Snape.”

“Professor Snape, Harry.”

“Yes, sir. I overheard them during Professor Slughorns party…well, I followed them, actually…”

Dumbledore listened to Harry’s story with an impassive face. When Harry had finished he did not speak for a few moments, then said, “Thank you for telling me this, Harry, but I suggest that you put it out of your mind. I do not think that it is of great importance.”

“Not of great importance?” repeated Harry incredulously. “Professor, did you understand -?”

“Yes, Harry, blessed as I am with extraordinary brainpower, I understood everything you told me,” said Dumbledore, a little sharply. “I think you might even consider the possibility that I understood more than you did. Again, I am glad that you have confided in me, but let me reassure you that you have not told me anything that causes me disquiet.”

Harry sat in seething silence, glaring at Dumbledore. What was going on? Did this mean that Dumbledore had indeed ordered Snape to find out what Malfoy was doing, in which case he had already heard everything Harry had just told him from Snape? Or was he really worried by what he had heard, but pretending not to be?

“So, sir,” said Harry, in what he hoped was a polite, calm voice, “you definitely still trust—?”

“I have been tolerant enough to answer that question already,” said Dumbledore, but he did not sound very tolerant anymore. “My answer has not changed.”

“I should think not,” said a snide voice; Phineas Nigellus was evidently only pretending to be asleep. Dumbledore ignored him.

“And now, Harry, I must insist that we press on. I have more important things to discuss with you this evening.”

Harry sat there feeling mutinous. How would it be if he refused to permit the change of subject, if he insisted upon arguing the case against Malfoy? As though he had read Harry’s mind, Dumbledore shook his head.

“Ah, Harry, how often this happens, even between the best of friends! Each of us believes that what he has to say is much more important than anything the other might have to contribute!”

“I don’t think what you’ve got to say is unimportant, sir,” said Harry stiffly.

“Well, you are quite right, because it is not,” said Dumbledore briskly. “I have two more memories to show you this evening, both obtained with enormous difficulty, and the second of them is, I think, the most important I have collected.”

Harry did not say anything to this; he still felt angry at the reception his confidences had received, but could not see what was to be gained by arguing further.

“So,” said Dumbledore, in a ringing voice, “we meet this evening to continue the tale of Tom Riddle, whom we left last lesson poised on the threshold of his years at Hogwarts. You will remember how excited he was to hear that he was a wizard, that he refused my company on a trip to Diagon Alley, and that I, in turn, warned him against continued thievery when he arrived at school.

“Well, the start of the school year arrived and with it came Tom Riddle, a quiet boy in his secondhand robes, who lined up with the other first years to be sorted. He was placed in Slytherin

House almost the moment that the Sorting Hat touched his head," continued Dumbledore, waving his blackened hand toward the shelf over his head where the Sorting Hat sat, ancient and unmoving. "How soon Riddle learned that the famous founder of the House could talk to snakes, I do not know — perhaps that very evening. The knowledge can only have excited him and increased his sense of self-importance.

"However, if he was frightening or impressing fellow Slytherins with displays of Parseltongue in their common room, no hint of it reached the staff. He showed no sign of outward arrogance or aggression at all. As an unusually talented and very good-looking orphan, he naturally drew attention and sympathy from the staff almost from the moment of his arrival. He seemed polite, quiet, and thirsty for knowledge. Nearly all were most favorably impressed by him."

"Didn't you tell them, sir, what he'd been like when you met him at the orphanage?" asked Harry.

"No, I did not. Though he had shown no hint of remorse, it was possible that he felt sorry for how he had behaved before and was resolved to turn over a fresh leaf. I chose to give him that chance."

Dumbledore paused and looked inquiringly at Harry, who had opened his mouth to speak. Here, again, was Dumbledore's tendency to trust people in spite of overwhelming evidence that they did not deserve it! But then Harry remembered something…

"But you didn't really trust him, sir, did you? He told me…the Riddle who came out of that diary said, 'Dumbledore never seemed to like me as much as the other teachers did.'"

"Let us say that I did not take it for granted that he was trustworthy," said Dumbledore. "I had, as I have already indicated, resolved to keep a close eye upon him, and so I did. I cannot pretend that I gleaned a great deal from my observations at first. He was very guarded with me; he felt, I am sure, that in the thrill of discovering his true identity he had told me a little too much. He was careful never to reveal as much again, but he could not take back what he had let slip in his excitement, nor what Mrs. Cole had confided in me. However, he had the sense never to try and charm me as he charmed so many of my colleagues.

"As he moved up the school, he gathered about him a group of dedicated friends; I call them that, for want of a better term, although as I have already indicated, Riddle undoubtedly felt no affection for any of them. This group had a kind of dark glamour within the castle. They were a motley collection; a mixture of the weak seeking protection, the ambitious seeking some shared glory, and the thuggish gravitating toward a leader who could show them more refined forms of

cruelty. In other words, they were the forerunners of the Death Eaters, and indeed some of them became the first Death Eaters after leaving Hogwarts.

"Rigidly controlled by Riddle, they were never detected in open wrongdoing, although their seven years at Hogwarts were marked by a number of nasty incidents to which they were never satisfactorily linked, the most serious of which was, of course, the opening of the Chamber of Secrets, which resulted in the death of a girl. As you know, Hagrid was wrongly accused of that crime.

"I have not been able to find many memories of Riddle at Hogwarts," said Dumbledore, placing his withered hand on the Pensieve. "Few who knew him then are prepared to talk about him; they are too terrified. What I know, I found out after he had left Hogwarts, after much painstaking effort, after tracing those few who could be tricked into speaking, after searching old records and questioning Muggle and wizard witnesses alike.

"Those whom I could persuade to talk told me that Riddle was obsessed with his parentage. This is understandable, of course; he had grown up in an orphanage and naturally wished to know how he came to be there. It seems that he searched in vain for some trace of Tom Riddle senior on the shields in the trophy room, on the lists of prefects in the old school records, even in the books of Wizarding history. Finally he was forced to accept that his father had never set foot in Hogwarts. I believe that it was then that he dropped the name forever, assumed the identity of Lord Voldemort, and began his investigations into his previously despised mother's family — the woman whom, you will remember, he had thought could not be a witch if she had succumbed to the shameful human weakness of death.

"All he had to go upon was the single name 'Marvolo,' which he knew from those who ran the orphanage had been his mother's father's name. Finally, after painstaking research, through old books of Wizarding families, he discovered the existence of Slytherin's surviving line. In the summer of his sixteenth year, he left the orphanage to which he returned annually and set off to find his Gaunt relatives. And now, Harry, if you will stand…"

Dumbledore rose, and Harry saw that he was again holding a small crystal bottle filled with swirling, pearly memory.

"I was very lucky to collect this," he said, as he poured the gleaming mass into the Pensieve. "As you will understand when we have experienced it. Shall we?"

Harry stepped up to the stone basin and bowed obediently until his face sank through the surface of the memory; he felt the familiar sensation of falling through nothingness and then landed upon a dirty stone floor in almost total darkness.

It took him several seconds to recognize the place, by which time Dumbledore had landed beside him. The Gaunts' house was now more indescribably filthy than anywhere Harry had ever seen. The ceiling was thick with cobwebs, the floor coated in grime; moldy and rotting food lay upon the table amidst a mass of crusted pots. The only light came from a single guttering candle placed at the feet of a man with hair and beard so overgrown Harry could see neither eyes nor mouth. He was slumped in an armchair by the fire, and Harry wondered for a moment whether he was dead. But then there came a loud knock on the door and the man jerked awake, raising a wand in his right hand and a short knife in his left.

The door creaked open. There on the threshold, holding an old-fashioned lamp, stood a boy Harry recognized at once: tall, pale, dark-haired, and handsome — the teenage Voldemort.

Voldemort's eyes moved slowly around the hovel and then found the man in the armchair. For a few seconds they looked at each other, then the man staggered upright, the many empty bottles at his feet clattering and tinkling across the floor.

"YOU!" he bellowed. "YOU!"

And he hurtled drunkenly at Riddle, wand and knife held aloft.

"*Stop*."

Riddle spoke in Parseltongue. The man skidded into the table, sending moldy pots crashing to the floor. He stared at Riddle. There was a long silence while they contemplated each other. The man broke it.

"*You speak it*?"

"*Yes, I speak it*," said Riddle. He moved forward into the room, allowing the door to swing shut behind him. Harry could not help but feel a resentful admiration for Voldemort's complete lack of fear. His race merely expressed disgust and, perhaps, disappointment.

"*Where is Marvolo*?" he asked.

"*Dead*," said the other. "*Died years ago, didn't he*?"

Riddle frowned.

"*Who are you, then*?"

"*I'm Morfin, ain't I*?"

"*Marvolo's son*?"

"'*Course I am, then…*"

Morfin pushed the hair out of his dirty face, the better to see Riddle, and Harry saw that he wore Marvolo's black-stoned ring on his right hand.

"*I thought you was that Muggle*," whispered Morfin. "*You look mighty like that Muggle*."

"*What Muggle*?" said Riddle sharply.

"*That Muggle what my sister took a fancy to, that Muggle what lives in the big house over the way*," said Morfin, and he spat unexpectedly upon the floor between them. "*You look right like him. Riddle. But he's older now, in 'e? He's older'n you, now I think on it…*"

Morfin looked slightly dazed and swayed a little, still clutching the edge of the table for support. "*He come back, see*," he added stupidly.

Voldemort was gazing at Morfin as though appraising his possibilities. Now he moved a little closer and said, "*Riddle came back*?"

"*Ar, he left her, and serve her right, marrying filth*!" said Morfin, spitting on the floor again. "*Robbed us, mind, before she ran off., where's the locket, eh, where's Slytherin's locket*?"

Voldemort did not answer. Morfin was working himself into a rage again; he brandished his knife and shouted, "*Dishonored us, she did, that little slut! And who're you, coming here and asking questions about all that? It's over, innit…It's over…*"

He looked away, staggering slightly, and Voldemort moved forward. As he did so, an unnatural darkness fell, extinguishing Voldemort's lamp and Morfin's candle, extinguishing everything…

Dumbledore's fingers closed tightly around Harry's arm and they were soaring back into the present again. The soft golden light in Dumbledore's office seemed to dazzle Harry's eyes after that impenetrable darkness.

"Is that all?" said Harry at once. "Why did it go dark, what happened?"

"Because Morfin could not remember anything from that point onward," said Dumbledore, gesturing Harry back into his seat. "When he awoke next morning, he was lying on the floor, quite alone. Marvolo's ring had gone.

"Meanwhile, in the village of Little Hangleton, a maid was running along the High Street, screaming that there were three bodies lying in the drawing room of the big house: Tom Riddle Senior and his mother and father.

"The Muggle authorities were perplexed. As far as I am aware, they do not know to this day how the Riddles died, for the *Avada Kedavra* curse does not usually leave any sign of damage…The exception sits before me," Dumbledore added, with a nod to Harry's scar. "The Ministry, on the

other hand, knew at once that this was a wizard's murder. They also knew that a convicted Muggle-hater lived across the valley from the Riddle house, a Muggle-hater who had already been imprisoned once for attacking one of the murdered people.

"So the Ministry called upon Morfin. They did not need to question him, to use Veritaserum or Legilimency. He admitted to the murder on the spot, giving details only the murderer could know. He was proud, he said, to have killed the Muggles, had been awaiting his chance all these years. He handed over his wand, which was proved at once to have been used to kill the Riddles. And he permitted himself to be led off to Azkaban without a fight. All that disturbed him was the fact that his fathers ring had disappeared. 'He'll kill me for losing it,' he told his captors over and over again. 'He'll kill me for losing his ring.' And that, apparently, was all he ever said again. He lived out the remainder of his life in Azkaban, lamenting the loss of Marvolo's last heirloom, and is buried beside the prison, alongside the other poor souls who have expired within its walls."

"So Voldemort stole Morfin's wand and used it?" said Harry, sitting up straight.

"That's right," said Dumbledore. "We have no memories to show us this, but I think we can be fairly sure what happened. Voldemort Stupefied his uncle, took his wand, and proceeded across the valley to 'the big house over the way.' There he murdered the Muggle man who had abandoned his witch mother, and, for good measure, his Muggle grandparents, thus obliterating the last of the unworthy Riddle line and revenging himself upon the father who never wanted him. Then he returned to the Gaunt hovel, performed the complex bit of magic that would implant a false memory in his uncle's mind, laid Morfin's wand beside its unconscious owner, pocketed the ancient ring he wore, and departed."

"And Morfin never realized he hadn't done it?"

"Never," said Dumbledore. "He gave, as I say, a full and boastful confession."

"But he had this real memory in him all the time!"

"Yes, but it took a great deal of skilled Legilimency to coax it out of him," said Dumbledore, "and why should anybody delve further into Morfin's mind when he had already confessed to the crime? However, I was able to secure a visit to Morfin in the last weeks of his life, by which time I was attempting to discover as much as I could about Voldemort's past. I extracted this memory with difficulty. When I saw what it contained, I attempted to use it to secure Morfin's release from Azkaban. Before the Ministry reached their decision, however, Morfin had died."

"But how come the Ministry didn't realize that Voldemort had done all that to Morfin?" Harry asked angrily "He was underage at the time, wasn't he? I thought they could detect underage magic!"

“You are quite right — they can detect magic, but not the perpetrator: You will remember that you were blamed by the Ministry for the Hover Charm that was, in fact, cast by —”

“Dobby,” growled Harry; this injustice still rankled. “So if you’re underage and you do magic inside an adult witch or wizard’s house, the Ministry won’t know?”

“They will certainly be unable to tell who performed the magic,” said Dumbledore, smiling slightly at the look of great indignation on Harry’s face. “They rely on witch and wizard parents to enforce their offspring’s obedience while within their walls.”

“Well, that’s rubbish,” snapped Harry. “Look what happened here, look what happened to Morfin!”

“I agree,” said Dumbledore. “Whatever Morfin was, he did not deserve to die as he did, blamed for murders he had not committed. But it is getting late, and I want you to see this other memory before we part…”

Dumbledore took from an inside pocket another crystal phial and Harry fell silent at once, remembering that Dumbledore had said it was the most important one he had collected. Harry noticed that the contents proved difficult to empty into the Pensieve, as though they had congealed slightly; did memories go bad?

“This will not take long,” said Dumbledore, when he had finally emptied the phial. “We shall be back before you know it. Once more into the Pensieve, then…”

And Harry fell again through the silver surface, landing this time right in front of a man he recognized at once.

It was a much younger Horace Slughorn. Harry was so used to him bald that he found the sight of Slughorn with thick, shiny, straw-colored hair quite disconcerting; it looked as though he had had his head thatched, though there was already a shiny Galleon-sized bald patch on his crown. His mustache, less massive than it was these days, was gingery-blond. He was not quite as round as the Slughorn Harry knew, though the golden buttons on his richly embroidered waistcoat were taking a fair amount of strain. His little feet resting upon a velvet pouffe, he was sitting well back in a comfortable winged armchair, one hand grasping a small glass of wine, the other searching through a box of crystalized pineapple.

Harry looked around as Dumbledore appeared beside him and saw that they were standing in Slughorn’s office. Half a dozen boys were sitting around Slughorn, all on harder or lower seats than his, and all in their mid-teens. Harry recognized Voldemort at once. His was the most handsome face and he looked the most relaxed of all the boys. His right hand lay negligently upon the arm of

his chair; with a jolt, Harry saw that he was wearing Marvolo's gold-and-black ring; he had already killed his father.

"Sir, is it true that Professor Merrythought is retiring?" he asked.

"Tom, Tom, if I knew I couldn't tell you," said Slughorn, wagging a reproving, sugar-covered finger at Riddle, though ruining the effect slightly by winking. "I must say, I'd like to know where you get your information, boy, more knowledgeable than half the staff, you are."

Riddle smiled; the other boys laughed and cast him admiring looks.

"What with your uncanny ability to know things you shouldn't, and your careful flattery of the people who matter — thank you for the pineapple, by the way, you're quite right, it is my favorite —"

As several of the boys tittered, something very odd happened. The whole room was suddenly filled with a thick white fog, so that Harry could see nothing but the face of Dumbledore, who was standing beside him. Then Slughorn's voice rang out through the mist, unnaturally loudly, *"You'll go wrong, boy, mark my words."*

The fog cleared as suddenly as it had appeared and yet nobody made any allusion to it, nor did anybody look as though anything unusual had just happened. Bewildered, Harry looked around as a small golden clock standing upon Slughorn's desk chimed eleven o'clock.

"Good gracious, is it that time already?" said Slughorn. "You'd better get going, boys, or we'll all be in trouble. Lestrange, I want your essay by tomorrow or it's detention. Same goes for you, Avery."

Slughorn pulled himself out of his armchair and carried his empty glass over to his desk as the boys filed out. Voldemort, however, stayed behind. Harry could tell he had dawdled deliberately, wanting to be last in the room with Slughorn.

"Look sharp, Tom," said Slughorn, turning around and finding him still present. "You don't want to be caught out of bed out of hours, and you a prefect…"

"Sir, I wanted to ask you something."

"Ask away, then, m'boy, ask away…"

"Sir, I wondered what you know about…about Horcruxes?"

And it happened all over again: The dense fog filled the room so that Harry could not see Slughorn or Voldemort at all; only Dumbledore, smiling serenely beside him. Then Slughorn's voice boomed out again, just as it had done before.

"I don't know anything about Horcruxes and I wouldn't tell you if I did! Now get out of here at once and don't let me catch you mentioning them again!"

“Well, that’s that,” said Dumbledore placidly beside Harry. “Time to go.”

And Harry’s feet left the floor to fall, seconds later, back onto the rug in front of Dumbledore’s desk.

“That’s all there is?” said Harry blankly.

Dumbledore had said that this was the most important memory of all, but he could not see what was so significant about it. Admittedly the fog, and the fact that nobody seemed to have noticed it, was odd, but other than that nothing seemed to have happened except that Voldemort had asked a question and failed to get an answer.

“As you might have noticed,” said Dumbledore, reseating himself behind his desk, “that memory has been tampered with.”

“Tampered with?” repeated Harry, sitting back down too.

“Certainly,” said Dumbledore. “Professor Slughorn has meddled with his own recollections.”

“But why would he do that?”

“Because, I think, he is ashamed of what he remembers,” said Dumbledore. “He has tried to rework the memory to show himself in a better light, obliterating those parts which he does not wish me to see. It is, as you will have noticed, very crudely done, and that is all to the good, for it shows that the true memory is still there beneath the alterations.

“And so, for the first time, I am giving you homework, Harry. It will be your job to persuade Professor Slughorn to divulge the real memory, which will undoubtedly be our most crucial piece of information of all.”

Harry stared at him.

“But surely, sir,” he said, keeping his voice as respectful as possible, “you don’t need me — you could use Legilimency…or Veritaserum…”

“Professor Slughorn is an extremely able wizard who will be expecting both,” said Dumbledore. “He is much more accomplished at Occlumency than poor Morfin Gaunt, and I would be astonished if he has not carried an antidote to Veritaserum with him ever since I coerced him into giving me this travesty of a recollection.

“No, I think it would be foolish to attempt to wrest the truth from Professor Slughorn by force, and might do much more harm than good; I do not wish him to leave Hogwarts. However, he has his weaknesses like the rest of us, and I believe that you are the one person who might be able to penetrate his defenses. It is most important that we secure the true memory, Harry…How important, we will only know when we have seen the real thing. So, good luck…and good night.”

A little taken aback by the abrupt dismissal, Harry got to his feet quickly. “Good night, sir.”

As he closed the study door behind him, he distinctly heard Phineas Nigellus say, “I can’t see why the boy should be able to do it better than you, Dumbledore.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to, Phineas,” replied Dumbledore, and Fawkes gave another low, musical cry.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

BIRTHDAY SURPRISES

The next day Harry confided in both Ron and Hermione the task that Dumbledore had set him, though separately, for Hermione still refused to remain in Ron's presence longer than it took to give him a contemptuous look.

Ron thought that Harry was unlikely to have any trouble with Slughorn at all.

"He loves you," he said over breakfast, waving an airy forkful of fried egg. "Won't refuse you anything, will he? Not his little Potions Prince. Just hang back after class this afternoon and ask him."

Hermione, however, took a gloomier view.

"He must be determined to hide what really happened if Dumbledore couldn't get it out of him," she said in a low voice, as they stood in the deserted, snowy courtyard at break. "Horcruxes…Horcruxes…I've never even heard of them…"

"You haven't?"

Harry was disappointed; he had hoped that Hermione might have been able to give him a clue as to what Horcruxes were.

"They must be really advanced Dark magic, or why would Voldemort have wanted to know about them? I think it's going to be difficult to get the information, Harry, you'll have to be very careful about how you approach Slughorn, think out a strategy…"

"Ron reckons I should just hang back after Potions this afternoon…"

"Oh, well, if Won-Won thinks that, you'd better do it," she said, flaring up at once. "After all, when has Won-Won's judgement ever been faulty?"

"Hermione, can't you —"

"No!" she said angrily, and stormed away, leaving Harry alone and ankle-deep in snow.

Potions lessons were uncomfortable enough these days, seeing as Harry, Ron and Hermione had to share a desk. Today, Hermione moved her cauldron around the table so that she was close to Ernie, and ignored both Harry and Ron.

"What've *you* done?" Ron muttered to Harry, looking at Hermione's haughty profile.

But before Harry could answer, Slughorn was calling for silence from the front of the room.

"Settle down, settle down, please! Quickly, now, lots of work to get through this afternoon! Golpalott's Third Law…who can tell me —? But Miss Granger can, of course!"

Hermione recited at top speed: "Golpalott's-Third-Law- states-that-the-antidote-for-a-blended-poison-will-be-equal-to-more-than-the-sum-of-the-antidotes-for-each-of-the-separate- components."

"Precisely!" beamed Slughorn. "Ten points for Gryffindor! Now, if we accept Golpalott's Third Law as true…"

Harry was going to have to take Slughorn's word for it that Golpalott's Third Law was true, because he had not understood any of it. Nobody apart from Hermione seemed to be following what Slughorn said next, either.

"…which means, of course, that assuming we have achieved correct identification of the potion's ingredients by Scarpin's Revelaspell, our primary aim is not the relatively simple one of selecting antidotes to those ingredients in a of themselves, but to find that added component which will, by an almost alchemical process, transform these disparate elements —"

Ron was sitting beside Harry with his mouth half open, doodling absently on his new copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*. Ron kept forgetting that he could no longer rely on Hermione to help him out of trouble when he failed to grasp what was going on.

"…and so," finished Slughorn, "I want each of you to come and take one of these phials from my desk. You are to create an antidote for the poison within it before the end of the lesson. Good luck, and don't forget your protective gloves!"

Hermione had left her stool and was halfway towards Siughorn's desk before the rest of the class had realized it was time to move, and by the time Harry, Ron and Ernie returned to the table, she had already tipped the contents of her phial into her cauldron and was kindling a fire underneath it.

"It's a shame that the Prince won't be able to help you much with this, Harry," she said brightly as she straightened up. "You have to understand the principles involved this time. No short cuts or cheats!"

Annoyed, Harry uncorked the poison he had taken from Sliughorn's desk, which was a garish shade of pink, tipped it into his cauldron and lit a fire underneath it. He did not have the faintest idea what he was supposed to do next. He glanced at Ron, who was now standing there looking rather gormless, having copied everything Harry had done.

"You sure the Prince hasn't got any tips?" Ron muttered to Harry.

Harry pulled out his trusty copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* and turned to the chapter on Antidotes. There was Golpalott's Third Law, stated word for word as Hermione had recited it, but not a single illuminating note in the Prince's hand to explain what it meant. Apparently the Prince, like Hermione, had had no difficulty understanding it.

"Nothing," said Harry gloomily.

Hermione was now waving her wand enthusiastically over her cauldron. Unfortunately, they could not copy the spell she was doing because she was now so good at non-verbal incantations that she did not need to say the words aloud. Ernie Macmillan, however, was muttering, "*Specialis revelio!*" over his cauldron, which sounded impressive, so Harry and Ron hastened to imitate him.

It took Harry only five minutes to realize that his reputation as the best potion-maker in the class was crashing around his ears. Slughorn had peered hopefully into his cauldron on his first circuit of the dungeon, preparing to exclaim in delight as he usually did, and instead had withdrawn his head hastily, coughing, as the smell of bad eggs overwhelmed him. Hermione's expression could not have been any smugger; she had loathed being out-performed in every Potions class. She was now decanting the mysteriously separated ingredients of her poison into ten different crystal phials. More to avoid watching this irritating sight than anything else, Harry bent over the Half-Blood Prince's book and turned a few pages with unnecessary force.

And there it was, scrawled right across a long list of antidotes.

Just shove a bezoar down their throats.

Harry stared at these words for a moment. Hadn't he once, long ago, heard of bezoars? Hadn't Snape mentioned them in their first ever Potions lesson? "*A stone taken from the stomach of a goat, which will protect from most poisons*."

It was not an answer to the Golpalott problem, and had Snape still been their teacher, Harry would not have dared do it, but this was a moment for desperate measures. He hastened towards the store cupboard and rummaged within it, pushing aside unicorn horns and tangles of dried herbs until he found, at the very back, a small card box on which had been scribbled the word *Bezoars*.

He opened the box just as Slughorn called, "Two minutes left, everyone!" Inside were half a dozen shrivelled brown objects, looking more like dried-up kidneys than real stones. Harry seized one, put the box back in the cupboard and hurried back to his cauldron.

"Time's…UP!" called Slughorn genially. "Well, let's see how you've done! Blaise…what have you got for me?"

Slowly, Slughorn moved around the room, examining the various antidotes. Nobody had finished the task, although Hermione was trying to cram a few more ingredients into her bottle before Slughorn reached her. Ron had given up completely, and was merely trying to avoid breathing in the putrid fumes issuing from his cauldron. Harry stood there waiting, the bezoar clutched in a slightly sweaty hand.

Slughorn reached their table last. He sniffed Ernie's potion and passed on to Ron's with a grimace. He did not linger over Ron's cauldron, but backed away swiftly, retching slightly.

"And you, Harry," he said. "What have you got to show me?"

Harry held out his hand, the bezoar sitting on his palm.

Slughorn looked down at it for a full ten seconds. Harry wondered, for a moment, whether he was going to shout at him. Then he threw back his head and roared with laughter.

"You've got a nerve, boy!" he boomed, taking the bezoar and holding it up so that the class could see it. "Oh, you're like your mother…well, I can't fault you…a bezoar would certainly act as an antidote to all these potions!"

Hermione, who was sweaty-faced and had soot on her nose, looked livid. Her half-finished antidote, comprising fifty-two ingredients including a chunk of her own hair, bubbled sluggishly behind Slughorn, who had eyes for nobody but Harry.

"And you thought of a bezoar all by yourself, did you, Harry?" she asked through gritted teeth.

"That's the individual spirit a real potion-maker needs!" said Slughorn happily, before Harry could reply. "Just like his mother, she had the same intuitive grasp of potion-making, it's undoubtedly from Lily he gets it…yes, Harry, yes, if you've got a bezoar to hand, of course that would do the trick…although as they don't work on everything, and are pretty rare, it's still worth knowing how to mix antidotes…"

The only person in the room looking angrier than Hermione was Malfoy, who, Harry was pleased to see, had spilled something that looked like cat sick over himself. Before either of them could express their fury that Harry had come top of the class by not doing any work, however, the bell rang.

"Time to pack up!" said Slughorn. "And an extra ten points to Gryffindor for sheer cheek!" Still chuckling, he waddled back to his desk at the front of the dungeon.

Harry dawdled behind, taking an inordinate amount of time to do up his bag. Neither Ron nor Hermione wished him luck as they left; both looked rather annoyed. At last Harry and Slughorn were the only two left in the room.

"Come on, now, Harry, you'll be late for your next lesson," said Slughorn affably, snapping the gold clasps shut on his dragonskin briefcase.

"Sir," said Harry, reminding himself irresistibly of Voldemort, "I wanted to ask you something."

"Ask away, then, my dear boy, ask away…"

"Sir, I wondered what you know about…about Horcruxes?"

Slughorn froze. His round face seemed to sink in upon itself. He licked his lips and said hoarsely, "What did you say?"

"I asked whether you know anything about Horcruxes, sir. You see — "

"Dumbledore put you up to this," whispered Slughorn.

His voice had changed completely. It was not genial any more, but shocked, terrified. He fumbled in his breast pocket and pulled out a handkerchief, mopping his sweating brow.

"Dumbledore's shown you that — that memory," said Slughorn. "Well? Hasn't he?"

"Yes," said Harry, deciding on the spot that it was best not to lie.

"Yes, of course," said Slughorn quietly, still dabbing at his white face. "Of course…well, if you've seen that memory, Harry, you'll know that I don't know anything — anything" — he repeated the word forcefully — "about Horcruxes."

He seized his dragonskin briefcase, stuffed his handkerchief back into his pocket and marched to the dungeon door.

"Sir," said Harry desperately, "I just thought there might be a bit more to the memory -"

"Did you?" said Slughorn. "Then you were wrong, weren't you? WRONG!"

He bellowed the last word and, before Harry could say another word, slammed the dungeon door behind him.

Neither Ron nor Hermione was at all sympathetic when Harry told them of this disastrous interview. Hermione was still seething at the way Harry had triumphed without doing the work properly. Ron was resentful that Harry hadn't slipped him a bezoar, too.

"It would've just looked stupid if we'd both done it!" said Harry irritably. "Look, I had to try and soften him up so I could ask him about Voldemort, didn't I? Oh, will you get a grip!" he added in exasperation, as Ron winced at the sound of the name.

Infuriated by his failure and by Ron and Hermione's attitudes, Harry brooded for the next few days over what to do next about Slughorn. He decided that, for the time being, he would let Slughorn think that he had forgotten all about Horcruxes; it was surely best to lull him into a false sense of security before returning to the attack.

When Harry did not question Slughorn again, the Potions master reverted to his usual affectionate treatment of him, and appeared to have put the matter from his mind. Harry awaited an invitation to one of his little evening parties, determined to accept this time, even if he had to reschedule Quidditch practice. Unfortunately, however, no such invitation arrived. Harry checked with Hermione and Ginny: neither of them had received an invitation and nor, as far as they knew,

had anybody else. Harry could not help wondering whether this meant that Slughorn was not quite as forgetful as he appeared, simply determined to give Harry no additional opportunities to question him.

Meanwhile, the Hogwarts library had failed Hermione for the first lime in living memory. She was so shocked, she even forgot that she was annoyed at Harry for his trick with the bezoar,

"I haven't found one single explanation of what Horcruxes do!" she told him. "Not a single one! I've been right through the restricted section and even in the most *horrible* books, where they tell you how to brew the most *gruesome* potions — nothing! All I could find was this, in the introduciion to *Magick Mostc Evile* — listen — 'Of the Horcrux, wickedest of magical inventions, we shall not speak nor give direction'…I mean, why mention it, then?" she said impatiently, slamming the old book shut; it let out a ghostly wail. "Oh, shut up," she snapped, stuffing it back into her bag.

The snow melted around the school as February arrived, to be replaced by cold, dreary wetness. Purplish-grey clouds hung low over the castle and a constant fall of chilly rain made the lawns slippery and muddy. The upshot of this was that the sixth-years' first Apparition lesson, which was scheduled for a Saturday morning so that no normal lessons would be missed, took place in the Great Hall instead of in the grounds.

When Harry and Hermione arrived in the Hall (Ron had come down with Lavender) they found that the tables had disappeared. Rain lashed against the high windows and the enchanted ceiling swirled darkly above them as they assembled in front of Professors McGonagall, Snape, Flitwick and Sprout — the Heads of House — and a small wizard whom Harry took to be the Apparition Instructor from the Ministry. He was oddly colorless, with transparent eyelashes, wispy hair and an insubstantial air, as though a single gust of wind might blow him away. Harry wondered whether constant disappearances and reappearances had somehow diminished his substance, or whether this frail build was ideal for anyone wishing to vanish.

"Good morning," said the Ministry wizard, when all the students had arrived and the Heads of House had called for quiet. "My name is Wilkie Twycross and I shall be your Ministry Apparition Instructor for the next twelve weeks. I hope to be able to prepare you for your Apparition test in this time —"

"Malfoy, be quiet and pay attention!" barked Professor McGonagall.

Everybody looked round. Malfoy had flushed a dull pink; he looked furious as he stepped away from Crabbe, with whom he appeared to have been having a whispered argument. Harry glanced

quickly at Snape, who also looked annoyed, though Harry strongly suspected that this was less because of Malfoy's rudeness than the fact that McGonagall had reprimanded one of his house.

"— by which time, many of you may be ready to take your test," Twycross continued, as though there had been no interruption.

"As you may know, it is usually impossible to Apparate or Disapparate within Hogwarts. The Headmaster has lifted this enchantment, purely within the Great Hall, for one hour, so as to enable you to practice. May I emphasise that you will not be able to Apparate outside the walls of this Hall, and that you would be unwise to try.

"I would like each of you to place yourselves now so that you have a clear five feet of space in front of you."

There was a great scrambiing and jostling as people separated, banged into each other, and ordered others out of their space. The Heads of House moved among the students, marshalling them into position and breaking up arguments.

"Harry, where are you going?" demanded Hermione.

But Harry did not answer; he was moving quickly through the crowd, past the place where Professor Flitwick was making squeaky attempts to position a few Ravenclaws, all of whom wanted to be near the front, past Professor Sprout, who was chivvying the Hufflepuffs into line, until, by dodging around Ernie Macmillan, he managed to position himself right at the back of the crowd, directly behind Malfoy, who was taking advantage of the general upheaval to continue his argument with Crabbe, standing five feet away and looking mutinous.

"I don't know how much longer, all right?" Malfoy shot at him, oblivious to Harry standing right behind him. "It's taking longer than I thought it would."

Crabbe opened his mouth, but Malfoy appeared to second-guess what he was going to say.

"Look, it's none of your business what I'm doing, Crabbe, you and Goyle just do as you're told and keep a lookout!"

"I tell my friends what I'm up to, if I want them to keep a lookout for me," Harry said, just loud enough for Malfoy to hear him.

Malfoy spun round on the spot, his hand flying to his wand, but at that precise moment the four Heads of House shouted, "Quiet!" and silence fell again. Malfoy turned slowly to face the front.

"Thank you," said Twycross. "Now then…"

He waved his wand. Old-fashioned wooden hoops instantly appeared on the floor in from of every student.

“The important things to remember when Apparating are the three D’s!” said Twycross. “Destination, Determination, Deliberation!

“Step one: fix your mind firmly upon the desired destination,” said Twycross. “In this case, the interior of your hoop. Kindly concentrate upon that destination now.”

Everybody looked around furtively, to check that everyone else was staring into their hoop, then hastily did as they were told. Harry gazed at the circular patch of dusty floor enclosed by his hoop and tried hard to think of nothing else. This proved impossible, as he couldn’t stop puzzling over what Malfoy was doing that needed lookouts.

“Step two,” said Twycross, “focus your determination to occupy the visualised space! Let your yearning to enter it flood from your mind to every particle of your body! “

Harry glanced around surreptitiously. A little way to his left, Ernie Macmillan was contemplating his hoop so hard that his face had turned pink; it looked as though he was straining to lay a Quaffle-sized egg. Harry bit back a laugh and hastily returned his gaze to his own hoop.

“Step three,” called Twycross, “only when I give the command…turn on the spot, feeling your way into nothingness, moving with deliberation. On my command, now…one —”

Harry glanced around again; lots of people were looking positively alarmed at being asked to Apparate so quickly.

“— two — ”

Harry tried to fix his thoughts on his hoop again; he had already forgotten what the three D’s stood for.

“— THREE!”

Harry spun on the spot, lost his balance and nearly fell over. He was not the only one. The whole Hall was suddenly full of staggering people; Neville was flat on his back; Ernie Macmillan, on the other hand, had done a kind of pirouetting leap into his hoop and looked momentarily thrilled, until he caught sight of Dean Thomas roaring with laughter at him.

“Never mind, never mind,” said Twycross dryly, who did not seem to have expected anything better. “Adjust your hoops, please, and back to your original positions…”

The second atlempt was no better than the first. The third was just as bad. Not until the fourth did anything exciting happen. There was a horrible screech of pain and everybody looked around, terrified, to see Susan Bones of Hufflepuff wobbling in her hoop with her left leg still standing five feet away where she had started.

The Heads of House converged on her; there was a great bang and a puff of purple smoke, which cleared to reveal Susan sobbing, reunited with her leg but looking horrified.

"Splinching, or the separation of random body parts," said Wilkie Twycross dispassionately, "occurs when the mind is insufficiently determined. You must concentrate continually upon your destination, and move, without haste, but with deliberation…thus."

Twycross stepped forwards, turned gracefully on the spot with his arms outstretched and vanished in a swirl of robes, reappearing at the back of the Hall. "Remember the three D's," he said, "and try again…one — two — three"

But an hour later, Susan's Splinching was still the most interesting thing that had happened. Twycross did not seem discouraged. Fastening his cloak at his neck, he merely said, "Until next Saturday, everybody, and do not forget: Destination. Determination. Deliberation."

With that, he waved his wand, Vanishing the hoops, and walked out of the Hall accompanied by Professor McGonagall. Talk broke out at once as people began moving towards the Entrance Hall.

"How did you do?" asked Ron, hurrying towards Harry. "I think I felt something the last time I tried — a kind of tingling in my feet."

"I expect your trainers are too small, Won-Won," said a voice behind them, and Hermione stalked past, smirking.

"I didn't feel anything," said Harry, ignoring this interruption. "But I don't care about that now-"

"What d'you mean, you don't care…don't you want to learn to Apparate?" said Ron incredulously.

"I'm not fussed, really. I prefer flying," said Harry, glancing over his shoulder to see where Malfoy was, and speeding up as they came into the Entrance Hall. "Look, hurry up, will you, there's something I want to do…"

Perplexed, Ron followed Harry back to Gryffindor Tower at a run. They were temporarily detained by Peeves, who had jammed a door on the fourth floor shut and was refusing to let anyone pass until they set fire to their own pants, but Harry and Ron simply turned back and took one of their trusted shortcuts. Within five minutes, they were climbing through the portrait hole.

"Are you going to tell me what we're doing, then?" asked Ron, panting slightly.

"Up here," said Harry, and he crossed the common room and led the way through the door to the boys' staircase.

Their dormitory was, as Harry had hoped, empty. He flung open his trunk and began to rummage in it, while Ron watched impatiently.

"Harry…"

"Malfoy's using Crabbe and Goyle as lookouts. He was arguing with Crabbe just now. I want to know…aha."

He had found it, a folded square of apparently blank parchment, which he now smoothed out and tapped with the tip of his wand. "*I solemnly swear that I am up to no good*…or Malfoy is."

At once, the Marauder's Map appeared on the parchment's surface. Here was a detailed plan of every one of the castle's floors and, moving around it, the tiny, labelled black dots that signified each of the castle's occupants.

"Help me find Malfoy," said Harry urgently.

He laid the map upon his bed and he and Ron leaned over it, searching.

"There!" said Ron, after a minute or so. "He's in the Slytherin common room, look…with Parkinson and Zabini and Crabbe and Goyle…"

Harry looked down at the map, disappointed, but rallied almost at once.

"Well, I'm keeping an eye on him from now on," he said firmly. "And the moment I see him lurking somewhere with Crabbe and Goyle keeping watch outside, it'll be on with the old Invisibility Cloak and off to find out what he's —"

He broke off as Neville entered the dormitory, bringing with him a strong smell of singed material, and began rummaging in his trunk for a fresh pair of pants.

Despite his determination to catch Malfoy out, Harry had no luck at all over the next couple of weeks. Although he consulted the map as often as he could, sometimes making unnecessary visits to the bathroom between lessons to search it, he did not once see Malfoy anywhere suspicious. Admittedly, he spotted Crabbe and Goyle moving around the castle on their own more often than usual, sometimes remaining stationary in deserted corridors, but at these times Malfoy was not only nowhere near them, but impossible to locate on the map at all. This was most mysterious. Harry toyed with the possibility that Malfoy was actually leaving the school grounds, but could not see how he could be doing it, given the very high level of security now operating within the castle. He could only suppose that he was missing Malfoy amongst the hundreds of tiny black dots upon the map. As for the fact that Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle appeared to be going their different ways when they were usually inseparable, these things happened as people got older — Ron and Hermione, Harry reflected sadly, were living proof.

February moved towards March with no change in the weather except that it became windy as well as wet. To general indignation, a sign went up on all common-room noticeboards that the next trip into Hogsmeade had been cancelled. Ron was furious.

"It was on my birthday!" he said, "I was looking forward to that!"

"Not a big surprise, though, is it?" said Harry. "Not after what happened to Katie."

She had still not returned from St. Mungo's. What was more, further disappearances had been reported in the *Daily Prophet*, including several relatives of students at Hogwarts.

"But now all I've got to look forward to is stupid Apparition!" said Ron grumpily. "Big birthday treat…"

Three lessons on, Apparition was proving as difficult as ever, though a few more people had managed to Splinch themselves. Frustration was running high and there was a certain amount of ill-feeling towards Wilkie Twycross and his three D's, which had inspired a number of nicknames for him, the politest of which were Dog-breath and Dung-head.

"Happy birthday, Ron," said Harry, when they were woken on the first of March by Seamus and Dean leaving noisily for breakfast. "Have a present."

He threw the package across on to Ron's bed, where it joined a small pile of them that must, Harry assumed, have been delivered by house-elves in the night.

"Cheers," said Ron drowsily, and as he ripped off the paper Harry got out of bed, opened his own trunk and began rummaging in it for the Marauder's Map, which he hid after every use. He turfed out half the contents of his trunk before he found it hiding beneath the rolled-up socks in which he was still keeping his bottle of lucky potion, Felix Felicis.

"Right," he murmured, taking it back to bed with him, tapping it quietly and murmuring, "*I solemnly swear that I am up to no good*," so that Neville, who was passing the foot of his bed at the time, would not hear.

"Nice one, Harry!" said Ron enthusiastically, waving the new pair of Quidditch Keeper's gloves Harry had given him.

"No problem," said Harry absent-mindedly, as he searched the Slytherin dormitory closely for Malfoy. "Hey…I don't think he's in his bed…"

Ron did not answer; he was too busy unwrapping presents, every now and then letting out an exclamation of pleasure.

“Seriously good haul this year!” he announced, holding up a heavy gold watch with odd symbols around the edge and tiny moving stars instead of hands. “See what Mum and Dad got me? Blimey, I think I’ll come of age next year too…”

“Cool,” muttered Harry, sparing the watch a glance before peering more closely at the map. Where was Malfoy? He did not seem to be at the Slytherin table in the Great Hall, eating breakfast…he was nowhere near Snape, who was sitting in his study…he wasn’t in any of the bathrooms or in the hospital wing…

“Want one?” said Ron thickly, holding out a box of Chocolate Cauldrons.

“No thanks,” said Harry, looking up. “Malfoy’s gone again!”

“Can’t have done,” said Ron, stuffing a second Cauldron into his mouth as he slid out of bed to get dressed. “Come on if you don’t hurry up you’ll have to Apparate on an empty-stomach…might make it easier, I suppose…”

Ron looked thoughtfully at the box of Chocolate Cauldrons, then shrugged and helped himself to a third.

Harry tapped the map with his wand, muttered, “Mischief managed,” though it hadn’t been, and got dressed, thinking hard. There had to be an explanation for Malfoy’s periodic disappearances, but he simply could not think what it could be. The best way of finding out would be to tail him, but even with the Invisibility Cloak this was an impractical idea; he had lessons, Quidditch practice, homework and Apparition; he could not follow Malfoy around school all day wilhout his absence being remarked upon,

“Ready?” he said to Ron.

He was halfway to the dormitory door when he realized that Ron had not moved, but was leaning on his bedpost, staring out of the rain-washed window with a strangely un-focused look on his face.

“Ron? Breakfast.”

“I’m not hungry.”

Harry stared ai him.

“I thought you just said —?”

“Well, all right, I’ll come down with you,” sighed Ron, “but I don’t want to eat.”

Harry scrutinised him suspiciously.

“You’ve just eaten half a box of Chocolate Cauldrons, haven’t you?”

“It’s not that,” Ron sighed again. “You…you wouldn’t understand.”

“Fair enough,” said Harry, albeit puzzled, as he turned to open the door.

“Harry!” said Ron suddenly.

“What?”

“Harry, I can’t stand it!”

“You can’t stand what?” asked Harry, now starling to feel definitely alarmed. Ron was rather pale and looked as though he was about to be sick.

“I can’t stop thinking about her!” said Ron hoarsely.

Harry gaped at him. He had not expected this and was not sure he wanted to hear it. Friends they might be, but if Ron started calling Lavender “Lav-Lav”, he would have to put his foot down.

“Why does that stop you having breakfast?” Harry asked, trying to inject a note of common sense into the proceedings.

“I don’t think she knows I exist,” said Ron with a desperate gesture.

“She definitely knows you exist,” said Harry, bewildered. “She keeps snogging you, doesn’t she?”

Ron blinked.

“Who are you talking about?”

“Who are you talking about?” said Harry, with an increasing sense that all reason had dropped out of the conversation.

“Romilda Vane,” said Ron softly, and his whole face seemed to illuminate as he said it, as though hit by a ray of purest sunlight. They stared at each other for almost a whole minute, before Harry said, “This is a joke, right? You’re joking.”

“I think…Harry, I think I love her,” said Ron in a strangled voice.

“Okay,” said Harry, walking up to Ron to get a better look at the glazed eyes and the pallid complexion, “Okay…say that again with a straight face.”

“I love her,” repeated Ron breathlessly. “Have you seen her hair, it’s all black and shiny and silky…and her eyes? Her big dark eyes? And her “

“This is really funny and everything,” said Harry impatiently, “but joke’s over, all right? Drop it.”

He turned to leave; he had got two steps towards the door when a crashing blow hit him on the right ear. Staggering, he looked round. Ron’s fist was drawn right back, his face was contorted with rage; he was about to strike again.

Harry reacted instinctively; his wand was out of his pocket and the incantation sprang to mind without conscious thought: *Levicorpus!*

Ron yelled as his heel was wrenched upwards once more; he dangled helplessly, upside down, his robes hanging off him.

"*What was that for*?" Harry bellowed.

"You insulted her, Harry! You said it was a joke!" shouted Ron, who was slowly turning purple in the face as all the blood rushed to his head.

"This is insane!" said Harry. "What's got into —?"

And then he saw the box lying open on Ron's bed and the truth hit him with the force of a stampeding troll.

"Where did you get those Chocolate Cauldrons?"

"They were a birthday present!" shouted Ron, revolving slowly in midair as he struggled to get free. "I offered you one, didn't I?"

"You just picked them up off the floor, didn't you?"

"They'd fallen off my bed, all right? Let me go!"

"They didn't fall off your bed, you prat, don't you understand? They were mine, I chucked them out of my trunk when I was looking for the map. They're the Chocolate Cauldrons Romilda gave me before Christmas and they're all spiked with love potion!"

But only one word of this seemed to have registered with Ron.

"Romilda?" he repeated. "Did you say Romilda? Harry - do you know her? Can you introduce me?"

Harry stared at the dangling Ron, whose face now looked tremendously hopeful, and fought a strong desire to laugh. A part of him — the part closest to his throbbing right ear - was quite keen on the idea of letting Ron down and watching him run amok until the effects of the potion wore off…but on the other hand, they were supposed to be friends, Ron had not been himself when he had attacked, and Harry thought that he would deserve another punching if he permitted Ron to declare undying love for Romilda Vane.

"Yeah, I'll introduce you," said Harry, thinking fast. "I'm going to let you down now, okay?"

He sent Ron crashing back to the floor (his ear did hurt quite a lot), but Ron simply bounded to his feet again, grinning.

"She'll be in Slughorn's office," said Harry confidently, leading the way to the door.

"Why will she be in there?" asked Ron anxiously, hurrying to keep up.

"Oh, she has extra Potions lessons with him," said Harry, inventing wildly.

"Maybe I could ask if I can have them with her?" said Ron eagerly.

“Great idea,” said Harry. Lavender was waiting beside the portrait hole, a complication Harry had not foreseen.

“You’re late, Won-Won!” she pouted. “I’ve got you a birthday —”

“Leave me alone,” said Ron impatiently, “Harry’s going to introduce me to Romilda Vane.”

And without another word to her, he pushed his way out of the portrait hole. Harry tried to make an apologetic face to Lavender, but it might have turned out simply amused, because she looked more offended than ever as the Fat Lady swung shut behind them.

Harry had been slightly worried that Slughorn might be at breakfast, but he answered his office door at the first knock, wearing a green velvet dressing-gown and matching nightcap and looking rather bleary-eyed.

“Harry,” he mumbled. “This is very early for a call…I generally sleep late on a Saturday…”

“Professor, I’m really sorry to disturb you,” said Harry as quietly as possible, while Ron stood on tiptoe, attempting to see past Slughorn into his room, “but my friend Ron’s swallowed a love potion by mistake. You couldn’t make him an antidote, could you? I’d take him to Madam Pomfrey, but we’re not supposed to have anything from Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes and, you know…awkward questions…”

“I’d have thought you could have whipped him up a remedy, Harry, an expert potioneer like you?” asked Slughorn.

“Er,” said Harry, somewhat distracted by the fact that Ron was now elbowing him in the ribs in an attempt to force his way into the room, “well, I’ve never mixed an antidote for a love potion, sir, and by the time I get it right Ron might’ve done something serious “

Helpfully, Ron chose this moment to moan, “I can’t see her. Harry — is he hiding her?”

“Was this potion within date?” asked Slughorn, now eyeing Ron with professional interest. “They can strengthen, you know, the longer they’re kept.”

“That would explain a lot,” panted Harry, now positively wrestling with Ron to keep him from knocking Slughorn over. “It’s his birthday, Professor,” he added imploringly.

“Oh, all right, come in, then, come in,” said Slughorn, relenting. “I’ve got the necessary here in my bag, it’s not a difficult antidote…”

Ron burst through the door into Slughorn’s overheated, crowded study, tripped over a tasselled footstool, regained his balance by seizing Harry around the neck and muttered, “She didn’t see that, did she?”

“She’s not here yet,” said Harry, watching Slughorn opening his potion kit and adding a few pinches of this and that to a small crystal bottle.

“That’s good,” said Ron fervently. “How do I look?”

“Very handsome,” said Slughorn smoothly, handing Ron a glass of clear liquid. “Now drink that up, it’s a tonic for the nerves, keep you calm when she arrives, you know,”

“Brilliant,” said Ron eagerly, and he gulped the antidote down noisily.

Harry and Slughorn watched him. For a moment, Ron beamed at them. Then, very slowly, his grin sagged and vanished, to be replaced by an expression of utmost horror.

“Back to normal, then?” said Harry, grinning. Slughorn chuckled. “Thanks a lot, Professor.”

“Don’t mention it, m’boy, don’t mention it,” said Slughorn, as Ron collapsed into a nearby armchair, looking devastated. “Pick-me-up, that’s what he needs,” Slughorn continued, now-bustling over to a table loaded with drinks. “I’ve got butterbeer, I’ve got wine, I’ve got one last bottle of this oak-matured mead…hmm…meant to give that to Dumbledore for Christmas…ah well…” he shrugged “…he can’t miss what he’s never had! Why don’t we open it now and celebrate Mr. Weasley’s birthday? Nothing like a fine spirit to chase away the pangs of disappointed love…”

He chortled again and Harry joined in. This was the first time he had found himself almost alone with Slughorn since his disastrous first attempt to extract the true memory from him. Perhaps, if he could just keep Slughorn in a good mood…perhaps if they got through enough of the oak-matured mead…

“There you are, then,” said Slughorn, handing Harry and Ron a glass of mead each, before raising his own. “Well, a very happy birthday, Ralph —”

“— Ron —” whispered Harry.

But Ron, who did not appear to be listening to the toast, had already thrown the mead into his mouth and swallowed it.

There was one second, hardly more than a heartbeat, in which Harry knew there was something terribly wrong and Slughorn, it seemed, did not.

“— and may you have many more —”

“Ron!”

Ron had dropped his glass; he half-rose from his chair and then crumpled, his extremities jerking uncontrollably. Foam was dribbling from his mouth and his eyes were bulging from their sockets.

“Professor!” Harry bellowed. “Do something!”

But Slughorn seemed paralysed by shock. Ron twitched and choked: his skin was turning blue.

“What — but —” spluttered Slughorn.

Harry leapt over a low table and sprinted towards Slughorn’s open potion kit, pulling out jars and pouches, while the terrible sound of Ron’s gargling breath filled the room. Then he found it - the shrivelled kidney-like stone Slughorn had taken from him in Potions.

He hurtled back to Ron’s side, wrenched open his jaw and thrust the bezoar into his mouth. Ron gave a great shudder, a rattling gasp and his body became limp and still.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

ELF TAILS

"So, all in all, not one of Ron's better birthdays?" said Fred.

It was evening; the hospital wing was quiet, the windows curtained, the lamps lit. Ron's was the only occupied bed. Harry, Hermione, and Ginny were sitting around him; they had spent all day waiting outside the double doors, trying to see inside whenever somebody went in or out. Madam Pomfrey had only let them enter at eight o'clock. Fred and George had arrived at ten past.

"This isn't how we imagined handing over our present," said George grimly, putting down a large wrapped gift on Ron's bedside cabinet and sitting beside Ginny.

"Yeah, when we pictured the scene, he was conscious," said Fred.

"There we were in Hogsmeade, waiting to surprise him —" said George.

"You were in Hogsmeade?" asked Ginny, looking up.

"We were thinking of buying Zonko's," said Fred gloomily. "A Hogsmeade branch, you know, but a fat lot of good it'll do us if you lot aren't allowed out at weekends to buy our stuff anymore…But never mind that now."

He drew up a chair beside Harry and looked at Ron's pale face.

"How exactly did it happen, Harry?"

Harry retold the story he had already recounted, it felt like a hundred times to Dumbledore, to McGonagall, to Madam Pomfrey, to Hermione, and to Ginny.

"…and then I got the bezoar down his throat and his breathing eased up a bit, Slughorn ran for help, McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey turned up, and they brought Ron up here. They reckon he'll be all right. Madam Pomfrey says he'll have to stay here a week or so…keep taking essence of rue…"

"Blimey, it was lucky you thought of a bezoar," said George in a low voice.

"Lucky there was one in the room," said Harry, who kept turning cold at the thought of what would have happened if he had not been able to lay hands on the little stone.

Hermione gave an almost inaudible sniff. She had been exceptionally quiet all day. Having hurtled, white-faced, up to Harry outside the hospital wing and demanded to know what had happened., she had taken almost no part in Harry and Ginny's obsessive discussion about how Ron had been poisoned, but merely stood beside them, clench-jawed and frightened-looking, until ai last they had been allowed in to see him.

"Do Mum and Dad know?" Fred asked Ginny.

"They've already seen him, they arrived an hour ago — they're in Dumbledore's office now, but they'll be back soon…"

There was a pause while they all watched Ron mumble a little in his sleep.

"So the poison was in the drink?" said Fred quietly.

"Yes," said Harry at once; he could think of nothing else and was glad for the opportunity to start discussing it again. "Slughorn poured it out —"

"Would he have been able to slip something into Ron's glass without you seeing?"

"Probably," said Harry, "but why would Slughorn want to poison Ron?"

"No idea," said Fred, frowning. "You don't think he could have mixed up the glasses by mistake? Meaning to get you?"

"Why would Slughorn want to poison Harry?" asked Ginny.

"I dunno," said Fred, "but there must be loads of people who'd like to poison Harry, mustn't there? 'The Chosen One' and all that?"

"So you think Slughorn's a Death Eater?" said Ginny.

"Anything's possible," said Fred darkly.

"He could be under the Imperius Curse," said George.

"Or he could be innocent," said Ginny. "The poison could have been in the bottle, in which case it was probably meant for Slughorn himself."

"Who'd want to kill Slughorn?"

"Dumbledore reckons Voldemort wanted Slughorn on his side," said Harry. "Slughorn was in hiding for a year before he came to Hogwarts. And…" He thought of the memory Dumbledore had not yet been able to extract from Slughorn. "And maybe Voldemort wants him out of the way, maybe he thinks he could be valuable to Dumbledore."

"But you said Slughorn had been planning to give that bottle to Dumbledore for Christmas," Ginny reminded him. "So the poisoner could just as easily have been after Dumbledore."

"Then the poisoner didn't know Slughorn very well," said Hermione, speaking for the first time in hours and sounding as though she had a bad head cold. "Anyone who knew Slughorn would have known there was a good chance he'd keep something that tasty for himself."

"Er-my-nee," croaked Ron unexpectedly from between them

They all fell silent, watching him anxiously, but after muttering incomprehensibly for a moment he merely started snoring.

The dormitory doors flew open, making them all jump: Hagrid came striding toward them, his hair rain-flecked, his bearskin coat flapping behind him, a crossbow in his hand, leaving a trail of muddy dolphin-sized footprints all over the floor.

"Bin in the forest all day!" he panted. "Aragog's worse, I bin readin' to him — didn' get up ter dinner till jus' now an' then Professor Sprout told me abou' Ron! How is he?"

"Not bad," said Harry. "They say he'll be okay."

"No more than six visitors at a time!" said Madam Pomfrey, hurrying out of her office.

"Hagrid makes six," George pointed out.

"Oh…yes…" said Madam Pomfrey, who seemed to have been counting Hagrid as several people due to his vastness. To cover her confusion, she hurried off to clear up his muddy foot prints with her wand.

"I don' believe this," said Hagrid hoarsely, shaking his great shaggy head as he stared down at Ron. "Jus' don' believe it…Look at him lyin' there…Who'd want ter hurt him, eh?"

"That's just what we were discussing," said Harry. "We don't know."

"Someone couldn' have a grudge against the Gryfinndor Quidditch team, could they?" said Hagrid anxiously. "Firs' Katie, now Ron…"

"I can't see anyone trying to bump off a Quidditch team," said George.

"Wood might've done the Slytherins if he could've got away with it," said Fred fairly.

"Well, I don't think it's Quidditch, but I think there's a connection between the attacks," said Hermione quietly

"How d'you work that out?" asked Fred.

"Well, for one thing, they both ought to have been fatal and weren't, although that was pure luck. And for another, neither the poison nor the necklace seems to have reached the person who was supposed to be killed. Of course," she added broodingly, "that makes the person behind this even more dangerous in a way, because they don't seem to care how many people they finish off before they actually reach their victim."

Before anybody could respond to this ominous pronouncement, the dormitory doors opened again and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley hurried up the ward. They had done no more than satisfy themselves that Ron would make a full recovery on their last visit to the ward; now Mrs. Weasley seized hold of Harry and hugged him very tighty.

"Dumbledore's told us how you saved him with the bezoar," she sobbed. "Oh, Harry, what can we say? You saved Ginny…you saved Arthur…now you've saved Ron

“Don’t be…I didn’t…” muttered Harry awkwardly.

“Half our family does seem to owe you their lives, now I stop and think about it,” Mr. Weasley said in a constricted voice. “Well, all I can say is that it was a lucky day for the Weasleys when Ron decided to sit in your compartment on the Hogwarts Express Harry.”

Harry could not think of any reply to this and was almost glad when Madam Pomfrey reminded them that there were only supposed to be six visitors around Ron’s bed; he and Hermione rose at once to leave and Hagrid decided to go with them, leaving Ron with his family.

“It’s terrible,” growled Hagrid into his beard, as the three of them walked back along the corridor to the marble staircase. “All this new security, an kids are still gettin’ hurt…Dumbledore’s worried sick…He don’ say much, but I can tell…”

“Hasn’t he got any ideas, Hagrid?” asked Hermione desperately.

“I spect he’s got hundreds of ideas, brain like his,” said Hagrid. “But he doesn’ know who sent that necklace nor put poison in that wine, or they’dve bin caught, wouldn they? Wha’ worries me,” said Hagrid, lowering his voice and glancing over his shoulder (Harry, for good measure, checked the ceiling for Peeves), “is how long Hogwarts can stay open if kids are bein’ attacked. Chamber o’ Secrets all over again, isn’ it? There’ll be panic, more parents takin their kids outta school, an nex’ thing yeh know the board o’ governors…”

Hagrid stopped talking as the ghost of a long-haired woman drifted serenely past, then resumed in a hoarse whisper, “…the board o’ governors’ll be talkin about shuttin’ us up fer good.”

“Surely not?” said Hermione, looking worried.

“Gotta see it from their point o’ view,” said Hagrid heavily. “I mean, it’s always bin a bit of a risk sendin a kid ter Hogwarts, hasn’ it? Yer expect accidents, don’ yeh, wit hundreds of underage wizards all locked up tergether, but attempted murder, tha’s diff’rent. ‘S’no wonder Dumbledore’s angry with Sn —”

Hagrid stopped in his tracks, a familiar, guilty expression on what was visible of his face above his tangled black beard.

“What?” said Harry quickly. “Dumbledore’s angry with Snape?”

“I never said tha’,” said Hagrid, though his look of panic could not have been a bigger giveaway. “Look at the time, it’s gettin’ on fer midnight, I need ter —”

“Hagrid, why is Dumbledore angry with Snape?” Harry asked loudly.

"Shhhh!" said Hagrid, looking both nervous and angry. "Don' shout stuff like that, Harry, d'yeh wan' me ter lose me job? Mind, I don' suppose yeh'd care, would yeh, not now yeh've given up Care of Mag —"

"Don't try and make me feel guilty, it wont work!" said Harry forcefully. "What's Snape done?"

"I dunno, Harry, I shouldn'ta heard it at all! I — well, I was comin' outta the forest the other evenin' an' I overheard 'em talking — well, arguin'. Didn't like ter draw attention to meself, so I sorta skulked an' tried not ter listen, but it was a — well, a heated discussion an' it wasn' easy ter block it out."

"Well?" Harry urged him, as Hagrid shuffled his enormous feet uneasily.

"Well — I jus' heard Snape sayin' Dumbledore took too much fer granted an maybe he — Snape — didn' wan' ter do it anymore —"

"Do what?"

"I dunno, Harry, it sounded like Snape was feelin' a bit overworked, tha's all — anyway, Dumbledore told him flat out he'd agreed ter do it an' that was all there was to it. Pretty firm with him. An' then he said summat abou' Snape makin' investigations in his House, in Slytherin. Well, there's nothin' strange abou' that!" Hagrid added hastily, as Harry and Hermione exchanged looks full of meaning. "All the Heads o' Houses were asked ter look inter that necklace business —"

"Yeah, but Dumbledore's not having rows with the rest of them, is he?" said Harry.

"Look," Hagrid twisted his crossbow uncomfortably in his hands; there was a loud splintering sound and it snapped in two. "I know what yeh're like abou' Snape, Harry, an' I don' want yeh ter go readin' more inter this than there is."

"Look out," said Hermione tersely.

They turned just in time to see the shadow of Argus Filch looming over the wall behind them before the man himself turned the corner, hunchbacked, his jowls aquiver.

"Oho!" he wheezed. "Out of bed so late, this'll mean detention!"

"No it won', Filch," said Hagrid shortly. "They're with me, aren' they?"

"And what difference does that make?" asked Filch obnoxiously.

"I'm a ruddy teacher, aren' I, yeh sneakin' Squib!" said Hagrid, firing up at once.

There was a nasty hissing noise as Filch swelled with fury; Mrs. Norris had arrived, unseen, and was twisting herself sinuously around Filch's skinny ankles.

"Get goin," said Hagrid out of the corner of his mouth.

Harry did not need telling twice; he and Hermione both hurried off; Hagrid's and Filch's raised voices echoed behind them as they ran. They passed Peeves near the turning into Gryffindor Tower, but he was streaking happily toward the source of the yelling, cackling and calling,

When there's strife and when there's trouble

Call on Peevsie, he'll make double!

The Fat Lady was snoozing and not pleased to be woken, but swung forward grumpily to allow them to clamber into the mercifully peaceful and empty common room. It did not seem that people knew about Ron yet; Harry was very relieved: He had been interrogated enough that day. Hermione bade him good night and set off for the girls' dormitory. Harry, however, remained behind, taking a seat beside the fire and looking down into the dying embers.

So Dumbledore had argued with Snape. In spite of all he had told Harry, in spite of his insistence that he trusted Snape completely, he had lost his temper with him…He did not think that Snape had tried hard enough to investigate the Slytherins…or, perhaps, to investigate a single Slytherin: Malfoy?

Was it because Dumbledore did not want Harry to do anything foolish, to take matters into his own hands, that he had pretended there was nothing in Harry's suspicions? That seemed likely. It might even be that Dumbledore did not want anything to distract Harry from their lessons, or from procuring that memory from Slughorn. Perhaps Dumbledore did not think it right to confide suspicions about his staff to sixteen-year-olds…

"There you are, Potter!"

Harry jumped to his feet in shock, his wand at the ready. He had been quite convinced that the common room was empty; he had not been at all prepared for a hulking figure to rise suddenly out of a distant chair. A closer look showed him that it was Cormac McLaggen.

"I've been waiting for you to come back," said McLaggen, disregarding Harry's drawn wand. "Must've fallen asleep. Look, I saw them taking Weasley up to the hospital wing earlier. Didn't look like he'll be fit for next week's match."

It took Harry a few moments to realize what McLaggen was talking about.

"Oh…right…Quidditch," he said, putting his wand back into the belt of his jeans and running a hand wearily through his hair. "Yeah…he might not make it."

"Well, then, I'll be playing Keeper, won't I?" said McLaggen.

"Yeah," said Harry. "Yeah, I suppose so…"

He could not think of an argument against it; after all, McLaggen had certainly performed second-best in the trials.

"Excellent," said McLaggen in a satisfied voice. "So when's practice?"

"What? Oh…there's one tomorrow evening."

"Good. Listen, Potter, we should have a talk beforehand. I've got some ideas on strategy you might find useful."

"Right," said Harry unenthusiastically. "Well, I'll hear them tomorrow, then. I'm pretty tired now…see you…"

The news that Ron had been poisoned spread quickly next day, but it did not cause the sensation that Katie's attack had done. People seemed to think that it might have been an accident, given that he had been in the Potions master's room at the time, and that as he had been given an antidote immediately there was no real harm done. In fact, the Gryffindors were generally much more interested in the upcoming Quidditch match against Hufflepuff, for many of them wanted to see Zacharias Smith, who played Chaser on the Hufflepuff team, punished soundly for his commentary during the opening match against Slytherin.

Harry, however, had never been less interested in Quidditch; he was rapidly becoming obsessed with Draco Malfoy. Still checking the Marauder's Map whenever he got a chance, he sometimes made detours to wherever Malfoy happened to be, but had not yet detected him doing anything out of the ordinary. And still there were those inexplicable times when Malfoy simply vanished from the map…

But Harry did not get a lot of time to consider the problem, what with Quidditch practice, homework, and the fact that he was now being dogged wherever he went by Cormac McLaggen and Lavender Brown.

He could not decide which of them was more annoying. McLaggen kept up a constant stream of hints that he would make a better permanent Keeper for the team than Ron, and that now that Harry was seeing him play regularly he would surely come around to this way of thinking too; he was also keen to criticize the other players and provide Harry with detailed training schemes, so that more than once Harry was forced to remind him who was Captain.

Meanwhile, Lavender kept sidling up to Harry to discuss Ron, which Harry found almost more wearing than McLaggen's Quidditch lectures. At first, Lavender had been very annoyed that nobody had thought to tell her that Ron was in the hospital wing — "I mean, I am his girlfriend!"— but unfortunately she had now decided to forgive Harry this lapse of memory and was keen to have lots

of in-depth chats with him about Ron's feelings, a most uncomfortable experience that Harry would have happily forgone.

"Look, why don't you talk to Ron about all this?" Harry asked, after a particularly long interrogation from Lavender that took in everything from precisely what Ron had said about her new drew robes to whether or not Harry thought that Ron considered his relationship with Lavender to be "serious."

"Well, I would, but he's always asleep when I go and see him!" said Lavender fretfully.

"Is he?" said Harry, surprised, for he had found Ron perfectly alert every time he had been up to the hospital wing, both highly interested in the news of Dumbledore and Snape's row and keen abuse McLaggen as much as possible.

"Is Hermione Granger still visiting him?" Lavender demanded suddenly.

"Yeah, I think so. Well, they're friends, aren't they?" said Harry uncomfortably.

"Friends, don't make me laugh," said Lavender scornfully. "She didn't talk to him for weeks after he started going out with me! But I suppose she wants to make up with him now he's all interesting…"

"Would you call getting poisoned being interesting?" asked Harry. "Anyway — sorry, got to go — there's McLaggen coming for a talk about Quidditch," said Harry hurriedly, and he dashed sideways through a door pretending to be solid wall and sprinted down the shortcut that would take him off to Potions where, thankfully, neither Lavender nor McLaggen could follow him.

On the morning of the Quidditch match against Hufflepuff, Harry dropped in on the hospital wing before heading down to the pitch. Ron was very agitated; Madam Pomfrey would not let him go down to watch the match, feeling it would overexcite him.

"So how's McLaggen shaping up?" he asked Harry nervously, apparently forgetting that he had already asked the same question twice.

"I've told you," said Harry patiently, "he could be world-class and I wouldn't want to keep him. He keeps trying to tell everyone what to do, he thinks he could play every position better than the rest of us. I can't wait to be shot of him. And speaking of getting shot of people," Harry added, getting to his feet and picking up his Firebolt, "will you stop pretending to be asleep when Lavender comes to see you? She's driving me mad as well."

"Oh," said Ron, looking sheepish. "Yeah. All right."

"If you don't want to go out with her anymore, just tell her," said Harry.

“Yeah…well…it’s not that easy, is it?” said Ron. He paused. “Hermione going to look in before the match?” he added casually.

“No, she’s already gone down to the pitch with Ginny.”

“Oh,” said Ron, looking rather glum. “Right. Well, good luck. Hope you hammer McLag— I mean, Smith.”

“I’ll try,” said Harry, shouldering his broom. “See you after the match.”

He hurried down through the deserted corridors; the whole school was outside, either already seated in the stadium or heading down toward it. He was looking out of the windows he passed, trying to gauge how much wind they were facing, when a noise ahead made him glance up and he saw Malfoy walking toward him, accompanied by two girls, both of whom looked sulky and resentful.

Malfoy stopped short at the sight of Harry, then gave a short, humorless laugh and continued walking.

“Where’re you going?” Harry demanded.

“Yeah, I’m really going to tell you, because it’s your business, Potter,” sneered Malfoy. “You’d better hurry up, they’ll be waiting for ‘the Chosen Captain’ — ‘the Boy Who Scored’ — whatever they call you these days.”

One of the girls gave an unwilling giggle. Harry stared at her. She blushed. Malfoy pushed past Harry and she and her friend followed at a trot, turning the corner and vanishing from view.

Harry stood rooted on the spot and watched them disappear. This was infuriating; he was already cutting it fine to get to the match on time and yet there was Malfoy, skulking off while the rest of the school was absent: Harry’s best chance yet of discovering what Malfoy was up to. The silent seconds trickled past, and Harry remained where he was, frozen, gazing at the place where Malfoy had vanished…

“Where have you been?” demanded Ginny, as Harry sprinted into the changing rooms. The whole team was changed and ready; Coote and Peakes, the Beaters, were both hitting their clubs nervously against their legs.

“I met Malfoy,” Harry told her quietly, as he pulled his scarlet robes over his head. “So I wanted to know how come he’s up at the castle with a couple of girlfriends while everyone else is down here…”

“Does it matter right now?”

“Well, I’m not likely to find out, am I?” said Harry, seizing his Firebolt and pushing his glasses straight. “Come on then!”

And without another word, he marched out onto the pitch to deafening cheers and boos.

There was little wind; the clouds were patchy; every now and then there were dazzling flashes of bright sunlight.

“Tricky conditions!” McLaggen said bracingly to the team. “Coote, Peakes, you’ll want to fly out of the sun, so they don’t see you coming —”

“I’m the Captain, McLaggen, shut up giving them instructions,” said Harry angrily. “Just get up by the goal posts!”

Once McLaggen had marched off, Harry turned to Coote and Peakes.

“Make sure you do fly out of the sun,” he told them grudgingly.

He shook hands with the Hufflepuff Captain, and then, on Madam Hooch’s whistle, kicked off and rose into the air, higher than the rest of his team, streaking around the pitch in search of the Snitch. If he could catch it good and early, there might be a chance he could get back up to the castle, seize the Marauder’s Map, and find out what Malfoy was doing…

“And that’s Smith of Hufflepuff with the Quaffle,” said a dreamy voice, echoing over the grounds. “He did the commentary last time, of course, and Ginny Weasley flew into him, I think probably on purpose, it looked like it. Smith was being quite rude about Gryffindor, I expect he regrets that now he’s playing them — oh, look, he’s lost the Quaffle, Ginny took it from him, I do like her, she’s very nice…”

Harry stared down at the commentator’s podium. Surely nobody in their right mind would have let Luna Lovegood commentate? But even from above there was no mistaking that long, dirty-blonde hair, nor the necklace of butterbeer corks…Beside Luna, Professor McGonagall was looking slightly uncomfortable, as though she was indeed having second thoughts about this appointment.

“…but now that big Hufflepuff player’s got the Quaffle from her, I can’t remember his name, it’s something like Bibble — no, Buggins —”

“It’s Cadwallader!” said Professor McGonagall loudly from beside Luna. The crowd laughed.

Harry stared around for the Snitch; there was no sign of it. Moments later, Cadwallader scored. McLaggen had been shouting criticism at Ginny for allowing the Quaffle out of her possession, with the result that he had not noticed the large red ball soaring past his right ear.

“McLaggen, will you pay attention to what you’re supposed to be doing and leave everyone else alone!” bellowed Harry, wheeling around to face his Keeper.

“You’re not setting a great example!” McLaggen shouted back, red-faced and furious.

“And Harry Potter’s now having an argument with his Keeper,” said Luna serenely, while both Hufflepuffs and Slytherins below in the crowd cheered and jeered. “I don’t think that’ll help him find the Snitch, but maybe it’s a clever ruse…”

Swearing angrily, Harry spun round and set off around the pitch again, scanning the skies for some sign of the tiny, winged golden ball.

Ginny and Demelza scored a goal apiece, giving the red-and-gold-clad supporters below something to cheer about. Then Cadwallader scored again, making things level, but Luna did not seem to have noticed; she appeared singularly uninterested in such mundane things as the score, and kept attempting to draw the crowd’s attention to such things as interestingly shaped clouds and the possibility that Zacharias Smith, who had so far failed to maintain possession of the Quaffle for longer than a minute, was suffering from something called “Loser’s Lurgy.”

“Seventy-forty to Hufflepuff!” barked Professor McGonagall into Luna’s megaphone.

“Is it, already?” said Luna vaguely. “Oh, look! The Gryffindor Keeper’s got hold of one of the Beater’s bats.”

Harry spun around in midair. Sure enough, McLaggen, for reasons best known to himself, had pulled Peakes’s bat from him and appeared to be demonstrating how to hit a Bludger toward an oncoming Cadwallader.

“Will you give him back his bat and get back to the goal posts!” roared Harry, pelting toward McLaggen just as McLaggen took a ferocious swipe at the Bludger and mishit it.

A blinding, sickening pain…a flash of light…distant screams…and the sensation of falling down a long tunnel…

And the next thing Harry knew, he was lying in a remarkably warm and comfortable bed and looking up at a lamp that was throwing a circle of golden light onto a shadowy ceiling. He raised his head awkwardly. There on his left was a familiar-looking, freckly, red-haired person.

“Nice of you to drop in,” said Ron, grinning.

Harry blinked and looked around. Of course: He was in the hospital wing. The sky outside was indigo streaked with crimson. The match must have finished hours ago…as had any hope of cornering Malfoy. Harry’s head felt strangely heavy; he raised a hand and felt a stiff turban of bandages.

“What happened?”

"Cracked skull," said Madam Pomfrey, bustling up and pushing him back against his pillows. "Nothing to worry about, I mended it at once, but I'm keeping you in overnight. You shouldn't over exert yourself for a few hours."

"I don't want to stay here overnight," said Harry angrily, sitting up and throwing back his covers. "I want to find McLaggen and kill him."

"I'm afraid that would come under the heading of 'overexertion,'" said Madam Pomfrey, pushing him firmly back onto the bed and raising her wand in a threatening manner. "You will stay here until I discharge you, Potter, or I shall call the headmaster."

She bustled back into her office, and Harry sank back into his pillows, fuming.

"D'you know how much we lost by?" he asked Ron through clenched teeth.

"Well, yeah I do," said Ron apologetically. "Final score was three hundred and twenty to sixty."

"Brilliant," said Harry savagely. "Really brilliant! When I get hold of McLaggen —"

"You don't want to get hold of him, he's the size of a troll," said Ron reasonably. "Personally, I think there's a lot to be said for hexing him with that toenail thing of the Prince's. Anyway, the rest of the team might've dealt with him before you get out of here, they're not happy…"

There was a note of badly suppressed glee in Rons voice; Harry could tell he was nothing short of thrilled that McLaggen had messed up so badly. Harry lay there, staring up at the patch of light on the ceiling, his recently mended skull not hurting, precisely, but feeling slightly tender underneath all the bandaging.

"I could hear the match commentary from here," said Ron, his voice now shaking with laughter. "I hope Luna always commentates from now on…Loser's Lurgy…"

But Harry was still too angry to see much humor in the situation, and after a while Ron's snorts subsided.

"Ginny came in to visit while you were unconscious," he said, after a long pause, and Harry's imagination zoomed into overdrive, rapidly constructing a scene in which Ginny, weeping over his lifeless form, confessed her feelings of deep attraction to him while Ron gave them his blessing…"She reckons you only just arrived on time for the match. How come? You left here early enough."

"Oh…" said Harry, as the scene in his mind's eye imploded. "Yeah…well, I saw Malfoy sneaking off with a couple of girls who didn't look like they wanted to be with him, and that's the second time he's made sure he isn't down on the Quidditch pitch with the rest of the school; he

skipped the last match too, remember?" Harry sighed. "Wish I'd followed him now, the match was such a fiasco…"

"Don't be stupid," said Ron sharply. "You couldn't have missed a Quidditch match just to follow Malfoy, you're the Captain!"

"I want to know what he's up to," said Harry. "And don't tell me its all in my head, not after what I overheard between him and Snape —"

"I never said it was all in your head," said Ron, hoisting himself up on an elbow in turn and frowning at Harry, "but there's no rule saying only one person at a time can be plotting anything in this place! You're getting a bit obsessed with Malfoy, Harry. I mean, thinking about missing a match just to follow him…"

"I want to catch him at it!" said Harry in frustration. "I mean, where's he going when he disappears off the map?"

"I dunno…Hogsmeade?" suggested Ron, yawning.

"I've never seen him going along any of the secret passageway on the map. I thought they were being watched now anyway?"

"Well then, I dunno," said Ron.

Silence fell between them. Harry stared up at the circle of lamp light above him, thinking…

If only he had Rufus Scrimgeour's power, he would have been able to set a tail upon Malfoy, but unfortunately Harry did not have an office full of Aurors at his command…He thought fleetingly of trying to set something up with the D.A., but there again was the problem that people would be missed from lessons; most of them, after all, still had full schedules…

There was a low, rumbling snore from Ron's bed. After a while Madam Pomfrey came out of her office, this time wearing a thick dressing gown. It was easiest to feign sleep; Harry rolled over onto his side and listened to all the curtains closing themselves as she waved her wand. The lamps dimmed, and she returned to her office; he heard the door click behind her and knew that she was off to bed.

This was, Harry reflected in the darkness, the third time that he had been brought to the hospital wing because of a Quidditch injury. Last time he had fallen off his broom due to the presence of dementors around the pitch, and the time before that, all the bones had been removed from his arm by the incurably inept Professor Lockhart…That had been his most painful injury by far…he remembered the agony of regrowing an armful of bones in one night, a discomfort not eased by the arrival of an unexpected visitor in the middle of the —

Harry sat bolt upright, his heart pounding, his bandage turban askew. He had the solution at last: There was a way to have Malfoy followed — how could he have forgotten, why hadn't he thought of it before?

But the question was, how to call him? What did you do? Quietly, tentatively, Harry spoke into the darkness.

"Kreacher?"

There was a very loud crack, and the sounds of scuffling and squeaks filled the silent room. Ron awoke with a yelp.

"What's going —?"

Harry pointed his wand hastily at the door of Madam Pomfrey's office and muttered, "*Muffliato!*" so that she would not come running. Then he scrambled to the end of his bed for a better look at what was going on.

Two house-elves were rolling around on the floor in the middle of the dormitory, one wearing a shrunken maroon jumper and several woolly hats, the other, a filthy old rag strung over his hips like a loincloth. Then there was another loud bang, and Peeves the Poltergeist appeared in midair above the wrestling elves.

"I was watching that, Potty!" he told Harry indignantly, pointing at the fight below, before letting out a loud cackle. "Look at the ickle creatures squabbling, bitey bitey, punchy punchy—"

"Kreacher will not insult Harry Potter in front of Dobby, no he won't, or Dobby will shut Kreacher's mouth for him!" cried Dobby in a high-pitched voice.

"— kicky, scratchy!" cried Peeves happily, now pelting bits of' chalk at the elves to enrage them further. "Tweaky, pokey!"

"Kreacher will say what he likes about his master, oh yes, and what a master he is, filthy friend of Mudbloods, oh, what would poor Kreacher's mistress say —?"

Exactly what Kreacher's mistress would have said they did not find out, for at that moment Dobby sank his knobbly little fist into Kreacher's mouth and knocked out half of his teeth. Harry and Ron both leapt out of their beds and wrenched the two elves apart, though they continued to try and kick and punch each other, egged on by Peeves, who swooped around the lamp squealing, "Stick your fingers up his nosey, draw his cork and pull his earsies —"

Harry aimed his wand at Peeves and said, "*Langlock!*" Peeves clutched at his throat, gulped, then swooped from the room making obscene gestures but unable to speak, owing to the fact that his tongue had just glued itself to the roof of his mouth.

“Nice one,” said Ron appreciatively, lifting Dobby into the air so that his flailing limbs no longer made contact with Kreacher. “That was another Prince hex, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah,” said Harry, twisting Kreacher’s wizened arm into a half nelson. “Right — I’m forbidding you to fight each other! Well, Kreacher, you’re forbidden to fight Dobby. Dobby, I know I’m not allowed to give you orders —”

“Dobby is a free house-elf and he can obey anyone he likes and Dobby will do whatever Harry Potter wants him to do!” said Dobby, tears now streaming down his shriveled little face onto his jumper.

“Okay then,” said Harry, and he and Ron both released the elves, who fell to the floor but did not continue fighting.

“Master called me?” croaked Kreacher, sinking into a bow even as he gave Harry a look that plainly wished him a painful death.

“Yeah, I did,” said Harry, glancing toward Madam Pomfrey’s office door to check that the Muffliato spell was still working; there was no sign that she had heard any of the commotion. “I’ve got a job for you.”

“Kreacher will do whatever Master wants,” said Kreacher, sinking so low that his lips almost touched his gnarled toes, “because Kreacher has no choice, but Kreacher is ashamed to have such a master, yes —”

“Dobby will do it, Harry Potter!” squeaked Dobby, his tennis-ball-sized eyes still swimming in tears. “Dobby would be honored to help Harry Potter!”

“Come to think of it, it would be good to have both of you,” said Harry. “Okay then…I want you to tail Draco Malfoy.”

Ignoring the look of mingled surprise and exasperation on Ron’s face, Harry went on, “I want to know where he’s going, who he’s meeting, and what he’s doing. I want you to follow him around the clock.”

“Yes, Harry Potter!” said Dobby at once, his great eyes shining with excitement. “And if Dobby does it wrong, Dobby will throw himself off the topmost tower, Harry Potter!”

“There won’t be any need for that,” said Harry hastily.

“Master wants me to follow the youngest of the Malfoys?” croaked Kreacher. “Master wants me to spy upon the pureblood great-nephew of my old mistress?”

“That’s the one,” said Harry, foreseeing a great danger and determining to prevent it immediately. “And you’re forbidden to tip him off, Kreacher, or to show him what you’re up to, or to talk to him at all, or to write him messages or…or to contact him in any way. Got it?”

He thought he could see Kreacher struggling to see a loophole in the instructions he had just been given and waited. After a moment or two, and to Harry’s great satisfaction, Kreacher bowed deeply again and said, with bitter resentment, “Master thinks of everything, and Kreacher must obey him even though Kreacher would much rather be the servant of the Malfoy boy, oh yes…”

“That’s settled, then,” said Harry. “I’ll want regular reports, but make sure I’m not surrounded by people when you turn up. Ron and Hermione are okay. And don’t tell anyone what you’re doing. Just stick to Malfoy like a couple of wart plasters.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

LORD VOLDEMORT'S REQUEST

Harry and Ron left the hospital wing first thing on Monday morning, restored to full health by the ministrations of Madam Pomfrey and now able to enjoy the benefits of having been knocked out and poisoned, the best of which was that Hermione was friends with Ron again. Hermione even escorted them down to breakfast, bringing with her the news that Ginny had argued with Dean. The drowsing creature in Harry's chest suddenly raised its head, sniffing the air hopefully.

"What did they row about?" he asked, trying to sound casual as they turned onto a seventh-floor corridor that was deserted but for a very small girl who had been examining a tapestry of trolls in tutus. She looked terrified at the sight of the approaching sixth years and dropped the heavy brass scales she was carrying.

"It's all right!" said Hermione kindly, hurrying forward to help her. "Here…"

She tapped the broken scales with her wand and said, "*Reparo*." The girl did not say thank you, but remained rooted to the spot as they passed and watched them out of sight; Ron glanced back at her.

"I swear they're getting smaller," he said.

"Never mind her," said Harry, a little impatiently. "What did Ginny and Dean row about, Hermione?"

"Oh, Dean was laughing about McLaggen hitting that Bludger at you," said Hermione

"It must've looked funny," said Ron reasonably

"It didn't look funny at all!" said Hermione hotly, "It looked terrible and if Coote and Peakes hadn't caught Harry he could have been badly hurt!"

"Yeah, well, there was no need for Ginny and Dean to split up over it," said Harry, still trying to sound casual. "Or are they still together?"

"Yes, they are — but why are you so interested?" asked Hermione, giving Harry a sharp look.

"I just don't want my Quidditch team messed up again!" he said hastily, but Hermione continued to look suspicious, and he was most relieved when a voice behind them called, "Harry!" giving him an excuse to turn his back on her.

"Oh, hi, Luna."

"I went to the hospital wing to find you," said Luna, rummaging in her bag. "But they said you'd left…"

She thrust what appeared to be a green onion, a large spotted toadstool, and a considerable amount of what looked like cat litter into Ron's hands, finally pulling out a rather grubby scroll of parchment that she handed to Harry.

"…I've been told to give you this."

It was a small roll of parchment, which Harry recognized at once as another invitation to a lesson with Dumbledore.

"Tonight," he told Ron and Hermione, once he had unrolled it.

"Nice commentary last match!" said Ron to Luna as she took back the green onion, the toadstool, and the cat litter. Luna smiled vaguely.

"You're making fun of me, aren't you?" she said. "Everyone says I was dreadful."

"No, I'm serious!" said Ron earnestly. "I can't remember enjoying commentary more! What is this, by the way?" he added, holding the onionlike object up to eye level.

"Oh, it's a Gurdyroot," she said, stuffing the cat litter and the toadstool back into her bag. "You can keep it if you like, I've got a few of them. They're really excellent for warding off Gulping Plimpies." And she walked away, leaving Ron chortling, still clutching the Gurdyroot.

"You know, she's grown on me, Luna," he said, as they set off again for the Great Hall. "I know she's insane, but it's in a good —" He stopped talking very suddenly. Lavender Brown was standing at the foot of the marble staircase looking thunderous.

"Hi," said Ron nervously.

"C'mon," Harry muttered to Hermione, and they sped past, though not before they had heard Lavender say, "Why didn't you tell me you were getting out today? And why was *she* with you?"

Ron looked both sulky and annoyed when he appeared at breakfast half an hour later, and though he sat with Lavender, Harry did not see them exchange a word all the time they were together. Hermione was acting as though she was quite oblivious to all of this, but once or twice Harry saw an inexplicable smirk cross her face. All that day she seemed to be in a particularly good mood, and that evening in the common room she even consented to look over (in other words, finish writing) Harry's Herbology essay, something she had been resolutely refusing to do up to this point, because she had known that Harry would then let Ron copy his work.

"Thanks a lot, Hermione," said Harry, giving her a hasty pat on the back as he checked his watch and saw that it was nearly eight o'clock. "Listen, I've got to hurry or I'll be late for Dumbledore…"

She did not answer, but merely crossed out a few of his feebler sentences in a weary sort of way. Grinning, Harry hurried out through the portrait hole and off to the headmaster's office. The gargoyle leapt aside at the mention of toffee eclairs, and Harry took the spiral staircase two steps at a time, knocking on the door just as a clock within chimed eight.

"Enter," called Dumbledore, but as Harry put out a hand to push the door, it was wrenched open from inside. There stood Professor Trelawney.

"Aha!" she cried, pointing dramatically at Harry as she blinked at him through her magnifying spectacles. "So this is the reason I am to be thrown unceremoniously from your office, Dumbledore!"

"My dear Sybill," said Dumbledore in a slightly exasperated voice, "there is no question of throwing you unceremoniously from anywhere, but Harry does have an appointment, and I really don't think there is any more to be said —"

"Very well," said Professor Trelawney, in a deeply wounded voice. "If you will not banish the usurping nag, so be it…Perhaps I shall find a school where my talents are better appreciated…"

She pushed past Harry and disappeared down the spiral staircase; they heard her stumble halfway down, and Harry guessed that she had tripped over one of her trailing shawls.

"Please close the door and sit down, Harry," said Dumbledore, sounding rather tired.

Harry obeyed, noticing as he took his usual seat in front of Dumbledore's desk that the Pensieve lay between them once more, as did two more tiny crystal bottles full of swirling memory.

"Professor Trelawney still isn't happy Firenze is teaching, then?" Harry asked.

"No," said Dumbledore, "Divination is turning out to be much more trouble than I could have foreseen, never having studied the subject myself. I cannot ask Firenze to return to the forest, where he is now an outcast, nor can I ask Sybill Trelawney to leave. Between ourselves, she has no idea of the danger she would be in outside the castle. She does not know — and I think it would be unwise to enlighten her — that she made the prophecy about you and Voldemort, you see."

Dumbledore heaved a deep sigh, then said, "But never mind my staffing problems. We have much more important matters to discuss. Firstly — have you managed the task I set you at the end of our previous lesson?"

"Ah," said Harry, brought up short. What with Apparition lessons and Quidditch and Ron being poisoned and getting his skull cracked and his determination to find out what Draco Malfoy was up to, Harry had almost forgotten about the memory Dumbledore had asked him to extract

from Professor Slughorn. "Well, I asked Professor Slughorn about it at the end of Potions, sir, but, er, he wouldn't give it to me." There was a little silence.

"I see," said Dumbledore eventually, peering at Harry over the top of his half-moon spectacles and giving Harry the usual sensation that he was being X-rayed. "And you feel that you have exerted your very best efforts in this matter, do you? That you have exercised all of your considerable ingenuity? That you have left no depth of cunning unplumbed in your quest to retrieve the memory?"

"Well," Harry stalled, at a loss for what to say next. His single attempt to get hold of the memory suddenly seemed embarrassingly feeble. "Well…the day Ron swallowed love potion by mistake I took him to Professor Slughorn. I thought maybe if I got Professor Slughorn in a good enough mood —"

"And did that work?" asked Dumbledore.

"Well, no, sir, because Ron got poisoned —"

"— which, naturally, made you forget all about trying to retrieve the memory; I would have expected nothing else, while your best friend was in danger. Once it became clear that Mr. Weasley was going to make a full recovery, however, I would have hoped that you returned to the task I set you. I thought I made it clear to you how very important that memory is. Indeed, I did my best to impress upon you that it is the most crucial memory of all and that we will be wasting our time without it."

A hot, prickly feeling of shame spread from the top of Harry's head all the way down his body. Dumbledore had not raised his voice, he did not even sound angry, but Harry would have preferred him to yell; this cold disappointment was worse than anything.

"Sir," he said, a little desperately, "it isn't that I wasn't bothered or anything, I've just had other — other things…"

"Other things on your mind," Dumbledore finished the sentence for him. "I see."

Silence fell between them again, the most uncomfortable silence Harry had ever experienced with Dumbledore; it seemed to go on and on, punctuated only by the little grunting snores of the portrait of Armando Dippet over Dumbledore's head. Harry felt strangely diminished, as though he had shrunk a little since he had entered the room. When he could stand it no longer he said, "Professor Dumbledore, I'm really sorry. I should have done more…I should have realized you wouldn't have asked me to do it if it wasn't really important."

"Thank you for saying that, Harry," said Dumbledore quietly. "May I hope, then, that you will give this matter higher priority from now on? There will be little point in our meeting after tonight unless we have that memory."

"I'll do it, sir, I'll get it from him," he said earnestly.

"Then we shall say no more about it just now," said Dumbledore more kindly, "but continue with our story where we left off. You remember where that was?"

"Yes, sir," said Harry quickly. "Voldemort killed his father and his grandparents and made it look as though his Uncle Morfin did it. Then he went back to Hogwarts and he asked…he asked Professor Slughorn about Horcruxes," he mumbled shamefacedly.

"Very good," said Dumbledore. "Now, you will remember, I hope, that I told you at the very outset of these meetings of ours that we would be entering the realms of guesswork and speculation?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thus far, as I hope you agree, I have shown you reasonably firm sources of fact for my deductions as to what Voldemort did until the age of seventeen?"

Harry nodded.

"But now, Harry," said Dumbledore, "now things become murkier and stranger. If it was difficult to find evidence about the boy Riddle, it has been almost impossible to find anyone prepared to reminisce about the man Voldemort. In fact, I doubt whether there is a soul alive, apart from himself, who could give us a full account of his life since he left Hogwarts. However, I have two last memories that I would like to share with you." Dumbledore indicated the two little crystal bottles gleaming beside the Pensieve. "I shall then be glad of your opinion as to whether the conclusions I have drawn from them seem likely."

The idea that Dumbledore valued his opinion this highly made Harry feel even more deeply ashamed that he had failed in the task of retrieving the Horcrux memory, and he shifted guiltily in his seat as Dumbledore raised the first of the two bottles to the light and examined it.

"I hope you are not tired of diving into other people's memories, for they are curious recollections, these two," he said. "This first one came from a very old house-elf by the name of Hokey. Before we see what Hokey witnessed, I must quickly recount how Lord Voldemort left Hogwarts.

"He reached the seventh year of his schooling with, as you might have expected, top grades in every examination he had taken. All around him, his classmates were deciding which jobs they were to pursue once they had left Hogwarts. Nearly everybody expected spectacular things from Tom

Riddle, prefect, Head Boy, winner of the Award for Special Services to the School. I know that several teachers, Professor Slughorn amongst them, suggested that he join the Ministry of Magic, offered to set up appointments, put him in touch with useful contacts. He refused all offers. The next thing the staff knew, Voldemort was working at Borgin and Burkes."

"At Borgin and Burkes?" Harry repeated, stunned.

"At Borgin and Burkes," repeated Dumbledore calmly. "I think you will see what attractions the place held for him when we have entered Hokey's memory. But this was not Voldemort's first choice of job. Hardly anyone knew of it at the time — I was one of the few in whom the then headmaster confided — but Voldemort first approached Professor Dippet and asked whether he could remain at Hogwarts as a teacher."

"He wanted to stay here? Why?" asked Harry, more amazed still.

"I believe he had several reasons, though he confided none of them to Professor Dippet," said Dumbledore. "Firstly, and very importantly, Voldemort was, I believe, more attached to this school than he has ever been to a person. Hogwarts was where he had been happiest; the first and only place he had felt at home."

Harry felt slightly uncomfortable at these words, for this was exactly how he felt about Hogwarts too.

"Secondly, the castle is a stronghold of ancient magic. Undoubtedly Voldemort had penetrated many more of its secrets than most of the students who pass through the place, but he may have felt that there were still mysteries to unravel, stores of magic to tap.

"And thirdly, as a teacher, he would have had great power and influence over young witches and wizards. Perhaps he had gained the idea from Professor Slughorn, the teacher with whom he was on best terms, who had demonstrated how influential a role a teacher can play. I do not imagine for an instant that Voldemort envisaged spending the rest of his life at Hogwarts, but I do think that he saw it as a useful recruiting ground, and a place where he might begin to build himself an army."

"But he didn't get the job, sir?"

"No, he did not. Professor Dippet told him that he was too young at eighteen, but invited him to reapply in a few years, if he still wished to teach."

"How did you feel about that, sir?" asked Harry hesitantly.

"Deeply uneasy," said Dumbledore. "I had advised Armando against the appointment — I did not give the reasons I have given you, for Professor Dippet was very fond of Voldemort and

convinced of his honesty. But I did not want Lord Voldemort back at this school, and especially not in a position of power."

"Which job did he want, sir? What subject did he want to teach?"

Somehow, Harry knew the answer even before Dumbledore gave it.

"Defense Against the Dark Arts. It was being taught at the time by an old Professor by the name of Galatea Merrythought, who had been at Hogwarts for nearly fifty years.

"So Voldemort went off to Borgin and Burkes, and all the staff who had admired him said what a waste it was, a brilliant young wizard like that, working in a shop. However, Voldemort was no mere assistant. Polite and handsome and clever, he was soon given particular jobs of the type that only exist in a place like Borgin and Burkes, which specializes, as you know, Harry, in objects with unusual and powerful properties. Voldemort was sent to persuade people to part with their treasures for sale by the partners, and he was, by all accounts, unusually gifted at doing this."

"I'll bet he was," said Harry, unable to contain himself.

"Well, quite," said Dumbledore, with a faint smile. "And now it is time to hear from Hokey the house-elf, who worked for a very old, very rich witch by the name of Hepzibah Smith."

Dumbledore tapped a bottle with his wand, the cork flew out, and he tipped the swirling memory into the Pensieve, saying as he did so, "After you, Harry."

Harry got to his feet and bent once more over the rippling silver contents of the stone basin until his face touched them. He tumbled through dark nothingness and landed in a sitting room in front of an immensely fat old lady wearing an elaborate ginger wig and a brilliant pink set of robes that flowed all around her, giving her the look of a melting iced cake. She was looking into a small jeweled mirror and dabbing rouge onto her already scarlet cheeks with a large powder puff, while the tiniest and oldest house-elf Harry had ever seen laced her fleshy feet into tight satin slippers.

"Hurry up, Hokey!" said Hepzibah imperiously. "He said he'd come at four, it's only a couple of minutes to and he's never been late yet!"

She tucked away her powder puff as the house-elf straightened up. The top of the elf's head barely reached the seat of Hepzibah's chair, and her papery skin hung off her frame just like the crisp linen sheet she wore draped like a toga.

"How do I look?" said Hepzibah, turning her head to admire the various angles of her face in the mirror.

"Lovely, madam," squeaked Hokey.

Harry could only assume that it was down in Hokey's contract that she must lie through her teeth when asked this question, because Hepzibah Smith looked a long way from lovely in his opinion.

A tinkling doorbell rang and both mistress and elf jumped.

"Quick, quick, he's here, Hokey!" cried Hepzibah and the elf scurried out of the room, which was so crammed with objects that it was difficult to see how anybody could navigate their way across it without knocking over at least a dozen things: There were cabinets full of little lacquered boxes, cases full of gold-embossed books, shelves of orbs and celestial globes, and many flourishing potted plants in brass containers. In fact, the room looked like a cross between a magical antique shop and a conservatory.

The house-elf returned within minutes, followed by a tall young man Harry had no difficulty whatsoever in recognizing as Voldemort. He was plainly dressed in a black suit; his hair was a little longer than it had been at school and his cheeks were hollowed, but all of this suited him; he looked more handsome than ever. He picked his way through the cramped room with an air that showed he had visited many times before and bowed low over Hepzibah's fat little hand, brushing it with his lips.

"I brought you flowers," he said quietly, producing a bunch of roses from nowhere.

"You naughty boy, you shouldn't have!" squealed old Hepzibah, though Harry noticed that she had an empty vase standing ready on the nearest little table. "You do spoil this old lady, Tom…Sit down, sit down…Where's Hokey? Ah…"

The house-elf had come dashing back into the room carrying a tray of little cakes, which she set at her mistress's elbow.

"Help yourself, Tom," said Hepzibah, "I know how you love my cakes. Now, how are you? You look pale. They overwork you at that shop, I've said it a hundred times…"

Voldemort smiled mechanically and Hepzibah simpered.

"Well, what's your excuse for visiting this time?" she asked, batering her lashes.

"Mr. Burke would like to make an improved offer for the goblin-made armor," said Voldemort. "Five hundred Galleons, he feels it is a more than fair —"

"Now, now, not so fast, or I'll think you're only here for my trinkets!" pouted Hepzibah.

"I am ordered here because of them," said Voldemort quietly. "I am only a poor assistant, madam, who must do as he is told. Mr. Burke wishes me to inquire —"

“Oh, Mr. Burke, phooey!” said Hepzibah, waving a little hand. “I’ve something to show you that I’ve never shown Mr. Burke! Can you keep a secret, Tom? Will you promise you won’t tell Mr. Burke I’ve got it? He’d never let me rest if he knew I’d shown it to you, and I’m not selling, not to Burke, not to anyone! But you, Tom, you’ll appreciate it for its history, not how many Galleons you can get for it.”

“I’d be glad to see anything Miss Hepzibah shows me,” said Voldemort quietly, and Hepzibah gave another girlish giggle.

“I had Hokey bring it out for me…Hokey, where are you? I want to show Mr. Riddle our finest treasure…In fact, bring both, while you’re at it…”

“Here, madam,” squeaked the house-elf, and Harry saw two leather boxes, one on top of the other, moving across the room as if of their own volition, though he knew the tiny elf was holding them over her head as she wended her way between tables, pouffes, and footstools.

“Now,” said Hepzibah happily, taking the boxes from the elf, laying them in her lap, and preparing to open the topmost one, “I think you’ll like this, Tom…Oh, if my family knew I was showing you…They can’t wait to get their hands on this!”

She opened the lid. Harry edged forward a little to get a better view and saw what looked like a small golden cup with two finely wrought handles.

“I wonder whether you know what it is, Tom? Pick it up, have a good look!” whispered Hepzibah, and Voldemort stretched out a long-fingered hand and lifted the cup by one handle out of its snug silken wrappings. Harry thought he saw a red gleam in his dark eyes. His greedy expression was curiously mirrored on Hepzibah’s face, except that her tiny eyes were fixed upon Voldemort’s handsome features.

“A badger,” murmured Voldemort, examining the engraving upon the cup. “Then this was…?”

“Helga Hufflepuff’s, as you very well know, you clever boy!” said Hepzibah, leaning forward with a loud creaking of corsets and actually pinching his hollow cheek. “Didn’t I tell you I was distantly descended? This has been handed down in the family for years and years. Lovely, isn’t it? And all sorts of powers it’s supposed to possess too, but I haven’t tested them thoroughly, I just keep it nice and safe in here…”

She hooked the cup back off Voldemort’s long forefinger and restored it gently to its box, too intent upon settling it carefully back into position to notice the shadow that crossed Voldemort’s face as the cup was taken away.

“Now then,” said Hepzibah happily, “where’s Hokey? Oh yes, there you are — take that away now, Hokey.”

The elf obediently took the boxed cup, and Hepzibah turned her attention to the much flatter box in her lap.

“I think you’ll like this even more, Tom,” she whispered. “Lean in a little, dear boy, so you can see…Of course, Burke knows I’ve got this one, I bought it from him, and I daresay he’d love to get it back when I’m gone…”

She slid back the fine filigree clasp and flipped open the box. There upon the smooth crimson velvet lay a heavy golden locket.

Voldemort reached out his hand, without invitation this time, and held it up to the light, staring at it.

“Slytherin’s mark,” he said quietly, as the light played upon an ornate, serpentine *S*.

“That’s right!” said Hepzibah, delighted, apparently, at the sight of Voldemort gazing at her locket, transfixed. “I had to pay an arm and a leg for it, but I couldn’t let it pass, not a real treasure like that, had to have it for my collection. Burke bought it, apparently, from a ragged-looking woman who seemed to have stolen it, but had no idea of its true value —”

There was no mistaking it this time: Voldemort’s eyes flashed scarlet at the words, and Harry saw his knuckles whiten on the locket’s chain.

“— I daresay Burke paid her a pittance but there you are…Pretty, isn’t it? And again, all kinds of powers attributed to it, though I just keep it nice and safe…”

She reached out to take the locket back. For a moment, Harry thought Voldemort was not going to let go of it, but then it had slid through his fingers and was back in its red velvet cushion.

“So there you are, Tom, clear, and I hope you enjoyed that!”

She looked him full in the face and for the first time, Harry saw her foolish smile falter.

“Are you all right, dear?”

“Oh yes,” said Voldemort quietly. “Yes, I’m very well…”

“I thought — but a trick of the light, I suppose —” said Hepzibah, looking unnerved, and Harry guessed that she too had seen the momentary red gleam in Voldemort’s eyes.

“Here, Hokey, take these away and lock them up again…The usual enchantments…”

“Time to leave, Harry,” said Dumbledore quietly, and as the in tie elf bobbed away bearing the boxes, Dumbledore grasped Harry once again above the elbow and together they rose up through oblivion and back to Dumbledore’s office.

“Hepzibah Smith died two days after that little scene,” said Dumbledore, resuming his seat and indicating that Harry should do the same. “Hokey the house-elf was convicted by the Ministry of poisoning her mistress’s evening cocoa by accident.”

“No way!” said Harry angrily.

“I see we are of one mind,” said Dumbledore. “Certainly, there are many similarities between this death and that of the Riddles. In both cases, somebody else took the blame, someone who had a clear memory of having caused the death —”

“Hokey confessed?”

“She remembered putting something in her mistress’s cocoa that turned out not to be sugar, but a lethal and little-known poison,” said Dumbledore. “It was concluded that she had not meant to do it, but being old and confused —”

“Voldemort modified her memory, just like he did with Morfin!”

“Yes, that is my conclusion too,” said Dumbledore. “And, just as with Morfin, the Ministry was predisposed to suspect Hokey —”

“— because she was a house-elf,” said Harry. He had rarely felt more in sympathy with the society Hermione had set up, S.P.E.W.

“Precisely,” said Dumbledore. “She was old, she admitted to having tampered with the drink, and nobody at the Ministry bothered to inquire further. As in the case of Morfin, by the time I traced her and managed to extract this memory, her life was almost over — but her memory, of course, proves nothing except that Voldemort knew of the existence of the cup and the locket.

“By the time Hokey was convicted, Hepzibah’s family had realized that two of her greatest treasures were missing. It took them a while to be sure of this, for she had many hiding places, having always guarded her collection most jealously. But before they were sure beyond doubt that the cup and the locket were both gone, the assistant who had worked at Borgin and Burkes, the young man who had visited Hepzibah so regularly and charmed her so well, had resigned his post and vanished. His superiors had no idea where he had gone; they were as surprised as anyone at his disappearance. And that was the last that was seen or heard of Tom Riddle for a very long time.

“Now,” said Dumbledore, “if you don’t mind, Harry, I want to pause once more to draw your attention to certain points of our story. Voldemort had committed another murder; whether it was his first since he killed the Riddles, I do not know, but I think it was. This time, as you will have seen, he killed not for revenge, but for gain. He wanted the two fabulous trophies that poor,

besotted, old woman showed him. Just as he had once robbed the other children at his orphanage, just as he had stolen his Uncle Morfin's ring, so he ran off now with Hepzibahs cup and locket."

"But," said Harry, frowning, "it seems mad…Risking everything, throwing away his job, just for those…"

"Mad to you, perhaps, but not to Voldemort," said Dumbledore. "I hope you will understand in due course exactly what those objects meant to him, Harry, but you must admit that it is not difficult to imagine that he saw the locket, at least, as rightfully his."

"The locket maybe," said Harry, "but why take the cup as well?"

"It had belonged to another of Hogwarts's founders," said Dumbledore. "I think he still felt a great pull toward the school and that he could not resist an object so steeped in Hogwarts history. There were other reasons, I think…I hope to be able to demonstrate them to you in due course.

"And now for the very last recollection I have to show you, at least until you manage to retrieve Professor Slughorn's memory for us. Ten years separates Hokey's memory and this one, ten years during which we can only guess at what Lord Voldemort was doing…"

Harry got to his feet once more as Dumbledore emptied the last memory into the Pensieve.

"Whose memory is it?" he asked.

"Mine," said Dumbledore.

And Harry dived after Dumbledore through the shifting silver mass, landing in the very office he had just left. There was Fawkes slumbering happily on his perch, and there behind the desk was Dumbledore, who looked very similar to the Dumbledore standing beside Harry, though both hands were whole and undamaged and his face was, perhaps, a little less lined. The one difference between the present-day office and this one was that it was snowing in the past; bluish flecks were drifting past the window in the dark and building up on the outside ledge.

The younger Dumbledore seemed to be waiting for something, and sure enough, moments after their arrival, there was a knock on the door and he said, "Enter."

Harry let out a hastily stifled gasp. Voldemort had entered the room. His features were not those Harry had seen emerge from the great stone cauldron almost two years ago: They were not as snake-like, the eyes were not yet scarlet, the face not yet masklike, and yet he was no longer handsome Tom Riddle. It was as though his features had been burned and blurred; they were waxy and oddly distorted, and the whites of the eyes now had a permanently bloody look, though the pupils were not yet the slits that Harry knew they would become. He was wearing a long black cloak, and his face was as pale as the snow glistening on his shoulders.

The Dumbledore behind the desk showed no sign of surprise. Evidently this visit had been made by appointment.

“Good evening, Tom,” said Dumbledore easily. “Won’t you sit down?”

“Thank you,” said Voldemort, and he took the seat to which Dumbledore had gestured — the very seat, by the looks of it, that Harry had just vacated in the present. “I heard that you had become headmaster,” he said, and his voice was slightly higher and colder than it had been. “A worthy choice.”

“I am glad you approve,” said Dumbledore, smiling. “May I offer you a drink?”

“That would be welcome,” said Voldemort. “I have come a long way.”

Dumbledore stood and swept over to the cabinet where he now kept the Pensieve, but which then was full of bottles. Having handed Voldemort a goblet of wine and poured one for himself, he returned to the seat behind his desk.

“So, Tom…to what do I owe the pleasure?”

Voldemort did not answer at once, but merely sipped his wine.

“They do not call me ‘Tom’ anymore,” he said. “These days, I am known as —”

“I know what you are known as,” said Dumbledore, smiling, pleasantly. “But to me, I’m afraid, you will always be Tom Riddle. It is one of the irritating things about old teachers. I am afraid that they never quite forget their charges’ youthful beginnings.”

He raised his glass as though toasting Voldemort, whose face remained expressionless. Nevertheless, Harry felt the atmosphere in the room change subtly: Dumbledore’s refusal to use Voldemort’s chosen name was a refusal to allow Voldemort to dictate the terms of the meeting, and Harry could tell that Voldemort took it as such.

“I am surprised you have remained here so long,” said Voldemort after a short pause. “I always wondered why a wizard such as yourself never wished to leave school.”

“Well,” said Dumbledore, still smiling, “to a wizard such as myself, there can be nothing more important than passing on ancient skills, helping hone young minds. If I remember correctly, you once saw the attraction of teaching too.”

“I see it still,” said Voldemort. “I merely wondered why you — who are so often asked for advice by the Ministry, and who have twice, I think, been offered the post of Minister —”

“Three times at the last count, actually,” said Dumbledore. “But the Ministry never attracted me as a career. Again, something we have in common, I think.”

Voldemort inclined his head, unsmiling, and took another sip of wine. Dumbledore did not break the silence that stretched between them now, but waited, with a look of pleasant expectancy, for Voldemort to talk first.

"I have returned," he said, after a little while, "later, perhaps, than Professor Dippet expected…but I have returned, nevertheless, to request again what he once told me I was too young to have. I have come to you to ask that you permit me to return to this castle, to teach. I think you must know that I have seen and done much since I left this place. I could show and tell your students things they can gain from no other wizard."

Dumbledore considered Voldemort over the top of his own goblet for a while before speaking.

"Yes, I certainly do know that you have seen and done much since leaving us," he said quietly. "Rumors of your doings have reached your old school, Tom. I should be sorry to believe half of them."

Voldemort's expression remained impassive as he said, "Greatness inspires envy, envy engenders spite, spite spawns lies. You must know this, Dumbledore."

"You call it 'greatness,' what you have been doing, do you?" asked Dumbledore delicately.

"Certainly," said Voldemort, and his eyes seemed to burn red. "I have experimented; I have pushed the boundaries of magic further, perhaps, than they have ever been pushed —"

"Of some kinds of magic," Dumbledore corrected him quietly. "Of some. Of others, you remain…forgive me…woefully ignorant."

For the first time, Voldemort smiled. It was a taut leer, an evil thing, more threatening than a look of rage.

"The old argument," he said softly. "But nothing I have seen in the world has supported your famous pronouncements that love is more powerful than my kind of magic, Dumbledore."

"Perhaps you have been looking in the wrong places," suggested Dumbledore.

"Well, then, what better place to start my fresh researches than here, at Hogwarts?" said Voldemort. "Will you let me return? Will you let me share my knowledge with your students? I place myself and my talents at your disposal. I am yours to command."

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. "And what will become of those whom you command? What will happen to those who call themselves — or so rumor has it — the Death Eaters?"

Harry could tell that Voldemort had not expected Dumbledore to know this name; he saw Voldemort's eyes flash red again and the slitlike nostrils flare.

"My friends," he said, after a moment's pause, "will carry on without me, I am sure."

“I am glad to hear that you consider them friends,” said Dumbledore. “I was under the impression that they are more in the order of servants.”

“You are mistaken,” said Voldemort.

“Then if I were to go to the Hog’s Head tonight, I would not find a group of them — Nott, Rosier, Muldber, Dolohov — awaiting your return? Devoted friends indeed, to travel this far with you on a snowy night, merely to wish you luck as you attempted to secure a teaching post.”

There could be no doubt that Dumbledore’s detailed knowledge of those with whom he was traveling was even less welcome to Voldemort; however, he rallied almost at once.

“You are omniscient as ever, Dumbledore.”

“Oh no, merely friendly with the local barmen,” said Dumbledore lightly. “Now, Tom…”

Dumbledore set down his empty glass and drew himself up in his seat, the tips of his fingers together in a very characteristic gesture.

“Let us speak openly. Why have you come here tonight, surrounded by henchmen, to request a job we both know you do not want?”

Voldemort looked coldly surprised. “A job I do not want? On the contrary, Dumbledore, I want it very much.”

“Oh, you want to come back to Hogwarts, but you do not want to teach any more than you wanted to when you were eighteen. What is it you’re after, Tom? Why not try an open request for once?”

Voldemort sneered. “If you do not want to give me a job —”

“Of course I don’t,” said Dumbledore. “And I don’t think for a moment you expected me to. Nevertheless, you came here, you asked, you must have had a purpose.”

Voldemort stood up. He looked less like Tom Riddle than ever, his features thick with rage. “This is your final word?”

“It is,” said Dumbledore, also standing.

“Then we have nothing more to say to each other.”

“No, nothing,” said Dumbledore, and a great sadness filled his face. “The time is long gone when I could frighten you with a burning wardrobe and force you to make repayment for your crimes. But I wish I could, Tom…I wish I could…”

For a second, Harry was on the verge of shouting a pointless warning: He was sure that Voldemort’s hand had twitched toward his pocket and his wand; but then the moment had passed, Voldemort had turned away, the door was closing, and he was gone.

Harry felt Dumbledore's hand close over his arm again and moments later, they were standing together on almost the same spot, but there was no snow building on the window ledge, and Dumbledore's hand was blackened and dead-looking once more.

"Why?" said Harry at once, looking up into Dumbledore's face. "Why did he come back? Did you ever find out?"

"I have ideas," said Dumbledore, "but no more than that."

"What ideas, sir?"

"I shall tell you, Harry, when you have retrieved that memory from Professor Slughorn," said Dumbledore. "When you have that last piece of the jigsaw, everything will, I hope, be clear…to both of us."

Harry was still burning with curiosity and even though Dumbledore had walked to the door and was holding it open for him, he did not move at once.

"Was he after the Defense Against the Dark Arts job again, sir? He didn't say…"

"Oh, he definitely wanted the Defense Against the Dark Arts job," said Dumbledore. "The aftermath of our little meeting proved that. You see, we have never been able to keep a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher for longer than a year since I refused the post to Lord Voldemort."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE UNKNOWABLE ROOM

Harry wracked his brains over the next week as to how he was to persuade Slughorn to hand over the true memory, but nothing in the nature of a brain wave occurred and he was reduced to doing what he did increasingly these days when at a loss: poring over his Potions book, hoping that the Prince would have scribbled something useful in a margin, as he had done so many times before.

"You won't find anything in there," said Hermione firmly, late on Sunday evening.

"Don't start, Hermione," said Harry. "If it hadn't been for the Prince, Ron wouldn't be sitting here now."

"He would if you'd just listened to Snape in our first year," said Hermione dismissively.

Harry ignored her. He had just found an incantation ("*Sectumsempra!*") scrawled in a margin above the intriguing words "For enemies," and was itching to try it out, but thought it best not to in front of Hermione. Instead, he surreptitiously folded down the corner of the page.

They were sitting beside the fire in the common room; the only other people awake were fellow sixth years. There had been a certain amount of excitement earlier when they had come back from dinner to find a new sign on the notice board that announced the date for their Apparition Test. Those who would be seventeen on or before the first test date, the twenty-first of April, had the option of signing up for additional practice sessions, which would take place (heavily supervised) in Hogsmeade.

Ron had panicked on reading this notice; he had still not managed to Apparate and feared he would not be ready for the test. Hermione, who had now achieved Apparition twice, was a little more confident, but Harry, who would not be seventeen for another four months, could not take the test whether ready or not.

"At least you can Apparate, though!" said Ron tensely. "You'll have no trouble come July!"

"I've only done it once," Harry reminded him; he had finally managed to disappear and rematerialize inside his hoop during their previous lesson.

Having wasted a lot of time worrying aloud about Apparition, Ron was now struggling to finish a viciously difficult essay for Snape that Harry and Hermione had already completed. Harry fully expected to receive low marks on his, because he had disagreed with Snape on the best way to tackle dementors, but he did not care: Slughorns memory was the most important thing to him now.

"I'm telling you, the stupid Prince isn't going to be able to help you with this, Harry!" said Hermione, more loudly. "There's only one way to force someone to do what you want, and that's the Imperius Curse, which is illegal —"

"Yeah, I know that, thanks," said Harry, not looking up from the book. "That's why I'm looking for something different. Dumbledore says Veritaserum won't do it, but there might be something else, a potion or a spell…"

"You're going about it the wrong way," said Hermione. "Only you can get the memory, Dumbledore says. That must mean you can persuade Slughorn where other people can't. It's not a question of slipping him a potion, anyone could do that —"

"How do you spell 'belligerent'?" said Ron, shaking his quill very hard while staring at his parchment. "It can't be B — U — M —"

"No, it isn't," said Hermione, pulling Ron's essay toward her. "And 'augury' doesn't begin O — R — G either. What kind of quill are you using?"

"It's one of Fred and George's Spell-Check ones, but I think the charm must be wearing off."

"Yes, it must," said Hermione, pointing at the title of his essay, "because we were asked how we'd deal with dementors, not 'Dug-bogs', and I don't remember you changing your name to 'Roonil Wazlib' either."

"Ah no!" said Ron, staring horror-struck at the parchment. "Don't say I'll have to write the whole thing out again!"

"It's okay, we can fix it," said Hermione, pulling the essay toward her and taking out her wand.

"I love you, Hermione," said Ron, sinking back in his chair, rubbing his eyes wearily.

Hermione turned faintly pink, but merely said, "Don't let Lavender hear you saying that."

"I won't," said Ron into his hands. "Or maybe I will, then she'll ditch me."

"Why don't you ditch her if you want to finish it?" asked Harry.

"You haven't ever chucked anyone, have you?" said Ron. "You and Cho just —"

"Sort of fell apart, yeah," said Harry.

"Wish that would happen with me and Lavender," said Ron gloomily, watching Hermione silently tapping each of his misspelled words with the end of her wand, so that they corrected themselves on the page. "But the more I hint I want to finish it, the tighter she holds on. It's like going out with the giant squid."

"There," said Hermione, some twenty minutes later, handing back Ron's essay.

"Thanks a million," said Ron. "Can I borrow your quill for the conclusion?" Harry, who had found nothing useful in the Half-Blood Prince's notes so far, looked around; the three of them were now the only ones left in the common room, Seamus having just gone up to bed cursing Snape and his essay. The only sounds were the crackling of the fire and Ron scratching out one last paragraph

on dementors using Hermione's quill. Harry had just closed the Half-Blood Prince's book, yawning, when —

Crack.

Hermione let out a little shriek; Ron spilled ink all over his freshly completed essay, and Harry said, "Kreacher!"

The house-elf bowed low and addressed his own gnarled toes. "Master said he wanted regular reports on what the Malfoy boy is doing, so Kreacher has come to give —"

Crack.

Dobby appeared alongside Kreacher, his tea-cozy hat askew. "Dobby has been helping too, Harry Potter!" he squeaked, casting Kreacher a resentful look. "And Kreacher ought to tell Dobby when he is coming to see Harry Potter so they can make their reports together!"

"What is this?" asked Hermione, still looking shocked by these sudden appearances. "What's going on, Harry?"

Harry hesitated before answering, because he had not told Hermione about setting Kreacher and Dobby to tail Malfoy; house-elves were always such a touchy subject with her.

"Well…they've been following Malfoy for me," he said.

"Night and day," croaked Kreacher.

"Dobby has not slept for a week, Harry Potter!" said Dobby proudly, swaying where he stood. Hermione looked indignant.

"You haven't slept, Dobby? But surely, Harry, you didn't tell him not to —"

"No, of course I didn't," said Harry quickly. "Dobby, you can sleep, all right? But has either of you found out anything?" he hastened to ask, before Hermione could intervene again.

"Master Malfoy moves with a nobility that befits his pure blood," croaked Kreacher at once. "His features recall the fine bones of my mistress and his manners are those of —"

"Draco Malfoy is a bad boy!" squeaked Dobby angrily. "A bad boy who — who —" He shuddered from the tassel of his tea cozy to the toes of his socks and then ran at the fire, as though about to dive into it. Harry, to whom this was not entirely unexpected, caught him around the middle and held him fast. For a few seconds Dobby struggled, then went limp.

"Thank you, Harry Potter," he panted. "Dobby still finds it difficult to speak ill of his old masters."

Harry released him; Dobby straightened his tea cozy and said defiantly to Kreacher, "But Kreacher should know that Draco Malfoy is not a good master to a house-elf!"

"Yeah, we don't need to hear about you being in love with Malfoy," Harry told Kreacher. "Let's fast forward to where he's actually been going."

Kreacher bowed again, looking furious, and then said, "Master Malfoy eats in the Great Hall, he sleeps in a dormitory in the dungeons, he attends his classes in a variety of —"

"Dobby, you tell me," said Harry, cutting across Kreacher. "Has he been going anywhere he shouldn't have?"

"Harry Potter, sir," squeaked Dobby, his great orblike eyes shining in the firelight, "the Malfoy boy is breaking no rules that Dobby can discover, but he is still keen to avoid detection. He has been making regular visits to the seventh floor with a variety of other students, who keep watch for him while he enters —"

"The Room of Requirement!" said Harry, smacking himself hard on the forehead with *Advanced Potion-Making*. Hermione and Ron stared at him. "That's where he's been sneaking off to! That's where he's doing…whatever he's doing! And I bet that's why he's been disappearing off the map — come to think of it, I've never seen the Room of Requirement on there!"

"Maybe the Marauders never knew the room was there," said Ron.

"I think it'll be part of the magic of the room," said Hermione. "If you need it to be unplottable, it will be."

"Dobby, have you managed to get in to have a look at what Malfoy's doing?" said Harry eagerly.

"No, Harry Potter, that is impossible," said Dobby.

"No, it's not," said Harry at once. "Malfoy got into our headquarters there last year, so I'll be able to get in and spy on him, no problem."

"But I don't think you will, Harry," said Hermione slowly. "Malfoy already knew exactly how we were using the room, didn't he, because that stupid Marietta had blabbed. He needed the room to become the headquarters of the D.A., so it did. But you don't know what the room becomes when Malfoy goes in there, so you don't know what to ask it to transform into."

"There'll be a way around that," said Harry dismissively. "You've done brilliantly, Dobby."

"Kreachers done well too," said Hermione kindly; but far from looking grateful, Kreacher averted his huge, bloodshot eyes and croaked at the ceiling, "The Mudblood is speaking to Kreacher, Kreacher will pretend he cannot hear —"

"Get out of it," Harry snapped at him, and Kreacher made one last deep bow and Disapparated. "You'd better go and get some sleep too, Dobby."

"Thank you, Harry Potter, sir!" squeaked Dobby happily, and he too vanished.

“How good is this?” said Harry enthusiastically, turning to Ron and Hermione the moment the room was elf-free again. “We know where Malfoy’s going! We’ve got him cornered now!”

“Yeah, it’s great,” said Ron glumly, who was attempting to mop up the sodden mass of ink chat had recently been an almost completed essay. Hermione pulled it toward her and began siphoning the ink off with her wand.

“But what’s all this about him going up there with a variety of students’?” said Hermione. “How many people are in on it? You wouldn’t think he’d trust lots of them to know what he’s doing—”

“Yeah, that is weird,” said Harry, frowning. “I heard him telling Crabbe it wasn’t Crabbe’s business what he was doing…so what’s he telling all these…all these…” Harry’s voice tailed away; he was staring at the fire. “God, I’ve been stupid,” he said quietly. “It’s obvious, isn’t it? There was a great vat of it down in the dungeon…He could’ve nicked some any time during that lesson…”

“Nicked what?” said Ron.

“Polyjuice Potion. He stole some of the Polyjuice Potion Slughorn showed us in our first Potions lesson…There aren’t a whole variety of students standing guard for Malfoy…it’s just Crabbe and Goyle as usual…Yeah, it all fits!” said Harry, jumping up and starting to pace in front of the fire. “They’re stupid enough to do what they’re told even if he won’t tell them what he’s up to, but he doesn’t want them to be seen lurking around outside the Room of Requirement, so he’s got them taking Polyjuice to make them look like other people…Those two girls I saw him with when he missed Quidditch — ha! Crabbe and Goyle!”

“Do you mean to say,” said Hermione in a hushed voice, “that that little girl whose scales I repaired —?”

“Yeah, of course!” said Harry loudly, staring at her. “Of course! Malfoy must’ve been inside the room at the time, so she — what am I talking about? — he dropped the scales to tell Malfoy not to come out, because there was someone there! And there was that girl who dropped the toadspawn too! We’ve been walking past him all the time and not realizing it!”

“He’s got Crabbe and Goyle transforming into girls?” guffawed Ron. “Blimey…no wonder they don’t look too happy these days. I’m surprised they don’t tell him to stuff it.”

“Well, they wouldn’t, would they, if he’s shown them his Dark Mark?” said Harry.

“Hmmm…the Dark Mark we don’t know exists,” said Hermione skeptically, rolling up Ron’s dried essay before it could come to any more harm and handing it to him.

“We’ll see” said Harry confidently.

“Yes, we will,” Hermione said, getting to her feet and stretching. “But, Harry, before you get all excited, I still don’t think you’ll be able to get into the Room of Requirement without knowing what’s there first. And I don’t think you should forget”— she heaved her bag onto her shoulder and gave him a very serious look — “that what you’re *supposed* to be concentrating on is getting that memory from Slughorn. Good night.”

Harry watched her go, feeling slightly disgruntled. Once the door to the girls’ dormitories had closed behind her he rounded on Ron. “What d’you think?”

“Wish I could Disapparate like a house-elf,” said Ron, staring at the spot where Dobby had vanished. “I’d have that Apparition Test in the bag.”

Harry did not sleep well that night. He lay awake for what felt like hours, wondering how Malfoy was using the Room of Requirement and what he, Harry, would see when he went in there the following day, for whatever Hermione said, Harry was sure that if Malfoy had been able to see the headquarters of the D.A., he would be able to see Malfoy’s, what could it be? A meeting place? A hideout? A store-room? A workshop? Harry’s mind worked feverishly and his dreams, when he finally fell asleep, were broken and disturbed by images of Malfoy, who turned into Slughorn, who turned into Snape…

Harry was in a state of great anticipation over breakfast the following morning; he had a free period before Defense Against the Dark Arts and was determined to spend it trying to get into the Room of Requirement. Hermione was rather ostentatiously showing no interest in his whispered plans for forcing entry into the room, which irritated Harry, because he thought she might be a lot of help if she wanted to.

“Look,” he said quietly, leaning forward and putting a hand on the *Daily Prophet*, which she had just removed from a post owl, to stop her from opening it and vanishing behind it. “I haven’t forgotten about Slughorn, but I haven’t got a clue how to get that memory off him, and until I get a brain wave why shouldn’t I find out what Malfoy’s doing?”

“I’ve already told you, you need to persuade Slughorn,” said Hermione. “It’s not a question of tricking him or bewitching him, or Dumbledore could have done it in a second. Instead of messing around outside the Room of Requirement”— she jerked the *Prophet* out from under Harry’s hand and unfolded it to look at the front page — “you should go and find Slughorn and start appealing to his better nature.”

“Anyone we know —?” asked Ron, as Hermione scanned the headlines.

“Yes!” said Hermione, causing both Harry and Ron to gag on their breakfast. “But it’s all right, he’s not dead — its Mundungus, he’s been arrested and sent to Azkaban! Something to do with impersonating an Inferius during an attempted burglary, and someone called Octavius Pepper has vanished. Oh, and how horrible, a nine-year-old boy has been arrested for trying to kill his grandparents, they think he was under the Imperius Curse.”

They finished their breakfast in silence. Hermione set off immediately for Ancient Runes; Ron for the common room, where he still had to finish his conclusion on Snape’s dementor essay, and Harry for the corridor on the seventh floor and the stretch of wall opposite the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy teaching trolls to do ballet.

Harry slipped on his Invisibility Cloak once he had found an empty passage, but he need not have bothered. When he reached his destination he found it deserted. Harry was not sure whether his chances of getting inside the room were better with Malfoy inside it or out, but at least his first attempt was not going to be complicated by the presence of Crabbe or Goyle pretending to be an eleven-year-old girl.

He closed his eyes as he approached the place where the Room of Requirement’s door was concealed. He knew what he had to do; he had become most accomplished at it last year. Concentrating with all his might he thought, *I need to see what Malfoy’s doing in here…I need to see what Malfoy’s doing in here…I need to see what Malfoy’s doing in here…*

Three times he walked past the door; then, his heart pounding with excitement, he opened his eyes and faced it — but he was still looking at a stretch of mundanely blank wall. He moved forward and gave it an experimental push. The stone remained solid and unyielding.

“Okay,” said Harry aloud. “Okay…I thought the wrong thing…” He pondered for a moment then set off again, eyes closed, concentrating as hard as he could. *I need to see the place where Malfoy keeps coming secretly…I need to see the place where Malfoy keeps coming secretly…*After three walks past, he opened his eyes expectantly.

There was no door.

“Oh, come off it,” he told the wall irritably. “That was a clear instruction. Fine.” He thought hard for several minutes before striding off once more. *I need you to become the place you become for Draco Malfoy…*

He did not immediately open his eyes when he had finished his patrolling; he was listening hard, as though he might hear the door pop into existence. He heard nothing, however, except the distant twittering of birds outside. He opened his eyes.

There was still no door.

Harry swore. Someone screamed. He looked around to see a gaggle of first years running back around the corner, apparently under the impression that they had just encountered a particularly foulmouthed ghost.

Harry tried every variation of *I need to see what Draco Malfoy is doing inside you* that he could think of for a whole hour, at the end of which he was forced to concede that Hermione might have had a point: The room simply did not want to open for him. Frus-trated and annoyed, he set off for Defense Against the Dark Arts, pulling off his Invisibility Cloak and stuffing it into his bag as he went.

"Late again, Potter," said Snape coldly, as Harry hurried into the candlelit classroom. "Ten points from Gryfrindor." Harry scowled at Snape as he flung himself into the seat beside Ron. Half the class were still on their feet, taking out books and organizing their things; he could not be much later than any of them.

"Before we start, I want your dementor essays," said Snape, waving his wand carelessly, so that twenty-five scrolls of parchment soared into the air and landed in a neat pile on his desk. "And I hope for your sakes they are better than the tripe I had to endure on resisting the Imperius Curse. Now, if you will all open your books to page — what is it, Mr. Finnigan?"

"Sir," said Seamus, "I've been wondering, how do you tell the difference between an Inferius and a ghost? Because there was something in the paper about an Inferius —"

"No, there wasn't," said Snape in a bored voice.

"But sir, I heard people talking —"

"If you had actually read the article in question, Mr. Finnigan, you would have known that the so-called Inferius was nothing but a smelly sneak thief by the name of Mundungus Fletcher."

"I thought Snape and Mundungus were on the same side," muttered Harry to Ron and Hermione. "Shouldn't he be upset Mundungus has been arrest —"

"But Potter seems to have a lot to say on the subject," said Snape, pointing suddenly at the back of the room, his black eyes fixed on Harry. "Let us ask Potter how we would tell the difference between an Inferius and a ghost."

The whole class looked around at Harry, who hastily tried to recall what Dumbledore had told him the night that they had gone to visit Slughorn. "Er — well — ghosts are transparent —" he said.

"Oh, very good," interrupted Snape, his lip curling. "Yes, it in easy to see that nearly six years of magical education have not been wasted on you, Potter. 'Ghosts are transparent.'"

Pansy Parkinson let out a high-pitched giggle. Several other people were smirking. Harry took a deep breath and continued calmly, though his insides were boiling, "Yeah, ghosts are transparent, but Inferi are dead bodies, aren't they? So they'd be solid —"

"A five-year-old could have told us as much," sneered Snape. "The Inferius is a corpse that has been reanimated by a Dark wizard's spells. It is not alive, it is merely used like a puppet to do the wizard's bidding. A ghost, as I trust that you are all aware by now, is the imprint of a departed soul left upon the earth, and of course, as Potter so wisely tells us, transparent."

"Well, what Harry said is the most useful if we're trying to tell them apart!" said Ron. "When we come face-to-face with one down a dark alley, we're going to be having a look to see if its solid, aren't we, we're not going to be asking, 'Excuse me, are you the imprint of a departed soul?'"

There was a ripple of laughter, instantly quelled by the look Snape gave the class.

"Another ten points from Gryffindor," said Snape. "I would expect nothing more sophisticated from you, Ronald Weasley, the boy so solid he cannot Apparate half an inch across a room."

"*No!*" whispered Hermione, grabbing Harry's arm as he opened his mouth furiously. "There's no point, you'll just end up in detention again, leave it!"

"Now open your books to page two hundred and thirteen," said Snape, smirking a little, "and read the first two paragraphs on the Cruciatus Curse."

Ron was very subdued all through the class. When the bell sounded at the end of the lesson, Lavender caught up with Ron and Harry (Hermione mysteriously melted out of sight as she approached) and abused Snape hotly for his jibe about Ron's Apparition, but this seemed to merely irritate Ron, and he shook her off by making a detour into the boys' bathroom with Harry.

"Snape's right, though, isn't he?" said Ron, after staring into a cracked mirror for a minute or two. "I dunno whether it's worth me taking the test. I just can't get the hang of Apparition."

"You might as well do the extra practice sessions in Hogsmeade and see where they get you," said Harry reasonably. "It'll be more interesting than trying to get into a stupid hoop anyway. Then, if you're still not — you know — as good as you'd like to be, you can postpone the test, do it with me over the summer — Myrtle, this is the boys' bathroom!"

The ghost of a girl had risen out of the toilet in a cubicle behind them and was now floating in midair, staring at them through thick, white, round glasses. "Oh," she said glumly. "It's you two."

"Who were you expecting?" said Ron, looking at her in the mirror.

“Nobody,” said Myrtle, picking moodily at a spot on her chin. “He said he’d come back and see me, but then you said you’d pop in and visit me too”— she gave Harry a reproachful look — “and I haven’t seen you for months and months. I’ve learned not to expect too much from boys.”

“I thought you lived in that girls’ bathroom?” said Harry, who had been careful to give the place a wide berth for some years now.

“I do,” she said, with a sulky little shrug, “but that doesn’t mean I can’t visit other places. I came and saw you in your bath once, remember?”

“Vividly,” said Harry.

“But I thought he liked me,” she said plaintively. “Maybe if you two left, he’d come back again. We had lots in common. I’m sure he felt it.”

And she looked hopefully toward the door. “When you say you had lots in common,” said Ron, sounding rather amused now, “d’you mean he lives in an S-bend too?”

“No,” said Myrtle defiantly, her voice echoing loudly around the old tiled bathroom. “I mean he’s sensitive, people bully him too, and he feels lonely and hasn’t got anybody to talk to, and he’s not afraid to show his feelings and cry!”

“There’s been a boy in here crying?” said Harry curiously. “A young boy?”

“Never you mind!” said Myrtle, her small, leaky eyes fixed on Ron, who was now definitely grinning. “I promised I wouldn’t tell anyone, and I’ll take his secret to the —”

“— not the grave, surely?” said Ron with a snort. “The sewers, maybe.” Myrtle gave a howl of rage and dived back into the toilet, causing water to slop over the sides and onto the floor. Goading Myrtle seemed to have put fresh heart into Ron. “You’re right,” he said, swinging his schoolbag back over his shoulder, “I’ll do the practice sessions in Hogsmeade before I decide about taking the test.”

And so the following weekend, Ron joined Hermione and the rest of the sixth years who would turn seventeen in time to take the test in a fortnight. Harry felt rather jealous watching them all get ready to go into the village; he missed making trips there, and it was a particularly fine spring day, one of the first clear skies they had seen in a long time. However, he had decided to use the time to attempt another assault on the Room of Requirement.

“You’d do better,” said Hermione, when he confided this plan to Ron and her in the entrance hall, “to go straight to Slughorn’s office and try and get that memory from him.”

“I’ve been trying!” said Harry crossly, which was perfectly true. He had lagged behind after every Potions lesson that week in an attempt to corner Slughorn, but the Potions master always left the dungeon so fast that Harry had not been able to catch him. Twice, Harry had gone to his office and

knocked, but received no reply, though on the second occasion he was sure he had heard the quickly stifled sounds of an old gramophone.

"He doesn't want to talk to me, Hermione! He can tell I've been trying to get him on his own again, and he's not going to let it happen!"

"Well, you've just got to keep at it, haven't you?"

The short queue of people waiting to file past Filch, who was doing his usual prodding act with the Secrecy Sensor, moved forward a few steps and Harry did not answer in case he was overheard by the caretaker. He wished Ron and Hermione both luck, then turned and climbed the marble staircase again, determined, whatever Hermione said, to devote an hour or two to the Room of Requirement.

Once out of sight of the entrance hall, Harry pulled the Marauder's Map and his Invisibility Cloak from his bag. Having concealed himself, he tapped the map, murmured, "*I solemnly swear that I am up to no good*," and scanned it carefully.

As it was Sunday morning, nearly all the students were inside their various common rooms, the Gryffindors in one tower, the Ravenclaws in another, the Slytherins in the dungeons, and the Hufflepuffs in the basement near the kitchens. Here and there a stray person meandered around the library or up a corridor. There were a few people out in the grounds, and there, alone in the seventh-floor corridor, was Gregory Goyle. There was no sign of the Room of Requirement, but Harry was not worried about that; if Goyle was standing guard outside it, the room was open, whether the map was aware of it or not. He therefore sprinted up the stairs, slowing down only when he reached the corner into the corridor, when he began to creep, very slowly, toward the very same little girl, clutching her heavy brass scales, that Hermione had so kindly helped a fortnight before. He waited until he was right behind her before bending very low and whispering, "Hello…you're very pretty, aren't you?"

Goyle gave a high-pitched scream of terror, threw the scales up into the air, and sprinted away, vanishing from sight long before the sound of the scales smashing had stopped echoing around the corri-dor. Laughing, Harry turned to contemplate the blank wall behind which, he was sure, Draco Malfoy was now standing frozen, aware that someone unwelcome was out there, but not daring to make an appearance. It gave Harry a most agreeable feeling of power as he tried to remember what form of words he had not yet tried.

Yet this hopeful mood did not last long. Half an hour later, having tried many more variations of his request to see what Malfoy was up to, the wall was just as doorless as ever. Harry felt frustrated

beyond belief Malfoy might be just feet away from him, and there was still not the tiniest shred of evidence as to what he was doing in there. Losing his patience completely, Harry ran at the wall and kicked it.

"OUCH!"

He thought he might have broken his toe; as he clutched it and hopped on one foot, the Invisibility Cloak slipped off him.

"Harry?"

He spun around, one-legged, and toppled over. There, to his utter astonishment, was Tonks, walking toward him as though she frequently strolled up this corridor.

"What're you doing here?" he said, scrambling to his feet again; why did she always have to find him lying on the floor?

"I came to see Dumbledore," said Tonks. Harry thought she looked terrible: thinner than usual, her mouse-colored hair lank.

"His office isn't here," said Harry, "it's round the other side of the castle, behind the gargoyle—"

"I know," said Tonks. "He's not there. Apparently he's gone away again."

"Has he?" said Harry, putting his bruised foot gingerly back on the floor. "Hey — you don't know where he goes, I suppose?"

"No," said Tonks.

"What did you want to see him about?"

"Nothing in particular," said Tonks, picking, apparently unconsciously, at the sleeve of her robe. "I just thought he might know what's going on. I've heard rumors…people getting hurt."

"Yeah, I know, it's all been in the papers," said Harry. "That little kid trying to kill his —"

"The *Prophet's* often behind the times," said Tonks, who didn't seem to be listening to him. "You haven't had any letters from anyone in the Order recently?"

"No one from the Order writes to me anymore," said Harry, "not since Sirius —" He saw that her eyes had filled with tears.

"I'm sorry," he muttered awkwardly. "I mean…I miss him, as well."

"What?" said Tonks blankly, as though she had not heard him. "Well…I'll see you around, Harry…"

And she turned abruptly and walked back down the corridor, leaving Harry to stare after her. After a minute or so, he pulled the Invisibility Cloak on again and resumed his efforts to get into the Room of Requirement, but his heart was not in it. Finally, a hollow feeling in his stomach and the

knowledge that Ron and Hermione would soon be back for lunch made him abandon the attempt and leave the corridor to Malfoy who, hopefully, would be too afraid to leave for some hours to come.

He found Ron and Hermione in the Great Hall, already halfway through an early lunch.

"I did it — well, kind of!" Ron told Harry enthusiastically when he caught sight of him. "I was supposed to be Apparating to outside Madam Puddifoots Tea Shop and I overshot it a bit, ended up near Scrivenshafts, but at least I moved!"

"Good one," said Harry. "How'd you do, Hermione?"

"Oh, she was perfect, obviously," said Ron, before Hermione could answer. "Perfect deliberation, divination, and desperation or whatever the hell it is — we all went for a quick drink in the Three Broomsticks after and you should've heard Twycross going on about her — I'll be surprised if he doesn't pop the question soon —"

"And what about you?" asked Hermione, ignoring Ron. "Have you been up at the Room of Requirement all this time?"

"Yep," said Harry. "And guess who I ran into up there? Tonks!"

"Tonks?" repeated Ron and Hermione together, looking surprised.

"Yeah, she said she'd come to visit Dumbledore."

"If you ask me," said Ron once Harry had finished describing his conversation with Tonks, "she's cracking up a bit. Losing her nerve after what happened at the Ministry."

"It's a bit odd," said Hermione, who for some reason looked very concerned. "She's supposed to be guarding the school, why she suddenly abandoning her post to come and see Dumbledore when he's not even here?"

"I had a thought," said Harry tentatively. He felt strange about voicing it; this was much more Hermione's territory than his. "You don't think she can have been…you know…in love with Sirius?"

Hermione stared at him. "What on earth makes you say that?"

"I dunno," said Harry, shrugging, "but she was nearly crying when I mentioned his name, and her Patronus is a big four-legged thing now. I wondered whether it hadn't become…you know…him."

"It's a thought," said Hermione slowly. "But I still don't know why she'd be bursting into the castle to see Dumbledore, if that's really why she was here."

“Goes back to what I said, doesn’t it?” said Ron, who was now shoveling mashed potato into his mouth. “She’s gone a bit funny. Lost her nerve. Women,” he said wisely to Harry, “they’re easily upset.”

“And yet,” said Hermione, coming out of her reverie, “I doubt you’d find a woman who sulked for half an hour because Madam Rosmerta didn’t laugh at their joke about the hag, the Healer, and the Mimbulus mimbletonia.”

Ron scowled.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

AFTER THE BURIAL

Patches of bright blue sky were beginning to appear over the castle turrets, but these signs of approaching summer did not lift Harry's mood. He had been thwarted, both in his attempts to find out what Malfoy was doing, and in his efforts to start a conversation with Slughorn that might lead, somehow, to Slughorn hand-ing over the memory he had apparently suppressed for decades.

"For the last time, just forget about Malfoy," Hermione told Harry firmly.

They were sitting with Ron in a sunny corner of the courtyard after lunch. Hermione and Ron were both clutching a Ministry of Magic leaflet — *Common Apparition Mistakes and How to Avoid Them* — for they were taking their tests that very afternoon, but by and large the leaflets had not proved soothing to the nerves.

Ron gave a start and tried to hide behind Hermione as a girl came around the corner.

"It isn't Lavender," said Hermione wearily.

"Oh, good," said Ron, relaxing.

"Harry Potter?" said the girl. "I was asked to give you this."

"Thanks…"

Harry's heart sank as he took the small scroll of parchment. Once the girl was out of earshot he said, "Dumbledore said we wouldn't be having any more lessons until I got the memory!"

"Maybe he wants to check on how you're doing?" suggested Hermione, as Harry unrolled the parchment; but rather than finding Dumbledore's long, narrow, slanted writing he saw an untidy sprawl, very difficult to read due to the presence of large blotches on the parchment where the ink had run.

Dear Harry, Ron and Hermione!

Aragog died last night. Harry and Ron, you met him and you know how special he was.

Hermione, I know you'd have liked him. It would mean a lot to me if you'd nip down for the burial later this evening. I'm planning on doing it round dusk, that was his favorite time of day.

I know you're not supposed to be out that late, but you can use the cloak. Wouldn't ask, but I can't face it alone.

Hagrid

"Look at this," said Harry, handing the note to Hermione.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," she said, scanning it quickly and passing it to Ron, who read it through looking increasingly incredulous.

“He’s *mental*!” he said furiously. “That thing told its mates to eat Harry and me! Told them to help themselves! And now Hagrid expects us to go down there and cry over its horrible hairy body!”

“It’s not just that,” said Hermione. “He’s asking us to leave the castle at night and he knows security’s a million times tighter and how much trouble we’d be in if we were caught.”

“We’ve been down to see him by night before,” said Harry.

“Yes, but for something like this?” said Hermione. “We’ve risked a lot to help Hagrid out, but after all — Aragog’s dead. If it were a question of saving him —”

“— I’d want to go even less,” said Ron firmly. “You didn’t meet him, Hermione. Believe me, being dead will have improved him a lot.”

Harry took the note back and stared down at all the inky blotches all over it. Tears had clearly fallen thick and fast upon the parchment…

“Harry, you can’t be thinking of going,” said Hermione. “It’s such a pointless thing to get detention for.”

Harry sighed. “Yeah, I know,” he said. “I s’pose Hagrid’ll have to bury Aragog without us.”

“Yes, he will,” said Hermione, looking relieved. “Look, Potions will be almost empty this afternoon, with us all off doing our tests…Try and soften Slughorn up a bit then!”

“Fifty-seventh time lucky, you think?” said Harry bitterly.

“Lucky,” said Ron suddenly. “Harry, that’s it — get lucky!”

“What d’you mean?”

“Use your lucky potion!”

“Ron, that’s — that’s it!” said Hermione, sounding stunned. “Of course! Why didn’t I think of it?”

Harry stared at them both. “Felix Felicis?” he said. “I dunno…I was sort of saving it…”

“What for?” demanded Ron incredulously.

“What on earth is more important than this memory, Harry?” asked Hermione.

Harry did not answer. The thought of that little golden bottle had hovered on the edges of his imagination for some time; vague and unformulated plans that involved Ginny splitting up with Dean, and Ron somehow being happy to see her with a new boyfriend, had been fermenting in the depths of his brain, unacknowledged except during dreams or the twilight time between sleeping and waking…

“Harry? Are you still with us?” asked Hermione.

"Wha —? Yeah, of course," he said, pulling himself together. "Well…okay. If I can't get Slughorn to talk this afternoon, I'll take some Felix and have another go this evening."

"That's decided, then," said Hermione briskly, getting to her feet and performing a graceful pirouette. "Destination…determination…deliberation…" she murmured.

"Oh, stop that," Ron begged her, "I feel sick enough as it is — quick, hide me!"

"It isn't Lavender!" said Hermione impatiently, as another couple of girls appeared in the courtyard and Ron dived behind her.

"Cool," said Ron, peering over Hermiones shoulder to check. "Blimey, they don't look happy, do they?"

"They're the Montgomery sisters and of course they don't look happy, didn't you hear what happened to their little brother?" said Hermione.

"I'm losing track of what's happening to everyone's relatives, to be honest," said Ron.

"Well, their brother was attacked by a werewolf. The rumor is that their mother refused to help the Death Eaters. Anyway, the boy was only five and he died in St. Mungos, they couldn't save him."

"He died?" repeated Harry, shocked. "But surely werewolves don't kill, they just turn you into one of them?"

"They sometimes kill," said Ron, who looked unusually grave now. "I've heard of it happening when the werewolf gets carried away."

"What was the werewolf's name?" said Harry quickly.

"Well, the rumor is that it was that Fenrir Greyback," said Hermione.

"I knew it — the maniac who likes attacking kids, the one Lupin told me about!" said Harry angrily.

Hermione looked at him bleakly.

"Harry, you've got to get that memory," she said. "It's all about stopping Voldemort, isn't it? These dreadful things that are happening are all down to him…"

The bell rang overhead in the castle and both Hermione and Ron jumped to their feet, looking terrified.

"You'll do fine," Harry told them both, as they headed toward the entrance hall to meet the rest of the people taking their Apparition Test. "Good luck."

"And you too!" said Hermione with a significant look, as Harry headed off to the dungeons.

There were only three of them in Potions that afternoon: Harry, Ernie, and Draco Malfoy.

"All too young to Apparate just yet?" said Slughorh genially, "Not turned seventeen yet?"

They shook their heads.

"Ah well," said Slughorn cheerily, "as we're so few, we'll do something for fun. I want you all to brew me up something amusing!"

"That sounds good, sir," said Ernie sycophantically, rubbing his hands together. Malfoy, on the other hand, did not crack a smile.

"What do you mean, 'something amusing'?" he said irritably.

"Oh, surprise me," said Slughorn airily.

Malfoy opened his copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* with a sulky expression. It could not have been plainer that he thought this lesson was a waste of time. Undoubtedly, Harry thought, watching him over the top of his own book, Malfoy was begrudging the time he could otherwise be spending in the Room of Requirement.

Was it his imagination, or did Malfoy, like Tonks, look thinner! Certainly he looked paler; his skin still had that grayish tinge, probably because he so rarely saw daylight these days. But there was no air of smugness, excitement, or superiority; none of the swagger that he had had on the Hogwarts Express, when he had boasted openly of the mission he had been given by Voldemort…There could be only one conclusion, in Harry's opinion: The mission, whatever it was, was going badly.

Cheered by this thought, Harry skimmed through his copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* and found a heavily corrected Half-Blood Prince's version of "An Elixir to Induce Euphoria," which seemed not only to meet Slughorn's instructions, but which might (Harry's heart leapt as the thought struck him) put Slughorn into such a good mood that he would be prepared to hand over that memory if Harry could persuade him to taste some…

"Well, now, this looks absolutely wonderful," said Slughorn an hour and a half later, clapping his hands together as he stared down into the sunshine yellow contents of Harry's cauldron. "Euphoria, I take it? And what's that I smell? Mmmm…you've added just a sprig of peppermint, haven't you? Unorthodox, but what a stroke of inspiration, Harry, of course, that would tend to counterbalance the occasional side effects of excessive singing and nose-tweaking…I really don't know where you get these brain waves, my boy…unless —"

Harry pushed the Half-Blood Prince's book deeper into his bag with his foot.

"— it's just your mother's genes coming out in you!"

"Oh…yeah, maybe," said Harry, relieved.

Ernie was looking rather grumpy; determined to outshine Harry for once, he had most rashly invented his own potion, which had curdled and formed a kind of purple dumpling at the bottom of his cauldron. Malfoy was already packing up, sour-faced; Slughorn had pronounced his Hiccuping Solution merely "passable."

The bell rang and both Ernie and Malfoy left at once. "Sir," Harry began, but Slughorn immediately glanced over his shoulder; when he saw that the room was empty but for himself and Harry, he hurried away as fast as he could.

"Professor — Professor, don't you want to taste my po —?" called Harry desperately.

But Slughorn had gone. Disappointed, Harry emptied the caul-dron, packed up his things, left the dungeon, and walked slowly back upstairs to the common room.

Ron and Hermione returned in the late afternoon.

"Harry!" cried Hermione as she climbed through the portrait hole. "Harry, I passed!"

"Well done!" he said. "And Ron?"

"He — he just failed," whispered Hermione, as Ron came slouching into the room looking most morose. "It was really unlucky, a tiny thing, the examiner just spotted that he'd left half an eyebrow behind…How did it go with Slughorn?"

"No joy," said Harry, as Ron joined them. "Bad luck, mate, but you'll pass next time — we can take it together."

"Yeah, I s'pose," said Ron grumpily. "But half an eyebrow – like that matters!"

"I know," said Hermione soothingly, "it does seem really harsh…"

They spent most of their dinner roundly abusing the Apparition examiner, and Ron looked fractionally more cheerful by the time they set off back to the common room, now discussing the continuing problem of Slughorn and the memory.

"So, Harry — you going to use the Felix Felicis or what?" Ron demanded.

"Yeah, I s'pose I'd better," said Harry. "I don't reckon I'll need all of it, not twelve hours' worth, it can't take all night…I'll just take a mouthful. Two or three hours should do it."

"It's a great feeling when you take it," said Ron reminiscently. "Like you can't do anything wrong."

"What are you talking about?" said Hermione, laughing. "You've never taken any!"

"Yeah, but I thought I had, didn't I?" said Ron, as though ex-plaining the obvious. "Same difference really…"

As they had only just seen Slughorn enter the Great Hall and knew that he liked to take time over meals, they lingered for a while in the common room, the plan being that Harry should go to Slughorn s office once the teacher had had time to get back there. When the sun had sunk to the level of the treetops in the Forbidden Forest, they decided the moment had come, and after checking carefully that Neville, Dean, and Seamus were all in the common room, sneaked up to the boys' dormitory.

Harry took out the rolled-up socks at the bottom of his trunk and extracted the tiny, gleaming bottle.

"Well, here goes," said Harry, and he raised the little bottle and look a carefully measured gulp.

"What does it feel like?" whispered Hermione.

Harry did not answer for a moment. Then, slowly but surely, an exhilarating sense of infinite opportunity stole through him; he felt as though he could have done anything, anything at all…and getting the memory from Slughorn seemed suddenly not only pos-sible, but positively easy…

He got to his feet, smiling, brimming with confidence.

"Excellent," he said. "Really excellent. Right…I'm going down to Hagrid's."

"What?" said Ron and Hermione together, looking aghast.

"No, Harry — you've got to go and see Slughorn, remember?" said Hermione.

"No," said Harry confidently. "I'm going to Hagrid's, I've got a good feeling about going to Hagrid's."

"You've got a good feeling about burying a giant spider?" asked Ron, looking stunned.

"Yeah," said Harry, pulling his Invisibility Cloak out of his bag. "I feel like it's the place to be tonight, you know what I mean?"

"No," said Ron and Hermione together, both looking positively alarmed now.

"This is Felix Felicis, I suppose?" said Hermione anxiously, holding up the bottle to the light. "You haven't got another little bottle full of — I don't know —"

"Essence of Insanity?" suggested Ron, as Harry swung his cloak over his shoulders.

Harry laughed, and Ron and Hermione looked even more alarmed.

"Trust me," he said. "I know what I'm doing…or at least" he strolled confidently to the door — "Felix does."

He pulled the Invisibility Cloak over his head and set off down the stairs, Ron and Hermione hurrying along behind him. At the foot of the stairs, Harry slid through the open door.

“What were you doing up there with her” shrieked Lavender Brown, staring right through Harry at Ron and Hermione emerging together from the boys’ dormitories. Harry heard Ron spluttering behind him as he darted across the room away from them.

Getting through the portrait hole was simple; as he approached it, Ginny and Dean came through it, and Harry was able to slip between them. As he did so, he brushed accidentally against Ginny.

“Don’t push me, please, Dean,” she said, sounding annoyed. “You’re always doing that, I can get through perfectly well on my own…”

The portrait swung closed behind Harry, but not before he had heard Dean make an angry retort…His feeling of elation increasing, Harry strode off through the castle. He did not have to creep along, for he met nobody on his way, but this did not surprise him in the slightest. This evening, he was the luckiest person at Hogwarts.

Why he knew that going to Hagrid’s was the right thing to do, he had no idea. It was as though the potion was illuminating a few steps of the path at a time. He could not see the final destination, he could not see where Slughorn came in, but he knew that he was going the right way to get that memory. When he reached the entrance hall he saw that Filch had forgotten to lock the front door. Beaming, Harry threw it open and breathed in the smell of clean air and grass for a moment before walking down the steps into the dusk.

It was when he reached the bottom step that it occurred to him how very pleasant it would be to pass the vegetable patch on his walk to Hagrid’s. It was not strictly on the way, but it seemed clear to Harry that this was a whim on which he should act, so he directed his feet immediately toward the vegetable patch, where he was pleased, but not altogether surprised, to find Professor Slughorn in conversation with Professor Sprout. Harry lurked behind a low stone wall, feeling at peace with the world and listening to their conversation.

“I do thank you for taking the time, Pomona,” Slughorn was saying courteously, “most authorities agree that they are at their most efficacious if picked at twilight.”

“Oh, I quite agree,” said Professor Sprout warmly. “That enough for you?”

“Plenty, plenty,” said Slughorn, who, Harry saw, was carrying an armful of leafy plants. “This should allow for a few leaves for each of my third years, and some to spare if anybody over-stews them…Well, good evening to you, and many thanks again!”

Professor Sprout headed off into the gathering darkness in the direction of her greenhouses, and Slughorn directed his steps to the spot where Harry stood, invisible.

Seized with an immediate desire to reveal himself, Harry pullet I off the cloak with a flourish.

"Good evening, Professor."

"Merlin's beard, Harry, you made me jump," said Slughotn, stopping dead in his tracks and looking wary. "How did you get out of the castle?"

"I think Filch must've forgotten to lock the doors," said Harry cheerfully, and was delighted to see Slughorn scowl.

"I'll be reporting that man, he's more concerned about litter than proper security if you ask me…But why are you out then, Harry?"

"Well, sir, it's Hagrid," said Harry, who knew that the right thing to do just now was to tell the truth. "He's pretty upset…But you won't tell anyone, Professor? I don't want trouble for him…"

Slughorn's curiosity was evidently aroused. "Well, I can't promise that," he said gruffly. "But I know that Dumbledore trusts Hagrid to the hilt, so I'm sure he can't be up to anything very dreadful…"

"Well, it's this giant spider, he's had it for years…It lived in the forest…It could talk and everything —"

"I heard rumors there were acromantulas in the forest," said Slughorn softly, looking over at the mass of black trees. "It's true, then?"

"Yes," said Harry. "But this one, Aragog, the first one Hagrid ever got, it died last night. He's devastated. He wants company while he buries it and I said I'd go."

"Touching, touching," said Slughorn absentmindedly, his large droopy eyes fixed upon the distant lights of Hagrid's cabin. "But acromantula venom is very valuable…If the beast only just died it might not yet have dried out…Of course, I wouldn't want to do anything insensitive if Hagrid is upset…but if there was any way to procure some…I mean, it's almost impossible to get venom from an acromantula while it's alive…"

Slughorn seemed to be talking more to himself than Harry now. "…seems an awful waste not to collect it…might get a hundred Galleons a pint…To be frank, my salary is not large…"

And now Harry saw clearly what was to be done. "Well," he said, with a most convincing hesitancy, "well, if you wanted to come, Professor, Hagrid would probably be really pleased…Give Aragog a better send-off, you know…"

"Yes, of course," said Slughorn, his eyes now gleaming with en-thusiasm. "I tell you what, Harry, I'll meet you down there with a bottle or two…We'll drink the poor beast's — well — not health —

but we'll send it off in style, anyway, once it's buried. And I'll change my tie, this one is a little exuberant for the occasion…"

He bustled back into the castle, and Harry sped off to Hagrid's, delighted with himself.

"Yeh came," croaked Hagrid, when he opened the door and saw Harry emerging from the Invisibility Cloak in front of him.

"Yeah — Ron and Hermione couldn't, though," said Harry. "They're really sorry."

"Don — don matter…Hed've bin touched yeh're here, though, Harry…"

Hagrid gave a great sob. He had made himself a black armband out of what looked like a rag dipped in boot polish, and his eyes were puffy, red, and swollen. Harry patted him consolingly on the elbow, which was the highest point of Hagrid he could easily reach.

"Where are we burying him?" he asked. "The forest?"

"Blimey, no," said Hagrid, wiping his streaming eyes on the bot-tom of his shirt. "The other spiders won' let me anywhere near their webs now Aragog's gone. Turns out it was only on his orders they didn' eat me! Can yeh believe that, Harry?"

The honest answer was "yes"; Harry recalled with painful ease the scene when he and Ron had come face-to-face with the aero-mantulas. They had been quite clear that Aragog was the only thing that stopped them from eating Hagrid.

"Never bin an area o' the forest I couldn' go before!" said Hagrid, shaking his head. "It wasn' easy, gettin' Aragog's body out o' there, I can tell yeh — they usually eat their dead, see…But I wanted ter give 'im a nice burial…a proper send-off…"

He broke into sobs again and Harry resumed the patting of his elbow, saying as he did so (for the potion seemed to indicate that it was the right thing to do), "Professor Slughorn met me coming down here, Hagrid."

"Not in trouble, are yeh?" said Hagrid, looking up, alarmed. "Yeh shouldn' be outta the castle in the evenin', I know it, it's my fault —"

"No, no, when he heard what I was doing he said he'd like to come and pay his last respects to Aragog too," said Harry. "He's gone to change into something more suitable, I think…and he said he'd bring some bottles so we can drink to Aragog's memory…"

"Did he?" said Hagrid, looking both astonished and touched. "Tha's — tha's righ' nice of him, that is, an' not turnin' yeh in either. I've never really had a lot ter do with Horace Slughorn before…Comin' ter see old Aragog off, though, eh? Well…he'd've liked that, Aragog would…"

Harry thought privately that what Aragog would have liked most about Slughorn was the ample amount of edible flesh he provided, but he merely moved to the rear window of Hagrid's hut, where he saw the rather horrible sight of the enormous dead spider lying on its back outside, its legs curled and tangled.

"Are we going to bury him here, Hagrid, in your garden?"

"Jus' beyond the pumpkin patch, I thought," said Hagrid in a choked voice. "I've already dug the — yeh know — grave. Jus' thought we'd say a few nice things over him — happy memories, yeh know —"

His voice quivered and broke. There was a knock on the door, and he turned to answer it, blowing his nose on his great spotted handkerchief as he did so. Slughorn hurried over the threshold, several bottles in his arms, and wearing a somber black cravat.

"Hagrid," he said, in a deep, grave voice. "So very sorry to hear of your loss."

"Tha's very nice of yeh," said Hagrid. "Thanks a lot. An' thanks fer not givin Harry detention neither…"

"Wouldn't have dreamed of it," said Slughorn. "Sad night, sad night…Where is the poor creature?"

"Out here," said Hagrid in a shaking voice. "Shall we — shall we do it, then?"

The three of them stepped out into the back garden. The moon was glistening palely through the trees now, and its rays mingled with the light spilling from Hagrid's window to illuminate Aragogs body lying on the edge of a massive pit beside a ten-foot- high mound of freshly dug earth.

"Magnificent," said Slughorn, approaching the spiders head, where eight milky eyes stared blankly at the sky and two huge, curved pincers shone, motionless, in the moonlight. Harry thougln he heard the tinkle of bottles as Slughorn bent over the pincers, apparently examining the enormous hairy head.

"Its not ev'ryone appreciates how beau'iful they are' said H grid to Slughorn's back, tears leaking from the corners of his crinkled eyes. "I didn' know yeh were interested in creatures like Aragog, Horace."

"Interested? My dear Hagrid, I revere them," said Slughorn, stepping back from the body. Harry saw the glint of a bottle disappear beneath his cloak, though Hagrid, mopping his eyes once more, noticed nothing. "Now…shall we proceed to the burial?"

Hagrid nodded and moved forward. He heaved the gigantic spider into his arms and, with an enormous grunt, rolled it into the dark pit. It hit the bottom with a rather horrible, crunchy thud. Hagrid started to cry again.

"Of course, it's difficult for you, who knew him best," said Slughorn, who like Harry could reach no higher than Hagrid's elbow, but patted it all the same. "Why don't I say a few words?"

He must have got a lot of good quality venom from Aragog, Harry thought, for Slughorn wore a satisfied smirk as he stepped up to the rim of the pit and said, in a slow, impressive voice, "Farewell, Aragog, king of arachnids, whose long and faithful friendship those who knew you won't forget! Though your body will decay, your spirit lingers on in the quiet, web-spun places of your forest home. May your many-eyed descendants ever flourish and your human friends find solace for the loss they have sustained."

"Tha was…tha was…beau'iful!" howled Hagrid, and he collapsed onto the compost heap, crying harder than ever.

"There, there," said Slughorn, waving his wand so that the huge pile of earth rose up and then fell, with a muffled sort of crash, onto the dead spider, forming a smooth mound. "Lets get inside and have a drink. Get on his other side, Harry…That's it…Up you come, Hagrid…Well done…"

They deposited Hagrid in a chair at the table. Fang, who had been skulking in his basket during the burial, now came padding softly across to them and put his heavy head into Harry's lap as usual. Slughorn uncorked one of the bottles of wine he had brought.

"I have had it all tested for poison," he assured Harry, pouring most of the first bottle into one of Hagrid's bucket-sized mugs and handing it to Hagrid. "Had a house-elf taste every bottle after what happened to your poor friend Rupert."

Harry saw, in his mind's eye, the expression on Hermione's face if she ever heard about this abuse of houseelves, and decided never to mention it to her.

"One for Harry…" said Slughorn, dividing a second bottle between two mugs, "…and one for me. Well"— he raised his mug high — "to Aragog."

"Aragog," said Harry and Hagrid together. Both Slughorn and Hagrid drank deeply. Harry, however, with the way ahead illuminated for him by Felix Felicis, knew that he must not drink, so he merely pretended to take a gulp and then set the mug back on the table before him.

"I had him from an egg, yeh know," said Hagrid morosely. "'Tiny little thing he was when he hatched. 'Bout the size of a Pekingese"

"Sweet," said Slughorn.

“Used ter keep him in a cupboard up at the school until…well…”

Hagrid’s face darkened and Harry knew why: Tom Riddle had contrived to have Hagrid thrown out of school, blamed for opening the Chamber of Secrets. Slughorn, however, did not seem to be listening; he was looking up at the ceiling, from which a number of brass pots hung, and also a long, silky skein of bright white hair.

“That’s not unicorn hair, Hagrid?”

“Oh, yeah,” said Hagrid indifferently. “Gets pulled out of their tails, they catch it on branches an’ stuff in the forest, yeh know…”

“But my dear chap, do you know how much that’s worth?”

“I use it fer bindin’ on bandages an’ stuff if a creature gets in jured,” said Hagrid, shrugging. “It’s dead useful…very strong.”

Slughorn took another deep draught from his mug, his eyes moving carefully around the cabin now, looking, Harry knew, for more treasures that he might be able to convert into a plentiful suply of oak-matured mead, crystalized pineapple, and velvet smoking jackets. He refilled Hagrid’s mug and his own, and questioned him about the creatures that lived in the forest these days and how Hagrid was able to look after them all. Hagrid, becoming expan-sive under the influence of the drink and Slughorn’s flattering interest, stopped mopping his eyes and entered happily into a long explanation of bowtruckle husbandry.

The Felix Felicis gave Harry a little nudge at this point, and he noticed that the supply of drink that Slughorn had brought was running out fast. Harry had not yet managed to bring off the Refilling Charm without saying the incantation aloud, but the idea that he might not be able to do it tonight was laughable: Indeed, Harry grinned to himself as, unnoticed by either Hagrid or Slughorn (now swapping tales of the illegal trade in dragon eggs) he pointed his wand under the able at the emptying bottles and they immediately began to refill.

After an hour or so, Hagrid and Slughorn began making extravagant toasts: to Hogwarts, to Dumbledore, to elf-made wine, and to —

“Harry Potter!” bellowed Hagrid, slopping some of his fourteenth bucket of wine down his chin as he drained it.

“Yes, indeed,” cried Slughorn a little thickly, “Parry Otter, the Chosen Boy Who — well — something of that sort,” he mumbled, and drained his mug too.

Not long after this, Hagrid became tearful again and pressed the whole unicorn tail upon Slughorn, who pocketed it with cries of, “To friendship! To generosity! To ten Galleons a hair!”

And for a while after that, Hagrid and Slughorn were sitting side by side, arms around each other, singing a slow sad song about a dying wizard called Odo.

"Aaargh, the good die young," muttered Hagrid, slumping low onto the table, a little cross-eyed, while Slughorn continued to war-ble the refrain. "Me dad was no age ter go…nor were yer mum' an' dad, Harry…"

Great fat tears oozed out of the corners of Hagrid's crinkled eyes again; he grasped Harry's arm and shook it

"Bes' wiz and witchard o' their age…I never knew…terrible thing…terrible thing…"

And Odo the hero, they bore him back home

To the place that he'd known as a lad,

sang Slughorn plaintively.

They laid him to rest with his hat inside out.

And his wand snapped in two, which was sad.

"…terrible," Hagrid grunted, and his great shaggy head rolled sideways onto his arms and he fell asleep, snoring deeply.

"Sorry," said Slughorn with a hiccup. "Can't carry a tune to save my life."

"Hagrid wasn't talking about your singing," said Harry quietly. "He was talking about my mum and dad dying."

"Oh," said Slughorn, repressing a large belch. "Oh dear. Yes, that was — was terrible indeed. Terrible…terrible…"

He looked quite at a loss for what to say, and resorted to refilling their mugs.

"I don't — don't suppose you remember it, Harry?" he asked awkwardly.

"No — well, I was only one when they died," said Harry, his eyes on the flame of the candle flickering in Hagrid's heavy snores. "But I've found out pretty much what happened since. My dad died first. Did you know that?"

"I — I didn't," said Slughorn in a hushed voice.

"Yeah…Voldemort murdered him and then stepped over his body toward my mum," said Harry.

Slughorn gave a great shudder, but he did not seem able to tear his horrified gaze away from Harry's face.

"He told her to get out of the way," said Harry remorselessly. "He told me she needn't have died. He only wanted me. She could have run."

“Oh dear,” breathed Slughorn. “She could have…she needn’t…That’s awful…”

“It is, isn’t it?” said Harry, in a voice barely more than a whisper. “But she didn’t move. Dad was already dead, but she didn’t want me to go too. She tried to plead with Voldemort…but he just laughed…”

“That’s enough!” said Slughorn suddenly, raising a shaking hand. “Really, my dear boy, enough…I’m an old man…I don’t need to hear…I don’t want to hear…”

“I forgot,” lied Harry, Felix Felicis leading him on. “You liked her, didn’t you?”

“Liked her?” said Slughorn, his eyes brimming with tears once more. “I don’t imagine anyone who met her wouldn’t have liked her…Very brave…Very funny…It was the most horrible thing…”

“But you won’t help her son,” said Harry. “She gave me her life, but you won’t give me a memory.”

Hagrid’s rumbling snores filled the cabin. Harry looked steadily into Slughorn’s tear-filled eyes. The Potions master seemed unable to look away.

“Don’t say that,” he whispered. “It isn’t a question…If it were to help you, of course…but no purpose can be served…”

“It can,” said Harry clearly. “Dumbledore needs information. I need information.”

He knew he was safe: Felix was telling him that Slughorn would remember nothing of this in the morning. Looking Slughorn straight in the eye, Harry leaned forward a little.

“I am the Chosen One. I have to kill him. I need that memory.”

Slughorn turned paler than ever; his shiny forehead gleamed with sweat.

“You are the Chosen One?”

“Of course I am,” said Harry calmly.

“But then…my dear boy…you’re asking a great deal…you’re asking me, in fact, to aid you in your attempt to destroy —”

“You don’t want to get rid of the wizard who killed Lily Evans?’”

“Harry, Harry, of course I do, but —”

“You’re scared he’ll find out you helped me?”

Slughorn said nothing; he looked terrified.

“Be brave like my mother, Professor…”

Slughorn raised a pudgy hand and pressed his shaking fingers to his mouth; he looked for a moment like an enormously overgrown baby.

“I am not proud…” he whispered through his fingers. “I am ashamed of what — of what that memory shows…I think I may have done great damage that day…”

“You’d cancel out anything you did by giving me the memory,” said Harry. “It would be a very brave and noble thing to do.”

Hagrid twitched in his sleep and snored on. Slughorn and Harry stared at each other over the guttering candle. There was a long, long silence, but Felix Felicis told Harry not to break it, to wait. Then, very slowly, Slughorn put his hand in his pocket and pulled out his wand. He put his other hand inside his cloak and took out a small, empty bottle. Still looking into Harry’s eyes, Slughorn touched the tip of his wand to his temple and withdrew it, so that a long, silver thread of memory came away too, clinging to the wand tip. Longer and longer the memory stretched until it broke and swung, silvery bright, from the wand. Slughorn lowered it into the bottle where it coiled, then spread, swirling like gas. He corked the bottle with a trembling hand and then passed it across the table to Harry.

“Thank you very much, Professor.”

“You’re a good boy,” said Professor Slughorn, tears trickling down his fat cheeks into his walrus mustache. “And you’ve got her eyes…Just don’t think too badly of me once you’ve seen it…”

And he too put his head on his arms, gave a deep sigh, and fell asleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

HORCRUXES

Harry could feel the Felix Felicis wearing off as he creeped back into the castle. The front door had remained unlocked for him, but on the third floor he met Peeves and only narrowly avoided detection by diving sideways through one of his shortcuts. By the time he got up to the portrait of the Fat Lady and pulled off his Invisibility Cloak, he was not surprised to find her in a most unhelpful mood.

"What sort of time do you call this?"

"I'm really sorry — I had to go out for something important —"

"Well, the password changed at midnight, so you'll just have to sleep in the corridor, won't you?"

"You're joking!" said Harry. "Why did it have to change at midnight?"

"That's the way it is," said the Fat Lady. "If you're angry, go and take it up with the headmaster, he's the one who's tightened security."

"Fantastic," said Harry bitterly, looking around at the hard floor. "Really brilliant. Yeah, I would go and take it up with Dumbledore if he was here, because he's the one who wanted me to —"

"He is here," said a voice behind Harry. "Professor Dumbledore returned to the school an hour ago."

Nearly Headless Nick was gliding toward Harry, his head wobbling as usual upon his ruff.

"I had it from the Bloody Baron, who saw him arrive," said Nick. "He appeared, according to the Baron, to be in good spirits, though a little tired, of course."

"Where is he?" said Harry, his heart leaping,"

"Oh, groaning and clanking up on the Astronomy Tower, it's a, favorite pastime of his —"

"Not the Bloody Baron — Dumbledore!"

"Oh — in his office," said Nick. "I believe, from what the Baron said, that he had business to attend to before turning in —"

"Yeah, he has," said Harry, excitement blazing in his chest at the prospect of telling Dumbledore he had secured the memory. He wheeled about and sprinted off again, ignoring the Fat Lady who was calling after him.

"Come back! All right, I lied! I was annoyed you woke me up! The password's still 'tapeworm'!"

But Harry was already hurtling back along the corridor and within minutes, he was saying "toffee eclairs" to Dumbledore's gargoyle, which leapt aside, permitting Harry entrance onto the spiral staircase.

“Enter,” said Dumbledore when Harry knocked. He sounded exhausted. Harry pushed open the door. There was Dumbledore’s office, looking the same as ever, but with black, star-strewn skies beyond the windows.

“Good gracious, Harry,” said Dumbledore in surprise. “To what do I owe this very late pleasure?”

“Sir — I’ve got it. I’ve got the memory from Slughorn.”

Harry pulled out the tiny glass bottle and showed it to Dumbledore. For a moment or two, the headmaster looked stunned. Then his face split in a wide smile.

“Harry, this is spectacular news! Very well done indeed! I knew you could do it!”

All thought of the lateness of the hour apparently forgotten, he hurried around his desk, took the bottle with Slughorn’s memory in his uninjured hand, and strode over to the cabinet where he kepi the Pensieve.

“And now,” said Dumbledore, placing the stone basin upon the desk and emptying the contents of the bottle into it. “Now, at last, we shall see. Harry, quickly…”

Harry bowed obediently over the Pensieve and felt his feet leave the office floor…Once again he fell through darkness and landed in Horace Slughorn’s office many years before. There was the much younger Slughorn, with his thick, shiny, straw-colored hair and his gingery-blond mustache, sitting again in the comfortable winged armchair in his office, his feet resting upon a velvet pouffe, a small glass of wine in one hand, the other rummaging in a box of crystallized pineapple. And there were the half dozen teenage boys sitting around Slughorn with Tom Riddle in the midst of them, Marvolo’s gold-and-black ring gleaming on his finger.

Dumbledore landed beside Harry just as Riddle asked, “Sir is it true that Professor Merrythought is retiring?”

“Tom, Tom, if I knew I couldn’t tell you,” said Slughorn, wagging his finger reprovingly at Riddle, though winking at the same time. “I must say, I’d like to know where you get your information, boy, more knowledgeable than half the staff, you are.”

Riddle smiled; the other boys laughed and cast him admiring looks.

“What with your uncanny ability to know things you shouldn’t, and your careful flattery of the people who matter — thank you for the pineapple, by the way, you’re quite right, it is my favorite —” Several of the boys tittered again. “— I confidently expect you to rise to Minister of Magic within twenty years. Fifteen, if you keep sending me pineapple, I have excellent contacts at the Ministry.”

Tom Riddle merely smiled as the others laughed again. Harry noticed that he was by no means the eldest of the group of boys, but that they all seemed to look to him as their leader.

"I don't know that politics would suit me, sir," he said when the laughter had died away. "I don't have the right kind of background, for one thing."

A couple of the boys around him smirked at each other. Harry was sure they were enjoying a private joke, undoubtedly about what they knew, or suspected, regarding their gang leader's famous ancestor.

"Nonsense," said Slughorn briskly, "couldn't be plainer you come from decent Wizarding stock, abilities like yours. No, you'll go far, Tom, I've never been wrong about a student yet."

The small golden clock standing upon Slughorn's desk chimed eleven o'clock behind him and he looked around.

"Good gracious, is it that time already? You'd better get going boys, or we'll all be in trouble. Lestrange, I want your essay by in morrow or it's detention. Same goes for you, Avery."

One by one, the boys filed out of the room. Slughorn heaved himself out of his armchair and carried his empty glass over to his desk. A movement behind him made him look around; Riddle was still standing there.

"Look sharp, Tom, you don't want to be caught out of bed out of hours, and you a prefect…"

"Sir, I wanted to ask you something."

"Ask away, then, m'boy, ask away…"

"Sir, I wondered what you know about…about Horcruxes?'

Slughorn stared at him, his thick ringers absentmindedly clawing the stem of his wine glass.

"Project for Defense Against the Dark Arts, is it?"

But Harry could tell that Slughorn knew perfectly well that this was not schoolwork.

"Not exactly, sir," said Riddle. "I came across the term while reading and I didn't fully understand it."

"No…well…you'd be hard-pushed to find a book at Hogwarts that'll give you details on Horcruxes, Tom, that's very Dark stuff, very Dark indeed," said Slughorn.

"But you obviously know all about them, sir? I mean, a wizard like you — sorry, I mean, if you can't tell me, obviously —I just knew if anyone could tell me, you could—so I just thought I'd–"

It was very well done, thought Harry, the hesitancy, the casual tone, the careful flattery, none of it overdone. He, Harry, had had too much experience of trying to wheedle information out of

reluctant people not to recognize a master at work. He could tell that Riddle wanted the information very, very much; perhaps had been working toward this moment for weeks.

"Well," said Slughorn, not looking at Riddle, but fiddling with the ribbon on top of his box of crystallized pineapple, "well, it can't hurt to give you an overview, of course. Just so that you understand the term. A Horcrux is the word used for an object in which a person has concealed part of their soul."

"I don't quite understand how that works, though, sir," said Riddle.

His voice was carefully controlled, but Harry could sense his excitement.

"Well, you split your soul, you see," said Slughorn, "and hide part of it in an object outside the body. Then, even if one's body is attacked or destroyed, one cannot die, for part of the soul remains earthbound and undamaged. But of course, existence in such a form…"

Slughorn's face crumpled and Harry found himself remembering words he had heard nearly two years before: *"I was ripped from my body, I was less than spirit, less than the meanest ghost…but still, I was alive."*

"…few would want it, Tom, very few. Death would be preferable."

But Riddle's hunger was now apparent; his expression was greedy, he could no longer hide his longing.

"How do you split your soul?"

"Well," said Slughorn uncomfortably, "you must understand that the soul is supposed to remain intact and whole. Splitting it is an act of violation, it is against nature."

"But how do you do it?"

"By an act of evil — the supreme act of evil. By commiting murder. Killing rips the soul apart. The wizard intent upon creating a Horcrux would use the damage to his advantage: He would encase the torn portion —"

"Encase? But how —?"

"There is a spell, do not ask me, I don't know!" said Slughoin shaking his head like an old elephant bothered by mosquitoes. "Do I look as though I have tried it — do I look like a killer?"

"No, sir, of course not," said Riddle quickly. "I'm sorry…I didn't mean to offend…"

"Not at all, not at all, not offended," said Slughorn gruffly, "It is natural to feel some curiosity about these things…Wizards of a certain caliber have always been drawn to that aspect of magic…"

"Yes, sir," said Riddle. "What I don't understand, though — just out of curiosity — I mean, would one Horcrux be much use? Can you only split your soul once? Wouldn't it be better, make

you stronger, to have your soul in more pieces, I mean, for instance, isn't seven the most powerfully magical number, wouldn't seven —?"

"Merlin's beard, Tom!" yelped Slughorn. "Seven! Isn't it bad enough to think of killing one person? And in any case…bad enough to divide the soul…but to rip it into seven pieces…"

Slughorn looked deeply troubled now: He was gazing at Riddle as though he had never seen him plainly before, and Harry could tell that he was regretting entering into the conversation at all.

"Of course," he muttered, "this is all hypothetical, what we're discussing, isn't it? All academic…"

"Yes, sir, of course," said Riddle quickly.

"But all the same, Tom…keep it quiet, what I've told — that's to say, what we've discussed. People wouldn't like to think we've been chatting about Horcruxes. It's a banned subject at Hogwarts, you know…Dumbledore's particularly fierce about it…"

"I won't say a word, sir," said Riddle, and he left, but not before Harry had glimpsed his face, which was full of that same wild happiness it had worn when he had first found out that he was a wizard, the sort of happiness that did not enhance his handsome features, but made them, somehow, less human…

"Thank you, Harry," said Dumbledore quietly. "Let us go…"

When Harry landed back on the office floor Dumbledore was; already sitting down behind his desk. Harry sat too and waited for Dumbledore to speak.

"I have been hoping for this piece of evidence for a very long time," said Dumbledore at last. "It confirms the theory on which I have been working, it tells me that I am right, and also how very far there is still to go…"

Harry suddenly noticed that every single one of the old headmasters and headmistresses in the portraits around the walls was awake and listening in on their conversation. A corpulent, red nosed wizard had actually taken out an ear trumpet.

"Well, Harry," said Dumbledore, "I am sure you understood the significance of what we just heard. At the same age as you are now, give or take a few months, Tom Riddle was doing all he could to find out how to make himself immortal."

"You think he succeeded then, sir?" asked Harry. "He made a Horcrux? And that's why he didn't die when he attacked me? He had a Horcrux hidden somewhere? A bit of his soul was safe?"

"A bit…or more," said Dumbledore. "You heard Voldemort, what he particularly wanted from Horace was an opinion on what would happen to the wizard who created more than one Horcrux,

what would happen to the wizard so determined to evade death that he would be prepared to murder many times, rip his soul repeatedly, so as to store it in many, separately concealed Horcrux. No book would have given him that information. As far as I know — as far, I am sure, as Voldemort knew — no wizard had ever done more than tear his soul in two."

Dumbledore paused for a moment, marshaling his thought, and then said, "Four years ago, I received what I considered certain proof that Voldemort had split his soul."

"Where?" asked Harry. "How?"

"You handed it to me, Harry," said Dumbledore. "The diary, Riddles diary, the one giving instructions on how to reopen the Chamber of Secrets."

"I don't understand, sir," said Harry.

"Well, although I did not see the Riddle who came out of the diary, what you described to me was a phenomenon I had never witnessed. A mere memory starting to act and think for itself? A mere memory, sapping the life out of the girl into whose hands it had fallen? No, something much more sinister had lived inside that book…a fragment of soul, I was almost sure of it. The diary had been a Horcrux. But this raised as many questions as it answered. What intrigued and alarmed me most was that that diary had been intended as a weapon as much as a safeguard."

"I still don't understand," said Harry.

"Well, it worked as a Horcrux is supposed to work — in other words, the fragment of soul concealed inside it was kept safe and had undoubtedly played its part in preventing the death of its owner. But there could be no doubt that Riddle really wanted that diary read, wanted the piece of his soul to inhabit or possess somebody else, so that Slytherin's monster would be unleashed again."

"Well, he didn't want his hard work to be wasted," said Harry. "He wanted people to know he was Slytherin's heir, because he couldn't take credit at the time."

"Quite correct," said Dumbledore, nodding. "But don't you see, Harry, that if he intended the diary to be passed to, or planted on, some future Hogwarts student, he was being remarkably blase about that precious fragment of his soul concealed within it. The point of a Horcrux is, as Professor Slughorn explained, to keep part of the self hidden and safe, not to fling it into somebody else's path and run the risk that they might destroy it — as indeed happened: That particular fragment of soul is no more; you saw to that.

"The careless way in which Voldemort regarded this Horcrux seemed most ominous to me. It suggested that he must have made — or had been planning to make — more Horcruxes, so that the loss of his first would not be so detrimental. I did not wish to believe it, but nothing else seemed to

make sense. Then you told me, two years later, that on the night that Voldemort returned to his body, he made a most illuminating and alarming statement to his Death Eaters. *'I who have gone further than anybody along the path that leads to immortality.'* That was what you told me he said. *'Further than anybody!'* And I thought I knew what that meant, though the Death Eaters did not. He was referring to his Horcruxes, Horcruxes in the plural, Harry, which I don't believe any other wizard has ever had. Yet it fitted: Lord Voldomort has seemed to grow less human with the passing years, and the transformation he had undergone seemed to me to be only explainable if his soul was mutitated beyond the realms of what we might call 'usual evil'…"

"So he's made himself impossible to kill by murdering other people?" said Harry. "Why couldn't he make a Sorcerer's Stone, or steal one, if he was so interested in immortality?"

"Well, we know that he tried to do just that, five years ago," said Dumbledore. "But there are several reasons why, I think, a Sorcerer's Stone would appeal less than Horcruxes to Lord Voldemort.

"While the Elixir of Life does indeed extend life, it must be drunk regularly, for all eternity, if the drinker is to maintain the immortality. Therefore, Voldemort would be entirely dependant on the Elixir, and if it ran out, or was contaminated, or if the Stone was stolen, he would die just like any other man. Voldemort likes to operate alone, remember. I believe that he would have found the thought of being dependent, even on the Elixir, intolerable. Of course he was prepared to drink it if it would take him out of the horrible part-life to which he was condemned after attacking you, but only to regain a body. Thereafter, I am convinced, he intended to continue to rely on his Horcruxes. He would need nothing more, if only he could regain a human form. He was already immortal, you see…or as close to immortal as any man can be.

"But now, Harry, armed with this information, the crucial memory you have succeeded in procuring for us, we are closer to the secret of finishing Lord Voldemort than anyone has ever been before. You heard him, Harry: 'Wouldn't it be better, make you stronger, to have your soul in more pieces…isn't seven the most powerfully magical number…' *Isn't seven the most powerfully magical number*. Yes, I think the idea of a seven-part soul would greatly appeal to Lord Voldemort."

"He made seven Horcruxes?" said Harry, horror-struck, while several of the portraits on the walls made similar noises of shock mid outrage. "But they could be anywhere in the world — hidden — buried or invisible —"

"I am glad to see you appreciate the magnitude of the problem," said Dumbledore calmly. "But firstly, no, Harry, not seven Horcruxes: six. The seventh part of his soul, however maimed, resides

inside his regenerated body. That was the part of him that lived a spectral existence for so many years during his exile; without that, he has no self at all. That seventh piece of soul will be the last that anybody wishing to kill Voldemort must attack — the piece that lives in his body."

"But the six Horcruxes, then," said Harry, a little desperately, "how are we supposed to find them?"

"You are forgetting…you have already destroyed one of them. And I have destroyed another."

"You have?" said Harry eagerly.

"Yes indeed," said Dumbledore, and he raised his blackened, burned-looking hand. "The ring, Harry. Marvolo's ring. And a terrible curse there was upon it too. Had it not been — forgive me the lack of seemly modesty — for my own prodigious skill, and for Professor Snape's timely action when I returned to Hogwarts, desperately injured, I might not have lived to tell the tale. However, a withered hand does not seem an unreasonable exchange for a seventh of Voldemort's soul. The ring is no longer a Horcrux."

"But how did you find it?"

"Well, as you now know, for many years I have made it my business to discover as much as I can about Voldemort's past life. I have traveled widely, visiting those places he once knew. I stumbled across the ring hidden in the ruin of the Gaunt's house. It seems that once Voldemort had succeeded in sealing a piece of his soul inside it, he did not want to wear it anymore. He hid it, protected by many powerful enchantments, in the shack where his ancestors had once lived (Morfin having been carted off to Azkaban, of course), never guessing that I might one day take the trouble to visit the ruin, or that I might be keeping an eye open for traces of magical concealment.

"However, we should not congratulate ourselves too heartily. You destroyed the diary and I the ring, but if we are right in our theory of a seven-part soul, four Horcruxes remain."

"And they could be anything?" said Harry. "They could be oh, in tin cans or, I dunno, empty potion bottles…"

"You are thinking of Portkeys, Harry, which must be ordinary objects, easy to overlook. But would Lord Voldemort use tin cans or old potion bottles to guard his own precious soul? You are forgetting what I have showed you. Lord Voldemort liked to collect trophies, and he preferred objects with a powerful magical history. His pride, his belief in his own superiority, his determination to carve for himself a startling place in magical history; these things, suggest to me that Voldemort would have chosen his Horcruxes with some care, favoring objects worthy of the honor."

“The diary wasn’t that special.”

“The diary, as you have said yourself, was proof that he was the Hire of Slytherin. I am sure that Voldemort considered it of stupendous importance.”

“So, the other Horcruxes?” said Harry. “Do you think you know what they are, sir?”

“I can only guess,” said Dumbledore. “For the reasons I have already given, I believe that Lord Voldemort would prefer objects that, in themselves, have a certain grandeur. I have therefore trawled back through Voldemort’s past to see if I can find evidence that such artifacts have disappeared around him.”

“The locket!” said Harry loudly, “Hufflepuff’s cup!”

“Yes,” said Dumbledore, smiling, “I would be prepared to bet — perhaps not my other hand — but a couple of fingers, that they became Horcruxes three and four. The remaining two, assuming again that he created a total of six, are more of a problem, but I will hazard a guess that, having secured objects from Hufflepuff and Slytherin, he set out to track down objects owned by Gryffindor or Ravenclaw. Four objects from the four founders would, I am sure, have exerted a powerful pull over Voldemort’s imagination. I cannot answer for whether he ever managed to find anything of Ravenclaw’s. I am confident, however, that the only known relic of Gryffindor remains safe.”

Dumbledore pointed his blackened fingers to the wall behind him, where a ruby-encrusted sword reposed within a glass case.

“Do you think that’s why he really wanted to come back to Hogwarts, sir?” said Harry. “To try and find something from one of the other founders?”

“My thoughts precisely,” said Dumbledore. “But unfortunately, that does not advance us much further, for he was turned away, or so I believe, without the chance to search the school. I am forced to conclude that he never fulfilled his ambition of collecting four founders’ objects. He definitely had two — he may have found three — that is the best we can do for now.”

“Even if he got something of Ravenclaw’s or of Gryffindor’s, that leaves a sixth Horcrux,” said Harry, counting on his fingers. “Unless he’s got both?”

“I don’t think so,” said Dumbledore. “I think I know what the sixth Horcrux is. I wonder what you will say when I confess that I have been curious for a while about the behavior of the snake, Nagini?”

“The snake?” said Harry, startled. “You can use animals as Horcruxes?”

“Well, it is inadvisable to do so,” said Dumbledore, “because to confide a part of your soul to something that can think and move for itself is obviously a very risky business. However, if my calculations are correct, Voldemort was still at least one Horcrux short of his goal of six when he entered your parents’ house with the intention of killing you. He seems to have reserved the process of making Horcruxes for particularly significant deaths. You would certainly have been that. He believed that in killing you, he was destroying the danger the prophecy had outlined. He believed he was making himself invincible. I am sure that he was intending to make his final Horcrux with your death. As we know, he failed. After an interval of some years, however, he used Nagini to kill an old Muggle man, and it might then have occurred to him to turn her into his last Horcrux. She underlines the Slytherin connection, which enhances Lord Voldemorts mystique; I think he is perhaps as fond of her as he can be of anything; he certainly likes to keep her close, and he seems to have an unusual amount of control over her, even for a Parselmouth.”

“So,” said Harry, “the diary’s gone, the ring’s gone. The cup, the locket, and the snake are still intact, and you think there might be a Horcrux that was once Ravenclaw’s or Gryffindor’s?”

“An admirably succinct and accurate summary, yes,” said Dumbledore, bowing his head.

“So…are you still looking for them, sir? Is that where you’ve been going when you’ve been leaving the school?”

“Correct,” said Dumbledore. “I have been looking for a very long time. I think…perhaps…I may be close to finding another one. There are hopeful signs.”

“And if you do,” said Harry quickly, “can I come with you and help get rid of it?”

Dumbledore looked at Harry very intently for a moment before saying, “Yes, I think so.”

“I can?” said Harry, thoroughly taken aback.

“Oh yes,” said Dumbledore, smiling slightly. “I think you have earned that right.”

Harry felt his heart lift. It was very good not to hear words of caution and protection for once. The headmasters and head-mistresses around the walls seemed less impressed by Dumbledore’s decision; Harry saw a few of them shaking their heads and Phineas Nigellus actually snorted.

“Does Voldemort know when a Horcrux is destroyed, sir? Can he feel it?” Harry asked, ignoring the portraits.

“A very interesting question, Harry. I believe not. I believe that Voldemort is now so immersed in evil, and these crucial parts of himself have been detached for so long, he does not feel as we do. Perhaps, at the point of death, he might be aware of his loss…but he was not aware, for instance, that the diary had been destroyed until he forced the truth out of Lucius Malfoy. When Voldemort

discovered that the diary had been mutilated and robbed of all its powers, I am told that his anger was terrible to behold."

"But I thought he meant Lucius Malfoy to smuggle it into Hogwarts?"

"Yes, he did, years ago, when he was sure he would be able to create more Horcruxes, but still Lucius was supposed to wait for Voldemorts say-so, and he never received it, for Voldemort vanished shortly after giving him the diary. No doubt he thought that Lucius would not dare do anything with the Horcrux other than guard it carefully, but he was counting too much upon Lucius's fear of a master who had been gone for years and whom Lucius believed dead. Of course, Lucius did not know what the diary really was. I understand that Voldemort had told him the diary would cause the Chamber of Secrets to reopen because it was cleverly enchanted. Had Lucius known he held a portion of his masters soul in his hands, he would undoubtedly have treated it with more reverence — but instead he went ahead and carried out the old plan for his own ends. By planting the diary upon Arthur Weasleys daughter, he hoped to discredit Arthur and get rid of a highly incriminating magical object in one stroke. Ah, poor Lucius…what with Voldemorts fury about the fact that he threw away the Horcrux for his own gain, and the fiasco at the Ministry last year, I would not be surprised if he is not secretly glad to be safe in Azkaban at the moment."

Harry sat in thought for a moment, then asked, "So if all of his Horcruxes are destroyed, Voldemort could be killed?"

"Yes, I think so," said Dumbledore. "Without his Horcruxes, Voldemort will be a mortal man with a maimed and diminished soul. Never forget, though, that while his soul may be damaged beyond repair, his brain and his magical powers remain intact. It will take uncommon skill and power to kill a wizard like Voldemort even without his Horcruxes."

"But I haven't got uncommon skill and power," said Harry, before he could stop himself.

"Yes, you have," said Dumbledore firmly. "You have a power that Voldemort has never had. You can —"

"I know!" said Harry impatiently. "I can love!" It was only with difficulty that he stopped himself adding, "Big deal!"

"Yes, Harry, you can love," said Dumbledore, who looked as though he knew perfectly well what Harry had just refrained from saying. "Which, given everything that has happened to you, is a great and remarkable thing. You are still too young to understand how unusual you are, Harry."

"So, when the prophecy says that I'll have 'power the Dark Lord knows not,' it just means — love?" asked Harry, feeling a little let down.

"Yes — just love," said Dumbledore. "But Harry, never forget that what the prophecy says is only significant because Voldemort made it so. I told you this at the end of last year. Voldemort singled you out as the person who would be most dangerous to him — and in doing so, he made you the person who would be most dangerous to him!"

"But it comes to the same —"

"No, it doesn't!" said Dumbledore, sounding impatient now. Pointing at Harry with his black, withered hand, he said, "You are setting too much store by the prophecy!"

"But," spluttered Harry, "but you said the prophecy means —"

"If Voldemort had never heard of the prophecy, would it have been fulfilled? Would it have meant anything? Of course not! Do you think every prophecy in the Hall of Prophecy has been fulfilled?"

"But," said Harry, bewildered, "but last year, you said one of us would have to kill the other —"

"Harry, Harry, only because Voldemort made a grave error, and acted on Professor Trelawney's words! If Voldemort had never murdered your father, would he have imparted in you a furious desire for revenge? Of course not! If he had not forced your mother to die for you, would he have given you a magical protection he could not penetrate? Of course not, Harry! Don't you see? Voldemort himself created his worst enemy, just as tyrants everywhere do! Have you any idea how much tyrants fear the people they oppress? All of them realize that, one day, amongst their many victims, there is sure to be one who rises against them and strikes back! Voldemort is no different! Always he was on the lookout for the one who would challenge him. He heard the prophecy and he leapt into action, with the result that he not only handpicked the man most likely to finish him, he handed him uniquely deadly weapons!"

"But —"

"It is essential that you understand this!" said Dumbledore, standing up and striding about the room, his glittering robes swooshing in his wake; Harry had never seen him so agitated. "By attempting to kill you, Voldemort himself singled out the remarkable person who sits here in front of me, and gave him the tools for the job! It is Voldemort's fault that you were able to see into his thoughts, his ambitions, that you even understand the snakelike language in which he gives orders, and yet, Harry, despite your privileged insight into Voldemort's world (which, incidentally, is a gift any Death Eater would kill to have), you have never been seduced by the Dark Arts, never, even for a second, shown the slightest desire to become one of Voldemort's followers!"

"Of course I haven't!" said Harry indignantly. "He killed my mum and dad!"

"You are protected, in short, by your ability to love!" said Dumbledore loudly. "The only protection that can possibly work against the lure of power like Voldemort's! In spite of all the temptation you have endured, all the suffering, you remain pure of heart, just as pure as you were at the age of eleven, when you stared into a mirror that reflected your heart's desire, and it showed you only the way to thwart Lord Voldemort, and not immortality or riches. Harry, have you any idea how few wizards could have seen what you saw in that mirror? Voldemort should have known then what he was dealing with, but he did not!

"But he knows it now. You have flitted into Lord Voldemort's mind without damage to yourself, but he cannot possess you without enduring mortal agony, as he discovered in the Ministry. I do not think he understands why, Harry, but then, he was in such a hurry to mutilate his own soul, he never paused to understand the incomparable power of a soul that is untarnished and whole."

"But, sir," said Harry, making valiant efforts not to sound argumentative, "it all comes to the same thing, doesn't it? I've got to try and kill him, or —"

"Got to?" said Dumbledore. "Of course you've got to! But not because of the prophecy! Because you, yourself, will never rest until you've tried! We both know it! Imagine, please, just for a moment, that you had never heard that prophecy! How would you feel about Voldemort now? Think!"

Harry watched Dumbledore striding up and down in front of him, and thought. He thought of his mother, his father, and Sirius. He thought of Cedric Diggory. He thought of all the terrible deeds he knew Lord Voldemort had done. A flame seemed to leap inside his chest, searing his throat.

"I'd want him finished," said Harry quietly. "And I'd want to do it."

"Of course you would!" cried Dumbledore. "You see, the prophecy does not mean you have to do anything! But the prophecy caused Lord Voldemort to mark you as his equal…In other words, you are free to choose your way, quite free to turn your back on the prophecy! But Voldemort continues to set store by the prophecy. He will continue to hunt you…which makes it certain, really, that —"

"That one of us is going to end up killing the other," said Harry. "Yes."

But he understood at last what Dumbledore had been trying to tell him. It was, he thought, the difference between being dragged into the arena to face a battle to the death and walking into the arena with your head held high. Some people, perhaps, would say that there was little to choose between the two ways, but Dumbledore knew — and so do I, thought Harry, with a rush of fierce pride, and so did my parents — that there was all the difference in the world.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

SECTUMSEMPRA

Exhausted but delighted with his night's work, Harry told Ron and Hermione everything that had happened during next morning's Charms lesson (having first cast the Muffliato spell upon those nearest them). They were both satisfyingly impressed by the way he had wheedled the memory out of Slughorn and positively awed when he told them about Voldemort's Horcruxes and Dumbledore's promise to take Harry along, should he find another one.

"Wow," said Ron, when Harry had finally finished telling them everything; Ron was waving his wand very vaguely in the direction of the ceiling without paying the slightest bit of attention to what he was doing. "Wow. You're actually going to go with Dumbledore…and try and destroy…wow."

"Ron, you're making it snow," said Hermione patiently, grabbing his wrist and redirecting his wand away from the ceiling from which, sure enough, large white flakes had started to fall. Lavender Brown, Harry noticed, glared at Hermione from a neighboring table through very red eyes, and Hermione immediately let go of Rons arm.

"Oh yeah," said Ron, looking down at his shoulders in vague surprise. "Sorry…looks like we've all got horrible dandruff now…"

He brushed some of the fake snow off Hermiones shoulder. Lavender burst into tears. Ron looked immensely guilty and turned his back on her.

"We split up," he told Harry out of the corner of his mouth, "Last night. When she saw me coming out of the dormitory with Hermione. Obviously she couldn't see you, so she thought it had just been the two of us."

"Ah," said Harry. "Well — you don't mind it's over, do you?"

"No," Ron admitted. "It was pretty bad while she was yelling, but at least I didn't have to finish it."

"Coward," said Hermione, though she looked amused. "Well, it was a bad night for romance all around. Ginny and Dean split up too, Harry."

Harry thought there was a rather knowing look in her eye as she told him that, but she could not possibly know that his insides were suddenly dancing the conga. Keeping his face as immobile and his voice as indifferent as he could, he asked, "How come?"

"Oh, something really silly…She said he was always trying to help her through the portrait hole, like she couldn't climb in herself…but they've been a bit rocky for ages."

Harry glanced over at Dean on the other side of the classroom. He certainly looked unhappy.

"Of course, this puts you in a bit of a dilemma, doesn't it?" said Hermione.

"What d'you mean?" said Harry quickly.

"The Quidditch team," said Hermione. "If Ginny and Dean aren't speaking…"

"Oh — oh yeah," said Harry.

"Flitwick," said Ron in a warning tone. The tiny little Charms master was bobbing his way toward them, and Hermione was the only one who had managed to turn vinegar into wine; her glass flask was full of deep crimson liquid, whereas the contents of Harry's and Ron's were still murky brown.

"Now, now, boys," squeaked Professor Flitwick reproachfully. "A little less talk, a little more action…Let me see you try…"

Together they raised their wands, concentrating with all their might, and pointed them at their flasks. Harry's vinegar turned to ice; Rons flask exploded.

"Yes…for homework," said Professor Flitwick, reemerging from under the table and pulling shards of glass out of the top of his hat, "practice."

They had one of their rare joint free periods after Charms and walked back to the common room together. Ron seemed to be positively lighthearted about the end of his relationship with Lavender, and Hermione seemed cheery too, though when asked what she was grinning about she simply said, "It's a nice day." Neither of them seemed to have noticed that a fierce battle was raging inside Harry's brain:

She's Rons sister.

But she's ditched Dean!

She's still Rons sister.

I'm his best mate!

That'll make it worse.

If I talked to him first —

He'd hit you.

What if I don't care?

He's your best mate!

Harry barely noticed that they were climbing through the portrait hole into the sunny common room, and only vaguely registered the small group of seventh years clustered together there, until Hermione cried, "Katie! You're back! Are you okay?"

Harry stared: It was indeed Katie Bell, looking completely healthy and surrounded by her jubilant friends.

“I’m really well!” she said happily. “They let me out of St. Mungos on Monday, I had a couple of days at home with Mum and Dad and then came back here this morning. Leanne was just telling me about McLaggen and the last match, Harry…”

“Yeah,” said Harry, “well, now you’re back and Ron’s fit, we’ll have a decent chance of thrashing Ravenclaw, which means we could still be in the running for the Cup. Listen, Katie…”

He had to put the question to her at once; his curiosity even drove Ginny temporarily from his brain. He dropped his voice as Katie’s friends started gathering up their things; apparently they were late for Transfiguration.

“…that necklace…can you remember who gave it to you now?”

“No,” said Katie, shaking her head ruefully. “Everyone’s been asking me, but I haven’t got a clue. The last thing I remember was walking into the ladies’ in the Three Broomsticks.”

“You definitely went into the bathroom, then?” said Hermione.

“Well, I know I pushed open the door,” said Katie, “so I suppose whoever Imperiused me was standing just behind it. After that, my memory’s a blank until about two weeks ago in St. Mungo’s. Listen, I’d better go, I wouldn’t put it past McGonagall to give me lines even if it is my first day back…”

She caught up her bag and books and hurried after her friends, leaving Harry, Ron, and Hermione to sit down at a window table and ponder what she had told them.

“So it must have been a girl or a woman who gave Katie the necklace,” said Hermione, “to be in the ladies’ bathroom.”

“Or someone who looked like a girl or a woman,” said Harry. “Don’t forget, there was a cauldron full of Polyjuice Potion at Hogwarts. We know some of it got stolen…”

In his mind’s eye, he watched a parade of Crabbes and Goyles prance past, all transformed into girls.

“I think I’m going to take another swig of Felix,” said Harry, “and have a go at the Room of Requirement again.”

“That would be a complete waste of potion,” said Hermione flatly, putting down the copy of Spellmans Syllabary she had just taken out of her bag. “Luck can only get you so far, Harry. The situation with Slughorn was different; you always had the ability to persuade him, you just needed to tweak the circumstances a bit. Luck isn’t enough to get you through a powerful enchantment, though. Don’t go wasting the rest of that potion! You’ll need all the luck you can get if Dumbledore takes you along with him…” She dropped her voice to a whisper.

"Couldn't we make some more?" Ron asked Harry, ignoring Hermione. "It'd be great to have a stock of it…Have a look in the book…"

Harry pulled his copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* out of his bap, and looked up Felix Felicis.

"Blimey, it's seriously complicated," he said, running an eye down the list of ingredients. "And it takes six months…You've got to let it stew…"

"Typical," said Ron.

Harry was about to put his book away again when he noticed the corner of a page folded down; turning to it, he saw the *Sectumsempra* spell, captioned "For Enemies," that he had marked a few weeks previously. He had still not found out what it did, mainly because he did not want to test it around Hermione, but he was considering trying it out on McLaggen next time he came up behind him unawares.

The only person who was not particularly pleased to see Katie Bell back at school was Dean Thomas, because he would no longer be required to fill her place as Chaser. He took the blow stoically enough when Harry told him, merely grunting and shrugging, but Harry had the distinct feeling as he walked away that Dean and Seamus were muttering mutinously behind his back.

The following fortnight saw the best Quidditch practices Harry had known as Captain. His team was so pleased to be rid of McLaggen, so glad to have Katie back at last, that they were flying extremely well.

Ginny did not seem at all upset about the breakup with Dean; on the contrary, she was the life and soul of the team. Her imitations of Ron anxiously bobbing up and down in front of the goal posts as the Quaffle sped toward him, or of Harry bellowing orders at McLaggen before being knocked out cold, kept them all highly amused. Harry, laughing with the others, was glad to have an innocent reason to look at Ginny; he had received several more Bludger injuries during practice because he had not been keeping his eyes on the Snitch.

The battle still raged inside his head: *Ginny or Ron*? Sometimes he thought that the post-Lavender Ron might not mind too much if he asked Ginny out, but then he remembered Ron's expression when he had seen her kissing Dean, and was sure that Ron would consider it base treachery if Harry so much as held her hand…

Yet Harry could not help himself talking to Ginny, laughing with her, walking back from practice with her; however much his conscience ached, he found himself wondering how best to get her on her own. It would have been ideal if Slughorn had given another of his little parties, for Ron would not be around — but unfortunately, Slughorn seemed to have given them up. Once or twice

Harry considered asking for Hermione's help, but he did not think he could stand seeing the smug look on her face; he thought he caught it sometimes when Hermione spotted him staring at Ginny or laughing at her jokes. And to complicate matters, he had the nagging worry that if he didn't do it, somebody else was sure to ask Ginny out soon: He and Ron were at least agreed on the fact that she was too popular for her own good.

All in all, the temptation to take another gulp of Felix Felicis was becoming stronger by the day, for surely this was a case for, as Hermione put it, "tweaking the circumstances"? The balmy days slid gently through May, and Ron seemed to be there at Harry's shoulder every time he saw Ginny. Harry found himself longing for a stroke of luck that would somehow cause Ron to realize that nothing would make him happier than his best friend and his sister falling for each other and to leave them alone together for longer than a few seconds. There seemed no chance of either while the final Quidditch game of the season was looming; Ron wanted to talk tactics with Harry all the time and had little thought for anything else.

Ron was not unique in this respect; interest in the Gryffindor-Ravenclaw game was running extremely high throughout the school, for the match would decide the Championship, which was still wide open. If Gryffindor beat Ravenclaw by a margin of three hundred points (a tall order, and yet Harry had never known his team to fly better) then they would win the Championship. If they won by less than three hundred points, they would come second to Ravenclaw; if they lost by a hundred points they would be third behind Hufflepuff and if they lost by more than a hundred, they would be in fourth place and nobody, Harry thought, would ever, ever let him forget that it had been he who had captained Gryffindor to their first bottom-of-the-table defeat in two centuries.

The run-up to this crucial match had all the usual features: members of rival Houses attempting to intimidate opposing teams in the corridors; unpleasant chants about individual players being rehearsed loudly as they passed; the team members themselves either swaggering around enjoying all the attention or else dashing into bathrooms between classes to throw up. Somehow, the game had become inextricably linked in Harry's mind with success or failure in his plans for Ginny. He could not help feeling that if they won by more than three hundred points, the scenes of euphoria and a nice loud after-match party might be just as good as a hearty swig of Felix Felicis.

In the midst of all his preoccupations, Harry had not forgotten his other ambition: finding out what Malfoy was up to in the Room of Requirement. He was still checking the Marauder's Map, and as he was unable to locate Malfoy on it, deduced that Malfoy was still spending plenty of time within the room. Although Harry was losing hope that he would ever succeed in getting inside the

Room of Requirement, he attempted it whenever he was in the vicinity, but no matter how he reworded his request, the wall remained firmly doorless.

A few days before the match against Ravenclaw, Harry found himself walking down to dinner alone from the common room, Ron having rushed off into a nearby bathroom to throw up yet again, and Hermione having dashed off to see Professor Vector about a mistake she thought she might have made in her last Arithmancy essay. More out of habit than anything, Harry made his usual detour along the seventh-floor corridor, checking the Marauder's Map as he went. For a moment he could not find Malfoy anywhere and assumed he must indeed be inside the Room of Requirement again, but then he saw Malfoy's tiny, labeled dot standing in a boys' bathroom on the floor below, accompanied, not by Crabbe or Goyle, but by Moaning Myrtle.

Harry only stopped staring at this unlikely coupling when he walked right into a suit of armor. The loud crash brought him out of his reverie; hurrying from the scene lest Filch turn up, he dashed down the marble staircase and along the passageway below. Outside the bathroom, he pressed his ear against the door. He could not hear anything. He very quietly pushed the door open.

Draco Malfoy was standing with his back to the door, his hands clutching either side of the sink, his white-blond head bowed.

"Don't," crooned Moaning Myrtle's voice from one of the cubicles. "Don't…tell me what's wrong…I can help you…"

"No one can help me," said Malfoy. His whole body was shaking. "I can't do it…I can't…It won't work…and unless I do it soon…he says he'll kill me…"

And Harry realized, with a shock so huge it seemed to root him to the spot, that Malfoy was crying — actually crying — tears streaming down his pale face into the grimy basin. Malfoy gasped and gulped and then, with a great shudder, looked up into flu-cracked mirror and saw Harry staring at him over his shoulder.

Malfoy wheeled around, drawing his wand. Instinctively, Harry pulled out his own. Malfoy's hex missed Harry by inches, shattering the lamp on the wall beside him; Harry threw himself sideways, thought *Levicorpus!* and flicked his wand, but Malfoy blocked the jinx and raised his wand for another —

"No! No! Stop it!" squealed Moaning Myrtle, her voice echoing loudly around the tiled room. "Stop! STOP!"

There was a loud bang and the bin behind Harry exploded; Harry attempted a Leg-Locker Curse that backfired off the wall behind Malfoy's ear and smashed the cistern beneath Moaning Myr-tle,

who screamed loudly; water poured everywhere and Harry slipped as Malfoy, his face contorted, cried, "Cruci —"

"*SECTUMSEMPRA!*" bellowed Harry from the floor, waving his wand wildly.

Blood spurted from Malfoy's face and chest as though he had been slashed with an invisible sword. He staggered backward and collapsed onto the waterlogged floor with a great splash, his wand falling from his limp right hand.

"No —" gasped Harry.

Slipping and staggering, Harry got to his feet and plunged toward Malfoy, whose face was now shining scarlet, his white hands scrabbling at his blood-soaked chest.

"No — I didn't —"

Harry did not know what he was saying; he fell to his knees beside Malfoy, who was shaking uncontrollably in a pool of his own blood. Moaning Myrtle let out a deafening scream:

"MURDER! MURDER IN THE BATHROOM! MURDER!"

The door banged open behind Harry and he looked up, terrified: Snape had burst into the room, his face livid. Pushing Harry roughly aside, he knelt over Malfoy, drew his wand, and traced it over the deep wounds Harry's curse had made, muttering an incantation that sounded almost like song. The flow of blood seemed to ease; Snape wiped the residue from Malfoy's face and repeated his spell. Now the wounds seemed to be knitting.

Harry was still watching, horrified by what he had done, barely aware that he too was soaked in blood and water. Moaning Myrtle was still sobbing and wailing overhead. When Snape had performed his countercurse for the third time, he half-lifted Malfoy into a standing position.

"You need the hospital wing. There may be a certain amount of scarring, but if you take dittany immediately we might avoid even that…Come…"

He supported Malfoy across the bathroom, turning at the door to say in a voice of cold fury, "And you, Potter…You wait here for me."

It did not occur to Harry for a second to disobey. He stood up slowly, shaking, and looked down at the wet floor. There were bloodstains floating like crimson flowers across its surface. He could not even find it in himself to tell Moaning Myrtle to be quiet, as she continued to wail and sob with increasingly evident enjoyment.

Snape returned ten minutes later. He stepped into the bathroom and closed the door behind him.

"Go," he said to Myrtle, and she swooped back into her toilet at once, leaving a ringing silence behind her.

"I didn't mean it to happen," said Harry at once. His voice echoed in the cold, watery space. "I didn't know what that spell did."

But Snape ignored this. "Apparently I underestimated you, Potter," he said quietly. "Who would have thought you knew such Dark Magic? Who taught you that spell?"

"I — read about it somewhere."

"Where?"

"It was — a library book," Harry invented wildly. "I can't remember what it was call —"

"Liar," said Snape. Harry's throat went dry. He knew what Snape was going to do and he had never been able to prevent it…

The bathroom seemed to shimmer before his eyes; he struggled to block out all thought, but try as he might, the Half-Blood Prince's copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* swam hazily to the forefront of his mind.

And then he was staring at Snape again, in the midst of this wrecked, soaked bathroom. He stared into Snape's black eyes, hoping against hope that Snape had not seen what he feared, but —

"Bring me your schoolbag," said Snape softly, "and all of your schoolbooks. All of them. Bring them to me here. Now!"

There was no point arguing. Harry turned at once and splashed out of the bathroom. Once in the corridor, he broke into a run toward Gryffindor Tower. Most people were walking the other way; they gaped at him, drenched in water and blood, but he answered none of the questions fired at him as he ran past.

He felt stunned; it was as though a beloved pet had turned suddenly savage; what had the Prince been thinking to copy such a spell into his book? And what would happen when Snape saw it? Would he tell Slughorn — Harry's stomach churned — how Harry had been achieving such good results in Potions all year? Would he confiscate or destroy the book that had taught Harry so much…the book that had become a kind of guide and friend? Harry could not let it happen…He could not…

"Where've you —? Why are you soaking —? Is that blood." Ron was standing at the top of the stairs, looking bewildered at, the sight of Harry.

"I need your book," Harry panted. "Your Potions book. Quick…give it to me…"

"But what about the Half-Blood —"

“I’ll explain later!”

Ron pulled his copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* out of his bag and handed it over; Harry sprinted off past him and back to the common room. Here, he seized his schoolbag, ignoring the amazed looks of several people who had already finished their dinner, threw himself back out of the portrait hole, and hurtled off along the seventh-floor corridor.

He skidded to a halt beside the tapestry of dancing trolls, closed his eyes, and began to walk.

I need a place to hide my book…I need a place to hide my book…I need a place to hide my book…

Three times he walked up and down in front of the stretch of blank wall. When he opened his eyes, there it was at last: the door to the Room of Requirement. Harry wrenched it open, flung him self inside, and slammed it shut.

He gasped. Despite his haste, his panic, his fear of what awaited him back in the bathroom, he could not help but be overawed by what he was looking at. He was standing in a room the size of a large cathedral, whose high windows were sending shafts of light down upon what looked like a city with towering walls, built of what Harry knew must be objects hidden by generations of Hogwarts inhabitants. There were alleyways and roads bordered by tetering piles of broken and damaged furniture, stowed away, perhaps, to hide the evidence of mishandled magic, or else hidden by castle-proud house-elves. There were thousands and thousands of books, no doubt banned or graffitied or stolen. There were winged catapults and Fanged Frisbees, some still with enough life in them to hover halfheartedly over the mountains of other forbidden items; there were chipped bottles of congealed potions, hats, jewels, cloaks; there were what looked like dragon eggshells, corked bottles whose contents still shimmered evilly, several rusting swords, and a heavy, bloodstained axe.

Harry hurried forward into one of the many alleyways between all this hidden treasure. He turned right past an enormous stuffed troll, ran on a short way, took a left at the broken Vanishing Cabinet in which Montague had got lost the previous year, finally pausing beside a large cupboard that seemed to have had acid thrown at its blistered surface. He opened one of the cupboard’s creaking doors: It had already been used as a hiding place for something in a cage that had long since died; its skeleton had five legs. He stuffed the Half-Blood Princes book behind the cage and slammed the door. He paused for a moment, his heart thumping horribly, gazing around at all the clutter…Would he be able to find this spot again amidst all this junk? Seizing the chipped bust of an ugly old warlock from on top of a nearby crate, he stood it on top of the cupboard where the book was now hidden, perched a dusty old wig and a tarnished tiara on the statues head to make it more distinctive, then sprinted back through the alleyways of hidden junk as fast as he could go, back to

the door, back out onto the corridor, where he slammed the door behind him, and it turned at once back into stone.

Harry ran flat-out toward the bathroom on the floor below, cramming Ron's copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* into his bag as he did so. A minute later, he was back in front of Snape, who held out his hand wordlessly for Harry's schoolbag. Harry handed it over, panting, a searing pain in his chest, and waited.

One by one, Snape extracted Harry's books and examined them. Finally, the only book left was the Potions book, which he looked at very carefully before speaking.

"This is your copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*, is it, Potter?"

"Yes," said Harry, still breathing hard.

"You're quite sure of that, are you, Potter?"

"Yes," said Harry, with a touch more defiance.

"This is the copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* that you purchased from Flourish and Blotts?"

"Yes," said Harry firmly.

"Then why," asked Snape, "does it have the name 'Roonil Wazlib' written inside the front cover?"

Harry's heart missed a beat. "That's my nickname," he said.

"Your nickname," repeated Snape.

"Yeah…that's what my friends call me," said Harry.

"I understand what a nickname is," said Snape. The cold, black eyes were boring once more into Harry's; he tried not to look into them. *Close your mind…Close your mind…*But he had never learned how to do it properly…

"Do you know what I think, Potter?" said Snape, very quietly. "I think that you are a liar and a cheat and that you deserve detention with me every Saturday until the end of term. What do you think, Potter?"

"I — I don't agree, sir," said Harry, still refusing to look into Snape's eyes.

"Well, we shall see how you feel after your detentions," said Snape. "Ten o'clock Saturday morning, Potter. My office."

"But sir…" said Harry, looking up desperately. "Quidditch…the last match of the…"

"Ten o'clock," whispered Snape, with a smile that showed his yellow teeth. "Poor Gryffindor…fourth place this year, I fear…"

And he left the bathroom without another word, leaving Harry to stare into the cracked mirror, feeling sicker, he was sure, than Ron had ever felt in his life.

"I won't say 'I told you so,'" said Hermione, an hour later in the common room.

"Leave it, Hermione," said Ron angrily.

Harry had never made it to dinner; he had no appetite at all. He had just finished telling Ron, Hermione, and Ginny what had happened, not that there seemed to have been much need. The news had traveled very fast: Apparently Moaning Myrtle had taken it upon herself to pop up in every bathroom in the castle to tell the story; Malfoy had already been visited in the hospital wing by Pansy Parkinson, who had lost no time in vilifying Harry far and wide, and Snape had told the staff precisely what had happened. Harry had already been called out of the common room to endure fifteen highly unpleasant minutes in the company of Professor McGonagall, who had told him he was lucky not to have been expelled and that she supported wholeheartedly Snape's punishment of detention every Saturday until the end of term.

"I told you there was something wrong with that Prince person," Hermione said, evidently unable to stop herself. "And I was right, wasn't I."

"No, I don't think you were," said Harry stubbornly.

He was having a bad enough time without Hermione lecturing him; the looks on the Gryffindor team's faces when he had told them he would not be able to play on Saturday had been the worst punishment of all. He could feel Ginny's eyes on him now but did not meet them; he did not want to see disappointment or anger there. He had just told her that she would be playing Seeker on Saturday and that Dean would be rejoining the team as Chaser in her place. Perhaps, if they won, Ginny and Dean would make up during the post-match euphoria…The thought went through Harry like an icy knife…

"Harry," said Hermione, "how can you still stick up for that book when that spell —"

"Will you stop harping on about the book!" snapped Harry. "The Prince only copied it out! It's not like he was advising anyone to use it! For all we know, he was making a note of something that had been used against him!"

"I don't believe this," said Hermione. "You're actually defending —"

"I'm not defending what I did!" said Harry quickly. "I wish I hadn't done it, and not just because I've got about a dozen detentions. You know I wouldn't've used a spell like that, not even on Malfoy, but you can't blame the Prince, he hadn't written 'try this out, it's really good' — he was just making notes for himself, wasn't he, not for anyone else…"

"Are you telling me," said Hermione, "that you're going to go back —?"

"And get the book? Yeah, I am," said Harry forcefully. "Listen, without the Prince I'd never have won the Felix Felicis. I'd never have known how to save Ron from poisoning, I'd never have —"

"— got a reputation for Potions brilliance you don't deserve," said Hermione nastily.

"Give it a rest, Hermione!" said Ginny, and Harry was so amazed, so grateful, he looked up. "By the sound of it, Malfoy was trying to use an Unforgivable Curse, you should be glad Harry had something good up his sleeve!"

"Well, of course I'm glad Harry wasn't cursed!" said Hermione, clearly stung. "But you can't call that Sectumsempra spell good, Ginny, look where it's landed him! And I'd have thought, seeing what this has done to your chances in the match —"

"Oh, don't start acting as though you understand Quidditch," snapped Ginny, "you'll only embarrass yourself."

Harry and Ron stared: Hermione and Ginny, who had always got on together very well, were now sitting with their arms folded, glaring in opposite directions. Ron looked nervously at Harry, then snatched up a book at random and hid behind it. Harry, however, little though he knew he deserved it, felt unbelievably cheerful all of a sudden, even though none of them spoke again for the rest of the evening.

His lightheartedness was short-lived. There were Slytherin taunts to be endured next day, not to mention much anger from fellow Gryffindors, who were most unhappy that their Captain had got himself banned from the final match of the season. By Saturday morning, whatever he might have told Hermione, Harry would have gladly exchanged all the Felix Felicis in the world to be walking down to the Quidditch pitch with Ron, Ginny, and the others. It was almost unbearable to turn away from the mass of students streaming out into the sunshine, all of them wearing rosettes and hats and brandishing banners and scarves, to descend the stone steps into the dungeons and walk until the distant sounds of the crowd were quite obliterated, knowing that he would not be able to hear a word of commentary or a cheer or groan.

"Ah, Potter," said Snape, when Harry had knocked on his door and entered the unpleasantly familiar office that Snape, despite teaching floors above now, had not vacated; it was as dimly lit as ever and the same slimy dead objects were suspended in colored potions all around the walls. Ominously, there were many cob-webbed boxes piled on a table where Harry was clearly supposed to sit; they had an aura of tedious, hard, and pointless work about them.

“Mr. Filch has been looking for someone to clear out these old files,” said Snape softly. “They are the records of other Hogwarts wrongdoers and their punishments. Where the ink has grown faint, or the cards have suffered damage from mice, we would like you to copy out the crimes and punishments afresh and, making sure that they are in alphabetical order, replace them in the boxes. You will not use magic.”

“Right, Professor,” said Harry, with as much contempt as he could put into the last three syllables.

“I thought you could start,” said Snape, a malicious smile on his lips, “with boxes one thousand and twelve to one thousand and fifty-six. You will find some familiar names in there, which should add interest to the task. Here, you see…”

He pulled out a card from one of the topmost boxes with a flourish and read, “‘*James Potter and Sirius Black. Apprehended using an illegal hex upon Bertram Aubrey. Aubreys head twice normal size. Double detention.*’” Snape sneered. “It must be such a comforting thing that, though they are gone, a record of their great achievements remains.”

Harry felt the familiar boiling sensation in the pit of his stomach. Biting his tongue to prevent himself retaliating, he sat down in front of the boxes and pulled one toward him.

It was, as Harry had anticipated, useless, boring work, punctuated (as Snape had clearly planned) with the regular jolt in the stomach that meant he had just read his father or Sirius’s names, usually coupled together in various petty misdeeds, occasionally accompanied by those of Remus Lupin and Peter Pettigrew. And while he copied out all their various offenses and punishments, he wondered what was going on outside, where the match would have just started…Ginny playing Seeker against Cho…

Harry glanced again and again at the large clock ticking on the wall. It seemed to be moving half as fast as a regular clock; perhaps Snape had bewitched it to go extra slowly? He could not have been here for only half an hour…an hour…an hour and a half…

Harry’s stomach started rumbling when the clock showed half past twelve. Snape, who had not spoken at all since setting Harry his task, finally looked up at ten past one.

“I think that will do,” he said coldly. “Mark the place you have reached. You will continue at ten o’clock next Saturday.”

“Yes, sir.”

Harry stuffed a bent card into the box at random and hurried out of the door before Snape could change his mind, racing back up the stone steps, straining his ears to hear a sound from the pitch, but all was quiet…It was over, then…

He hesitated outside the crowded Great Hall, then ran up the marble staircase; whether Gryffindor had won or lost, the team usually celebrated or commiserated in their own common room.

"*Quid agis*?" he said tentatively to the Fat Lady, wondering what he would find inside.

Her expression was unreadable as she replied, "You'll see."

And she swung forward.

A roar of celebration erupted from the hole behind her. Harry gaped as people began to scream at the sight of him; several hands pulled him into the room.

"We won!" yelled Ron, bounding into sight and brandishing the silver Cup at Harry. "We won! Four hundred and fifty to a hundred and forty! We won!"

Harry looked around; there was Ginny running toward him; she had a hard, blazing look in her face as she threw her arms around him. And without thinking, without planning it, without worrying about the fact that fifty people were watching, Harry kissed her.

After several long moments — or it might have been half an hour — or possibly several sunlit days — they broke apart. The room had gone very quiet. Then several people wolf-whistled and there was an outbreak of nervous giggling. Harry looked over the top of Ginny's head to see Dean Thomas holding a shattered glass in his hand, and Romilda Vane looking as though she might throw something. Hermione was beaming, but Harry's eyes sought Ron. At last he found him, still clutching the Cup and wearing an expression appropriate to having been clubbed over the head. For a fraction of a second they looked at each other, then Ron gave a tiny jerk of the head that Harry understood to mean, Well — if you must.

The creature in his chest roaring in triumph, he grinned down at Ginny and gestured wordlessly out of the portrait hole. A long walk in the grounds seemed indicated, during which — if they had time — they might discuss the match.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE SEER OVERHEARD

The fact that Harry Potter was going out with Ginny Weasley seemed to interest a great number of people, most of them girls, yet Harry found himself newly and happily impervious to gossip over the next few weeks. After all, it made a very nice change to be talked about because of something that was making him happier than he could remember being for a very long time, rather than because he had been involved in horrific scenes of Dark magic.

"You'd think people had better things to gossip about," said Ginny, as she sat on the common-room floor, leaning against Harry's legs and reading the *Daily Prophet*. "Three Dementor attacks in a week, and all Romilda Vane does is ask me if it's true you've got a Hippogriff tattooed across your chest."

Ron and Hermione both roared with laughter. Harry ignored them.

"What did you tell her?"

"I told her it's a Hungarian Horntail," said Ginny, turning a page of the newspaper idly. "Much more macho."

"Thanks," said Harry, grinning. "And what did you tell her Ron's got?"

"A Pygmy Puff, but I didn't say where."

Ron scowled as Hermione rolled around laughing.

"Watch it," he said, pointing wamingly at Harry and Ginny. "Just because I've given my permission doesn't mean I can't withdraw it —"

"Your permission", scoffed Ginny. "Since when did you give me permission to do anything? Anyway, you said yourself you'd rather it was Harry than Michael or Dean."

"Yeah, I would," said Ron grudgingly. "And just as long as you don't start snogging each other in public —"

"You filthy hypocrite! What about you and Lavender, thrashing around like a pair of eels all over the place?" demanded Ginny.

But Ron's tolerance was not to be tested much as they moved into June, for Harry and Ginny's time together was becoming increasingly restricted. Ginny's O.W.L.s were approaching and she was therefore forced to revise for hours into the night. On one such evening, when Ginny had retired to the library and Harry was sitting beside the window in the common room, supposedly finishing his Herbology homework but in reality reliving a particularly happy hour he had spent down by the lake with Ginny at lunch-time, Hermione dropped into the seat between him and Ron with an unpleasantly purposeful look on her face.

“I want to talk to you, Harry.”

“What about?” said Harry suspiciously. Only the previous day, Hermione had told him off for distracting Ginny when she ought to be working hard for her examinations.

“The so-called Half-Blood Prince.”

“Oh, not again,” he groaned. “Will you please drop it? “

He had not dared to return to the Room of Requirement to retrieve his book, and his performance in Potions was suffering accordingly (though Slughorn, who approved of Ginny, had jocularly attributed this to Harry being lovesick). But Harry was sure that Snape had not yet given up hope of laying hands on the Prince’s book, and was determined to leave it where it was while Snape remained on the lookout.

“I’m not dropping it,” said Hermione firmly, “until you’ve heard me out. Now, I’ve been trying to find out a bit about who might make a hobby of inventing Dark spells -”

“He didn’t make a hobby of it -”

“He, he - who says it’s a he?”

“We’ve been through this,” said Harry crossly. “Prince, Hermione, Prince!”

“Right!” said Hermione, red patches blazing in her cheeks as she pulled a very old piece of newsprint out of her pocket and slammed it down on the table in front of Harry. “Look at that! Look at the picture!”

Harry picked up the crumbling piece of paper and stared at the moving photograph, yellowed with age; Ron leaned over for a look, too. The picture showed a skinny girl of around fifteen. She was not pretty; she looked simultaneously cross and sullen, with heavy brows and a long, pallid face. Underneath the photograph was the caption: Eileen Prince, Captain of the Hogwarts Gobstones Team.

“So?” said Harry, scanning the short news item to which the picture belonged; it was a rather dull story about inter-school competitions.

“Her name was Eileen Prince. Prince, Harry.”

They looked at each other and Harry realized what Hermione was trying to say. He burst out laughing.

“No way.”

“What?”

“You think she was the Half-Blood…? Oh, come on.”

"Well, why not? Harry, there aren't any real princes in the wizarding world! It's either a nickname, a made-up title somebody's given themselves, or it could be their actual name, couldn't it? No, listen! If, say, her father was a wizard whose surname was "Prince", and her mother was a Muggle, then that would make her a 'half-blood Prince'!"

"Yeah, very ingenious, Hermione…"

"But it would! Maybe she was proud of being half a Prince!"

"Listen, Hermione, I can tell it's not a girl. I can just tell."

"The truth is that you don't think a girl would have been clever enough," said Hermione angrily.

"How can I have hung round with you for five years and not think girls are clever?" said Harry, stung by this. "It's the way he writes. I just know the Prince was a bloke, I can tell. This girl hasn't got anything to do with it. Where did you get this, anyway?"

"The library," said Hermione, predictably. "There's a whole collection of old *Prophets* up there. Well, I'm going to find out more about Eileen Prince if I can."

"Enjoy yourself," said Harry irritably.

"I will," said Hermione. "And the first place I'll look," she shot at him, as she reached the portrait hole, "is records of old Potions awards!"

Harry scowled after her for a moment, then continued his contemplation of the darkening sky.

"She's just never got over you outperforming her in Potions," said Ron, returning to his copy of *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi*.

"You don't think I'm mad, wanting that book back, do you?"

"Course not," said Ron robustly. "He was a genius, the Prince. Anyway…without his bezoar tip…" he drew his finger significantly across his own throat, "I wouldn't be here to discuss it, would I? I mean, I'm not saying that spell you used on Malfoy was great -"

"Nor am I," said Harry quickly.

"But he healed all right, didn't he? Back on his feet in no time."

"Yeah," said Harry; this was perfectly true, although his conscience squirmed slightly all the same. "Thanks to Snape…"

"You still got detention with Snape this Saturday?" Ron continued.

"Yeah, and the Saturday after that, and the Saturday after that,'"sighed Harry. "And he's hinting now that if I don't get all the boxes done by the end of term, we'll carry on next year."

He was finding these detentions particularly irksome because they cut into the already limited time he could have been spending with Ginny. Indeed, he had frequently wondered lately whether

Snape did not know this, for he was keeping Harry later and later every time, while making pointed asides about Harry having to miss the good weather and the varied opportunities it offered.

Harry was shaken from these bitter reflections by the appearance at his side of Jimmy Peakes, who was holding out a scroll of parchment.

"Thanks, Jimmy…hey, it's from Dumbledore!" said Harry excitedly, unrolling the parchment and scanning it. "He wants me to go to his office as quick as I can!"

They stared at each other.

"Blimey," whispered Ron. "You don't reckon…he hasn't found…?"

"Better go and see, hadn't I?" said Harry, jumping to his feet.

He hurried out of the common room and along the seventh floor as fast as he could, passing nobody but Peeves, who swooped past in the opposite direction, throwing bits of chalk at Harry in a routine sort of way and cackling loudly as he dodged Harry's defensive jinx. Once Peeves had vanished, there was silence in the corridors; with only fifteen minutes left until curfew, most people had already returned to their common rooms.

And then Harry heard a scream and a crash. He stopped in his tracks, listening.

"How - dare - you - aaaaargh!"

The noise was coming from a corridor nearby; Harry sprinted towards it, his wand at the ready, hurtled round another corner and saw Professor Trelawney sprawled upon the floor, her head covered in one of her many shawls, several sherry bottles lying beside her, one broken.

"Professor —"

Harry hurried forwards and helped Professor Trelawney to her feet. Some of her glittering beads had become entangled with her glasses. She hiccoughed loudly, patted her hair and pulled herself up on Harry's helping arm.

"What happened, Professor?"

"You may well ask!" she said shrilly. "I was strolling along, brooding upon certain Dark portents happen to have glimpsed…"

But Harry was not paying much attention. He had just noticed where they were standing: there on the right was the tapestry of dancing trolls and, on the left, that smoothly impenetrable stretch of stone wall that concealed —

"Professor, were you trying to get into the Room of Requirement?"

"…omens I have been vouchsafed — what?"

She looked suddenly shifty.

“The Room of Requirement,” repeated Harry. “Were you trying to get in there?”

“I — well — I didn’t know students knew about -”

“Not all of them do,” said Harry. “But what happened? You screamed…it sounded as though you were hurt…”

“I — well,” said Professor Trelawney, drawing her shawls around her defensively and staring down at him with her vastly magnified eyes. “I wished to — ah — deposit certain – um - personal items in the Room…” And she muttered something about ‘nasty accusations’.

“Right,” said Harry, glancing down at the sherry bottles. “But you couldn’t get in and hide them?”

He found this very odd; the Room had opened for him, after all, when he had wanted to hide the Half-Blood Prince’s book.

“Oh, I got in all right,” said Professor Trelawney, glaring at the wall. “But there was somebody already in there.”

“Somebody in —? Who?”demanded Harry. “Who was in there?”

“Who? I have no idea,” said Professor Trelawney, looking slightly taken aback at the urgency in Harry’s voice. “I walked into the Room and I heard a voice, which has never happened before in all my years of hiding — of using the Room, I mean.”

“A voice? Saying what? “

“I don’t know that it was saying anything,” said Professor Trelawney. “It was…whooping.”

“Whooping?”

“Gleefully,” she said, nodding.

Harry stared at her.

“Was it male or female?”

“I would hazard a guess at male,” said Professor Trelawney.

“And it sounded happy?”

“Very happy,” said Professor Trelawney sniffily.

“As though it was celebrating?”

“Most definitely.”

“And then —?”

“And then I called out, ‘Who’s there?’”

“You couldn’t have found out who it was without asking?” Harry asked her, slightly frustrated.

“The Inner Eye,” said Professor Trelawney with dignity, straightening her shawls and many strands of glittering beads, “was fixed upon matters well outside the mundane realms of whooping voices.”

“Right,” said Harry hastily; he had heard about Professor Trelawney’s Inner Eye all too often before. “And did the voice say who was there?”

“No, it did not,” she said. “Everything went pitch black and the next thing I knew, I was being hurled headfirst out of the Room!”

“And you didn’t see that coming?” said Harry, unable to help himself.

“No, I did not, as I say, it was pitch —” She stopped and glared at him suspiciously.

“I think you’d better tell Professor Dumbledore,” said Harry. “He ought to know Malfoy’s celebrating — I mean, that someone threw you out of the Room.”

To his surprise, Professor Trelawney drew herself up at this suggestion, looking haughty.

“The Headmaster has intimated that he would prefer fewer visits from me,” she said coldly. “I am not one to press my company upon those who do not value it. If Dumbledore chooses to ignore the warnings the cards show —”

Her bony hand closed suddenly around Harry’s wrist.

“Again and again, no matter how I lay them out —”

And she pulled a card dramatically from underneath her shawls.

“— the lightning-struck tower,” she whispered. “Calamity. Disaster. Coming nearer all the time…”

“Right,” said Harry again. “Well…I still think you should tell Dumbledore about this voice and everything going dark and being thrown out of the Room…”

“You think so?” Professor Trelawney seemed to consider the matter for a moment, but Harry could tell that she liked the idea of retelling her little adventure.

“I’m going to see him right now,” said Harry. “I’ve got a meeting with him. We could go together.”

“Oh, well, in that case,” said Professor Trelawney with a smile. She bent down, scooped up her sherry bottles and dumped them unceremoniously in a large blue and white vase standing in a nearby niche.

“I miss having you in my classes, Harry,” she said soulfully, as they set off together. “You were never much of a Seer…but you were a wonderful Object…”

Harry did not reply; he had loathed being the Object of Professor Trelawney's continual predictions of doom.

"I am afraid," she went on, "that the nag — I'm sorry, the centaur — knows nothing of cartomancy. I asked him — one Seer to another — had he not, too, sensed the distant vibrations of coming catastrophe? But he seemed to find me almost comical. Yes, comical!"

Her voice rose rather hysterically and Harry caught a powerful whiff of sherry even though the bottles had been left behind.

"Perhaps the horse has heard people say that I have not inherited my great-great-grandmother's gift. Those rumours have been bandied about by the jealous for years. You know what I say to such people, Harry? Would Dumbledore have let me teach at this great school, put so much trust in me all these years, had I not proved myself to him?"

Harry mumbled something indistinct.

"I well remember my first interview with Dumbledore," went on Professor Trelawney, in throaty tones. "He was deeply impressed, of course, deeply impressed…I was staying at the Hog's Head, which I do not advise, incidentally — bed bugs, dear boy — but funds were low. Dumbledore did me the courtesy of calling upon me in my room at the inn. He questioned me…I must confess that, at first, I thought he seemed ill-disposed towards Divination…and I remember I was starting to feel a little odd, I had not eaten much that day…but then…"

And now Harry was paying attention properly for the first time, for he knew what had happened then: Professor Trelawney had made the prophecy that had altered the course of his whole life, the prophecy about him and Voldemort.

"…but then we were rudely interrupted by Severus Snape!'

"What?"

"Yes, there was a commotion outside the door and it flew open, and there was that rather uncouth barman standing with Snape, who was waffling about having come the wrong way up the stairs, although I'm afraid that I myself rather thought he had been apprehended eavesdropping on my interview with Dumbledore — you see, he himself was seeking a job at the time, and no doubt hoped to pick up tips! Well, after that, you know, Dumbledore seemed much more disposed to give me a job, and I could not help thinking, Harry, that it was because he appreciated the stark contrast between my own unassuming manners and quiet talent, compared to the pushing, thrusting young man who was prepared to listen at keyholes — Harry, dear?"

She looked back over her shoulder, having only just realized that Harry was no longer with her; he had stopped walking and they were now ten feet from each other.

"Harry?" she repeated uncertainly.

Perhaps his face was white, to make her look so concerned and frightened. Harry was standing stock-still as waves of shock crashed over him, wave after wave, obliterating everything except the information that had been kept from him for so long…

It was Snape who had overheard the prophecy. It was Snape who had carried the news of the prophecy to Voldemort. Snape and Peter Pettigrew together had sent Voldemort hunting after Lily and James and their son…

Nothing else mattered to Harry just now.

"Harry?" said Professor Trelawney again. "Harry — I thought we were going to see the Headmaster together?"

"You stay here," said Harry through numb lips.

"But, dear…I was going to tell him how I was assaulted in the Room of —"

"You stay here!" Harry repeated angrily.

She looked alarmed as he ran past her, round the corner into Dumbledore's corridor, where the lone gargoyle stood sentry. Harry shouted the password at the gargoyle and ran up the moving spiral staircase three steps at a time. He did not knock upon Dumbledore's door, he hammered; and the calm voice answered 'Enter' after Harry had already flung himself into the room.

Fawkes the phoenix looked round, his bright black eyes gleaming with reflected gold from the sunset beyond the window. Dumbledore was standing at the window looking out at the grounds, a long, black travelling cloak in his arms.

"Well, Harry, I promised that you could come with me."

For a moment or two, Harry did not understand; the conversation with Trelawney had driven everything else out of his head and his brain seemed to be moving very slowly.

"Come…with you…?"

"Only if you wish it, of course."

"If I…"

And then Harry remembered why he had been eager to come to Dumbledore's office in the first place.

"You've found one? You've found a Horcrux?"

"I believe so."

Rage and resentment fought shock and excitement: for several moments, Harry could not speak.

"It is natural to be afraid," said Dumbledore.

"I'm not scared!" said Harry at once, and it was perfectly true; fear was one emotion he was not feeling at all. "Which Horcrux is it? Where is it?"

"I am not sure which it is — though I think we can rule out the snake — but I believe it to be hidden in a cave on the coast many miles from here, a cave I have been trying to locate for a very long time: the cave in which Tom Riddle once terrorised two children from his orphanage on their annual trip; you remember?"

"Yes," said Harry. "How is it protected?"

"I do not know; I have suspicions that may be entirely wrong." Dumbledore hesitated, then said, "Harry, I promised you that you could come with me, and I stand by that promise, but it would be very wrong of me not to warn you that this will be exceedingly dangerous."

"I'm coming," said Harry, almost before Dumbledore had finished speaking. Boiling with anger at Snape, his desire to do something desperate and risky had increased tenfold in the last few minutes. This seemed to show on Harry's face, for Dumbledore moved away from the window, and looked more closely at Harry, a slight crease between his silver eyebrows.

"What has happened to you?"

"Nothing," lied Harry promptly.

"What has upset you?"

"I'm not upset."

"Harry, you were never a good Occlumens —"

The word was the spark that ignited Harry's fury.

"Snape!" he said, very loudly, and Fawkes gave a soft squawk behind them. "Snape's what's happened! He told Voldemort about the prophecy, it was *him*, he listened outside the door, Trelawney told me!"

Dumbledore's expression did not change, but Harry thought his face whitened under the bloody tinge cast by the setting sun. For a long moment, Dumbledore said nothing.

"When did you find out about this?" he asked at last.

"Just now!" said Many, who was refraining from yelling with enormous difficulty. And then, suddenly, he could not stop himself. "AND YOU LET HIM TEACH HERE AND HE TOLD VOLDEMORT TO GO AFTER MY MUM AND DAD!"

Breathing hard as though he were fighting, Harry turned away from Dumbledore, who still had not moved a muscle, and paced up and down the study, rubbing his knuckles in his hand and exercising every last bit of restraint to prevent himself knocking things over. He wanted to rage and storm at Dumbledore, but he also wanted to go with him to try and destroy the Horcrux; he wanted to tell him that he was a foolish old man for trusting Snape, but he was terrified that Dumbledore would not take him along unless he mastered his anger…

"Harry," said Dumbledore quietly. "Please listen to me."

It was as difficult to stop his relentless pacing as to refrain from shouting. Harry paused, biting his lip, and looked into Dumbledore's lined face.

"Professor Snape made a terrible —"

"Don't tell me it was a mistake, sir, he was listening at the door!"

"Please let me finish." Dumbledore waited until Harry had nodded curtly, then went on. "Professor Snape made a terrible mistake. He was still in Lord Voldemort's employ on the night he heard the first half of Professor Trelawney's prophecy. Naturally, he hastened to tell his master what he had heard, for it concerned his master most deeply. But he did not know — he had no possible way of knowing — which boy Voldemort would hunt from then onwards, or that the parents he would destroy in his murderous quest were people that Professor Snape knew, that they were your mother and father —"

Harry let out a yell of mirthless laughter.

"He hated my dad like he hated Sirius! Haven't you noticed, Professor, how the people Snape hates tend to end up dead?"

"You have no idea of the remorse Professor Snape felt when he realized how Lord Voldemort had interpreted the prophecy, Harry. I believe it to be the greatest regret of his life and the reason that he returned —"

"But he's a very good Occlumens, isn't he, sir?" said Harry, whose voice was shaking with the effort of keeping it steady. "And isn't Voldemort convinced that Snape's on his side, even now? Professor…how can you be sure Snape's on our side?"

Dumbledore did not speak for a moment; he looked as though he was trying to make up his mind about something. At last he said, "I am sure. I trust Severus Snape completely."

Harry breathed deeply for a few moments in an effort to steady himself. It did not work.

"Well, I don't!" he said, as loudly as before. "He's up to something with Draco Malfoy right now, right under your nose, and you still —"

“We have discussed this, Harry,” said Dumbledore, and now he sounded stern again. “I have told you my views.”

“You’re leaving the school tonight and I’ll bet you haven’t even considered that Snape and Malfoy might decide to —”

“To what?” asked Dumbledore, his eyebrows raised. “What is it that you suspect them of doing, precisely?”

“I…they’re up to something!” said Harry and his hands curled into fists as he said it. “Professor Trelawney was just in the Room of Requirement, trying to hide her sherry bottles, and she heard Malfoy whooping, celebrating! He’s trying to mend something dangerous in there and if you ask me he’s fixed it at last and you’re about to just walk out of school without —”

“Enough,” said Dumbledore. He said it quite calmly, and yet Harry fell silent at once; he knew that he had finally crossed some invisible line. “Do you think that I have once left the school unprotected during my absences this year? I have not. Tonight, when I leave, there will again be additional protection in place. Please do not suggest that I do not take the safety of my students seriously, Harry.”

“I didn’t —” mumbled Harry, a little abashed, but Dumbledore cut across him.

“I do not wish to discuss the matter any further.”

Harry bit back his retort, scared that he had gone too far, that he had ruined his chance of accompanying Dumbledore, but Dumbledore went on, “Do you wish to come with me tonight?”

“Yes,” said Harry at once.

“Very well, then: listen.”

Dumbledore drew himself up to his full height.

“I take you with me on one condition: that you obey any command I might give you at once, and without question.”

“Of course.”

“Be sure to understand me, Harry. I mean that you must follow even such orders as ‘run’, ‘hide’ or ‘go back’. Do I have your word?”

“I - yes, of course.”

“If I tell you to hide, you will do so?”

“Yes.”

“If I tell you to flee, you will obey?”

“Yes.”

"If I tell you to leave me, and save yourself, you will do as I tell you?"

"I —"

"Harry?"

They looked at each other for a moment.

"Yes, sir."

"Very good. Then I wish you to go and fetch your Cloak and meet me in the Entrance Hall in five minutes' time."

Dumbledore turned back to look out of the fiery window; the sun was now a ruby-red glare along the horizon. Harry walked quickly from the office and down the spiral staircase. His mind was oddly clear all of a sudden. He knew what to do.

Ron and Hermione were sitting together in the common room when he came back. "What does Dumbledore want?" Hermione said at once. "Harry, are you okay?" she added anxiously.

"I'm fine," said Harry shortly, racing past them. He dashed up the stairs and into his dormitory, where he flung open his trunk and pulled out the Marauder's Map and a pair of balled-up socks. Then he stepped back down the stairs and into the common room, skidding to a halt where Ron and Hermione sat, looking stunned.

"I haven't got much time," Harry panted, "Dumbledore thinks I'm getting my Invisibility Cloak. Listen…"

Quickly he told them where he was going, and why. He did not pause either for Hermione's gasps of horror or for Ron's hasty questions; they could work out the finer details for themselves later.

"…so you see what this means?" Harry finished at a gallop. "Dumbledore won't be here tonight, so Malfoy's going to have another clear shot at whatever he's up to. No, listen to me!" he hissed angrily, as both Ron and Hermione showed every sign of interrupting. "I know it was Malfoy celebrating in the Room of Requirement. Here —" He shoved the Marauder's Map into Hermione's hand. "You've got to watch him and you've got to watch Snape, too. Use anyone else who you can rustle up from the DA. Hermione, those contact Galleons will still work, right? Dumbledore says he's put extra protection in the school, but if Snape's involved, he'll know what Dumbledore's protection is, and how to avoid it — but he won't be expecting you lot to be on the watch, will he?"

"Harry —" began Hermione, her eyes huge with fear.

"I haven't got time to argue," said Harry curtly. "Take this as well —" He thrust the socks into Ron's hands.

“Thanks,” said Ron. “Er — why do I need socks?”

“You need what’s wrapped in them, it’s the Felix Felicis. Share it between yourselves and Ginny too. Say goodbye to her from me. I’d better go, Dumbledore’s waiting —”

“No!” said Hermione, as Ron unwrapped the tiny little bottle of golden potion, looking awestruck. “We don’t want it, you take it, who knows what you’re going to be facing?”

“I’ll be fine, I’ll be with Dumbledore,” said Harry. “I want to know you lot are okay…don’t look like that, Hermione, I’ll see you later…”

And he was off, hurrying back through the portrait hole towards the Entrance Hall.

Dumbledore was waiting beside the oaken front doors. He turned as Harry came skidding out on to the topmost stone step, panting hard, a searing stitch in his side.

“I would like you to wear your Cloak, please,” said Dumbledore, and he waited until Harry had thrown it on before saying, “Very good. Shall we go?”

Dumbledore set off at once down the stone steps, his own travelling cloak barely stirring in the still summer air. Harry hurried alongside him under the Invisibility Cloak, still panting and sweating rather a lot.

“But what will people think when they see you leaving, Professor?” Harry asked, his mind on Malfoy and Snape.

“That I am off into Hogsmeade for a drink,” said Dumbledore lightly. “I sometimes offer Rosmerta my custom, or else visit the Hog’s Head…or I appear to. It is as good a way as any of disguising one’s true destination.”

They made their way down the drive in the gathering twilight. The air was full of the smells of warm grass, lake water and wood smoke from Hagrid’s cabin. It was difficult to believe that they were heading for anything dangerous or frightening.

“Professor,” said Harry quietly, as the gates at the bottom of the drive came into view, “will we be Apparating?”

“Yes,” said Dumbledore. “You can Apparate now, I believe?”

“Yes,” said Harry, “but I haven’t got a licence.”

He felt it best to be honest; what if he spoiled everything by turning up a hundred miles from where he was supposed to go?

“No matter,” said Dumbledore, “I can assist you again.”

They turned out of the gates into the twilit, deserted lane to Hogsmeade. Darkness descended fast as they walked and by the time they reached the High Street night was falling in earnest. Lights

twinkled from windows over shops and as they neared the Three Broomsticks they heard raucous shouting.

"— and stay out!" shouted Madam Rosmerta, forcibly ejecting a grubby-looking wizard. "Oh, hello, Albus…you're out late"

"Good evening, Rosmerta, good evening…forgive me, I'm off to the Hog's Head…no offence, but I feel like a quieter atmosphere tonight…"

A minute later they turned the corner into the side street where the Hog's Head's sign creaked a little, though there was no breeze. In contrast to the Three Broomsticks, the pub appeared to be completely empty.

"It will not be necessary for us to enter," muttered Dumbledore, glancing around. "As long as nobody sees us go…now place your hand upon my arm, Harry. There is no need to grip too hard, I am merely guiding you. On the count of three — one…two…three…"

Harry turned. At once, there was that horrible sensation that he was being squeezed through a thick rubber tube; he could not draw breath, every part of him was being com-pressed almost past endurance and then, just when he thought he must suffocate, the invisible bands seemed to burst open, and he was standing in cool darkness, breathing in lungfuls of fresh, salty air.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

THE CAVE

Harry could smell salt and hear rushing waves; a light, chilly breeze ruffled his hair as he looked out at moon-lit sea and star-strewn sky. He was standing upon a high outcrop of dark rock, water foaming and churning below him. He glanced over his shoulder. A towering cliff stood behind them, a sheer drop, black and faceless. A few large chunks of rock, such as the one upon which Harry and Dumbledore were standing, looked as though they had broken away from the cliff face at some point in the past. It was a bleak, harsh view, the sea and the rock unrelieved by any tree or sweep of grass or sand.

"What do you think?" asked Dumbledore. He might have been asking Harry's opinion on whether it was a good site for a picnic.

"They brought the kids from the orphanage here?" asked Harry, who could not imagine a less cozy spot for a day trip.

"Not here, precisely," said Dumbledore. "There is a village of sorts about halfway along the cliffs behind us. I believe the orphans were taken there for a little sea air and a view of the waves. No, I think it was only ever Tom Riddle and his youthful victims who visited this spot. No Muggle could reach this rock unless they were uncommonly good mountaineers, and boats cannot approach the cliffs, the waters around them are too dangerous. I imagine that Riddle climbed down; magic would have served better than ropes. And he brought two small children with him, probably for the pleasure of terrorizing them. I think the journey alone would have done it, don't you?"

Harry looked up at the cliff again and felt goose bumps.

"But his final destination — and ours — lies a little farther on. Come."

Dumbledore beckoned Harry to the very edge of the rock where a series of jagged niches made footholds leading down to boulders that lay half-submerged in water and closer to the cliff. It was a treacherous descent and Dumbledore, hampered slightly by his withered hand, moved slowly. The lower rocks were slippery with seawater. Harry could feel flecks of cold salt spray hitting his face. "*Lumos*," said Dumbledore, as he reached the boulder closest to the cliff face. A thousand flecks of golden light sparkled upon the dark surface of the water a few feet below where he crouched; the black wall of rock beside him was illuminated too. "You see?" said Dumbledore quietly, holding his wand a little higher. Harry saw a fissure in the cliff into which dark water was swirling. "You will not object to getting a little wet?"

"No," said Harry.

“Then take off your Invisibility Cloak — there is no need for it now — and let us take the plunge.”

And with the sudden agility of a much younger man, Dumbledore slid from the boulder, landed in the sea, and began to swim, with a perfect breaststroke, toward the dark slit in the rock face, his lit wand held in his teeth. Harry pulled off his cloak, stuffed it into his pocket, and followed.

The water was icy; Harry’s waterlogged clothes billowed around him and weighed him down. Taking deep breaths that filled his nostrils with the tang of salt and seaweed, he struck out for the shimmering, shrinking light now moving deeper into the cliff.

The fissure soon opened into a dark tunnel that Harry could tell would be filled with water at high tide. The slimy walls were barely three feet apart and glimmered like wet tar in the passing light of Dumbledore’s wand. A little way in, the passageway curved to the left, and Harry saw that it extended far into the cliff. He continued to swim in Dumbledore’s wake, the tips of his benumbed fingers brushing the rough, wet rock.

Then he saw Dumbledore rising out of the water ahead, his silver hair and dark robes gleaming. When Harry reached the spot he found steps that led into a large cave. He clambered up them, water streaming from his soaking clothes, and emerged, shivering uncontrollably, into the still and freezing air.

Dumbledore was standing in the middle of the cave, his wand held high as he turned slowly on the spot, examining the walls and ceiling.

“Yes, this is the place,” said Dumbledore.

“How can you tell?” Harry spoke in a whisper.

“It has known magic,” said Dumbledore simply.

Harry could not tell whether the shivers he was experiencing were due to his spine-deep coldness or to the same awareness of enchantments. He watched as Dumbledore continued to revolve on the spot, evidently concentrating on things Harry could not see.

“This is merely the antechamber, the entrance hall,” said Dumbledore after a moment or two. “We need to penetrate the inner place…Now it is Lord Voldemort’s obstacles that stand in our way, rather than those nature made…”

Dumbledore approached the wall of the cave and caressed it with his blackened fingertips, murmuring words in a strange tongue that Harry did not understand. Twice Dumbledore walked right around the cave, touching as much of the rough rock as he could, occasionally pausing,

running his fingers backward and forward over a particular spot, until finally he stopped, his hand pressed flat against the wall.

"Here," he said. "We go on through here. The entrance is concealed."

Harry did not ask how Dumbledore knew. He had never seen a wizard work things out like this, simply by looking and touching; but Harry had long since learned that bangs and smoke were more often the marks of ineptitude than expertise.

Dumbledore stepped back from the cave wall and pointed his wand at the rock. For a moment, an arched outline appeared there, blazing white as though there was a powerful light behind the crack.

"You've d-done it!" said Harry through chattering teeth, but before the words had left his lips the outline had gone, leaving the rock as bare and solid as ever. Dumbledore looked around.

"Harry, I'm so sorry, I forgot," he said; he now pointed his wand at Harry and at once, Harry's clothes were as warm and dry as if they had been hanging in front of a blazing fire.

"Thank you," said Harry gratefully, but Dumbledore had already turned his attention back to the solid cave wall. He did not try any more magic, but simply stood there staring at it intently, as though something extremely interesting was written on it. Harry stayed quite still; he did not want to break Dumbledores concentration. Then, after two solid minutes, Dumbledore said quietly, "Oh, surely not. So crude."

"What is it, Professor?"

"I rather think," said Dumbledore, putting his uninjured hand inside his robes and drawing out a short silver knife of the kind Harry used to chop potion ingredients, "that we are required to make payment to pass."

"Payment?" said Harry. "You've got to give the door something?"

"Yes," said Dumbledore. "Blood, if I am not much mistaken."

"Blood?"

"I said it was crude," said Dumbledore, who sounded disdainful, even disappointed, as though Voldemort had fallen short of higher standards Dumbledore expected. "The idea, as I am sure you will have gathered, is that your enemy must weaken him — or herself to enter. Once again, Lord Voldemort fails to grasp that there are much more terrible things than physical injury."

"Yeah, but still, if you can avoid it…" said Harry, who had experienced enough pain not to be keen for more.

“Sometimes, however, it is unavoidable,” said Dumbledore, shaking back the sleeve of his robes and exposing the forearm of his injured hand.

“Professor!” protested Harry, hurrying forward as Dumbledore raised his knife. “I’ll do it, I’m -”

He did not know what he was going to say — younger, fitter?

But Dumbledore merely smiled. There was a flash of silver, and a spurt of scarlet; the rock face was peppered with dark, glistening drops.

“You are very kind, Harry,” said Dumbledore, now passing the tip of his wand over the deep cut he had made in his own arm, so that it healed instantly, just as Snape had healed Malfoy’s wound, “But your blood is worth more than mine. Ah, that seems to have done the trick, doesn’t it?”

The blazing silver outline of an arch had appeared in the wall once more, and this time it did not fade away: The blood-spattered rock within it simply vanished, leaving an opening into what seemed total darkness. “After me, I think,” said Dumbledore, and he walked through the archway with Harry on his heels, lighting his own wand hastily as he went.

An eerie sight met their eyes: They were standing on the edge of a great black lake, so vast that Harry could not make out the distant banks, in a cavern so high that the ceiling too was out of sight. A misty greenish light shone far away in what looked like the middle of the lake; it was reflected in the completely still water below. The greenish glow and the light from the two wands were the only things that broke the otherwise velvety blackness, though their rays did not penetrate as far as Harry would have expected. The darkness was somehow denser than normal darkness.

“Let us walk,” said Dumbledore quietly. “Be very careful not to step into the water. Stay close to me.”

He set off around the edge of the lake, and Harry followed close behind him. Their footsteps made echoing, slapping sounds on the narrow rim of rock that surrounded the water. On and on they walked, but the view did not vary: on one side of them, the rough cavern wall, on the other, the boundless expanse of smooth, glassy blackness, in the very middle of which was that mysterious greenish glow. Harry found the place and the silence oppressive, unnerving.

“Professor?” he said finally. “Do you think the Horcrux is here?”

“Oh yes,” said Dumbledore. “Yes, I’m sure it is. The question is, how do we get to it?”

“We couldn’t…we couldn’t just try a Summoning Charm?” Harry said, sure that it was a stupid suggestion. But he was much keener than he was prepared to admit on getting out of this place as soon as possible.

“Certainly we could,” said Dumbledore, stopping so suddenly that Harry almost walked into him. “Why don’t you do it?”

“Me? Oh…okay…” Harry had not expected this, but cleared his throat and said loudly, wand aloft, “*Accio Horcrux!*”

With a noise like an explosion, something very large and pale erupted out of the dark water some twenty feet away; before Harry could see what it was, it had vanished again with a crashing splash that made great, deep ripples on the mirrored surface. Harry leapt backward in shock and hit the wall; his heart was still thundering as he turned to Dumbledore.

“What was that?”

“Something, I think, that is ready to respond should we attempt to seize the Horcrux.”

Harry looked back at the water. The surface of the lake was once more shining black glass: The ripples had vanished unnaturally fast; Harry’s heart, however, was still pounding.

“Did you think that would happen, sir?”

“I thought something would happen if we made an obvious attempt to get our hands on the Horcrux. That was a very good idea, Harry; much the simplest way of finding out what we are facing.”

“But we don’t know what the thing was,” said Harry, looking at the sinisterly smooth water.

“What the things are, you mean,” said Dumbledore. “I doubt very much that there is only one of them. Shall we walk on?”

“Professor?”

“Yes, Harry?”

“Do you think we’re going to have to go into the lake?”

“Into it? Only if we are very unfortunate.”

“You don’t think the Horcrux is at the bottom?”

“Oh no…I think the Horcrux is in the middle.” And Dumbledore pointed toward the misty green light in the center of the lake.

“So we’re going to have to cross the lake to get to it?”

“Yes, I think so.” Harry did not say anything. His thoughts were all of water monsters, of giant serpents, of demons, kelpies, and sprites…

“Aha,” said Dumbledore, and he stopped again; this time, Harry really did walk into him; for a moment he toppled on the edge of the dark water, and Dumbledore’s uninjured hand closed tightly

around his upper arm, pulling him back. "So sorry, Harry, I should have given warning. Stand back against the wall, please; I think I have found the place."

Harry had no idea what Dumbledore meant; this patch of dark bank was exactly like every other bit as far as he could tell, but Dumbledore seemed to have detected something special about it.

This time he was running his hand, not over the rocky wall, but t hrough the thin air, as though expecting to find and grip something invisible.

"Oho," said Dumbledore happily, seconds later. His hand had closed in midair upon something Harry could not see. Dumbledore moved closer to the water; Harry watched nervously as the tips of Dumbledore's buckled shoes found the utmost edge of the rock rim. Keeping his hand clenched in midair, Dumbledore raised his wand with the other and tapped his fist with the point.

Immediately a thick coppery green chain appeared out of thin air, extending from the depths of the water into Dumbledore's clenched hand. Dumbledore tapped the chain, which began to slide through his fist like a snake, coiling itself on the ground with a clinking sound that echoed noisily off the rocky walls, pulling something from the depths of the black water. Harry gasped as the ghostly prow of a tiny boat broke the surface, glowing as green as the chain, and floated, with barely a ripple, toward the place on the bank where Harry and Dumbledore stood.

"How did you know that was there?" Harry asked in astonishment.

"Magic always leaves traces," said Dumbledore, as the boat hit the bank with a gentle bump, "sometimes very distinctive traces. I taught Tom Riddle. I know his style."

"Is…is this boat safe?"

"Oh yes, I think so. Voldemort needed to create a means to cross the lake without attracting the wrath of those creatures he had placed within it in case he ever wanted to visit or remove his Horcrux."

"So the things in the water won't do anything to us if we cross in Voldemort's boat?"

"I think we must resign ourselves to the fact that they will, at some point, realize we are not Lord Voldemort. Thus far, however, we have done well. They have allowed us to raise the boat."

"But why have they let us?" asked Harry, who could not shake off the vision of tentacles rising out of the dark water the moment they were out of sight of the bank.

"Voldemort would have been reasonably confident that none but a very great wizard would have been able to find the boat," said Dumbledore. "I think he would have been prepared to risk what was, to his mind, the most unlikely possibility that somebody else would find it, knowing that he

had set other obstacles ahead that only he would be able to penetrate. We shall see whether he was right."

Harry looked down into the boat. It really was very small. "It doesn't look like it was built for two people. Will it hold both of us? Will we be too heavy together?"

Dumbledore chuckled. "Voldemort will not have cared about the weight, but about the amount of magical power that crossed his lake. I rather think an enchantment will have been placed upon this boat so that only one wizard at a time will be able to sail in it."

"But then —?"

"I do not think you will count, Harry: You are underage and unqualified. Voldemort would never have expected a sixteen-year-old to reach this place: I think it unlikely that your powers will register compared to mine."

These words did nothing to raise Harry's morale; perhaps Dumbledore knew it, for he added, "Voldemort's mistake, Harry, Voldemort's mistake…Age is foolish and forgetful when it underestimates youth…Now, you first this time, and be careful not to touch the water."

Dumbledore stood aside and Harry climbed carefully into the boat. Dumbledore stepped in too, coiling the chain onto the floor. They were crammed in together; Harry could not comfortably sit, but crouched, his knees jutting over the edge of the boat, which began to move at once. There was no sound other than the silken rustle of the boat's prow cleaving the water; it moved without their help, as though an invisible rope was pulling it onward toward the light in the center. Soon they could no longer see the walls of the cavern; they might have been at sea except that there were no waves.

Harry looked down and saw the reflected gold of his wandlight sparkling and glittering on the black water as they passed. The boat was carving deep ripples upon the glassy surface, grooves in the dark mirror…

And then Harry saw it, marble white, floating inches below the surface.

"Professor!" he said, and his startled voice echoed loudly over the silent water.

"Harry?"

"I think I saw a hand in the water — a human hand!"

"Yes, I am sure you did," said Dumbledore calmly.

Harry stared down into the water, looking for the vanished hand, and a sick feeling rose in his throat.

"So that thing that jumped out of the water —?"

But Harry had his answer before Dumbledore could reply; the wandlight had slid over a fresh patch of water and showed him, this time, a dead man lying faceup inches beneath the surface, his open eyes misted as though with cobwebs, his hair and his robes swirling around him like smoke.

"There are bodies in here!" said Harry, and his voice sounded much higher than usual and most unlike his own.

"Yes," said Dumbledore placidly, "but we do not need to worry about them at the moment."

"At the moment?" Harry repeated, tearing his gaze from the water to look at Dumbledore.

"Not while they are merely drifting peacefully below us," said Dumbledore. "There is nothing to be feared from a body, Harry, any more than there is anything to be feared from the darkness. Lord Voldemort, who of course secretly fears both, disagrees. But once again he reveals his own lack of wisdom. It is the unknown we fear when we look upon death and darkness, nothing more."

Harry said nothing; he did not want to argue, but he found the idea that there were bodies floating around them and beneath them horrible and, what was more, he did not believe that they were not dangerous.

"But one of them jumped," he said, trying to make his voice as level and calm as Dumbledore's. "When I tried to Summon the Horcrux, a body leapt out of the lake."

"Yes," said Dumbledore. "I am sure that once we take the Horcrux, we shall find them less peaceable. However, like many creatures that dwell in cold and darkness, they fear light and warmth, which we shall therefore call to our aid should the need arise. Fire, Harry," Dumbledore added with a smile, in response to Harry's bewildered expression.

"Oh…right…" said Harry quickly. He turned his head to look at the greenish glow toward which the boat was still inexorably sailing. He could not pretend now that he was not scared. The great black lake, teeming with the dead…It seemed hours and hours ago that he had met Professor Trelawney, that he had given Ron and Hermione Felix Felicis…He suddenly wished he had said a better good-bye to them…and he hadn't seen Ginny at all…

"Nearly there," said Dumbledore cheerfully.

Sure enough, the greenish light seemed to be growing larger at last, and within minutes, the boat had come to a halt, bumping gently into something that Harry could not see at first, but when he raised his illuminated wand he saw that they had reached a small island of smooth rock in the center of the lake.

"Careful not to touch the water," said Dumbledore again as Harry climbed out of the boat.

The island was no larger than Dumbledore's office, an expanse of flat dark stone on which stood nothing but the source of that greenish light, which looked much brighter when viewed close to. Harry squinted at it; at first, he thought it was a lamp of some kind, but then he saw that the light was coming from a stone basin rather like the Pensieve, which was set on top of a pedestal.

Dumbledore approached the basin and Harry followed. Side by side, they looked down into it. The basin was full of an emerald liq-uid emitting that phosphorescent glow.

"What is it?" asked Harry quietly.

"I am not sure," said Dumbledore. "Something more worrisome than blood and bodies, however."

Dumbledore pushed back the sleeve of his robe over his blackened hand, and stretched out the tips of his burned fingers toward the surface of the potion.

"Sir, no, don't touch —!"

"I cannot touch," said Dumbledore, smiling faintly. "See? I cannot approach any nearer than this. You try."

Staring, Harry put his hand into the basin and attempted to touch the potion. He met an invisible barrier that prevented him coming within an inch of it. No matter how hard he pushed, his fingers encountered nothing but what seemed to be solid and flexible air.

"Out of the way, please, Harry," said Dumbledore. He raised his wand and made complicated movements over the surface of the potion, murmuring soundlessly. Nothing happened, except perhaps that the potion glowed a little brighter. Harry remained silent while Dumbledore worked, but after a while Dumbledore withdrew his wand, and Harry felt it was safe to talk again.

"You think the Horcrux is in there, sir?"

"Oh yes." Dumbledore peered more closely into the basin. Harry saw his face reflected, upside down, in the smooth surface of the green potion. "But how to reach it? This potion cannot be penetrated by hand, Vanished, parted, scooped up, or siphoned away, nor can it be Transfigured, Charmed, or otherwise made to change its nature."

Almost absentmindedly, Dumbledore raised his wand again, twirled it once in midair, and then caught the crystal goblet that he had conjured out of nowhere.

"I can only conclude that this potion is supposed to be drunk."

"What?" said Harry. "No!"

"Yes, I think so: Only by drinking it can I empty the basin and see what lies in its depths."

"But what if — what if it kills you?"

"Oh, I doubt that it would work like that," said Dumbledore easily. "Lord Voldemort would not want to kill the person who reached this island."

Harry couldn't believe it. Was this more of Dumbledore's insane determination to see good in everyone?

"Sir," said Harry, trying to keep his voice reasonable, "sir, this is Voldemort we're —"

"I'm sorry, Harry; I should have said, he would not want to immediately kill the person who reached this island," Dumbledore corrected himself. "He would want to keep them alive long enough to find out how they managed to penetrate so far through his defenses and, most importantly of all, why they were so intent upon emptying the basin. Do not forget that Lord Voldemort believes that he alone knows about his Horcruxes."

Harry made to speak again, but this time Dumbledore raised his hand for silence, frowning slightly at the emerald liquid, evidently thinking hard.

"Undoubtedly," he said, finally, "this potion must act in a way that will prevent me taking the Horcrux. It might paralyze me, cause me to forget what I am here for, create so much pain I am distracted, or render me incapable in some other way. This being the case, Harry, it will be your job to make sure I keep drinking, even if you have to tip the potion into my protesting mouth. You understand?"

Their eyes met over the basin, each pale face lit with that strange, green light. Harry did not speak. Was this why he had been invited along — so that he could forcefeed Dumbledore a potion that might cause him unendurable pain?

"You remember," said Dumbledore, "the condition on which I brought you with me?"

Harry hesitated, looking into the blue eyes that had turned green in the reflected light of the basin.

"But what if —?"

"You swore, did you not, to follow any command I gave you?"

"Yes, but —"

"I warned you, did I not, that there might be danger?"

"Yes," said Harry, "but —"

"Well, then," said Dumbledore, shaking back his sleeves once more and raising the empty goblet, "you have my orders."

"Why can't I drink the potion instead?" asked Harry desperately.

“Because I am much older, much cleverer, and much less valuable,” said Dumbledore. “Once and for all, Harry, do I have your word that you will do all in your power to make me keep drinking?”

“Couldn’t —?”

“Do I have it?”

“But —”

“*Your word, Harry.*”

“I — all right, but —”

Before Harry could make any further protest, Dumbledore lowered the crystal goblet into the potion. For a split second, Harry hoped that he would not be able to touch the potion with the goblet, but the crystal sank into the surface as nothing else had; when the glass was full to the brim, Dumbledore lifted it to his mouth.

“Your good health, Harry.”

And he drained the goblet. Harry watched, terrified, his hands gripping the rim of the basin so hard that his fingertips were numb.

“Professor?” he said anxiously, as Dumbledore lowered the empty glass. “How do you feel?”

Dumbledore shook his head, his eyes closed. Harry wondered whether he was in pain. Dumbledore plunged the glass blindly back into the basin, refilled it, and drank once more.

In silence, Dumbledore drank three gobletsful of the potion. Then, halfway through the fourth goblet, he staggered and fell forward against the basin. His eyes were still closed, his breathing heavy.

“Professor Dumbledore?” said Harry, his voice strained. “Can you hear me?”

Dumbledore did not answer. His face was twitching as though he was deeply asleep, but dreaming a horrible dream. His grip on the goblet was slackening; the potion was about to spill from it. Harry reached forward and grasped the crystal cup, holding it steady.

“Professor, can you hear me?” he repeated loudly, his voice echoing around the cavern.

Dumbledore panted and then spoke in a voice Harry did not recognize, for he had never heard Dumbledore frightened like this.

“I don’t want…Don’t make me…”

Harry stared into the whitened face he knew so well, at the crooked nose and half-moon spectacles, and did not know what to do.

“…don’t like…want to stop…” moaned Dumbledore.

"You…you can't stop, Professor," said Harry. "You've got to keep drinking, remember? You told me you had to keep drinking. Here…"

Hating himself, repulsed by what he was doing, Harry forced the goblet back toward Dumbledore's mouth and tipped it, so that Dumbledore drank the remainder of the potion inside.

"No…" he groaned, as Harry lowered the goblet back into the basin and refilled it for him. "I don't want to…I don't want to…Let me go…"

"It's all right, Professor," said Harry, his hand shaking. "Its all right, I'm here —"

"Make it stop, make it stop," moaned Dumbledore.

"Yes…yes, this'll make it stop," lied Harry. He tipped the contents of the goblet into Dumbledore's open mouth.

Dumbledore screamed; the noise echoed all around the vast chamber, across the dead black water.

"No, no, no, no, I can't, I can't, don't make me, I don't want to…"

"It's all right, Professor, it's all right!" said Harry loudly, his hands shaking so badly he could hardly scoop up the sixth gobletful of potion; the basin was now half empty. "Nothing's happening to you, you're safe, it isn't real, I swear it isn't real — take this, now, take this…"

And obediently, Dumbledore drank, as though it was an antidote Harry offered him, but upon draining the goblet, he sank to his knees, shaking uncontrollably.

"It's all my fault, all my fault," he sobbed. "Please make it stop, I know I did wrong, oh please make it stop and I'll never, never again…"

"This will make it stop, Professor," Harry said, his voice cracking as he tipped the seventh glass of potion into Dumbledore's mouth.

Dumbledore began to cower as though invisible torturers surrounded him; his flailing hand almost knocked the refilled goblet from Harry's trembling hands as he moaned, "Don't hurt them, don't hurt them, please, please, it's my fault, hurt me instead…"

"Here, drink this, drink this, you'll be all right," said Harry desperately, and once again Dumbledore obeyed him, opening his mouth even as he kept his eyes tight shut and shook from head to foot.

And now he fell forward, screaming again, hammering his fists upon the ground, while Harry filled the ninth goblet.

"Please, please, please, no…not that, not that, I'll do anything…"

"Just drink, Professor, just drink…"

Dumbledore drank like a child dying of thirst, but when he had finished, he yelled again as though his insides were on fire. “No more, please, no more…”

Harry scooped up a tenth gobletful of potion and felt the crystal scrape the bottom of the basin.

“We’re nearly there, Professor. Drink this, drink it…”

He supported Dumbledore’s shoulders and again, Dumbledore drained the glass; then Harry was on his feet once more, refilling the goblet as Dumbledore began to scream in more anguish than ever, “I want to die! I want to die! Make it stop, make it stop, I want to die!”

“Drink this, Professor. Drink this…”

Dumbledore drank, and no sooner had he finished than he yelled, “KILL ME!”

“This — this one will!” gasped Harry. “Just drink this…It’ll be over…all over!”

Dumbledore gulped at the goblet, drained every last drop, and then, with a great, rattling gasp, rolled over onto his face.

“No!” shouted Harry, who had stood to refill the goblet again; instead he dropped the cup into the basin, flung himself down beside Dumbledore, and heaved him over onto his back; Dumbledore’s glasses were askew, his mouth agape, his eyes closed. “No.” said Harry, shaking Dumbledore, “no, you’re not dead, you said it wasn’t poison, wake up, wake up — *Rennervate!*” he cried, his wand pointing at Dumbledores chest; there was a flash of red light but nothing happened. “*Rennervate* — sir — please —”

Dumbledore’s eyelids flickered; Harry’s heart lept.

“Sir, are you —?”

“Water,” croaked Dumbledore.

“Water,” panted Harry. “Yes —”

He leapt to his feet and seized the goblet he had dropped in the basin; he barely registered the golden locket lying curled beneath it.

“*Aguamenti!*” he shouted, jabbing the goblet with his wand.

The goblet filled with clear water; Harry dropped to his knees beside Dumbledore, raised his head, and brought the glass to his lips — but it was empty. Dumbledore groaned and began to pant.

“But I had some — wait — *Aguamenti*!” said Harry again, pointing his wand at the goblet. Once more, for a second, clear water gleamed within it, but as he approached Dumbledores mouth, the water vanished again.

"Sir, I'm trying, I'm trying!" said Harry desperately, but he did not think that Dumbledore could hear him; he had rolled onto his side and was drawing great, rattling breaths that sounded agoniz-ing. "*Aguamenti — Aguamenti — AGUAMENTI!*"

The goblet filled and emptied once more. And now Dumbledores breathing was fading. His brain whirling in panic, Harry knew, instinctively, the only way left to get water, because Voldemort had planned it so…

He flung himself over to the edge of the rock and plunged the goblet into the lake, bringing it up full to the brim of icy water that did not vanish.

"Sir — here!" Harry yelled, and lunging forward, he tipped the water clumsily over Dumbledore's face.

It was the best he could do, for the icy feeling on his arm not holding the cup was not the lingering chill of the water. A slimy white hand had gripped his wrist, and the creature to whom it belonged was pulling him, slowly, backward across the rock. The surface of the lake was no longer mirror-smooth; it was churning, and everywhere Harry looked, white heads and hands were emerging from the dark water, men and women and children with sunken, sightless eyes were moving toward the rock: an army of the dead rising from the black water.

"*Petrificus Totalus!*" yelled Harry, struggling to cling to the smooth, soaked surface of the island as he pointed his wand at the Inferius that had his arm. It released him, falling backward into the water with a splash; he scrambled to his feet, but many more Inferi were already climbing onto the rock, their bony hands clawing at its slippery surface, their blank, frosted eyes upon him, trailing waterlogged rags, sunken faces leering.

"*Petrificus Totalus!*" Harry bellowed again, backing away as he swiped his wand through the air; six or seven of them crumpled, but more were coming toward him. "*Impedimenta! Incarcerous!*"

A few of them stumbled, one or two of them bound in ropes, but those climbing onto the rock behind them merely stepped over or on the fallen bodies. Still slashing at the air with his wand, Harry yelled, "*Sectumsempra! SECTUMSEMPRA!*"

But though gashes appeared in their sodden rags and their icy skin, they had no blood to spill: They walked on, unfeeling, their shrunken hands outstretched toward him, and as he backed away still farther, he felt arms enclose him from behind, thin, fleshlcv. arms cold as death, and his feet left the ground as they lifted him and began to carry him, slowly and surely, back to the water, anil he knew there would be no release, that he would be drowned, and become one more dead guardian of a fragment of Voldemorts shattered soul…

But then, through the darkness, fire erupted: crimson and gold, a ring of fire that surrounded the rock so that the Inferi holding Harry so tightly stumbled and faltered; they did not dare pass through the flames to get to the water. They dropped Harry; he hit the ground, slipped on the rock, and fell, grazing his arms, then scrambled back up, raising his wand and staring around.

Dumbledore was on his feet again, pale as any of the surrounding Inferi, but taller than any too, the fire dancing in his eyes; his wand was raised like a torch and from its tip emanated the flames, like a vast lasso, encircling them all with warmth. The Inferi bumped into each other, attempting, blindly, to escape the fire in which they were enclosed…

Dumbledore scooped the locket from the bottom of the stone basin and stowed it inside his robes. Wordlessly, he gestured to Harry to come to his side. Distracted by the flames, the Inferi seemed unaware that their quarry was leaving as Dumbledore led Harry back to the boat, the ring of fire moving with them, around them, the bewildered Inferi accompanying them to the waters edge, where they slipped gratefully back into their dark waters.

Harry, who was shaking all over, thought for a moment that Dumbledore might not be able to climb into the boat; he staggered a little as he attempted it; all his efforts seemed to be going into maintaining the ring of protective flame around them. Harry seized him and helped him back to his seat. Once they were both safely jammed inside again, the boat began to move back across the black water, away from the rock, still encircled by that ring of fire, and it seemed that the Inferi swarming below them did not dare resurface.

“Sir,” panted Harry, “sir, I forgot — about fire — they were coming at me and I panicked -”

“Quite understandable,” murmured Dumbledore. Harry was alarmed to hear how faint his voice was.

They reached the bank with a little bump and Harry leapt out, then turned quickly to help Dumbledore. The moment that Dumbledore reached the bank he let his wand hand fall; the ring of fire vanished, but the Inferi did not emerge again from the water. The little boat sank into the water once more; clanking and tinkling, its chain slithered back into the lake too. Dumbledore gave a great sigh and leaned against the cavern wall.

“I am weak…” he said.

“Don’t worry, sir,” said Harry at once, anxious about Dumbledore’s extreme pallor and by his air of exhaustion. “Don’t worry, I’ll get us back…Lean on me, sir…”

And pulling Dumbledore’s uninjured arm around his shoulders, Harry guided his headmaster back around the lake, bearing most of his weight.

“The protection was…after all…well-designed,” said Dumbledore faintly. “One alone could not have done it…You did well, very well, Harry…”

“Don’t talk now,” said Harry, fearing how slurred Dumbledore’s voice had become, how much his feet dragged. “Save your energy, sir…We’ll soon be out of here…”

“The archway will have sealed again…My knife…” ‘

“There’s no need, I got cut on the rock,” said Harry firmly. “Just tell me where…”

“Here…”

Harry wiped his grazed forearm upon the stone: Having re-ceived its tribute of blood, the archway reopened instantly. They crossed the outer cave, and Harry helped Dumbledore back into the icy seawater that filled the crevice in the cliff.

“It’s going to be all right, sir,” Harry said over and over again, more worried by Dumbledore’s silence than he had been by his weakened voice. “We’re nearly there…I can Apparate us both back…Don’t worry…”

“I am not worried, Harry,” said Dumbledore, his voice a little stronger despite the freezing water. “I am with you.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

THE LIGHTNING-STRUCK TOWER

Once back under the starry sky, Harry heaved Dumbledore on to the top of the nearest boulder and then to his feet. Sodden and shivering, Dumbledore's weight still upon him, Harry concentrated harder than he had ever done upon his destination: Hogsmeade. Closing his eyes, gripping Dumbledore's arm as tightly as he could, he stepped forwards into that feeling of horrible compression.

He knew it had worked before he opened his eyes: the smell of salt, the sea breeze had gone. He and Dumbledore were shivering and dripping in the middle of the dark High Street in Hogsmeade. For one horrible moment Harry's imagination showed him more Inferi creeping towards him around the sides of shops, but he blinked and saw that noth-ing was stirring; all was still, the darkness complete but for a few streetlamps and lit upper windows.

"We did it, Professor!" Harry whispered with difficulty; he suddenly realized that he had a searing stitch in his chest. "We did it! We got the Horcrux!"

Dumbledore staggered against him. For a moment, Harry thought that his inexpert Apparition had thrown Dumbledore off-balance; then he saw his face, paler and damper than ever in the distant light of a streetlamp.

"Sir, are you all right?"

"I've been better," said Dumbledore weakly, though the corners of his mouth twitched. "That potion…was no health drink…"

And to Harry's horror, Dumbledore sank on to the ground.

"Sir — it's okay, sir, you're going to be all right, don't worry -"

He looked around desperately for help, but there was nobody to be seen and all he could think was that he must somehow get Dumbledore quickly to the hospital wing.

"We need to get you up to the school, sir…Madam Pomfrey…"

"No," said Dumbledore. "It is…Professor Snape whom I need…but I do not think…I can walk very far just yet…"

"Right — sir, listen — I'm going to knock on a door, find a place you can stay — then I can run and get Madam —"

"Severus," said Dumbledore clearly. "I need Severus…"

"All right then, Snape — but I'm going to have to leave you for a moment so I can —"

Before Harry could make a move, however, he heard running footsteps. His heart leapt: somebody had seen, somebody knew they needed help — and looking around he saw Madam

Rosmerta scurrying down the dark street towards them on high-heeled, fluffy slippers, wearing a silk dressing-gown embroidered with dragons.

"I saw you Apparate as I was pulling my bedroom curtains! Thank goodness, thank goodness, I couldn't think what to — but what's wrong with Albus?"

She came to a halt, panting, and stared down, wide-eyed, at Dumbledore.

"He's hurt," said Harry. "Madam Rosmerta, can he come into the Three Broomsticks while I go up to the school and get help for him?"

"You can't go up there alone! Don't you realize — haven't you seen —?"

"If you help me support him," said Harry, not listening to her, "I think we can get him inside—"

"What has happened?" asked Dumbledore. "Rosmerta, what's wrong?"

"The — the Dark Mark, Albus."

And she pointed into the sky, in the direction of Hogwarts. Dread flooded Harry at the sound of the words…he turned and looked.

There it was, hanging in the sky above the school: the blazing green skull with a serpent tongue, the mark Death Eaters left behind whenever they had entered a building…wherever they had murdered…

"When did it appear?" asked Dumbledore, and his hand clenched painfully upon Harry's shoulder as he struggled to his feet.

"Must have been minutes ago, it wasn't there when I put the cat out, but when I got upstairs —"

"We need to return to the castle at once," said Dumbledore. "Rosmerta," and though he staggered a little, he seemed wholly in command of the situation, "we need transport - brooms -"

"I've got a couple behind the bar," she said, looking very frightened. "Shall I run and fetch —?"

"No, Harry can do it."

Harry raised his wand at once.

"*Accio Rosmerta's brooms*."

A second later they heard a loud bang as the front door of the pub burst open; two brooms had shot out into the street and were racing each other to Harry's side, where they stopped dead, quivering slightly, at waist height.

"Rosmerta, please send a message to the Ministry," said Dumbledore, as he mounted the broom nearest him. "It might be that nobody within Hogwarts has yet realized anything is wrong…Harry, put on your Invisibility Cloak."

Harry pulled his Cloak out of his pocket and threw it over himself before mounting his broom; Madam Rosmerta was already tottering back towards her pub as Harry and Dumbledore kicked off from the ground and rose up into the air. As they sped towards the castle, Harry glanced sideways at Dumbledore, ready to grab him should he fall, but the sight of the Dark Mark seemed to have acted upon Dumbledore like a stimulant: he was bent low over his broom, his eyes fixed upon the Mark, his long silver hair and beard flying behind him in the night air. And Harry, too, looked ahead at the skull, and fear swelled inside him like a venomous bubble, compressing his lungs, driving all other discomfort from his mind…

How long had they been away? Had Ron, Hermione and Ginny's luck run out by now? Was it one of them who had caused the Mark to be set over the school, or was it Neville, or Luna, or some other member of the DA? And if it was…he was the one who had told them to patrol the corridors, he had asked them to leave the safety of their beds…would he be responsible, again, for the death of a friend?

As they flew over the dark, twisting lane down which they had walked earlier, Harry heard, over the whistling of the night air in his ears, Dumbledore muttering in some strange language again. He thought he understood why as he felt his broom shudder for a moment when they flew over the boundary wall into the grounds: Dumbledore was undoing the enchantments he himself had set around the castle, so that they could enter at speed. The Dark Mark was glittering directly above the Astronomy Tower, the highest of the castle. Did that mean the death had occurred there?

Dumbledore had already crossed the crenellated ramparts and was dismounting; Harry landed next to him seconds later and looked around.

The ramparts were deserted. The door to the spiral staircase that led back into the castle was closed. There was no sign of a struggle, of a fight to the death, of a body.

"What does it mean?" Harry asked Dumbledore, looking up at the green skull with its serpent's tongue glinting evilly above them. "Is it the real Mark? Has someone definitely been — Professor?"

In the dim green glow from the Mark Harry saw Dumbledore clutching at his chest with his blackened hand.

"Go and wake Severus," said Dumbledore faintly but clearly. "Tell him what has happened and bring him to me. Do nothing else, speak to nobody else and do not remove your Cloak. I shall wait here."

"But —"

"You swore to obey me, Harry — go!"

Harry hurried over to the door leading to the spiral staircase, but his hand had only just closed upon the iron ring of the door when he heard running footsteps on the other side. He looked round at Dumbledore, who gestured to him to retreat. Harry backed away, drawing his wand as he did so.

The door burst open and somebody erupted through it and shouted: "*Expelliarmus!*"

Harry's body became instantly rigid and immobile, and he felt himself fall back against the Tower wall, propped like an unsteady statue, unable to move or speak. He could not understand how it had happened — Expelliarmus was not a Freezing Charm —

Then, by the light of the Mark, he saw Dumbledore's wand flying in an arc over the edge of the ramparts and understood…Dumbledore had wordlessly immobilised Harry, and the second he had taken to perform the spell had cost him the chance of defending himself.

Standing against the ramparts, very white in the face, Dumbledore still showed no sign of panic or distress. He merely looked across at his disarmer and said, "Good evening, Draco."

Malfoy stepped forwards, glancing around quickly to check that he and Dumbledore were alone. His eyes fell upon the second broom.

"Who else is here?"

"A question I might ask you. Or are you acting alone?"

Harry saw Malfoy's pale eyes shift back to Dumbledore in the greenish glare of the Mark.

"No," he said. "I've got back-up. There are Death Eaters here in your school tonight."

"Well, well," said Dumbledore, as though Malfoy was showing him an ambitious homework project. "Very good indeed. You found a way to let them in, did you?"

"Yeah," said Malfoy, who was panting. "Right under your nose and you never realized!"

"Ingenious," said Dumbledore. "Yet…forgive me…where are they now? You seem unsupported."

"They met some of your guard. They're having a fight down below. They won't be long…I came on ahead. I - I've got a job to do."

"Well, then, you must get on and do it, my dear boy," said Dumbledore softly.

There was silence. Harry stood imprisoned within his own invisible, paralyzed body, staring at the two of them, his ears straining to hear sounds of the Death Eaters' distant fight, and in front of him, Draco Malfoy did nothing but stare at Albus Dumbledore who, incredibly, smiled.

"Draco, Draco, you are not a killer."

"How do you know?" said Malfoy at once.

He seemed to realize how childish the words had sounded; Harry saw him flush in the Mark's greenish light.

"You don't know what I'm capable of," said Malfoy more forcefully, "you don't know what I've done!"

"Oh, yes, I do," said Dumbledore mildly. "You almost killed Katie Bell and Ronald Weasley. You have been trying, with increasing desperation, to kill me all year. Forgive me, Draco, but they have been feeble attempts…so feeble, to be honest, that I wonder whether your heart has been really in it…"

"It has been in it!" said Malfoy vehemently. "I've been working on it all year, and tonight—"

Somewhere in the depths of the castle below Harry heard a muffled yell. Malfoy stiffened and glanced over his shoulder.

"Somebody is putting up a good fight," said Dumbledore conversationally. "But you were saying…yes, you have managed to introduce Death Eaters into my school which, I admit, I thought impossible…how did you do it?"

But Malfoy said nothing: he was still listening to whatever was happening below and seemed almost as paralysed as Harry was.

"Perhaps you ought to get on with the job alone," suggested Dumbledore. "What if your backup has been thwarted by my guard? As you have perhaps realized, there are members of the Order of the Phoenix here tonight, too. And after all, you don't really need help…I have no wand at the moment…I cannot defend myself."

Malfoy merely stared at him.

"I see," said Dumbledore kindly, when Malfoy neither moved nor spoke. "You are afraid to act until they join you."

"I'm not afraid!" snarled Malfoy, though he still made no move to hurt Dumbledore. "It's you who should be scared!"

"But why? I don't think you will kill me, Draco. Killing is not nearly as easy as the innocent believe…so tell me, while we wait for your friends…how did you smuggle them in here? It seems to have taken you a long time to work out how to do it."

Malfoy looked as though he was fighting down the urge to shout, or to vomit. He gulped and took several deep breaths, glaring at Dumbledore, his wand pointing directly at the latter's heart. Then, as though he could not help himself, he said, "I had to mend that broken Vanishing Cabinet that no one's used for years. The one Montague got lost in last year."

“Aaaah.” Dumbledore’s sigh was half a groan. He closed his eyes for a moment. “That was clever…there is a pair, I take it?”

“The other’s in Borgin and Burkes,” said Malfoy, “and they make a kind of passage between them. Montague told me that when he was stuck in the Hogwarts one, he was trapped in limbo but sometimes he could hear what was going on at school, and sometimes what was going on in the shop, as if the Cabinet was traveling between them, but he couldn’t make anyone hear him…in the end he managed to Apparate out, even though he’d never passed his test. He nearly died doing it. Everyone thought it was a really good story, but I was the only one who realized what it meant — even Borgin didn’t know — I was the one who realized there could be a way into Hogwarts through the Cabinets if I fixed the broken one.”

“Very good,” murmured Dumbledore. “So the Death Eaters were able to pass from Borgin and Burkes into the school to help you…a clever plan, a very clever plan…and, as you say, right under my nose…”

“Yeah,” said Malfoy who, bizarrely, seemed to draw courage and comfort from Dumbledore’s praise. “Yeah, it was!”

“But there were times,” Dumbledore went on, “weren’t there, when you were not sure you would succeed in mending the Cabinet? And you resorted to crude and badly judged measures such as sending me a cursed necklace that was bound to reach the wrong hands…poisoning mead there was only the slightest chance I might drink…”

“Yeah, well, you still didn’t realize who was behind that stuff, did you?” sneered Malfoy, as Dumbledore slid a little down the ramparts, the strength in his legs apparently fading, and Harry struggled fruitlessly, mutely, against the enchantment binding him.

“As a matter of fact, I did,” said Dumbledore. “I was sure it was you.”

“Why didn’t you stop me, then?” Malfoy demanded.

“I tried, Draco. Professor Snape has been keeping watch over you on my orders —”

“He hasn’t been doing your orders, he promised my mother —”

“Of course that is what he would tell you, Draco, but —”

“He’s a double-agent, you stupid old man, he isn’t working for you, you just think he is!”

“We must agree to differ on that, Draco. It so happens that I trust Professor Snape —”

“Well, you’re losing your grip, then!” sneered Malfoy. “He’s been offering me plenty of help — wanting all the glory for himself — wanting a bit of the action — ‘What are you doing? Did you do the necklace, that was stupid, it could have blown everything —’ But I haven’t told him what I’ve

been doing in the Room of Requirement, he's going to wake up tomorrow and it'll all be over and he won't be the Dark Lord's favorite any more, he'll be nothing compared to me, nothing!"

"Very gratifying," said Dumbledore mildly. "We all like appreciation for our own hard work, of course…but you must have had an accomplice, all the same…someone in Hogsmeade, someone who was able to slip Katie the - the - aaaah"

Dumbledore closed his eyes again and nodded, as though he was about to fall asleep. "…of course…Rosmerta. How long has she been under the Imperius Curse?"

"Got there at last, have you?" Malfoy taunted.

There was another yell from below, rather louder than the last. Malfoy looked nervously over his shoulder again, then back at Dumbledore, who went on, "So poor Rosmerta was forced to lurk in her own bathroom and pass that necklace to any Hogwarts student who entered the room unaccompanied? And the poisoned mead…well, naturally, Rosmerta was able to poison it for you before she sent the bottle to Slughorn, believing that it was to be my Christmas present…yes, very neat…very neat…poor Mr. Filch would not, of course, think to check a bottle of Rosmerta's…tell me, how have you been communicating with Rosmerta? I thought we had all methods of communication in and out of the school monitored."

"Enchanted coins," said Malfoy, as though he was compelled to keep talking, though his wand hand was shaking badly. "I had one and she had the other and I could send her messages-"

"Isn't that the secret method of communication the group that called themselves Dumbledore's Army used last year?" asked Dumbledore. His voice was light and conversational, but Harry saw him slip an inch lower down the wall as he said it.

"Yeah, I got the idea from them," said Malfoy, with a twisted smile. "I got the idea of poisoning the mead from the Mudblood Granger, as well, I heard her talking in the library about Filch not recognising potions…"

"Please do not use that offensive word in front of me," said Dumbledore.

Malfoy gave a harsh laugh.

"You care about me saying 'Mudblood' when I'm about to kill you?"

"Yes, I do," said Dumbledore, and Harry saw his feet slide a little on the floor as he struggled to remain upright. "But as for being about to kill me, Draco, you have had several long minutes now. We are quite alone. I am more defenseless than you can have dreamed of finding me, and still you have not acted…"

Malfoy's mouth contorted involuntarily, as though he had tasted something very bitter.

“Now, about tonight,” Dumbledore went on, “I am a little puzzled about how it happened…you knew that I had left the school? But of course,” he answered his own question, “Rosmerta saw me leaving, she tipped you off using your ingenious coins, I’m sure…”

“That’s right,” said Malfoy. “But she said you were just going for a drink, you’d be back…”

“Well, I certainly did have a drink…and I came back…after a fashion,” mumbled Dumbledore. “So you decided to spring a trap for me?”

“We decided to put the Dark Mark over the Tower and get you to hurry up here, to see who’d been killed,” said Malfoy. “And it worked!”

“Well…yes and no…” said Dumbledore. “But am I to take it, then, that nobody has been murdered?”

“Someone’s dead,” said Malfoy and his voice seemed to go up an octave as he said it. “One of your people…I don’t know who, it was dark…I stepped over the body…I was supposed to be waiting up here when you got back, only your Phoenix lot got in the way…”

“Yes, they do that,” said Dumbledore.

There was a bang and shouts from below, louder than ever; it sounded as though people were fighting on the actual spiral staircase that led to where Dumbledore, Malfoy and Harry stood, and Harry’s heart thundered unheard in his invisible chest…someone was dead…Malfoy had stepped over the body…but who was it?

“There is little time, one way or another,” said Dumbledore. “So let us discuss your options, Draco.”

“My options!” said Malfoy loudly. “I’m standing here with a wand — I’m about to kill you—”

“My dear boy, let us have no more pretence about that. If you were going to kill me, you would have done it when you first dsarmed me, you would not have stopped for this pleasant chat about ways and means.”

“I haven’t got any options!” said Malfoy, and he was suddenly as white as Dumbledore. “I’ve got to do it! He’ll kill me! He’ll kill my whole family!”

“I appreciate the difficulty of your position,” said Dumbledore. “Why else do you think I have not confronted you before now? Because I knew that you would have been murdered if Lord Voldemort realized that I suspected you.”

Malfoy winced at the sound of the name.

“I did not dare speak to you of the mission with which I knew you had been entrusted, in case he used Legilimency against you,” continued Dumbledore. “But now at last we can speak plainly to

each other…no harm has been done, you have hurt nobody, though you are very lucky that your unintentional victims survived…I can help you, Draco."

"No, you can't," said Malfoy, his wand hand shaking very badly indeed. "Nobody can. He told me to do it or he'll kill me. I've got no choice."

"Come over to the right side, Draco, and we can hide you more completely than you can possibly imagine. What is more, I can send members of the Order to your mother tonight to hide her likewise. Your father is safe at the moment in Azkaban…when the time comes we can protect him too…come over to the right side, Draco…you are not a killer…"

Malfoy stared at Dumbledore.

"But I got this far, didn't I?" he said slowly. "They thought I'd die in the attempt, but I'm here…and you're in my power…I'm the one with the wand…you're at my mercy…"

"No, Draco," said Dumbledore quietly. "It is my mercy, and not yours, that matters now."

Malfoy did not speak. His mouth was open, his wand hand still trembling. Harry thought he saw it drop by a fraction —

But suddenly footsteps were thundering up the stairs and a second later Malfoy was buffeted out of the way as four people in black robes burst through the door on to the ramparts. Still paralysed, his eyes staring unblinkingly, Harry gazed in terror upon four strangers: it seemed the Death Eaters had won the fight below.

A lumpy-looking man with an odd lopsided leer gave a wheezy giggle.

"Dumbledore cornered!" he said, and he turned to a stocky little woman who looked as though she could be his sister and who was grinning eagerly. "Dumbledore wandless, Dumbledore alone! Well done, Draco, well done!"

"Good evening, Amycus," said Dumbledore calmly, as though welcoming the man to a tea party. "And you've brought Alecto too…charming…"

The woman gave an angry little titter.

"Think your little jokes'll help you on your death bed, then?" she jeered.

"Jokes? No, no, these are manners," replied Dumbledore.

"Do it," said the stranger standing nearest to Harry, a big, rangy man with matted grey hair and whiskers, whose black Death Eater's robes looked uncomfortably tight. He had a voice like none that Harry had ever heard: a rasping bark of a voice. Harry could smell a powerful mixture of dirt, sweat and, unmistakeably, of blood coming from him. His filthy hands had long yellowish nails.

"Is that you, Fenrir?" asked Dumbledore.

“That’s right,” rasped the other. “Pleased to see me, Dumbledore?”

“No, I cannot say that I am…”

Fenrir Greyback grinned, showing pointed teeth. Blood trickled down his chin and he licked his lips slowly, obscenely.

“But you know how much I like kids, Dumbledore.”

“Am I to take it that you are attacking even without the full moon now? This is most unusual…you have developed a taste for human flesh that cannot be satisfied once a month?”

“That’s right,” said Greyback. “Shocks you, that, does it, Dumbledore? Frightens you?”

“Well, I cannot pretend it does not disgust me a little,” said Dumbledore. “And, yes, I am a little shocked that Draco here invited you, of all people, into the school where his friends live…”

“I didn’t,” breathed Malfoy. He was not looking at Greyback; he did not seem to want to even glance at him. “I didn’t know he was going to come —”

“I wouldn’t want to miss a trip to Hogwarts, Dumbledore,” rasped Greyback. “Not when there are throats to be ripped out…delicious, delicious…”

And he raised a yellow fingernail and picked at his front teeth, leering at Dumbledore.

“I could do you for afters, Dumbledore…”

“No,” said the fourth Death Eater sharply. He had a heavy, brutal-looking face. “We’ve got orders. Draco’s got to do it. Now, Draco, and quickly.”

Malfoy was showing less resolution than ever. He looked terrified as he stared into Dumbledore’s face, which was even paler, and rather lower than usual, as he had slid so far down the rampart wall.

“He’s not long for this world anyway, if you ask me!” said the lopsided man, to the accompaniment of his sister’s wheezing giggles. “Look at him — what’s happened to you, then, Dumby?”

“Oh, weaker resistance, slower reflexes, Amycus,” said Dumbledore. “Old age, in short…one day, perhaps, it will happen to you…if you are lucky…”

“What’s that mean, then, what’s that mean?” yelled the Death Eater, suddenly violent.

“Always the same, weren’t yeh, Dumby, talking and doing nothing, nothing, I don’t even know why the Dark Lord’s bothering to kill yeh! Come on, Draco, do it!”

But at that moment, there were renewed sounds of scuffling from below and a voice shouted, “They’ve blocked the stairs - Reducto! REDUCTO!”

Harry’s heart leapt: so these four had not eliminated all opposition, but merely broken through the fight to the top of the Tower, and, by the sound of it, created a barrier behind them —

“Now, Draco, quickly!” said the brutal-faced man angrily.

But Malfoy’s hand was shaking so badly that he could barely aim.

“I’ll do it,” snarled Greyback, moving towards Dumbledore with his hands outstretched, his teeth bared.

“I said no!” shouted the brutal-faced man; there was a flash of light and the werewolf was blasted out of the way; he hit the ramparts and staggered, looking furious. Harry’s heart was hammering so hard it seemed impossible that nobody could hear him standing there, imprisoned by Dumbledore’s spell — if he could only move, he could aim a curse from under the Cloak —

“Draco, do it, or stand aside so one of us —” screeched the woman, but at that precise moment the door to the ramparts burst open once more and there stood Snape, his wand clutched in his hand as his black eyes swept the scene, from Dumbledore slumped against the wall, to the four Death Eaters, including the enraged werewolf, and Malfoy.

“We’ve got a problem, Snape,” said the lumpy Amycus, whose eyes and wand were fixed alike upon Dumbledore, “the boy doesn’t seem able —”

But somebody else had spoken Snape’s name, quite softly.

“Severus…”

The sound frightened Harry beyond anything he had experienced all evening. For the first time, Dumbledore was pleading.

Snape said nothing, but walked forwards and pushed Malfoy roughly out of the way. The three Death Eaters fell back without a word. Even the werewolf seemed cowed.

Snape gazed for a moment at Dumbledore, and there was revulsion and hatred etched in the harsh lines of his face.

“Severus…please…”

Snape raised his wand and pointed it directly at Dumbledore.

“*Avada Kedavra!*”

A jet of green light shot from the end of Snape’s wand and hit Dumbledore squarely in the chest. Harry’s scream of horror never left him; silent and unmoving, he was forced to watch as Dumbledore was blasted into the air: for a split second he seemed to hang suspended beneath the shining skull, and then he fell slowly backwards, like a great rag doll, over the battlements and out of sight.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Flight of the Prince

Harry felt as though he too were hurtling through space; *it had not happened… It could not have happened…*

"Out of here, quickly," said Snape.

He seized Malfoy by the scruff of the neck and forced him through the door ahead of the rest; Greyback and the squat brother and sister followed, the latter both panting excitedly. As they vanished through the door, Harry realized he could move again. What was now holding him paralyzed against the wall was not magic, but horror and shock. He threw the Invisibility Cloak aside as the brutal-faced Death Eater, last to leave the tower top, was disappearing through the door.

"*Petrificus Totalus!*"

The Death Eater buckled as though hit in the back with something solid and fell to the ground, rigid as a waxwork, but he had barely hit the floor when Harry was clambering over him and running down the darkened staircase.

Terror tore at Harry's heart…He had to get to Dumbledore and he had to catch Snape…Somehow the two things were linked…He could reverse what had happened if he had them both together…Dumbledore could not have died…

He leapt the last ten steps of the spiral staircase and stopped where he landed, his wand raised. The dimly lit corridor was full of dust; half the ceiling seemed to have fallen in; and a battle was raging before him, but even as he attempted to make out who were fighting whom, he heard the hated voice shout, "*It's over, time to go!*" and saw Snape disappearing around the corner at the far end of the corridor; he and Malfoy seemed to have forced their way through the fight unscathed. As Harry plunged after them, one of the fighters detached themselves from the fray and flew at him: it was the werewolf, Fenrir. He was on top of Harry before Harry could raise his wand: Harry fell backward, with filthy matted hair in his face, the stench of sweat and blood filling his nose and mouth, hot greedy breath at his throat —

"*Petrificus Totalus!*"

Harry felt Fenrir collapse against him; with a stupendous effort he pushed the werewolf off and onto the floor as a jet of green light came flying toward him; he ducked and ran, headfirst, into the fight. His feet met something squashy and slippery on the floor and he stumbled: There were two bodies lying there, lying facedown in a pool of blood, but there was no time to investigate. Harry now saw red hair flying like flames in front of him: Ginny was locked in combat with the lumpy

Death Eater, Amycus, who was throwing hex after hex at her while she dodged them: Amycus was giggling, enjoying the sport: "Crucio - Crucio - you can't dance forever, pretty -"

"*Impedimenta!*" yelled Harry.

His jinx hit Amycus in the chest: He gave a piglike squeal of pain, was lifted off his feet and slammed into the opposite wall, slid down it, and fell out of sight behind Ron, Professor McGonagall, and Lupin, each of whom was battling a separate Death Eater. Beyond them, Harry saw Tonks fighting an enormous blond wizard who was sending curses flying in all directions, so that they ricocheted off the walls around them, cracking stone, shattering the nearest window —

"Harry, where did you come from?" Ginny cried, but there was no time to answer her. He put his head down and sprinted forward, narrowly avoiding a blast that erupted over his head, showering them all in bits of wall. Snape must not escape, he must catch up with Snape —

"Take that!" shouted Professor McGonagall, and Harry glimpsed the female Death Eater, Alecto, sprinting away down the corridor with her arms over her head, her brother right behind her. He launched himself after them but his foot caught on something, and next moment he was lying across someone's legs. Looking around, he saw Neville's pale, round face flat against the floor.

"Neville, are you -?"

"M'all right," muttered Neville, who was clutching his stomach, "Harry…Snape 'n' Malfoy…ran past…"

"I know, I'm on it!" said Harry, aiming a hex from the floor at the enormous blond Death Eater who was causing most of the chaos. The man gave a howl of pain as the spell hit him in the face: He wheeled around, staggered, and then pounded away after the brother and sister. Harry scrambled up from the floor and began to sprint along the corridor, ignoring the bangs issuing from behind him, the yells of the others to come back, and the mute call of the figures on the ground whose fate he did not yet know…

He skidded around the corner, his trainers slippery with blood; Snape had an immense head start. Was it possible that he had already entered the cabinet in the Room of Requirement, or had the Order made steps to secure it, to prevent the Death Eaters retreating that way? He could hear nothing but his own pounding feet, his own hammering heart as he sprinted along the next empty corridor, but then spotted a bloody footprint that showed at least one of the fleeing Death Eaters was heading toward the front doors — perhaps the Room of Requirement was indeed blocked —

He skidded around another corner and a curse flew past him; he dived behind a suit of armor that exploded. He saw the brother and sister running down the marble staircase ahead and aimed

jinxes at them, but merely hit several bewigged witches in a portrait on the landing, who ran screeching into neighboring paintings. As he leapt the wreckage of armor, Harry heard more shouts and screams; other people within the castle seemed to have awoken…

He pelted toward a shortcut, hoping to overtake the brother and sister and close in on Snape and Malfoy, who must surely have reached the grounds by now. Remembering to leap the vanishing step halfway down the concealed staircase, he burst through a tapestry at the bottom and out into a corridor where a number of bewildered and pajama-clad Hufflepuffs stood.

"Harry! We heard a noise, and someone said something aboui the Dark Mark —" began Ernie Macmillan.

"Out of the way!" yelled Harry, knocking two boys aside as he sprinted toward the landing and down the remainder of the marble staircase. The oak front doors had been blasted open, there were smears of blood on the flagstones, and several terrified students stood huddled against the walls, one or two still cowering with their arms over their faces. The giant Gryffindor hourglass had been hit by a curse, and the rubies within were still falling, with a loud rattle, onto the flagstones below.

Harry flew across the entrance hall and out into the dark grounds: He could just make out three figures racing across the lawn, heading for the gates beyond which they could Disapparate — by the looks of them, the huge blond Death Eater and, some way ahead of him, Snape and Malfoy…

The cold night air ripped at Harry's lungs as he tore after them; he saw a flash of light in the distance that momentarily silhouetted his quarry. He did not know what it was but continued to run, not yet near enough to get a good aim with a curse —

Another flash, shouts, retaliatory jets of light, and Harry understood: Hagrid had emerged from his cabin and was trying to stop the Death Eaters escaping, and though every breath seemed to shred his lungs and the stitch in his chest was like fire, Harry sped up as an unbidden voice in his head said: *not Hagrid…not Hagrid too…*

Something caught Harry hard in the small of the back and he fell forward, his face smacking the ground, blood pouring out of both nostrils: He knew, even as he rolled over, his wand ready, that the brother and sister he had overtaken using his shortcut were closing in behind him…

"*Impedimenta!*" he yelled as he rolled over again, crouching close to the dark ground, and miraculously his jinx hit one of them, who stumbled and fell, tripping up the other; Harry leapt to his feet and sprinted on after Snape.

And now he saw the vast outline of Hagrid, illuminated by the light of the crescent moon revealed suddenly behind clouds; the blond Death Eater was aiming curse after curse at the

gamekeeper; but Hagrids immense strength and the toughened skin he had inherited from his giantess mother seemed to be protecting him. Snape and Malfoy, however, were still running; they would soon be beyond the gates, able to Disapparate —

Harry tore past Hagrid and his opponent, took aim at Snape's back, and yelled, "*Stupefy!*"

He missed; the jet of red light soared past Snape's head; Snape shouted, "Run, Draco!"and turned. Twenty yards apart, he and Harry looked at each other before raising their wands simultaneously.

"Cruc —"

But Snape parried the curse, knocking Harry backward off his feet before he could complete it; Harry rolled over and scrambled back up again as the huge Death Eater behind him yelled, "*Incendio!*" Harry heard an explosive bang and a dancing orange light spilled over all of them: Hagrid's house was on fire.

"Fang's in there, yer evil —!" Hagrid bellowed.

"Cruc —" yelled Harry for the second time, aiming for the figure ahead illuminated in the dancing firelight, but Snape blocked the spell again. Harry could see him sneering.

"No Unforgivable Curses from you, Potter!" he shouted over the rushing of the flames, Hagrid's yells, and the wild yelping of the trapped Fang. "You haven't got the nerve or the ability —"

"Incarc —"Harry roared, but Snape deflected the spell with an almost lazy flick of his arm.

"Fight back!" Harry screamed at him. "Fight back, you cowardly —"

"Coward, did you call me, Potter?" shouted Snape. "Your father would never attack me unless it was four on one, what would you call him, I wonder?"

"Stupe —"

"Blocked again and again and again until you learn to keep your mouth shut and your mind closed, Potter!" sneered Snape, deflecting the curse once more. "Now come!" he shouted at the huge Death Eater behind Harry. "It is time to be gone, before the Ministry turns up —"

"Impedi —"

But before he could finish this jinx, excruciating pain hit Harry; he keeled over in the grass. Someone was screaming, he would surely die of this agony, Snape was going to torture him to death or madness —

"No!" roared Snape's voice and the pain stopped as suddenly as it had started; Harry lay curled on the dark grass, clutching his wand and panting; somewhere overhead Snape was shouting, "Have you forgotten our orders? Potter belongs to the Dark Lord — we are to leave him! Go! Go!"

And Harry felt the ground shudder under his face as the brother and sister and the enormous Death Eater obeyed, running toward the gates. Harry uttered an inarticulate yell of rage: In that instant, he cared not whether he lived or died. Pushing himself to his feet again, he staggered blindly toward Snape, the man he now hated as much as he hated Voldemort himself —

"*Sectum —!*"

Snape flicked his wand and the curse was repelled yet again; but Harry was mere feet away now and he could see Snape's face clearly at last: He was no longer sneering or jeering; the blazing flames showed a face full of rage. Mustering all his powers of concentration, Harry thought, *Levi* —

"No, Potter!" screamed Snape. There was a loud BANG and Harry was soaring backward, hitting the ground hard again, and this time his wand flew out of his hand. He could hear Hagrid yelling and Fang howling as Snape closed in and looked down on him where he lay, wandless and defenseless as Dumbledore had been. Snape's pale face, illuminated by the flaming cabin, was suffused with hatred just as it had been before he had cursed Dumbledore.

"You dare use my own spells against me, Potter? It was I who invented them — I, the Half-Blood Prince! And you'd turn my inventions on me, like your filthy father, would you? I don't think so…no!"

Harry had dived for his wand; Snape shot a hex at it and it flew feet away into the darkness and out of sight.

"Kill me then," panted Harry, who felt no fear at all, but only rage and contempt. "Kill me like you killed him, you coward —"

"DON'T —" screamed Snape, and his face was suddenly demented, inhuman, as though he was in as much pain as the yelping, howling dog stuck in the burning house behind them —"CALL ME COWARD!"

And he slashed at the air: Harry felt a white-hot, whiplike something hit him across the face and was slammed backward into the ground. Spots of light burst in front of his eyes and for a moment all the breath seemed to have gone from his body, then he heard a rush of wings above him and something enormous obscured the stars. Buckbeak had flown at Snape, who staggered backward as the razor-sharp claws slashed at him. As Harry raised himself into a sitting position, his head still swimming from its last contact with the ground, he saw Snape running as hard as he could, the enormous beast flapping behind him and screeching as Harry had never heard him screech —

Harry struggled to his feet, looking around groggily for his wand, hoping to give chase again, but even as his fingers fumbled in the grass, discarding twigs, he knew it would be too late, and sure

enough, by the time he had located his wand, he turned only to see the hippogriff circling the gates. Snape had managed to Disapparate just beyond the school's boundaries.

"Hagrid," muttered Harry, still dazed, looking around. "HAGRID?"

He stumbled toward the burning house as an enormous figure emerged from out of the flames carrying Fang on his back. With a cry of thankfulness, Harry sank to his knees; he was shaking in every limb, his body ached all over, and his breath came in painful stabs.

"Yeh all righ', Harry? Yeh all righ'? Speak ter me, Harry…"

Hagrids huge, hairy face was swimming above Harry, blocking out the stars. Harry could smell burnt wood and dog hair; he put out a hand and felt Fang's reassuringly warm and alive body quivering beside him.

"I'm all right," panted Harry. "Are you?"

"'Course I am…take more'n that ter finish me."

Hagrid put his hands under Harry's arms and raised him up with such force that Harry's feet momentarily left the ground before Hagrid set him upright again. He could see blood trickling down Hagrid's cheek from a deep cut under one eye, which was swelling rapidly.

"We should put out your house," said Harry, "the charm's '*Aguamenti*'…"

"Knew it was summat like that," mumbled Hagrid, and he raised a smoldering pink, flowery umbrella and said, "*Aguamenti!*"

A jet of water flew out of the umbrella tip. Harry raised his wand arm, which felt like lead, and murmured "Aguamenti" too: Together, he and Hagrid poured water on the house until the last flame was extinguished.

"S'not too bad," said Hagrid hopefully a few minutes later, looking at the smoking wreck. "Nothin Dumbledore won' be able to put righ'…"

Harry felt a searing pain in his stomach at the sound of the name. In the silence and the stillness, horror rose inside him.

"Hagrid…"

"I was bindin' up a couple o' bowtruckle legs when I heard 'em coming," said Hagrid sadly, still staring at his wrecked cabin. "They'll bin burnt ter twigs, poor little things…"

"Hagrid…"

"But what happened, Harry? I jus' saw them Death Eaters runnin down from the castle, but what the ruddy hell was Snape doin' with 'em? Where's he gone — was he chasin' them?"

"He…" Harry cleared his throat; it was dry from panic and the smoke. "Hagrid, he killed…"

“Killed?” said Hagrid loudly, staring down at Harry. “Snape killed? What’re yeh on abou’ Harry?”

“Dumbledore,” said Harry. “Snape killed…Dumbledore.”

Hagrid simply looked at him, the little of his face that could be seen completely blank, uncomprehending.

“Dumbledore wha, Harry?”

“He’s dead. Snape killed him…”

“Don’ say that,” said Hagrid roughly. “Snape kill Dumbledore — don’ be stupid, Harry. Wha’s made yeh say tha’?”

“I saw it happen.”

“Yeh couldn’ have.”

“I saw it, Hagrid.”

Hagrid shook his head; his expression was disbelieving but sympathetic, and Harry knew that Hagrid thought he had sustained a blow to the head, that he was confused, perhaps by the aftereffects of a jinx…

“What musta happened was, Dumbledore musta told Snape ter go with them Death Eaters,” Hagrid said confidently. “I suppose he’s gotta keep his cover. Look, let’s get yeh back up ter the school. Come on, Harry…”

Harry did not attempt to argue or explain. He was still shaking uncontrollably. Hagrid would find out soon enough, too soon…As they directed their steps back toward the castle, Harry saw that many of its windows were lit now. He could imagine, clearly, the scenes inside as people moved from room to room, telling each other that Death Eaters had got in, that the Mark was shining over Hogwarts, that somebody must have been killed…

The oak front doors stood open ahead of them, light flooding out onto the drive and the lawn. Slowly, uncertainly, dressing-gowned people were creeping down the steps, looking around nervously for some sign of the Death Eaters who had fled into the night. Harry’s eyes, however, were fixed upon the ground at the foot of the tallest tower. He imagined that he could see a black, huddled mass lying in the grass there, though he was really too far away to see anything of the sort. Even as he stared wordlessly at the place where he thought Dumbledore’s body must lie, however, he saw people beginning to move toward it.

“What’re they all lookin’ at?” said Hagrid, as he and Harry approached the castle front, Fang keeping as close as he could to their ankles. “Wha’s that lyin’ on the grass?” Hagrid added sharply,

heading now toward the foot of the Astronomy Tower, where a small crowd was congregating. "See it, Harry? Right at the foot of the tower? Under where the Mark…Blimey…yeh don' think someone got thrown —?"

Hagrid fell silent, the thought apparently too horrible to express aloud. Harry walked alongside him, feeling the aches and pains in his face and his legs where the various hexes of the last half hour had hit him, though in an oddly detached way, as though somebody near him was suffering them. What was real and inescapable was the awful pressing feeling in his chest…

He and Hagrid moved, dreamlike, through the murmuring crowd to the very front, where the dumbstruck students and teachers had left a gap.

Harry heard Hagrid's moan of pain and shock, but he did not stop; he walked slowly forward until he reached the place where Dumbledore lay and crouched down beside him. He had known there was no hope from the moment that the full Body-Bind Curse Dumbledore had placed upon him lifted, known that it could have happened only because its caster was dead, but there was still no preparation for seeing him here, spread-eagled, broken: the greatest wizard Harry had ever, or would ever, meet.

Dumbledore's eyes were closed; but for the strange angle of his arms and legs, he might have been sleeping. Harry reached out, straightened the half-moon spectacles upon the crooked nose, and wiped a trickle of blood from the mouth with his own sleeve. Then he gazed down at the wise old face and tried to absorb the enormous and incomprehensible truth: that never again would Dumbledore speak to him, never again could he help …

The crowd murmured behind Harry. After what seemed like a long time, he became aware that he was kneeling upon something hard and looked down.

The locket they had managed to steal so many hours before had fallen out of Dumbledore's pocket. It had opened, perhaps due to the force with which it hit the ground. And although he could not feel more shock or horror or sadness than he felt already, Harry knew, as he picked it up, that there was something wrong …

He turned the locket over in his hands. This was neither as large as the locket he remembered seeing in the Pensieve, nor were there any markings upon it, no sign of the ornate *S* that was supposed to be Slytherins mark. Moreover, there was nothing inside but for a scrap of folded parchment wedged tightly into the place where a portrait should have been.

Automatically, without really thinking about what he was doing, Harry pulled out the fragment of parchment, opened it, and read by the light of the many wands that had now been lit behind him:

To the Dark Lord

I know I will be dead long before you read this but I want you to know that it was I who discovered your secret. I have stolen the real Horcrux and intend to destroy it as soon as I can.

I face death in the hope that when you meet your match you will be mortal once more.

R.A.B.

Harry neither knew nor cared what the message meant. Only one thing mattered: This was not a Horcrux. Dumbledore had weakened himself by drinking that terrible potion for nothing. Harry crumpled the parchment in his hand, and his eyes burned with tears as behind him Fang began to howl.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

THE PHOENIX LAMENT

"C 'mere, Harry…"

"No."

"Yeh can' stay here, Harry…Come on, now…"

"No."

He did not want to leave Dumbledores side, he did not want to move anywhere. Hagrid's hand on his shoulder was trembling. Then another voice said, "Harry, come on."

A much smaller and warmer hand had enclosed his and was pulling him upward. He obeyed its pressure without really thinking about it. Only as he walked blindly back through the crowd did he realize, from a trace of flowery scent on the air, that it was Ginny who was leading him back into the castle. Incomprehensible voices battered him, sobs and shouts and wails stabbed the night, but Harry and Ginny walked on, back up the steps into the entrance hall. Faces swam on the edges of Harry's vision, people were peering at him, whispering, wondering, and Gryffindor rubies glistened on the floor like drops of blood as they made their way toward the marble staircase.

"We're going to the hospital wing," said Ginny.

"I'm not hurt," said Harry.!

"It's McGonagalls orders," said Ginny. "Everyone's up there, Ron and Hermione and Lupin and everyone —"

Fear stirred in Harry's chest again: He had forgotten the inert figures he had left behind.

"Ginny, who else is dead?"

"Don't worry, none of us."

"But the Dark Mark — Malfoy said he stepped over a body —"

"He stepped over Bill, but its all right, he's alive."

There was something in her voice, however, that Harry knew boded ill.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure…he's a — a bit of a mess, that's all. Greyback attacked him. Madam Pomfrey says he won't — won't look the same anymore…"

Ginny's voice trembled a little.

"We don't really know what the aftereffects will be — I mean, Greyback being a werewolf, but not transformed at the time."

"But the others…There were other bodies on the ground…"

"Neville and Professor Flitwick are both hurt, but Madam Pomfrey says they'll be all right. And a Death Eater's dead, he got hit by a Killing Curse that huge blond one was firing off everywhere — Harry, if we hadn't had your Felix potion, I think we'd all have been killed, but everything seemed to just miss us —"

They had reached the hospital wing. Pushing open the doors, Harry saw Neville lying, apparently asleep, in a bed near the door. Ron, Hermione, Luna, Tonks, and Lupin were gathered around another bed near the far end of the ward. At the sound of the doors opening, they all looked up. Hermione ran to Harry and hugged him; Lupin moved forward too, looking anxious.

"Are you all right, Harry?"

"I'm fine…How's Bill?"

Nobody answered. Harry looked over Hermione's shoulder and saw an unrecognizable face lying on Bill's pillow, so badly slashed and ripped that he looked grotesque. Madam Pomfrey was dabbing at his wounds with some harsh-smelling green ointment. Harry remembered how Snape had mended Malfoy's Sectumsempra wounds so easily with his wand.

"Can't you fix them with a charm or something?" he asked the matron.

"No charm will work on these," said Madam Pomfrey. "I've tried everything I know, but there is no cure for werewolf bites."

"But he wasn't bitten at the full moon," said Ron, who was gazing down into his brother's face as though he could somehow force him to mend just by staring. "Greyback hadn't transformed, so surely Bill won't be a — a real —?"

He looked uncertainly at Lupin.

"No, I don't think that Bill will be a true werewolf," said Lupin, "but that does not mean that there won't be some contamination. Those are cursed wounds. They are unlikely ever to heal fully, and — and Bill might have some wolfish characteristics from now on."

"Dumbledore might know something that'd work, though," Ron said. "Where is he? Bill fought those maniacs on Dumbledore's orders, Dumbledore owes him, he can't leave him in this state -"

"Ron — Dumbledores dead," said Ginny.

"No!" Lupin looked wildly from Ginny to Harry, as though hoping the latter might contradict her, but when Harry did not, Lupin collapsed into a chair beside Bill's bed, his hands over his face. Harry had never seen Lupin lose control before; he felt as though he was intruding upon something private, indecent. He turned away and caught Ron's eye instead, exchanging in silence a look that confirmed what Ginny had said.

"How did he die?" whispered Tonks. "How did it happen?"

"Snape killed him," said Harry. "I was there, I saw it. We arrived back on the Astronomy Tower because that's where the Mark was…Dumbledore was ill, he was weak, but I think he realized it was a trap when we heard footsteps running up the stairs. He immobilized me, I couldn't do anything, I was under the Invisibility Cloak — and then Malfoy came through the door and disarmed him —"

Hermione clapped her hands to her mouth and Ron groaned. Luna's mouth trembled.

"— more Death Eaters arrived — and then Snape — and Snape did it. The *Avada Kedavra*." Harry couldn't go on.

Madam Pomfrey burst into tears. Nobody paid her any attention except Ginny, who whispered, "Shh! Listen!"

Gulping, Madam Pomfrey pressed her fingers to her mouth, her eyes wide. Somewhere out in the darkness, a phoenix was singing in a way Harry had never heard before: a stricken lament of terrible beauty. And Harry felt, as he had felt about phoenix song before, that the music was inside him, not without: It was his own grief turned magically to song that echoed across the grounds and through the castle windows.

How long they all stood there, listening, he did not know, nor why it seemed to ease their pain a little to listen to the sound of their mourning, but it felt like a long time later that the hospital door opened again and Professor McGonagall entered the ward. Like all the rest, she bore marks of the recent battle: There were grazes on her face and her robes were ripped.

"Molly and Arthur are on their way," she said, and the spell of the music was broken: Everyone roused themselves as though coming out of trances, turning again to look at Bill, or else to rub their own eyes shake their heads. "Harry, what happened? According to Hagrid you were with Professor Dumbledore when he — when it happened. He says Professor Snape was involved in some —"

"Snape killed Dumbledore," said Harry.

She stared at him for a moment, then swayed alarmingly; Madam Pomfrey, who seemed to have pulled herself together, ran forward, conjuring a chair from thin air, which she pushed under McGonagall.

"Snape," repeated McGonagall faintly, falling into the chair. "We all wondered…but he trusted…always…Snape…I can't believe it…"

"Snape was a highly accomplished Occlumens," said Lupin, his voice uncharacteristically harsh. "We always knew that."

“But Dumbledore swore he was on our side!” whispered Tonks. “I always thought Dumbledore must know something about Snape that we didn’t…”

“He always hinted that he had an ironclad reason for trusting Snape,” muttered Professor McGonagall, now dabbing at the corners of her leaking eyes with a tartan-edged handkerchief. “I mean…with Snapes history…of course people were bound to wonder…but Dumbledore told me explicitly that Snape’s repentance was absolutely genuine — Wouldn’t hear a word against him!”

“I’d love to know what Snape told him to convince him,” said Tonks.

“I know,” said Harry, and they all turned to look at him. “Snape passed Voldemort the information that made Voldemort hunt down my mum and dad. Then Snape told Dumbledore he hadn’t realized what he was doing, he was really sorry he’d done it, sorry that they were dead.”

They all stared at him.

“And Dumbledore believed that?” said Lupin incredulously. “Dumbledore believed Snape was sorry James was dead? Snape hated James…”

“And he didn’t think my mother was worth a damn either,” said Harry, “because she was Muggle-born…‘Mudblood,’ he called her…”

Nobody asked how Harry knew this. All of them seemed to be lost in horrified shock, trying to digest the monstrous truth of what had happened.

“This is all my fault,” said Professor McGonagall suddenly. She looked disoriented, twisting her wet handkerchief in her hands. “My fault. I sent Filius to fetch Snape tonight, I actually sent for him to come and help us! If I hadn’t alerted Snape to what was going on, he might never have joined forces with the Death Eaters. I don’t think he knew they were there before Filius told him, I don’t think he knew they were coming.”

“It isn’t your fault, Minerva,” said Lupin firmly. “We all wanted more help, we were glad to think Snape was on his way…”

“So when he arrived at the fight, he joined in on the Death Eaters’ side?” asked Harry, who wanted every detail of Snape’s duplicity and infamy, feverishly collecting more reasons to hate him, to swear vengeance.

“I don’t know exactly how it happened,” said Professor McGonagall distractedly. “It’s all so confusing…Dumbledore had told us that he would be leaving the school for a few hours and that we were to patrol the corridors just in case…Remus, Bill, and Nymphadora were to join us…and so we patrolled. All seemed quiet. Every secret passageway out of the school was covered. We knew nobody

could fly in. There were powerful enchantments on every entrance into the castle. I still don't know how the Death Eaters can possibly have entered…"

"I do," said Harry, and he explained, briefly, about the pair of Vanishing Cabinets and the magical pathway they formed. "So they got in through the Room of Requirement."

Almost against his will he glanced from Ron to Hermione, both of whom looked devastated.

"I messed up, Harry," said Ron bleakly. "We did like you told us: We checked the Marauder's Map and we couldn't see Malfoy on it, so we thought he must be in the Room of Requirement, so me, Ginny, and Neville went to keep watch on it…but Malfoy got past us."

"He came out of the room about an hour after we started keeping watch," said Ginny. "He was on his own, clutching that awful shriveled arm —"

"His Hand of Glory," said Ron. "Gives light only to the holder, remember?"

"Anyway," Ginny went on, "he must have been checking whether the coast was clear to let the Death Eaters out, because the moment he saw us he threw something into the air and it all went pitch-black —"

"— Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder," said Ron bitterly. "Fred and George's. I'm going to be having a word with them about who they let buy their products."

"We tried everything, Lumos, Incendio," said Ginny. "Nothing would penetrate the darkness; all we could do was grope our way out of the corridor again, and meanwhile we could hear people rushing past us. Obviously Malfoy could see because of that hand thing and was guiding them, but we didn't dare use any curses or anything in case we hit each other, and by the time we'd reached a corridor that was light, they'd gone."

"Luckily," said Lupin hoarsely, "Ron, Ginny, and Neville ran into us almost immediately and told us what had happened. We found the Death Eaters minutes later, heading in the direction of the Astronomy Tower. Malfoy obviously hadn't expected more people to be on the watch; he seemed to have exhausted his supply of Darkness Powder, at any rate. A fight broke out, they scattered and we gave chase. One of them, Gibbon, broke away and headed up the tower stairs -"

"To set off the Mark?" asked Harry.

"He must have done, yes, they must have arranged that before they left the Room of Requirement," said Lupin. "But I don't think Gibbon liked the idea of waiting up there alone for Dumbledore, because he came running back downstairs to rejoin the fight and was hit by a Killing Curse that just missed me."

“So if Ron was watching the Room of Requirement with Ginny and Neville,” said Harry, turning to Hermione, “were you —?”

“Outside Snape’s office, yes,” whispered Hermione, her eyes sparkling with tears, “with Luna. We hung around for ages outside it and nothing happened…We didn’t know what was going on upstairs, Ron had taken the map — It was nearly midnight when Professor Flitwick came sprinting down into the dungeons. He was shouting about Death Eaters in the castle, I don’t think he really registered that Luna and I were there at all, he just burst his way into Snape’s office and we heard him saying that Snape had to go back with him and help and then we heard a loud thump and Snape came hurtling out of his room and he saw us and — and —”

“What?” Harry urged her.

“I was so stupid, Harry!” said Hermione in a high-pitched whisper. “He said Professor Flitwick had collapsed and that we should go and take care of him while he — while he went to help fight the Death Eaters —” She covered her face in shame and continued to talk into her fingers, so that her voice was muffled. “We went into his office to see if we could help Professor Flitwick and found him unconscious on the floor…and oh, it’s so obvious now, Snape must have Stupefied Flitwick, but we didn’t realize, Harry, we didn’t realize, we just let Snape go!”

“It’s not your fault,” said Lupin firmly. “Hermione, had you not obeyed Snape and got out of the way, he probably would have killed you and Luna.”

“So then he came upstairs,” said Harry, who was watching Snape running up the marble staircase in his mind’s eye, his black robes billowing behind him as ever, pulling his wand from under his cloak as he ascended, “and he found the place where you were all fighting…”

“We were in trouble, we were losing,” said Tonks in a low voice. “Gibbon was down, but the rest of the Death Eaters seemed ready to fight to the death. Neville had been hurt, Bill had been savaged by Greyback…It was all dark…curses flying everywhere…The Malfoy boy had vanished, he must have slipped past, up the stairs…then more of them ran after him, but one of them blocked the stair behind them with some kind of curse…Neville ran at it and got thrown up into the air —”

“None of us could break through,” said Ron, “and that massive Death Eater was still firing off jinxes all over the place, they were bouncing off the walls and barely missing us…”

“And then Snape was there,” said Tonks, “and then he wasn’t —”

“I saw him running toward us, but that huge Death Eaters jinx just missed me right afterward and I ducked and lost track of things,” said Ginny.

“I saw him run straight through the cursed barrier as though it wasn’t there,” said Lupin. “I tried to follow him, but was thrown back just like Neville…”

“He must have known a spell we didn’t,” whispered McGonagall. “After all — he was the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher…I just assumed that he was in a hurry to chase after the Death Eaters who’d escaped up to the tower…”

“He was,” said Harry savagely, “but to help them, not to stop them…and I’ll bet you had to have a Dark Mark to get through that barrier — so what happened when he came back down?”

“Well, the big Death Eater had just fired off a hex that caused half the ceiling to fall in, and also broke the curse blocking the stairs,” said Lupin. “We all ran forward — those of us who were still standing anyway — and then Snape and the boy emerged out of the dust — obviously, none of us attacked them —”

“We just let them pass,” said Tonks in a hollow voice. “We thought they were being chased by the Death Eaters — and next thing, the other Death Eaters and Greyback were back and we were fighting again — I thought I heard Snape shout something, but I don’t know what —”

“He shouted, ‘It’s over,’” said Harry. “He’d done what he’d meant to do.”

They all fell silent. Fawkes’s lament was still echoing over the dark grounds outside. As the music reverberated upon the air, unbidden, unwelcome thoughts slunk into Harry’s mind…Had they taken Dumbledore’s body from the foot of the tower yet? What would happen to it next? Where would it rest? He clenched his fists tighdy in his pockets. He could feel the small cold lump of the fake Horcrux against the knuckles of his right hand.

The doors of the hospital wing burst open, making them all jump: Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were striding up the ward, Fleur just behind them, her beautiful face terrified.

“Molly — Arthur —” said Professor McGonagall, jumping up and hurrying to greet them. “I am so sorry —”

“Bill,” whispered Mrs. Weasley, darting past Professor McGonagall as she caught sight of Bill’s mangled face. “Oh, Bill!”

Lupin and Tonks had got up hastily and retreated so that Mr. and Mrs. Weasley could get nearer to the bed. Mrs. Weasley bent over her son and pressed her lips to his bloody forehead.

“You said Greyback attacked him?” Mr. Weasley asked Professor McGonagall distractedly. “But he hadn’t transformed? So what does that mean? What will happen to Bill?”

“We don’t yet know,” said Professor McGonagall, looking helplessly at Lupin.

"There will probably be some contamination, Arthur,".said Lupin. "It is an odd case, possibly unique…We don't know what his behavior might be like when he awakens…"

Mrs. Weasley took the nasty-smelling ointment from Madam Pomfrey and began dabbing at Bill's wounds.

"And Dumbledore…" said Mr. Weasley. "Minerva, is it true…Is he really…?"

As Professor McGonagall nodded, Harry felt Ginny move beside him and looked at her. Her slightly narrowed eyes were fixed upon Fleur, who was gazing down at Bill with a frozen expression on her face.

"Dumbledore gone," whispered Mr. Weasley, but Mrs. Weasley had eyes only for her eldest son; she began to sob, tears falling onto Bill's mutilated face.

"Of course, it doesn't matter how he looks…It's not r-really important…but he was a very handsome little b-boy…always very handsome…and he was g-going to be married!"

"And what do you mean by zat?" said Fleur suddenly and loudly. "What do you mean, 'he was going to be married?'"

Mrs. Weasley raised her tear-stained face, looking startled. "Well — only that —"

"You theenk Bill will not wish to marry me anymore?" demanded Fleur. "You theenk, because of these bites, he will not love me?"

"No, that's not what I —"

"Because 'e will!" said Fleur, drawing herself up to her full height and throwing back her long mane of silver hair. "It would take more zan a werewolf to stop Bill loving me!"

"Well, yes, I'm sure," said Mrs. Weasley, "but I thought perhaps — given how— how he—"

"You thought I would not weesh to marry him? Or per'aps, you hoped?" said Fleur, her nostrils flaring. "What do I care how he looks? I am good-looking enough for both of us, I theenk! All these scars show is zat my husband is brave! And I shall do zat!" she added fiercely, pushing Mrs. Weasley aside and snatching the ointment from her.

Mrs. Weasley fell back against her husband and watched Fleur mopping up Bill's wounds with a most curious expression upon her face. Nobody said anything; Harry did not dare move. Like everybody else, he was waiting for the explosion.

"Our Great-Auntie Muriel," said Mrs. Weasley after a long pause, "has a very beautiful tiara — goblin-made — which I am sure I could persuade her to lend you for the wedding. She is very fond of Bill, you know, and it would look lovely with your hair."

"Thank you," said Fleur stiffly. "I am sure zat will be lovely."

And then, Harry did not quite see how it happened, both, women were crying and hugging each other. Completely bewildered, wondering whether the world had gone mad, he turned around: Ron looked as stunned as he felt and Ginny and Hermione were exchanging startled looks.

"You see!" said a strained voice. Tonks was glaring at Lupin. "She still wants to marry him, even though he's been bitten! She doesn't care!

"It's different," said Lupin, barely moving his lips and looking suddenly tense. "Bill will not be a full werewolf. The cases are completely —"

"But I don't care either, I don't care!" said Tonks, seizing the front of Lupin's robes and shaking them. "I've told you a million times…"

And the meaning of Tonks's Patronus and her mouse-colored hair, and the reason she had come running to find Dumbledore when she had heard a rumor someone had been attacked by Greyback, all suddenly became clear to Harry; it had not been Sirius that Tonks had fallen in love with after all.

"And I've told you a million times," said Lupin, refusing to meet her eyes, staring at the floor, "that I am too old for you, too poor…too dangerous…"

"I've said all along you're taking a ridiculous line on this, Remus," said Mrs. Weasley over Fleur's shoulder as she patted her on the back.

"I am not being ridiculous," said Lupin steadily. "Tonks deserves somebody young and whole."

"But she wants you," said Mr. Weasley, with a small smile. "And after all, Remus, young and whole men do not necessarily remain so."

He gestured sadly at his son, lying between them.

"This is…not the moment to discuss it," said Lupin, avoiding everybody's eyes as he looked around distractedly. "Dumbledore is dead…"

"Dumbledore would have been happier than anybody to think that there was a little more love in the world," said Professor McGonagall curtly, just as the hospital doors opened again and Hagrid walked in.

The little of his face that was not obscured by hair or beard was soaking and swollen; he was shaking with tears, a vast, spotted handkerchief in his hand.

"I've…I've done it, Professor," he choked. "M-moved him. Professor Sprout's got the kids back in bed. Professor Flitwick's lyin down, but he says he'll be all righ' in a jiffy, an' Professor Slughorn says the Ministry's bin informed."

"Thank you, Hagrid," said Professor McGonagall, standing up at once and turning to look at the group around Bill's bed. "I shall have to see the Ministry when they get here. Hagrid, please tell

the Heads of Houses — Slughorn can represent Slytherin — that I want to see them in my office forthwith. I would like you to join us too."

As Hagrid nodded, turned, and shuffled out of the room again, she looked down at Harry.

"Before I meet them I would like a quick word with you, Harry. If you'll come with me…."

Harry stood up, murmured "See you in a bit" to Ron, Hermione, and Ginny, and followed Professor McGonagall back down the ward. The corridors outside were deserted and the only sound was the distant phoenix song. It was several minutes before Harry became aware that they were not heading for Professor McGonagall's office, but for Dumbledore's, and another few seconds before he realized that of course, she had been deputy headmistress…. Apparently she was now headmistress…so the room behind the gargoyle was now hers.

In silence they ascended the moving spiral staircase and entered the circular office. He did not know what he had expected: that the room would be draped in black, perhaps, or even that Dumbledore's body might be lying there. In fact, it looked almost exactly as it had done when he and Dumbledore had left it mere hours previously: the silver instruments whirring and puffing on their spindle legged tables, Gryffindor's sword in its glass case gleaming in the moonlight, the Sorting Hat on a shelf behind the desk, the Fawkes's perch stood empty, he was still crying his lament to the grounds. And a new portrait had joined the ranks of the dead headmasters and headmistresses of Hogwarts: Dumbledore was slumbering in a golden frame over the desk, his half-moon spectacle perched upon his crooked nose, looking peaceful and untroubled.

After glancing once at this portrait, Professor McGonagall made an odd movement as though steeling herself, then rounded the' desk to look at Harry, her face taut and lined.

"Harry," she said, "I would like to know what you and Professor Dumbledore were doing this evening when you left the school."

"I can't tell you that, Professor," said Harry. He had expected the question and had his answer ready. It had been here, in this very room, that Dumbledore had told him that he was to confide the contents of their lessons to nobody but Ron and Hermione.

"Harry, it might be important," said Professor McGonagall.

"It is," said Harry, "very, but he didn't want me to tell anyone."

Professor McGonagall glared at him. "Potter" — Harry registered the renewed use of his surname — "in the light of Professor Dumbledore's death, I think you must see that the situation has changed somewhat —"

“I don’t think so,” said Harry, shrugging. “Professor Dumbledore never told me to stop following his orders if he died.”

“But —”

“There’s one thing you should know before the Ministry gets here though. Madam Rosmerta’s under the Imperius Curse, she was helping Malfoy and the Death Eaters, that’s how the necklace and the poisoned mead —”

“Rosmerta?” said Professor McGonagall incredulously, but before she could go on, there was a knock on the door behind them and Professors Sprout, Flitwick, and Slughorn traipsed into the room, followed by Hagrid, who was still weeping copiously, his huge frame trembling with grief.

“Snape!” ejaculated Slughorn, who looked the most shaken, pale and sweating. “Snape! I taught him! I thought I knew him!”

But before any of them could respond to this, a sharp voice spoke from high on the wall: A sallow-faced wizard with a short black fringe had just walked back into his empty canvas.

“Minerva, the Minister will be here within seconds, he has just Disapparated from the Ministry.”

“Thank you, Everard,” said Professor McGonagall, and she turned quickly to her teachers.

“I want to talk about what happens to Hogwarts before he gets here,” she said quickly. “Personally, I am not convinced that the school should reopen next year. The death of the headmaster at the hands of one of our colleagues is a terrible stain upon Hogwarts’s history. It is horrible.”

“I am sure Dumbledore would have wanted the school to remain open,” said Professor Sprout. “I feel that if a single pupil wants to come, then the school ought to remain open for that pupil.”

“But will we have a single pupil after this?” said Slughorn, now dabbing his sweating brow with a silken handkerchief. “Parents will want to keep their children at home and I can’t say I blame them. Personally, I don’t think we’re in more danger at Hogwarts than we are anywhere else, but you can’t expect mothers to think like that. They’ll want to keep their families together, it’s only natural.”

“I agree,” said Professor McGonagall. “And in any case, it is not true to say that Dumbledore never envisaged a situation in which Hogwarts might close. When the Chamber of Secrets reopened he considered the closure of the school — and I must say that Professor Dumbledore’s murder is more disturbing to me than the idea of Slytherin’s monster living undetected in the bowels of the castle…”

“We must consult the governors,” said Professor Flitwick in his squeaky little voice; he had a large bruise on his forehead but seemed otherwise unscathed by his collapse in Snape’s office. “We must follow the established procedures. A decision should not be made hastily.”

“Hagrid, you haven’t said anything,” said Professor McGonagall. “What are your views, ought Hogwarts to remain open?”

Hagrid, who had been weeping silently into his large, spotted handkerchief throughout this conversation, now raised puffy red eyes and croaked, “I dunno, Professor…that’s fer the Heads of House an the headmistress ter decide…”

“Professor Dumbledore always valued your views,” said Professor McGonagall kindly, “and so do I.”

“Well, I’m stayin,” said Hagrid, fat tears still leaking out of the corners of his eyes and trickling down into his tangled beard. “It’s me home, it’s bin me home since I was thirteen. An’ if there’s kids who wan’ me ter teach ‘em, I’ll do it. But…I dunno…Hogwarts without Dumbledore…” He gulped and disappeared behind his handkerchief once more, and there was silence.

“Very well,” said Professor McGonagall, glancing out of the window at the grounds, checking to see whether the Minister was yet approaching, “then I must agree with Filius that the right thing to do is to consult the governors, who will make the final decision.

“Now, as to getting students home…there is an argument for doing it sooner rather than later. We could arrange for the Hogwarts Express to come tomorrow if necessary —”

“What about Dumbledore’s funeral?” said Harry, speaking at last.

“Well…” said Professor McGonagall, losing a little of her briskness as her voice shook. “I — I know that it was Dumbledore’s wish to be laid to rest here, at Hogwarts —”

“Then that’s what’ll happen, isn’t it?” said Harry fiercely.

“If the Ministry thinks it appropriate,” said Professor McGonagall. “No other headmaster or headmistress has ever been —”

“No other headmaster or headmistress ever gave more to this school,” growled Hagrid.

“Hogwarts should be Dumbledore’s final resting place,” said Professor Flitwick.

“Absolutely,” said Professor Sprout.

“And in that case,” said Harry, “you shouldn’t send the students home until the funeral’s over. They’ll want to say —”

The last word caught in his throat, but Professor Sprout completed the sentence for him.

“Good-bye.”

“Well said,” squeaked Professor Flitwick. “Well said indeed! Our students should pay tribute, it is fitting. We can arrange transport home afterward.”

“Seconded,” barked Professor Sprout.

“I suppose…yes…” said Slughorn in a rather agitated voice, while Hagrid let out a strangled sob of assent.

“He’s coming,” said Professor McGonagall suddenly, gazing down into the grounds. “The Minister…and by the looks of it. he’s brought a delegation…”

“Can I leave, Professor?” said Harry at once.

He had no desire at all to see, or be interrogated by, Rufus Scrimgeour tonight.

“You may,” said Professor McGonagall. “And quickly.”

She strode toward the door and held it open for him. He sped down the spiral staircase and off along the deserted corridor; he had left his Invisibility Cloak at the top of the Astronomy Tower, but it did not matter; there was nobody in the corridors to see him pass, not even Filch, Mrs. Norris, or Peeves. He did not meet another soul until he turned into the passage leading to the Gryffindor common room.

“Is it true?” whispered the Fat Lady as he approached her. “It is really true? Dumbledore — dead?”

“Yes,” said Harry.

She let out a wail and, without waiting for the password, swung forward to admit him.

As Harry had suspected it would be, the common room was jam-packed. The room fell silent as he climbed through the portrait hole. He saw Dean and Seamus sitting in a group nearby: This meant that the dormitory must be empty, or nearly so. Without speaking to anybody, without making eye contact at all, Harry walked straight across the room and through the door to the boys’ dormitories.

As he had hoped, Ron was waiting for him, still fully dressed, sitting on his bed. Harry sat down on his own four-poster and for a moment, they simply stared at each other.

“They’re talking about closing the school,” said Harry.

“Lupin said they would,” said Ron.

There was a pause.

“So?” said Ron in a very low voice, as though he thought the furniture might be listening in. “Did you find one? Did you get it? A — a Horcrux?”

Harry shook his head. All that had taken place around that black lake seemed like an old nightmare now; had it really happened, and only hours ago?

"You didn't get it?" said Ron, looking crestfallen. "It wasn't there?"

"No," said Harry. "Someone had already taken it and left a fake in its place."

"Already taken —?"

Wordlessly, Harry pulled the fake locket from his pocket, opened it, and passed it to Ron. The full story could wait…It did not matter tonight…nothing mattered except the end, the end of their pointless adventure, the end of Dumbledore's life…

"R.A.B.," whispered Ron, "but who was that?"

"Dunno," said Harry, lying back on his bed fully clothed and staring blankly upwards. He felt no curiosity at all about R.A.B.: He doubted that he would ever feel curious again. As he lay there, he became aware suddenly that the grounds were silent. Fawkes had stopped singing. And he knew, without knowing how he knew it, that ilie phoenix had gone, had left Hogwarts for good, just as Dumbledore had left the school, had left the world…had left Harry.

CHAPTER THIRTY

THE WHITE TOMB

All lessons were suspended, all examinations postponed. Some students were hurried away from Hogwarts by their parents over the next couple of days — the Patil twins were gone before breakfast on the morning following Dumbledore's death and Zacharias Smith was escorted from the castle by his haughty-looking father. Seamus Finnigan, on the other hand, refused point-blank to accompany his mother home; they had a shouting match in the Entrance Hall which was resolved when she agreed that he could remain behind for the funeral. She had difficulty in finding a bed in Hogsmeade, Seamus told Harry and Ron, for wizards and witches were pouring into the village, preparing to pay their last respects to Dumbledore.

Some excitement was caused among the younger students, who had never seen it before, when a powder-blue carriage the size of a house, pulled by a dozen giant winged palominos, came soaring out of the sky in the late afternoon before the funeral and landed on the edge of the Forest. Harry watched from a window as a gigantic and handsome olive-skinned, black-haired woman descended the carriage steps and threw herself into the waiting Hagrid's arms. Meanwhile a delegation of Ministry officials, including the Minister for Magic himself, was being accommodated within the castle. Harry was diligently avoiding contact with any of them; he was sure that, sooner or later, he would be asked again to account for Dumbledore's last excursion from Hogwarts.

Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny were spending all of their time together. The beautiful weather seemed to mock them; Harry could imagine how it would have been if Dumbledore had not died, and they had had this time together at the very end of the year, Ginny's examinations finished, the pressure of homework lifted…and hour by hour, he put off saying the thing that he knew he must say, doing what he knew it was right to do, because it was too hard to forgo his best source of comfort.

They visited the hospital wing twice a day: Neville had been discharged, but Bill remained under Madam Pomfrey's care. His scars were as bad as ever; in truth, he now bore a distinct resemblance to Mad-Eye Moody, though thankfully with both eyes and legs, but in personality he seemed just the same as ever. All that appeared to have changed was that he now had a great liking for very rare steaks.

"…so eet ees lucky 'e is marrying me," said Fleur happily, plumping up Bill's pillows, "because ze British overcook their meat, I 'ave always said this."

“I suppose I’m just going to have to accept that he really is going to marry her,” sighed Ginny later that evening, as she, Harry, Ron and Hermione sat beside the open window of the Gryffindor common room, looking out over the twilit grounds,

“She’s not that bad,” said Harry. “Ugly, though,” he added hastily, as Ginny raised her eyebrows, and she let out a reluctant giggle.

“Well, I suppose if Mum can stand it, I can.”

“Anyone else we know died?” Ron asked Hermione, who was perusing the *Evening Prophet*.

Hermione winced at the forced toughness in his voice.

“No,” she said reprovingly, folding up ihe newspaper. “They’re still looking for Snape, but no sign…”

“Of course there isn’t,” said Harry, who became angry every lime this subject cropped up. “They won’t find Snape till they find Voldemort, and seeing as they’ve never managed to do that in all this time…”

“I’m going to go to bed,” yawned Ginny. “I haven’t been sleeping that well since…well…I could do with some sleep.”

She kissed Harry (Ron looked away pointedly), waved at the other two and departed for the girls’ dormitories. The moment the door had closed behind her, Hermione leaned forwards towards Harry with a most Hermione-ish look on her face.

“Harry, I found something out this morning, in the library…”

“R.A.B.?” said Harry, silling up straight.

He did not feel the way he had so often felt before, excited, curious, burning to get to the bottom of a mystery; he simply knew that the task of discovering the truth about the real Horcrux had to be completed before he could move a little further along the dark and winding path stretching ahead of him, the path that he and Dumbledore had set out upon together, and which he now knew he would have to journey alone. There might still be as many as four Horcruxes out there somewhere and each would need to be found and elim-inated before there was even a possibility that Voldemort could be killed. He kept reciting their names to himself, as though by listing them he could bring them within reach: *the locket.., the cup…the snake…something of Gryffindor’s or Ravenclaw’s…the locket…the cup…the snake…something of Gryffindor’s or Ravenclaw’s…*

This mantra seemed to pulse through Harry’s mind as he fell asleep at night, and his dreams were thick with cups, lockets and mysterious objects that he could not quite reach, though

Dumbledore helpfully offered Harry a rope ladder that turned to snakes the moment he began to climb…

He had shown Hermione the note inside the locket the morning after Dumbledore's death, and although she had not immediately recognised the initials as belonging to some obscure wizard about whom she had been reading, she had since been rushing off to the library a little more often than was strictly necessary for somebody who had no homework to do.

"No," she said sadly, "I've been trying, Harry, but I haven't found anything…there are a couple of reasonably well-known wizards with those initials - Rosalind Antigone Bungs…Rupert 'Axebanger' Brookstanton…but they don't seem to fit at all. Judging by that note, the person who stole the Horcrux knew Voldemort, and I can't find a shred of evidence that Bungs or Axebanger ever had anything to do with him…no, actually, it's about…well, Snape."

She looked nervous even saying the name again.

"What about him?" asked Harry heavily, slumping back in his chair.

"Well, it's just that I was sort of right about the Half-Blood Prince business," she said tentatively.

"D'you have to rub it in, Hermione? How do you think I feel about that now?"

"No — no — Harry, I didn't mean that!" she said hastily, looking around to check that they were not being overheard. "It's just that I was right about Eileen Prince once owning the book. You see…she was Snape's mother!"

"I thought she wasn't much of a looker," said Ron. Hermione ignored him.

"I was going through the rest of the old *Prophets* and there was a tiny announcement about Eileen Prince marrying a man called Tobias Snape, and then later an announcement saying that she'd given birth to a —"

"— murderer," spat Harry.

"Well…yes," said Hermione. "So…I was sort of right. Snape must have been proud of being 'half a Prince', you see? Tobias Snape was a Muggle from what it said in the *Prophet*"

"Yeah, that fits," said Harry. "He'd play up the pure-blood side so he could get in with Lucius Malfoy and the rest of them…he's just like Voldemort. Pure-blood mother, Muggle father…ashamed of his parentage, trying to make himself feared using the Dark Arts, gave himself an impressive new name — Lord Voldemort — the Half-Blood Prince - how could Dumbledore have missed —?"

He broke off, looking out of the window. He could not stop himself dwelling upon Dumbledore's inexcusable trust in Snape…but as Hermione had just inadvertently reminded him,

he, Harry, had been taken in just the same…in spite of the increasing nastiness of those scribbled spells, he had refused to believe ill of the boy who had been so clever, who had helped him so much…

Helped him…it was an almost unendurable thought, now…

"I still don't get why he didn't turn you in for using that book," said Ron. "He must've known where you were getting it all from."

"He knew," said Harry bitterly. "He knew when I used Sectumsempra. He didn't really need Legilimency…he might even have known before then, with Slughom talking about how brilliant I was at Potions…shouldn't have left his old book in the bottom of that cupboard, should he?"

"But why didn't he turn you in?"

"I don't ihink he wanted to associate himself with that book," said Hermione. "I don't think Dumbledore would have liked it very much if he'd known. And even if Snape pretended it hadn't been his, Slughorn would have recognised his writing at once. Anyway, the book was left in Snape's old classroom, and I'll bet Dumbledore knew his mother was called 'Prince'."

"I should've shown the book to Dumbledore," said Harry. "All that time he was showing me how Voldemort was evil even when he was at school, and I had proof Snape was, too —"

"'Evil' is a strong word," said Hermione quietly.

"You were the one who kept telling me the book was dangerous!"

"I'm trying to say, Harry, that you're pulling too much blame on yourself. I thought the Prince seemed to have a nasty sense of humour, but I would never have guessed he was a potential killer…"

"None of us could've guessed Snape would…you know," said Ron.

Silence fell between them, each of them lost in their own thoughts, but Harry was sure that they, like him, were thinking about the following morning, when Dumbledore's body would be laid to rest. Harry had never attended a funeral before; there had been no body to bury when Sirius had died. He did not know what to expect and was a little worried about what he might see, about how he would feel. He wondered whether Dumbledore's death would be more real to him once the funeral was over. Though he had moments when the horrible fact of it threatened to overwhelm him, there were blank stretches of numbness where, despite the fact that nobody was talking about anything else in the whole castle, he still found it difficult to believe that Dumbledore had really gone. Admittedly he had not, as he had with Sirius, looked desperately for some kind of loophole, some way that Dumbledore would come back…he felt in his pocket for the cold chain of the fake

Horcrux, which he now carried with him everywhere, not as a talisman, but as a reminder of what it had cost and what remained still to do.

Harry rose early to pack the next day; the Hogwarts Express would be leaving an hour after the funeral. Downstairs he found the mood in the Great Hall subdued. Everybody was wearing their dress robes and no one seemed very hungry. Professor McGonagall had left the thronelike chair in the middle of the staff table empty. Hagrid's chair was deserted too: Harry thought that perhaps he had not been able to face breakfast; but Snape's place had been unceremoniously filled by Rufus Scrimgeour. Harry avoided his yellowish eyes as they scanned the Hall; Harry had the uncomfortable feeling that Scrimgeour was looking for him. Among Scrimgeour's entourage Harry spotted the red hair and horn-rimmed glasses of Percy Weasley. Ron gave no sign that he was aware of Percy, apart from stabbing pieces of kipper with unwonted venom.

Over at the Slytherin table Crabbe and Goyle were muttering together. Hulking boys though they were, they looked oddly lonely without the tall, pale figure of Malfoy between them, bossing them around. Harry had not spared Malfoy much thought. His animosity was all for Snape, but he had not forgotten the fear in Malfoy's voice on that Tower top, nor the fact that he had lowered his wand before the other Death Eaters arrived. Harry did not believe that Malfoy would have killed Dumbledore. He despised Malfoy still for his infatuation with the Dark Arts, but now the tiniest drop of pity mingled with his dislike. Where, Harry wondered, was Malfoy now, and what was Voldemort making him do under threat of killing him and his parents?

Harry's thoughts were interrupted by a nudge in the ribs from Ginny. Professor McGonagall had risen to her feet and the mournful hum in the Hall died away at once.

"It is nearly time," she said. "Please follow your Heads of House out into the grounds. Gryffindors, after me."

They filed out from behind their benches in near silence. Harry glimpsed Slughorn at the head of the Slytherin column, wearing magnificent long emerald-green robes embroidered with silver. He had never seen Professor Sprout, Head of the Hufflepuffs, looking so clean; there was not a single patch on her hat, and when they reached the Entrance Hall, they found Madam Pince standing beside Filch, she in a thick black veil that fell to her knees, he in an ancient black suit and tie reeking of mothbails.

They were heading, as Harry saw when he stepped out on to the stone steps from the front doors, towards the lake. The warmth of the sun caressed his face as they followed Professor McGonagall in silence to the place where hundreds of chairs had been set out in rows. An aisle ran

down the centre of them: there was a marble table standing at the front, all chairs facing it. It was the most beautiful summer's day.

An extraordinary assortment of people had already settled into half of the chairs: shabby and smart, old and young. Most Harry did not recognise, but there were a few that he did, including members of the Order of the Phoenix: Kingsley Shacklebolt, Mad-Eye Moody, Tonks, her hair miraculously returned to vividest pink, Remus Lupin, with whom she seemed to be holding hands, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Bill supported by Fleur and followed by Fred and George, who were wearing jackets of black dragonskin. Then there was Madame Maxime, who took up two-and-a-half chairs on her own, Tom, the landlord of the Leaky Cauldron, Arabella Figg, Harry's Squib neighbour, the hairy bass player from the wizardmg group the Weird Sisters, Ernie Prang, driver of the Knight Bus, Madam Malkin, of the robe shop in Diagon Alley, and some people whom Harry merely knew by sight, such as the barman of the Hog's Head and the witch who pushed the trolley on the Hogwarts Express. The castle ghosts were there too, barely visible in the bright sunlight, discernible only when they moved, shimmering insubstantially in the gleaming air.

Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny filed into seats at the end of a row beside the lake. People were whispering to each other; it sounded like a breeze in the grass, but the birdsong was louder by far. The crowd continued to swell; with a great rush of affection for both of them, Harry saw Neville being helped into a seat by Luna. They alone of all the D.A. had responded to Hermione's summons the night that Dumbledore had died, and Harry knew why: they were the ones who had missed the D.A. most…probably the ones who had checked their coins regularly in the hope that there would be another meeting.

Cornelius Fudge walked past them towards the front rows, his expression miserable, twirling his green bowler hat as usual; Harry next recognised Rita Skeeter, who, he was infuriated to see, had a notebook clutched in her red-taloned hand; and then, with a worse jolt of fury, Dolores Umbridge, an unconvincing expression of grief upon her toadlike face, a black velvet bow set atop her iron-colored curls. At the sight of the centaur Firenze, who was standing like a sentinel near the water's edge, she gave a start and scurried hastily into a seat a good distance away.

The staff were seated at last. Harry could see Scrimgeour looking grave and dignified in the front row with Professor McGonagall. He wondered whether Scrimgeour or any of these important people were really sorry that Dumbledore was dead. But then he heard music, strange, otherworldly music, and he forgot his dislike of the Ministry in looking around for the source of it. He was not the only one: many heads were turning, searching, a little alarmed.

“In there,” whispered Ginny in Harry’s ear.

And he saw them in the clear green sunlit water, inches below the surface, reminding him horribly of the Inferi; a chorus of merpeople singing in a strange language he did not understand, their pallid faces rippling, their purplish hair flowing all around them. The music made the hair on Harry’s neck stand up and yet it was not unpleasant. It spoke very clearly of loss and of despair. As he looked down into the wild faces of the singers he had the feeling that they, at least, were sorry for Dumbledore’s passing. Then Ginny nudged him again and he looked round.

Hagrid was walking slowly up the aisle between the chairs. He was crying quite silently, his face gleaming with tears, and in his arms, wrapped in purple velvet spangled with golden stars, was what Harry knew to be Dumbledore’s body. A sharp pain rose in Harry’s throat at this sight: for a moment, the strange music and the knowledge that Dumbledore’s body was so close seemed to take all warmth from the day. Ron looked white and shocked. Tears were falling thick and fast into both Ginny and Hermione’s laps.

They could not see clearly what was happening at the front. Hagrid seemed to have placed the body carefully upon the table. Now he retreated down the aisle, blowing his nose with loud trumpeting noises that drew scandalised looks from some, including, Harry saw, Dolores Umbridge…but Harry knew that Dumbledore would not have cared. He tried to make a friendly gesture to Hagrid as he passed, but Hagrid’s eyes were so swollen it was a wonder he could see where he was going. Harry glanced at the back row to which Hagrid was heading and realized what was guiding him, for there, dressed in a jacket and trousers each the size of a small marquee, was the giant Grawp, his great ugly boulder-like head bowed, docile, almost human. Hagrid sat down next to his half-brother and Grawp patted Hagrid hard on the head, so that his chair legs sank into the ground. Harry had a wonderful momentary urge to laugh. But then the music stopped and he turned to face the front again.

A little tufty-haired man in plain black robes had got to his feet and stood now in front of Dumbledore’s body. Harry could not hear what he was saying. Odd words floated back to them over the hundreds of beads. “Nobility of spirit”…“intellectual contribution”…“greatness of heart”…it did not mean very much. It had little to do with Dumbledore as Harry had known him. He suddenly remembered Dumbledore’s idea of a few words: “nitwit”, “oddment”, “blubber” and “tweak”, and again, had to suppress a grin…what was the matter with him?

There was a soft splashing noise to his left and he saw that the merpeople had broken the surface to listen, too. He remembered Dumbledore crouching at the water’s edge two years ago, very close to

where Harry now sat, and conversing in Mermish with the Merchieftainess. Harry wondered where Dumbledore had learned Mermish. There was so much he had never asked him, so much he should have said…

And then, without warning, it swept over him, the dreadful truth, more completely and undeniably than it had until now. Dumbledore was dead, gone…he clutched the cold locket in his hand so tightly that it hurt, but he could not prevent hot tears spilling from his eyes: he looked away from Ginny and the others and stared out over the lake, towards the Forest, as the little man in black droned on…there was movement among the trees. The centaurs had come to pay their respects, too. They did not move into the open but Harry saw them standing quite still, half-hidden in shadow, watching the wizards, their bows hanging at their sides. And Harry remembered his first nightmarish trip into the Forest, the first time he had ever encountered the thing that was then Voldemort, and how he had faced him, and how he and Dumbledore had discussed fighting a losing battle not long thereafter. It was important, Dumbledore said, to fight, and fight again, and keep fighting, for only then could evil be kept at bay, though never quite eradicated…

And Harry saw very clearly as he sat there under the hot sun how people who cared about him had stood in front of him one by one, his mother, his father, his godfather, and finally Dumbledore, all determined to protect him; but now that was over. He could not let anybody else stand between him and Voldemort; he must abandon forever the illusion he ought to have lost at the age of one: that the shelter of a parent's arms meant that nothing could hurt him. There was no waking from his nightmare, no comforting whisper in the dark that he was safe really, that it was all in his imagination; the last and greatest of his protectors had died and he was more alone than he had ever been before.

The little man in black had stopped speaking at last and resumed his seat. Harry waited for somebody else to get to their feet; he expected speeches, probably from the Minister, but nobody moved.

Then several people screamed. Bright, white flames had erupted around Dumbledore's body and the table upon which it lay: higher and higher they rose, obscuring the body. White smoke spiralled into the air and made strange shapes: Harry thought, for one heart-stopping moment, that he saw a phoenix fly joyfully into the blue, but next second the fire had vanished. In its place was a white marble tomb, encasing Dumbledore's body and the table on which he had rested.

There were a few more cries of shock as a shower of arrows soared through the air, but they fell far short of the crowd. It was, Harry knew, the centaurs' tribute: he saw them turn tail and disappear

back into the cool trees. Likewise the merpeople sank slowly back into the green water and were lost from view.

Harry looked at Ginny, Ron and Hermione: Ron's face was screwed up as though the sunlight was blinding him. Hermione's face was glazed with tears, but Ginny was no longer crying. She met Harry's gaze with the same hard, blazing look that he had seen when she had hugged him after winning the Quidditch Cup in his absence, and he knew that at that moment they understood each other perfectly, and that when he told her what he was going to do now, she would not say "Be careful", or "Don't do it", but accept his decision, because she would not have expected anything less of him. And so he steeled himself to say what he had known he must say ever since Dumbledore had died.

"Ginny, listen…" he said very quietly, as the buzz of conversation grew louder around them and people began to get to their feet. "I can't be involved with you anymore. We've got to stop seeing each other. We can't be together."

She said, with an oddly twisted smile, "It's for some stupid, noble reason, isn't it?"

"It's been like…like something out of someone else's life, these last few weeks with you," said Harry. "But I can't…we can't…I've got things to do alone now."

She did not cry, she simply looked at him,

"Voldemort uses people his enemies are close to. He's already used you as bait once, and that was just because you're my best friend's sister. Think how much danger you'll be in if we keep this up. He'll know, he'll find out. He'll try and get to me through you."

"What if I don't care?" said Ginny fiercely.

"I care," said Harry. "How do you think I'd feel if this was your funeral…and it was my fault…"

She looked away from him, over the lake.

"I never really gave up on you," she said. "Not really. I always hoped…Hermione told me to get on with life, maybe go out with some other people, relax a bit around you, because I never used to be able to talk if you were in the room, remember? And she thought you might take a bit more notice if I was a bit more — myself."

"Smart girl, that Hermione," said Harry, trying to smile. "I just wish I'd asked you sooner. We could 've had ages…months…years maybe…"

"But you've been too busy saving the wizarding world," said Ginny, half-laughing. "Well…I can't say I'm surprised. I knew this would happen in the end. I knew you wouldn't be happy unless you were hunting Voldemort. Maybe that's why I like you so much."

Harry could not bear to hear these things, nor did he think his resolution would hold if he remained sitting beside her. Ron, he saw, was now holding Hermione and stroking her hair while she sobbed into his shoulder, tears dripping from the end of his own long nose. With a miserable gesture, Harry got up, turned his back on Ginny and on Dumbledore's tomb and walked away around the lake. Moving felt much more bearable than sitting still: just as setting out as soon as possible to track down the Horcruxes and kill Voldemort would feel better than waiting to do it…

"Harry!"

He turned. Rufus Scrimgeour was limping rapidly towards him around the bank, leaning on his walking stick.

"I've been hoping to have a word…do you mind if I walk a little way with you?"

"No," said Harry indifferently, and set off again.

"Harry, this was a dreadful tragedy," said Scrimgeour quietly, "I cannot tell you how appalled I was to hear of it. Dumbledore was a very great wizard. We had our disagreements, as you know, but no one knows better than I —"

"What do you want?" asked Harry flatly.

Scrimgeour looked annoyed but, as before, hastily modified his expression to one of sorrowful understanding.

"You are, of course, devastated," he said. "I know that you were very close to Dumbledore. I think you may have been his favorite ever pupil. The bond between the two of you —"

"What do you want?" Harry repeated, coming to a halt.

Scrimgeour stopped too, leaned on his stick and stared at Harry, his expression shrewd now.

"The word is that you were with him when he left the school the night that he died."

"Whose word?" said Harry.

"Somebody Stupefied a Death Eater on top of the Tower after Dumbledore died. There were also two broomsticks up there. The Ministry can add two and two, Harry."

"Glad to hear it," said Harry. "Well, where I went with Dumbledore and what we did is my business. He didn't want people to know."

"Such loyalty is admirable, of course," said Scrimgeour, who seemed to be restraining his irritation with difficulty, "but Dumbledore is gone, Harry. He's gone"

"He will only be gone from the school when none here are loyal to him," said Harry, smiling in spite of himself.

"My dear boy…even Dumbledore cannot return from the —"

"I am not saying he can. You wouldn't understand. But I've got nothing to tell you."

Scrimgeour hesitated, then said, in what was evidently supposed to be a tone of delicacy, "The Ministry can offer you all sorts of protection, you know, Harry. I would be delighted to place a couple of my Aurors at your service —"

Harry laughed.

"Voldemort wants to kill me himself and Aurors won't stop him. So thanks for the offer, but no thanks."

"So," said Scrimgeour, his voice cold now, "the request I made of you at Christmas —"

"What request? Oh yeah…the one where I tell the world what a great job you're doing in exchange for — "

"— for raising everyone's morale!" snapped Scrimgeour.

Harry considered him for a moment.

"Released Stan Shunpike yet?"

Scrimgeour turned a nasty purple color highly reminiscent of Uncle Vernon.

"I see you are —"

"Dumbledore's man through and through," said Harry. "That's right."

Scrimgeour glared at him for another moment, then turned and limped away without another word. Harry could see Percy and the rest of the Ministry delegation waiting for him, casting nervous glances at the sobbing Hagrid and Grawp, who were still in their seats. Ron and Hermione were hurrying towards Harry, passing Scrimgeour going in the opposite direction; Harry turned and walked slowly on, waiting for them to catch up, which they finally did in the shade of a beech tree under which they had sat in happier times.

"What did Scrimgeour want?" Hermione whispered.

"Same as he wanted at Christmas," shrugged Harry. "Wanted me to give him inside information on Dumbledore and be the Ministry's new poster boy."

Ron seemed to struggle with himself for a moment, then he said loudly to Hermione, "Look, let me go back and hit Percy!"

"No," she said firmly, grabbing his arm.

"It'll make me feel better!"

Harry laughed. Even Hermione grinned a little, though her smile faded as she looked up at the castle.

“I can’t bear the idea that we might never come back.” she said softly. “How can Hogwarts close?”

“Maybe it won’t,” said Ron. “We’re not in any more danger here than we are at home, are we? Everywhere’s the same now. I’d even say Hogwarts is safer, there are more wizards inside to defend the place. What d’you reckon, Harry?”

“I’m not coming back even if it does reopen,” said Harry.

Ron gaped at him, but Hermione said sadly, “I knew you were going to say that. But then what will you do?”

“I’m going back to the Dursleys’ once more, because Dumbledore wanted me to,” said Harry. “But it’ll be a short visit, and then I’ll be gone for good.”

“But where will you go if you don’t come back to school?”

“I thought I might go back to Godric’s Hollow,” Harry muttered. He had had the idea in his head ever since the night of Dumbledore’s death. “For me, it started there, all of it. I’ve just got a feeling I need to go there. And I can visit my parents’ graves, I’d like that.”

“And then what?” said Ron.

“Then I’ve got to track down the rest of the Horcruxes, haven’t I?” said Harry, his eyes upon Dumbledore’s white tomb, reflected in the water on the other side of the lake. “That’s what he wanted me to do, that’s why he told me all about them. If Dumbledore was right — and I’m sure he was — there are still four of them out there. I’ve got to find them and destroy them and then I’ve got to go after the seventh bit of Voldemort’s soul, the bit that’s still in his body, and I’m the one who’s going to kill him. And if I meet Severus Snape along the way,” he added, “so much the better tor me, so mucn the worse for him.”

There was a long silence. The crowd had almost dispersed now, the stragglers giving the monumental figure of Grawp a wide berth as he cuddled Hagrid, whose howls of grief were still echoing across the water.

“We’ll be there, Harry,” said Ron.

“What?”

“At your aunt and uncle’s house,” said Ron. “And then we’ll go with you, wherever you’re going.”

“No —” said Harry quickly; he had not counted on this, he had meant them to understand that he was undertaking this most dangerous journey alone.

“You said to us once before,” said Hermione quietly, “that there was time to turn back if we wanted to. We’ve had time, haven’t we?”

“We’re with you whatever happens,” said Ron. “But, mate, you’re going to have to come round my mum and dad’s house before we do anything else, even Godric’s Hollow.”

“Why?”

“Bill and Fleur’s wedding, remember?”

Harry looked at him, startled; the idea that anything as normal as a wedding could still exist seemed incredible and yet wonderful.

“Yeah, we shouldn’t miss that,” he said finally.

His hand closed automatically around the fake Horcrux, but in spite of everything, in spite of the dark and twisting path he saw stretching ahead for himself, in spite of the final meeting with Voldemort he knew must come, whether in a month, in a year, or in ten, he felt his heart lift at the thought that there was still one last golden day of peace left to enjoy with Ron and Hermione.

HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS
1. The Escape

Harry slunk warily along the footpath, his head slightly bowed, eye's darting up and down the street, glancing every now and then left and right. His right hand hovered over the pocket in his worn out faded jeans where his wand lay hidden, but within easy grasp. His fist was unconsciously clenching and unclenching. Most people would have found the misty cool night air soothing, pleasant, but Harry was on edge.

As he rounded the corner of Privet Drive, he stopped. His head turned to survey the street before him. There was nothing out of the ordinary, but he knew someone was there, somewhere, lurking in the darkest corners, or hidden by magic. He could feel their presence as sure as he knew he was standing there himself. He waited for someone to show. He never knew who it would be, but he could predict their appearance down to the last second. He stood for a moment, almost overwhelmed by his impatience. It had been the same every night ever since he had been at his Aunt and Uncles. And tonight, as before, a figure gradually emerged from the nothingness.

Harry was able to make out the features as it made it's way towards him. It was Kingsley Shacklebolt. After scanning the area as soon as he had seen Harry, Kingsley had removed his invisibility cloak and given Harry a quick nod in greeting. When they were within a few feet of each other, Harry spoke.

'What's happening? Who's here with you?' His voice was calm, but his look was determined.
'Goldstein is at the other end of the street' Kingsley said in his deep voice 'But he'll be replaced by Tonks at midnight. I'm on until dawn.' Even as he spoke, he never stopped surveying the area.
'Nothing to report?'

This is how the quick exchanges between Harry and his guard had gone every night.
'No, nothing.' Harry's eye's barely met Kingsley's as he looked down at his shuffling feet. 'So … when am I getting out of here?'

'Nothing yet I'm afraid.' Kingsley was used to Harry's impatience, he had stood guard five out of the eight nights since Harry had returned to Privet Drive. 'Give it a bit of time,' he said 'things are not as … easy … as they were. It's going to take a fair bit of organizing. As it is Podmore has to leave early …' he brushed his hand over his bald head 'so I'm going to be hear alone for about half an hour.'

Harry looked up suddenly, and then looked back at the ground just as quickly, his eyes seeming to be searching for something. This was it! He thought. This was what he'd been waiting for. It was only a short amount of time, he would have to cut it close, but he knew he could do it. With one guard gone, he could slip through.

'Is there any other news?' Harry always dreaded asking this, but he had to know. If he was going to go through with his plan, he had to learn everything he could about what The Order knew. There was silence as Harry waited, eyes still lingering on the ground. He was sure if Kingsley caught his eye, he would see the guilt Harry tried so hard to conceal. Kingsley cleared his throat.
'Some of the usual stuff.' he said, though he seemed hesitant. 'A few more missing people … they found Fudge's body late last night.'

Harry looked away in disgust. Fudge hadn't been his favourite person in the world. When Harry had returned from the graveyard, clutching Cedric Diggory's dead body during the Triwizard Tournament over two years ago, Fudge had refused to believe that Voldemort had taken form again. And in the year following, he had gone to great lengths to discredit Harry in every way possible, squashing most of Dumbledore's efforts to get people to believe in Harry and to prepare for Lord Voldemort's return. But for all Fudge's faults, he did not deserve the hand that fate had dealt him.

Harry took a deep breath and turned back to Kingsley. Somehow this news had given him the push he needed. He now held such resolve that he was right in his plans, that he could look Shacklebolt directly in the eyes.

'What are Voldemort and his Death Eaters up to? They must have a plan! You must know something from following the trail of blood they leave behind.' Harry said this with such loathing that Kingsley barely grimaced at the mention of the name Voldemort, but pulled back slightly from Harry, seemingly more uncomfortable with his tone.

'We don't know … exactly.' Kingsley said evasively. This was the final straw for Harry, he could tell Kingsley was reluctant to say too much, and finally the pressure of the past eight days, sitting uselessly in his room at the Dursleys waiting for news, biding his time unable to rest as he waited for his chance, suddenly burst to the surface.

'If you think' he said gravely 'that Dumbledore didn't know I was ready for this,' his eyes blazed threateningly 'then you've already lost to Voldemort!' his body was rigid with frustration.

Kingsley seemed exceedingly uncomfortable, but Harry didn't care. If he was going to get out of Privet Drive tonight and take on the task Dumbledore had left him to do, then he needed information, and he needed it now. Harry had no intention of going after Voldemort yet. He had to find and destroy all of the Horcruxes, the artefacts that contained the pieces of Voldemort's shattered soul, before he could do that. No, he needed information so he could avoid detection. If he was going to do this, he was going to have to do it alone, and the last thing he needed was for Voldemort to find out what he was up to. With the exception of Ron and Hermione, no one would know where he was, not the Order, not Mr. and Mrs. Weasley … not even Ginny.

'Look,' Kingsley said, he was fidgeting with the invisibility cloak hanging fluidly in his left hand. 'I don't know what good it will do you to know too much right now anyway. You-you can't leave until you turn seventeen in a few weeks, it's safer that way. You will be better protected here than anywhere else until then, now that Dumble…' he trailed off with an awkward hand gesture. 'Well … you know what I mean.' He gave Harry a steady look, 'It's what he would have wanted.'

Harry let out a heavy sigh and his body slackened slightly. He knew he could not tell Kingsley why Dumbledore would have understood, he could not tell him about the Horcruxes, about Dumbledore's dying wish, so he resigned himself to returning to No 4, where he would sit and wait, now his chance had come. Harry turned to leave, hunched over, defeated, and had only gone a few paces when Kingsley called after him.

'See you same time tomorrow night, then.'
Harry turned slowly and looked at Kingsley 'Yeah,' he said quietly 'I'll be here.' A sinking feeling crept over Harry as he turned his back on Kingsley. Would he ever see him again? Would he ever see any of them again? He straightened himself to his full height and resumed his state of readiness as he moved quietly back up Privet Drive.

He knew what he had to do, the path lay before him, and he would walk that path alone, as he had done many times before.

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Harry could see the dim glow of light seeping through the small gaps in the curtains as he reached No.4. Someone was still awake. Harry crept up to the house and with great care, turned the handle and pushed the door open as quietly as possible, unwilling to give his Uncle yet another opportunity to start ranting at him, a favourite past time of his.

It seems the Dursleys had decided the best way to repay Harry for inflicting Dumbledore on them last summer, was to make his life with them even harder for him than before. He suspected that it had a lot to do with Dumbledore's comment about their beloved, and hopelessly spoiled dope of a son Dudley, who in their eyes was a perfect angel who could do no wrong.

He stepped over the threshold then eased the door back into place and released the handle, but no sooner had he turned to mount the stairs when he saw his Uncle's stocky figure standing in the doorway to the kitchen, arms crossed over his rounded stomach. His eye's glittered dangerously, as he glared at Harry, a smug satisfaction etched on his face. He had obviously known Harry had snuck

out, and had been waiting there for him, ready to catch him. Harry had the impression of being like a deer caught in the headlights of a car.

‘I knew you were up to something!’ his uncle said in quiet triumph ‘I said to Petunia you had been sneaking around, and now …’ his eyes narrowed ‘now I’ve got you!’ his barely suppressed glee at springing Harry was turning his face purple. ‘Where have you been boy?’ he demanded ‘Out terrorizing the neighbours? Prowling around the streets, causing trouble no doubt!’

Harry thought this was a bit rich.

His cousin Dudley was the biggest thug in the neighbourhood, yet somehow his Aunt and Uncle had always managed to explain away his behaviour as ‘boisterous youth’ or ‘having a bit of roguish fun’. But Harry knew the truth; Dudley was a prat.

Uncle Vernon’s eyebrow arched high on his forehead as he approached him, his arm raised and his finger jutting accusingly at Harry. ‘OUT WITH IT!’ he yelled sharply ‘Where have you been going every night?’

Harry was mildly astonished that his Uncle was even interested enough in his activities to realize he had been disappearing off on a regular basis.

A trickle of playful wickedness ran through him.
‘I’ve been reporting to my guard, actually.’ Harry said casually, watching for his Uncle’s reaction. A deep sense of satisfaction filled Harry as he saw his uncle falter immediately, his face slackening.

Uncle Vernon choked out the word ‘G-Guard?’
‘Yes,’ said Harry ‘that’s right …’ He paused for effect, his Uncles eyes grew wide with uncertainty ‘Guard.’ Harry finally confirmed ‘they’re posted just down the street, been there ever since I got back from school. You’ve met some of them before … at the station.’

Uncle Vernon looked like he had been hit with a Silencio charm. His lips were trying to form words but no sound was coming out. Harry was enjoying himself immensely. He knew his uncle would not have forgotten his encounter with the formidable figure of Mad-eye Moody a year ago. Harry added with a measured tinge of exasperation ‘They insist I keep them updated with how things are while I’m here.’ He sighed dramatically. ‘They’re quite overprotective really…’

His Uncle’s lips suddenly fused together, Harry could tell he had not been able to find a single retort. He was looking everywhere else but at Harry, his arms dangling by his sides as he shifted his weight uncomfortably. He finally cleared his throat.

‘You’d best get to bed.’ He mumbled without looking at Harry and then he turned and disappeared into the kitchen without a word, Harry smirking after him.

Strictly speaking, everything Harry said was perfectly true, so he felt no guilt what so ever that he had unhinged his Uncle. After all, it was only the fact that the Dursley’s were so unkind to him that gave them cause to worry about his "guard" in the first place.

He headed to his room and sat on the end of his bed, Hedwig hooted softly at him from her perch atop the cupboard. He looked up at her and smiled. She was the one thing that made being at the Dursley's bearable.

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Harry had been planning this night since he had arrived back at the Dursleys, and now that his chance had come he felt a surge of adrenalin pulse through him. He had some last minute tasks to do before midnight came, but almost everything he would need, lay in a state of readiness.

Mad-eye Moody had been his main obstacle, his magical eye saw right through almost everything, including invisibility cloaks, and Harry felt sure Moody could see through the walls into his very room at times, and on the nights Mad-eye took guard duty, he was quite certain he would not have

been able to slip by him.

Tonight however, Moody was not going to be a problem, and with only Kingsley on for maybe thirty minutes, he had his chance. Harry knew the guard changed at midnight and he glanced at the digital clock by his bed. 10.35pm, that would give him about an hour before he was to leave Privet Drive, forever.

Harry drew in a deep breath as he leapt to his feet. Taking out some parchment and ink from his desk draw, he sat down and started to write. As the quill scrawled across the page, Hedwig twittered in anticipation, keen to be put to use again. She had gone out only once in the past eight days, and that was to deliver a short, hastily written note to Ron that contained nothing of interest. It was not safe to pass information by owl.

Ron would be back at The Burrow, trying to learn anything he could by stealthily listening in on his father and Bill.

On the train back from Hogwarts Harry, Ron and Hermione had sat in a compartment they kept to themselves, conceiving various tactical ways of gathering information while Ron and Hermione were at The Burrow. Hermione had arranged to stay after spending only a week with her family. They occasionally looked up when interrupted by Order members who were patrolling the train, or fellow students like Neville who wandered in. But they were, for the most part, left alone. The loss of Professor Dumbledore had imparted a sombre mood upon the Hogwarts Express.

Every time the compartment door had slid open, Harry expected - hoped, to see Ginny's face; he sat through the train journey back to London feeling like part of him was missing. It was the beginning of the end of what had been for Harry the most wonderfully comforting thing he had ever known. His heart would have liked nothing more than to have Ginny sat beside him; the smell of her hair drifting lazily in the air and the comforting warmth of her body leaned against his. But he knew she could not be with him, he had made that choice. She understood he had to leave her behind. She understood he must face this challenge without her. She understood.

Harry looked at the message he had just finished writing, it was as bland as the one he had sent Ron, but it's purpose was far more important. He was rolling it up and sealing it when Hedwig fluttered down from her perch and landed on the desk in front of him. She held out her leg expectantly. Harry smiled at her affectionately and scratched her neck 'I'm not sending it yet.'

She nibbled at his finger a little too vigorously and Harry pulled it away 'Ow!' he breathed laughing softly, rubbing the red marks that she had left. She flapped her wings huffily and retreated to her cage for a drink. 'You'll just have to be patient, it wont be long.' He laid the scroll on his bed and reached for a knapsack. He had discovered it while searching one of the closets in his room days before; it had been bought for Dudley to take on a camping trip the Dursleys embarked on many summers ago. It had lain discarded and forgotten ever since.

Harry bent down and lifted the loose floorboard under his bed. There lay a reasonable store of provisions that he had managed to collect. He had been sneaking around the house in the gloom of night using his invisibility cloak. His Aunt Petunia put the missing food down to Dudley's inability to stick to his diet; his cousin had frequently left traces of midnight binging strewn from one end of the kitchen to the other.

One night, because of Dudley's veracious appetite, Harry had almost been sprung.

While heading up to his room after having just raided the pantry for supplies, Harry met Dudley coming in the opposite direction. He had snuck out of his own room and was descending the stairs, heading straight for Harry who was concealed under his cloak. The sheer size of Dudley meant there wasn't enough room for them to pass one another without Harry making significant contact with him. Harry was holding some packets of instant porridge, dried peas and some tinned fruit in his arms, and in his scramble to back down the stairs, he dropped a tin of apricot halves. It fell with a loud clunk, and then to his dismay, continued to roll down the stairs, Harry's feet dodging it, as he backed down the steps in an effort to get out of the way of Dudley.

Thunk … thunk … thunk was all his startled cousin heard on the stairway below him. Dudley could see neither Harry, nor the tin of apricot halves still hidden under the cloak.

When Harry and the tin came to a halt at the bottom of the stairs, he looked up and saw in the gloomy light from the street lamp outside, the look of sheer terror on his cousins bloodless, white face. Dudley's lower lip wobbled uncontrollably as he turned, stumbling over himself in his rush to get back to his room, inaudible squeaks escaping him as he heaved his weight against the door and slammed it shut.

He did not venture out in the small hours of the morning again, which turned out to be very convenient for Harry indeed.

Harry shoved some clothing and a bottle of water on top of the food he retrieved from the cavity, and then packed several other items carefully in the outside pockets of the pack. It was now heavily bulging as it lay on the bed. He reached in the closet for his broom, and placed it beside the scroll. He took out the invisibility cloak from his trunk and placed it over the back of the chair, and then lastly he packed his trunk with everything else he owned. It took him some time to check and double check that he had packed everything; he could not afford to leave anything behind this time as he had no intention of ever returning.

Hedwig had been watching him from her cage, her head swivelling this way and that as she followed him round the room. She let out a small screech as Harry sat down at the desk to write one last note.

Aunt Petunia,

I want to thank you, for you have done more than you know.

Because of you my mother did not die in vain.

Harry

He placed the parchment squarely in the centre of the desk, stood back and looked to Hedwig. ‘Okay,’ he said quietly raising his arm ‘come here.’ She fluttered down and settled onto Harry’s outstretched arm. ‘I need you to go to the park and wait for me there Hedwig.’ He said ‘Do you understand?’ She hooted softly and launched herself out of the window into the night.

Harry locked his trunk, flung the pack on his back, grasped his broom and swung his invisibility cloak over him.

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Harry entered the park, tense and alert. He hadn’t needed to pass Shacklebolt because he was posted at the opposite end of the street, but he was half expecting Tonks to come materializing out of thin air on top of him, so he quickened his pace as soon as he left the path to number four. The bulk of his pack and the awkwardness of his broom made it difficult to stay completely concealed under his cloak, but his need for urgency was overtaking his need for care as he scuffled along under his cloak.

Harry eyes were constantly on the move, searching for anything out of the ordinary, though he suspected he was safe for the time being. The Order of the Phoenix would not be looking for someone leaving the Dursley’s; they were primarily there to stop anything getting in.

The street lamps glowing dully in the mist cast eerie sprawling shadows across the lonesome grass of the unwelcoming night time park. Hedwig was perched on top of the swings, her large eyes looking straight at Harry. She had extremely good eyesight at night, and had no doubt seen a part of Harry’s foot or broom poking carelessly from under his invisibility cloak. He stopped in the shadow of the large, dense oak tree and removed the cloak, stuffing it into his jacket. Hedwig plopped down in front of him silently and he bent down to tie the scroll to her leg.

‘Take this to Hagrid’ he said breathlessly ‘Don’t stop for anything, Okay?’ She trilled lightly and took off in a silent feathery swoop. Harry mounted his Firebolt and sped off after her, into the night.

With any luck The Order wouldn't discover his absence until the following night when he failed to make his nightly report. There was a possibility that Moody would take a shift before then and discover him gone, but Harry had at least twelve hours under his belt in that event. It was the best he could hope for. A pang of guilt stabbed at him as he tilted his head into the wind, he knew The Order would be thrown into a state of uproar when they found out, he could picture Lupin's reaction when the news got back to Headquarters.

Over the past few weeks Lupin had reluctantly tried to fill Dumbledore's shoes and Harry had noticed the strain in his face when his ex-Professor had pulled him aside on the Hogwarts Express to give him instructions for the summer. Lupin would be racked with guilt and worry when he heard, but Harry could think of no other way to do what he knew he must.

The wind bit through his jacket as he soared over the hills below. Hedwig was an incredible flyer, and although Harry had no trouble keeping up with her on his Firebolt, he couldn't help but marvel at her skill and determination as he tailed her.

Things would have been much easier if he was seventeen and confident with his disapparating, he could have apparated near his destination and been there in an instant. But using magic while he was sixteen at The Dursleys would have brought the ministry down on him immediately, which also would have alerted The Order, and Harry needed time if this was to work.

Harry was chilled to the bone by the time he started the descent. He had been successfully led to Hogwarts by Hedwig who was heading straight for the newly restored Hagrid's hut, but Harry could not risk flying over the castle walls, unsure of the enchantments they held, so he landed near the edge of the Dark Forest and pulled his cloak back on.

The absence of the brightly lit castle torches which normally sent light streaming out of the windows, made Hogwarts appear far less welcoming than Harry remembered, and it seemed to him that the castle itself was lamenting Dumbledores passing.

When he finally rapped on Hagrid's door, Harry heard Fang launch into a zealous round of barking, followed by the muffled sound of something breaking within. Hagrid opened the door only inches, his beetle like eyes staring suspiciously through the gap.

'Who's there?' he grunted
Harry lifted the front of his cloak so only Hagrid would see him, he had not seen anyone else around, but it was best to be cautious.
'It's me.' He said in a half whisper, 'Can I come in?'

'Oh, It's you.' Hagrid relaxed for a moment, but as he opened the door to let Harry pass he suddenly tensed again. 'Wait a minute! Wha the 'ell are you doin here?'
'Ssh!' said Harry impatiently as he removed his cloak, placed his broom against the inside wall and proceeded to close all the curtains in the cabin. Hagrid had locked the door and was standing with his arms on his hips, a look of annoyance plastered across his face.

'Yeh not s'pose to be here!' he exclaimed, more quietly this time but his anger still evident. 'Yer s'pose to be home where yer safe!'
Harry's message lay opened on the table near Hedwig who was pecking at a dish of food. He gave her head an affectionate rub then pulled off his pack and threw it in a corner, planting himself on one of the huge wooden chairs by the table.

'I need your help.' He said, as he looked Hagrid squarely in the eyes. 'There's something I've got to do, something that I cant do alone. But it's very important, and I need your help.'

'What are yeh talking about? Yeh cant jus walz in here with plans to do something that'll mor'an likely put yeh in danger again. Yeh can't jus go sneakin off like that!' Hagrid waved his arms pointedly at Harry. He was intensely irritated and if Harry hadn't known him as well as he did, he might have feared him right now.

'I had no choice,' Harry's eyes dropped to the ground and he added quietly 'There was no other way.'

'I'm a member of The Order, I am!' said Hagrid indignantly. 'Wha are they gonna think when they discover yer gone, eh?' Harry felt awful, but he needed to make Hagrid understand, so he looked up again.

'Hagrid, please listen to me … this is really important … just hear me out. You know I wouldn't have come unless there was no other way.' And because he didn't know what else to say, 'Please Hagrid … trust me.'

Hagrid heard the plea behind Harry's voice and his look of anger had gradually turned to one of concern. He seemed to be going through some sort of internal struggle as he moved over to the sink and scooped up the broken pieces of a cup.

'Don't know what good it'll do yeh.' He dumped them in a bin and looked over at Harry 'I've half a mind to send a message 'n let 'em, know where yeh are right now!' He turned his full attention on Harry who sat slumped in the oversized chair. Hagrid puffed out his chest 'Not promisin nothin mind,' he said 'but if yeh got somethin to say, I'll hear yeh out.'

~*~*~*~

'I need you to take me to Godric's Hollow. I want you to show me where my parents were murdered.'

Harry watched Hagrid where he stood, and for a moment he wavered, the thought struck him that Hagrid would never agree to this. Hagrid's eyes closed for a fraction of a moment as he sighed heavily, then he pulled out a chair and sat down opposite Harry, he was looking intently at the tabletop as if searching for the right words.

'I knew yeh'd wan teh go there one day. Bin expectin it for a while,' Harry had imagined all sorts of reactions from Hagrid, but not this. Hagrid finally met Harry's eyes 'ever since yeh returned from the graveyard, in fact. But it's not somethin' yeh should be thinkin 'bout doin right now.' Hagrid's eyes swelled with tears and he looked away again 'Not now tha Dumbledores gone. It's not safe Harry, it's the sorta place they'd be waitin fer yeh teh turn up.'

'I have to go Hagrid, I have to know what happened.' Harry was trying to catch Hagrid's eye. 'I need to see where it all started.' Hagrid was listening to Harry as though he knew exactly what he was going to say before he said it. 'I need to see what's left behind.' Harry added quietly. Hagrid frowned as he looked back at him.

'What d'yeh mean, left behind?'
Harry was trying to read the look on Hagrid's face in an effort to decide what he should say next.
'What's left of my parents house?'

'It's jus as it was the night it happened. The place was pretty much destroyed after Sirius returned and tha Pettigrew blew up the street. There wern't much left, but nob'dy was allowed teh go near it after that, tell yer the truth, nob'dy much wanted to either.'
'So, no ones been through it since Voldemort was there? No one at all?' Harry asked.

'Dumbledore wen there teh put a block on it. Magic teh stop curious folk from wanderin in there. Guess he thought it might be dangerous still, or maybe he thought it was a fittin memorial, I don't know, but like I says 'Arry, it's not the sorta place yeh wanna be rushin off to now.'

Harry sighed and looked away. 'I have to go, it's something I've got to do.' He was talking more to himself as he studied Hedwig, but then he looked back to Hagrid 'And I'll go with or without your help, if I have to.'

Hagrid was slowly shaking his head, his eyes on the table again 'Yer goin to stay here until The Order come and get yer, I cant let yeh do it Harry, I'm sorry. I understand why yeh wanna go, but it's not safe, I'll send 'em a message 'n let 'em know yer here-' He started to rise from his chair, but Harry leapt to his feet and had his wand out so fast that Hagrid stopped, one arm still resting on the

table, eyeing the slightly shaking wand now aimed at him.

‘I’m going Hagrid, one way or another.’ Harry’s voice was shaking but he was determined to see this through. Hagrid drew himself to his full height as Harry gulped before adding, ‘You can either help me, or step aside’

Hagrid did not seemed perturbed by Harry’s wand; on the contrary, he was looking at Harry with what looked like pity. They stood across the table from one another for a time, neither speaking, but a change was gradually overcoming Hagrid.

‘Firs’ly, I know yeh wont use that thing on me so yeh migh as well put it away, and secondly’ Hagrid reached into a cupboard and pulled out a plate of rock cakes ‘Better have somethin to eat, it’s a way teh the Hollow and we don't know how long we’ll be gone.’

~*~*~*~

A short time later the two of them were hurrying across the grounds, the sun was almost up and Harry, hidden under his cloak, was having a job to keep up with Hagrid’s gigantic strides. When they arrived at a battered old wooden shed near the greenhouses, Hagrid pulled out a key ring that jangled loudly with what must have been over a hundred keys, all of different shapes and sizes. He fumbled through them for a moment then seemed to find the one he was looking for. As the old door swung open they entered into complete darkness, Harry took out his wand and lifted the cloak.

‘*Lumos*’

There were no windows and the atmosphere in the shed was thick and dusty as if it hadn’t been opened in years. There was an assortment of odd wooden carvings scattered across the workbench and unusual leather straps dangled here and there from the ceiling. There were several rusty old cages of different sizes and strengths stacked against the walls, and in the very back corner stood a large dark motorcycle.

Hagrid grabbed a scrap of cloth and brushed the seat, a cloud of dust and grit filled the air and Harry spluttered, waving his hand around trying to disperse it.

‘The last trip this bike did was teh take you from yer parents house to your Aunt and Uncles.’ Hagrid looked down at Harry ‘and now sixteen years on, it’s goin to take yeh back to the beginning again,’ Hagrid raised his eyebrows dubiously ‘if we can get it goin o‘course!’

'This is Sirius's bike?' Harry looked at it as a pang shot through him.
'Yup! Kept it here all these years. Don't have much use for it meself, don't go anywhere I might need it. Still ere it is!' Hagrid patted it fondly. 'You know, come teh think of it, it'd be your bike now.' He leaned over it and winked at Harry, 'You want teh drive it?'
'No!' Harry said quickly, 'I mean, I don't have a license.'
'Well, yer in good company then,' Hagrid smiled. 'Nor do I!'

Minutes later the bike was rumbling loudly and Harry scooted onto it’s back behind Hagrid.

‘*Nox*’ he said as he replaced his wand, careful to tuck his cloak around himself, keeping his feet well hidden. The biked jerked suddenly, then rolled out into the early dawn rays, Harry grasping the pillion bar tightly.
‘Yer alright Harry?’ Hagrid asked over his shoulder.
‘Yeah.’

Hagrid weaved between the greenhouses and headed towards the gate, once through he turned the bike South and accelerated. Harry felt the front wheel lift and a moment later the rear left the ground as well and they were ascending rapidly as Hagrid steered them over the forest.

They sailed along at a great height for what seemed like hours to Harry, it was almost impossible to talk to Hagrid over the sound of the wind and the grumbling engine, so his thoughts strayed to other people and places.

He had told Ron and Hermione of his plans to return to Godric's Hollow so he knew they would be expecting this, and he had sworn them to secrecy, so when they were questioned by Mr. Weasley, (as he knew they would be) they would put on a plausible act of innocence while denying any knowledge of his whereabouts.

Ginny, on the other hand had no idea, though because she was always quick on the uptake, Harry suspected she would know he was up to something by Ron and Hermione's reactions. It made him feel better knowing that she was smart enough to figure out when something was really wrong, and he was reassured by the thoughts of seeing her again when the wedding came. He knew he would not be able to touch her, or seek the solace he had found in her arms, but he would look upon her again and that would be enough.

The sun was high in the sky when they started their descent, and it wasn't long before Hagrid had found a suitable place to land; a clearing near the edge of a pine forest. They walked some miles to the edge of town, Harry looking about him from under his invisibility cloak. As the houses became more frequent and shops started to spring up, Harry began to notice things about the town that were remarkably familiar.

2. Back To The Beginning

The streets began to fill with people the closer they were to the centre of town, and Hagrid was attracting a variety of looks from the passers-by, not the least being a sort of stunned gaze that followed him as they were unable to stop themselves from turning their heads as they gaped after his enormous bulk. But Hagrid lumbered along the footpath, bending very low every now and then to avoid hitting his head on a shop awning, Harry alongside him under his cloak.

Some pedestrians automatically gave Hagrid a wide berth, even taking the trouble to cross the street before continuing on their way, however there were one or two very old people who merely looked slightly surprised when they noticed him, and went back to chatting to who ever they were with, or scanning the shop windows with great interest.

Godric's Hollow was the greenest and prettiest place Harry had ever seen. He had noticed on the walk in, the grassy fields had seemed particularly lush, and the trees almost too tall, as if every living thing was thriving. Closer to town every nook and cranny was filled with the richest lush foliage or peppered with an array of dazzling colourful flowers. Even the people looked unusually healthy and bright.

You couldn't have asked for a cleaner looking hub, and although many of the buildings were obviously very old, they were lovingly looked after, none of the flaking paintwork or cracked bricks that you might ordinarily expect. It was almost as if the buildings were in some sort of time warp while everything else carried on around them. But it wasn't just the beauty of this town that caught Harry's eye.

The "Welcome To Godric's Hollow" sign was the first hint of what lay in wait. It was in the form of a shield, painted richly in red and gold, with the formidable Gryffindor Lion rearing up on hind legs, mouth open and teeth bared in mid roar with its claws out stretched. 'Population – 2297' it said in Gold Lettering across the bottom. Over some of the oldest buildings, moulded into the keystone brick that was common in the archways was the distinctive mark of the lion once more, some had abandoned the red and gold colour scheme, but many were very much still icons of Gryffindor. Small bronze lions were mounted atop railing ends and the shield was repeated several times throughout the streets signs.

In the very centre of town was a marble statue, it would have been close to 15 feet in height and was surrounded by a garden bed of vibrant red and golden-yellow flowers. The bearded man stood proud and tall, wearing what could have been a travelling cloak, and a hat with a wide brim, which tapered up to a point that sagged gently to one side. His left arm was held aloft, his hand cupped loosely as if holding something of great importance, his right hand rested on a the hilt of a sword, the tip of the blade on the ground. Harry did not need to look at the plaque at the base of the

statue to know that this was Godric Gryffindor,

As they neared it Hagrid spoke ‘Guess yeh know who tha is.’ Nodding at the impressive stone figure.
‘Yeah,’ said Harry as he looked around him to make sure no one was close. ‘This was a wizard town once, wasn’t it.’

‘Yep! Long time ago though, bin muggles here for centuries now, but there are still wizards here n’all.’ Hagrid said looking about him ‘It’s them that looks after the town mostly, they keeps it true.’
‘True?’

‘Don’t know if yeh noticed but things don’t exactly age here like they do elsewhere.’ Hagrid looked at the statue of Godric and added ‘He was a very powerful wizard by all accounts, set up all sorts of enchantments on the area teh keep it from gettin spoiled. He wanted to make sure it would remain true to Gryffindor here long after he’d gone. His family lived here fer generations, buildin it up, kept the enchantments goin. Mostly older wizards here now though, they stay in memory of ‘im.’ Hagrid put a hand up to his eyes and looked into the sun hovering in the sky. ‘It’s goin teh be dark in a couple of hours so we’d better get a move on.’

Harry turned away from the marble man and followed Hagrid down the road, winding further and further through the quaint older style houses. As the sun dipped lower the buildings glowed and shadows crept across the road. The landscape took on an almost surreal appearance but the beauty of it was all but wasted on Harry. He was aware of only one thing. He was almost at the place where Voldemort had destroyed his family.

When they rounded Achilles Lane the change in their surroundings was instant. Instead of the delicate garden beds and cosy cottages they had just passed, the houses lay abandoned, distinctly grey in appearance and lacking any trace of warmth or homeliness. The occasional For Sale sign was stuck in an overgrown garden and there was neither light nor sound coming from any of the windows.

Then suddenly, there it was.

Harry looked out on the devastation before him and he knew he had arrived. Hagrid stopped in front of the ruin and cleared his throat. He looked to where he thought Harry ought to be, but said nothing.

Harry removed his cloak and stared out at the scene, a stony look on his face. There was a corner section of a room with part of the ceiling still attached, jutting out of piles of rubble, the only trace that a house once stood there. He gazed at it for a moment, unaware of his cloak sliding from his slackening grip to the ground.

He started to move slowly towards the ruin, not thinking about the block Dumbledore had placed on it, not thinking that at any moment he would be repelled backwards. One foot in front of the other as if in a trance, he made his way to where it had all began. He could vaguely hear Hagrid’s voice behind him but he could not stop himself, he stepped beyond the tiny white gate and amongst the broken bricks.

He made his way to the partially standing room, scanning the wreckage as he went, unsure of what he was looking for, every now and then something caught his eye, but when he bent to investigate it was pieces of broken glass glittering in the light, or fragments of plaster and wallpaper. He stopped before the wall and looked up at the sagging ceiling, then beyond to the sky. He didn’t have much time before sunset, so he closed himself to everything but the task at hand.

‘Harry!’ he looked over to where Hagrid was yelling to him from outside the gate. ‘Harry, I think yeh should come back, I can’t get past the block!’ Hagrid looked as if he were pressed against a pain of glass. His cheek and lips were distorted as he pushed himself into the invisible barrier, straining to get through.

As Harry watched, it struck him that Dumbledore had protected this site from everyone entering, except him. Either Dumbledore knew Harry would want to come back or he was intending to bring him here himself.

‘It’s Okay, Hagrid.’ He said loudly ‘don’t worry … I think Dumbledore wanted me to come back here.’ He looked around him ‘It’ll be dark soon anyway… just wait for me … I wont be long.’

Hagrid stopped struggling and sat on the low rock wall on the street, ‘Jus hurry up.’ He said ‘Don’t wanna be here longer than we have teh be.’ Then added ‘What yeh looking fer anyway?’

‘I don’t know,’ answered Harry feeling his way along the wall ‘I don’t know.’ He added quietly under his breath as he bent down to sift through the rubble.

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The sun had disappeared behind the trees at the end of the street long ago; the moon shed only the dullest of light. Harry hands were scratched and bleeding in places and his clothes were covered in powder from the bricks and plaster, but the only things he found were useless broken pieces of metal and other building materials.

After a long while he sat himself down on a chunk of wood, looking over at Hagrid who was still sitting on the wall, though he was slumped and looked as if he might be asleep. Harry put his elbows on his knees, and lowering his head, he brushed his hands through his hair, breathing heavily.

Nothing. Not a single thing left! Harry felt frustrated and disappointed. He was sure there would have been something of them here, a small trinket, a picture, clothes, anything! He rubbed his face trying to quash the emptiness that was growing inside him, shuddering as the cold night air penetrated him. How could he have been so stupid, dragging Hagrid all this way for nothing? He was feeling worse by the second and emptiness seemed to consume him as he pulled his cloak around him. It was as if a cold, dead claw had wrapped itself around Harry's heart - squeezing the hope and light from it. A soft mist was gently emerging from his mouth.

The whole thing had been pointless.

All hope left him.

His darkness felt complete.

With a sudden realization, Harry jerked his head up. He leapt from his squatting position and pulled out his wand. With lightening speed, he scrambled towards Hagrid, desperately searching the dark skies above him as his heart caved in fear.

‘Hagrid!’ he yelled ‘HAGRID!’ he heard Hagrid snort as he stirred *‘HAGRID!’*
But before Harry could reach him a mass of floating black cloaks were closing in on Hagrid from all sides.

Knowing what to do, Harry reached inside and pulled a day spent with Ginny down by the lake to his thoughts. *‘Expecto Patronum!’* Harry yelled as the memory flooded him, his arm outstretched and his wand gripped tightly. A perfect, giant silver stag leapt from the end of his wand and rushed at the Dementors. It raced towards them with it’s head down, antlers forward, but as it hit the magical block that Hagrid had been unable to get through it dissolved into nothing.

Harry was struggling over the debris trying desperately to reach Hagrid who was flailing his umbrella around hopelessly.

‘Expecto Patronum!’ Once again the stag erupted from Harry’s wand and rushed at the Dementors, and again it dissipated when it hit the block. Hagrid let out an awful moan as he dropped to the ground.

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Harry flung himself over the gate.
'*Expecto Patronum!*' His heartbeat raced as the great silver stag burst forth and charged. This time it made contact and ploughed through Dementor after Dementor.

'TO HAGRID!' Harry yelled, pointing urgently at the enormous motionless figure sprawled on the ground. 'Get them away from him!' Harry was rushing up behind his patronus as it cleared the way and now that he was out of the magical block, he could hear the dreadful hollow sucking breaths the bony, cloaked figures emitted. Dementors seemed to just keep coming, closing ranks behind Harry and the stag as they reached Hagrid.

'Keep them back!' Harry yelled over his shoulder as he crouched down over Hagrid gripping the front of his coat, shaking him 'Hagrid! *Hagrid!*' Hagrid moaned and strained to open his eyes.

'Get back … behind … the block … Harry!' he breathed, barely conscious. Harry looked up and saw the stag running in a circle around them, only just managing to keep the shadowy figures at bay. Dementors were pressing in on them relentlessly and Harry knew they could not be held off forever by his patronus. There were too many of them.

Hagrid was trying to raise his head up but lacked the strength, his eyes were only half open as he looked out at the flowing black cloaks and his body trembled from the icy coldness the Dementors inflicted.
'Get … back' he was struggling to talk 'behind … the block'

'It's alright … it's okay …' Harry was saying to Hagrid 'They can't get to us.' But he looked back out at the hooded figures swarming all around them. It was only a matter of time before his patronus would fade then they would be sitting ducks, he wouldn't even have enough time to conjure another one before they swooped in on them. He looked down at Hagrid.

'Harry … get … back -'
'I'm not leaving you Hagrid!' Harry cut in abruptly, then more softly he added 'stop trying to talk.' His mind raced, he had no idea how he was going to do it, but he was not going to let Hagrid have his soul sucked out by a Dementor; he was going to get them both out of there.

CRACK!

All of a sudden, several loud popping noises sounded beyond the black swirling dome that enclosed them. Harry's stomach lurched as a feeling of dread flooded him. *Death Eaters!*

He heard loud voices but couldn't make out what they were saying. He closed his eyes. *I should never have come. I should never have persuaded Hagrid to come. He trusted me!* He opened his eyes again and stood up. A new strength took hold and any fear abandoned him as he set himself to defend his friend with his last breath.

It appeared the Dementors were being called off so the Death Eaters could take over, the ones on the outer edge were falling away rapidly and it wouldn't be long before Harry would be face to face with Voldemort's cronies, or maybe even Lord Voldemort himself.

For a moment it seemed the Dementors had been caught by surprise, they jerked suddenly, like swarming fish avoiding circling sharks, turning their backs on Harry, and then a change came over them. They scattered, some darting away up into the sky while others appeared to be dropping away, as if knocked down. A gap opened up before him and Harry realized what was happening.

A large silver animal, a goat patronus was charging down Dementors with ease, and to Harry's left and right he caught sight of more silver patronuses, one that looked like a large wild cat, the other an enormous vulture, all of them clearing the way as three very old wizards in white robes, two with long silvery beards and the other almost completely hairless, rushed up to where Harry stood over Hagrid.

'Are you … alright?' the skinny bearded one panted breathlessly, bent over clutching his knees.
'I'm fine, but they attacked Hagrid before I could get to him.' Harry watched the other two wizards recall their patronuses now that the last of the Dementors had gone, Harry's stag turned to him but

faded into the darkness as it approached his outstretched hand, finally at the end of it's power. The biting cold eased to a mild calm night once more.

He turned back to Hagrid and crouching over him said 'It's alright Hagrid, they're gone now.' Hagrid was beginning to recover, his giant blood providing far more resilience to the Dementors than ordinary people. Harry looked over his shoulder 'Don't suppose you have some chocolate handy?'

'What was … all that … about?' Wheezed the dumpy bearded wizard in a grainy voice, looking at Harry. Slowly comprehension dawned on his face; he had probably recognized Harry from his photo in the paper. Harry doubted his scar was visible in the dim light.

'You!' he breathed 'Wha … what are you doin here?' his eyes wide, but even before Harry had a chance to answer the little bald wizard cut in.
'Now why would ya be needin to ask a question like that for, Fudd?' he had a look of exasperation on his face as he threw his arm in the direction of Harry's parents house.

'Eh?' Fudd said screwing his face up and cupping his hand behind one ear 'Whadya say?'
'Look where we bleedin well are, for goodness sake!' the other wizard answered loudly 'Whadya think he's doin here? On 'oliday doin a bit a sightseein?' he said gruffly and rolled his eyes 'Doddery old bludger.' He added not too quietly.

'I 'eard that.' Said Fudd.
'Oh, so ya heard that alright!' said the second man giving Fudd a sideways glance.
'Eh … what?' the plump man was making it obvious he was having trouble hearing again. 'What was that?'
'Never mind!' the bald man said loudly in frustration.

'I do not think it is wise to stand here bickering amongst ourselves.' Interrupted the thin bearded wizard, his voice was old and cracked but firm 'We had best leave here as soon as possible.' He gave the other two wizards a silencing look. 'They may very well return and in even greater numbers. Mr. Potter, you and your friend will come with us for now,' he said motioning the others to help get Hagrid to his feet. 'You can go no further tonight, I think'

Harry helped rouse Hagrid who stumbled to his feet, listing to the side. He was grey behind his bushy beard and looked very weak so Harry did his best to help support him. It was backbreaking work as they walked back down the street, but Hagrid was slowly regaining his composure and easing Harry's burden as they went.

'Who are you?' Harry asked.

'We must make haste,' the old wizard glanced at Harry 'there will be time for introductions later.'

Harry could see the wizards face in the street lamp as they passed, he looked incredibly old; his face was full of lines and his hair was ghostly white, he was glancing about him as he moved down the street and like the others was still brandishing a wand.

They hurried along a tree lined avenue where the dwellings were made from large grey stone bricks and were spaced well apart, all had sweeping lawns that surrounded regal looking buildings and as they neared a large gold iron gate they drew to a halt.

There was no house here that Harry could see, it looked more like a park of some sorts, though it was definitely private going by the enormous walls on either side of the entrance that blocked it from view. The ghostly wizard motioned to Harry and Hagrid so they leant in.

'Gryffindor's Seventh on Hollow.' he whispered.

From out of nowhere an enormous stone mansion began to expand before their eyes, nudging aside giant old knarley trees and small flowering shrubs. Harry had experienced this once before when he had been taken to Gimmauld Place, Sirius's family home. It, like this place, was a protected site, unplottable and unknown by any who were not given the address by the secret keeper.

Hagrid started at the sight before him and the old man smiled faintly 'Dandelion.' he said. The gates

parted and as they approached the large stone manor, Harry noticed an ornate Gryffindor emblem upon the enormous oaken doors. The building itself was rather plain and unassuming, something the other houses along this road were not.

'You get the door, Waldo' said Fudd loudly as he and Harry struggled to keep Hagrid from swaying on his unsteady feet. The little bald wizard muttered something under his breath and ran the tip of his wand lightly along the crack where the double doors joined in the middle of the two massive cast iron handles shaped like lions. There were several loud clunks and the doors swung slowly inwards, creaking loudly as Harry guided Hagrid through the entrance.

'This way,' said the thin bearded man, motioning his hand as he entered a small room just off the entry. Hagrid dropped onto a bench seat that lay beneath the main window and Harry sat himself down on the arm of a leather chair nearby, surveying the scene.

The room had a distinctly cosy feel to it. Harry gave an involuntary shudder, his brush with the Dementors sat in stark contrast to the welcoming surroundings he now found himself in. A crackling fire blazed in an old blackened stone fireplace on the far wall, casting warm flecks of orange light around the room and the circular iron chandelier that hung from the high ceiling was laden with burning candles illuminating the furnishings which appeared as old as the wizards who now sat in them.

'Oi … Sooty!' Waldo said suddenly, his eyes searching the air around him. A second later a small figure appeared in middle of the room, it was immediately recognizable as a house elf, but it appeared to be much younger than the house elves Harry had seen, its skin was uncharacteristically wrinkle free.

It had large grey eyes and a small nose that looked like an unripe strawberry, it was wearing a red and gold kilt that hung from its chest and was fidgeting where it stood.

It realized after an exasperated look from Waldo that it had materialized on top of the coffee table and it let out an apologetic oops! Before jumping down onto the rug.
'Yes … er … sir?' It squeaked anxiously.

'Right,' said Waldo shifting in his chair 'bring some tea for our guests ... and chocolate … and don't forget the sugar pot this time…' and then added 'or the milk … or the tea for that matter.'
'No sir … I mean yes sir.' It said sheepishly then it turned and trotted out of the room.

'It'd be a miracle if she brings cups.' Fudd grumbled from the corner near the fire, rolling his eyes exaggeratingly as he put his feet up on the stool before him.

'So Emerick, what do we do now?' asked Waldo sitting back in his chair and tapping a pipe on a small round dish he had picked up from the side table.

The thin bearded wizard who had remained standing walked over to the fireplace, bent down and began prodding the fire with a metal poker, sending sparks soaring up the chimney. He turned and looked at Hagrid and Harry.

'Sooty will make you a room each for the night. You will be safe here until morning at least, however,' he looked directly at Harry from under his brow 'You-Know-Who will be aware of your presence here by now and there will almost certainly be some of his minions in the Hollow seeking you. I advise you not to attempt to return to Achilles Lane under any circumstances.'

Harry dropped his eyes to the worn rug at his feet. Disappointment washed over him again at the thoughts that his search had turned up nothing, and he was beginning to feel extremely guilty for bringing Hagrid with him. He was beginning to see it as a rather selfish endeavour after all.

Emerick turned and stared into the flames, the glowing flickers danced across his face. 'We were fortunate tonight. You must have caught them off guard, they were not monitoring the site as closely as I would have expected. Next time…' he said as he turned back to Harry 'you will not be so lucky.'

'Lucky?' said Hagrid credulously. Harry's stomach churned as he thought of the swarm of

Dementors that had enclosed Hagrid and himself; he couldn't imagine how much worse it could get, yet he felt inclined to listen to Emerick, he reminded Harry a little of the wise and gentle Dumbledore whom he had always trusted.

A tinkle of silver announced Sooty's return. She was clutching a tray that for some reason Harry found himself checking the contents of. It held a large silver pot with steam rising from it, five cups, a tub of sugar, a milk jug, and a slab of chocolate. He felt some relief that she appeared to have remembered everything and was turning back to Emerick when her rather large foot caught the leg of the cloak stand, and with an almighty crash Sooty went flying face down onto the floor, the stand tumbling over behind her and burying her in clothing. The contents of the tray spewed out over the rug.

Harry automatically jumped to his feet to help her. He yanked the clothing off her, pulling her up by the arm. She was tittering nervously and Harry could hear Fudd mumbling '... useless ... couldn't dry a dish in a desert ...' Emerick had pulled out his wand and with a double wave the tray right sided itself and the tea set jumped back into place, the mess of tea, sugar, milk and chocolate disappeared from the carpet and the tray finally settled on the small table.

'Not to worry Sooty, why don't you see if you can get two rooms ready for Mr. Potter and his friend, Mm?' She nodded brushing herself off and started to leave but then she stopped suddenly in her tracks.
Sooty looked around at Harry who was watching her with a bemused grimace on his face; it was a bit like waiting for an accident to happen. Sooty's eyes suddenly became wide with wonder.

'M-M-Mr. Potter?' she stammered 'H-Harry Potter?' she went on 'The H-Harry P-Potter?' she seemed unable to grasp the enormity of it and although Harry had gotten used to peoples reactions to him, he was feeling slightly uncomfortable at Sooty's awe; it felt akin to having a female Dobby staring at him.

'Yes,' smiled Emerick looking rather amused at the both of them.
'Harry Potter!' she breathed. Harry was looking at the fire to hide his embarrassment though at least she could say his name without stammering now. 'James and Lily's son!'

Harry's head spun round. 'What?'

'Y-Your James and Lily's son!' she turned, her mouth gaping as she breathed heavily looking at Emerick but pointing to Harry. 'Harry Potter ... James and Lily's son!'

Emerick chuckled faintly 'Yes Sooty,' he said as if he were speaking to a child 'This is Harry Potter, James and Lily's son.' She gave another gasp as though hearing the idea from Emerick for the first time.

Harry's heartbeat raced at the mention of his mother and father; the very reason he had come to Godric's Hollow in the first place. He looked from Sooty to Emerick, to Waldo and Fudd trying to read their faces. Sooty looked flummoxed, Emerick was smiling faintly and Waldo and Fudd were regarding him with interest but neither had moved; Waldo was puffing out a billowy cloud of smoke and Fudd had his finger in his ear jiggling it to and fro apparently trying to clear out some obstruction so he could hear better.

All of a sudden a loud snort came from behind him and Harry realized before he had even turned, that Hagrid had fallen asleep, the drain of the Dementors finally catching up with him. Harry turned back to Emerick.

'You knew my parents?' there was a tinge of desperation in his voice; he could hardly bring himself to hope that coming to Godric's Hollow had not been in vain.
'Yes, Harry' said Emerick 'myself in particular new your mother and father rather well.'

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Harry undressed carelessly in the silvery moonlight and slipped under the cool white cotton bed

covers. He lay with his hands behind his head gazing up at the flickering shadows on the ceiling as an ancient willow outside the open window swayed gently in the breeze. The yellowed heavy lace curtains flapped gently as a wisp of air gently wafted through and played over Harry's untidy hair. Somewhere in the distance a chorus of frogs were trying to outdo their cricket counterparts, croaking and gurgling fervently.

He breathed deeply as his thoughts churned, he had expected to be overcome with emotion at what Emerick and the others had told him, he had expected to feel elated or sorrowful at what they had to say, but instead the time spent listening about his parents had left him numb.

Harry turned his head to the small black chest that crouched on the bedside cabinet. When Emerick had handed it to him at the foot of the stairs, Harry had assumed it contained nightclothes and wash things for the morning, instead Emerick revealed it contained all that was salvaged of his mother and father's things after Voldemort had murdered them.

He stared at it for a moment, studying its outline in the gloomy din, wondering why he couldn't bring himself to open it. Turning back to the ceiling he closed his eyes. Nothing had gone at all like imagined; Hagrid had put up far less resistance than he had expected, Harry alone had been able to walk straight through the magical block to gain entrance to the ruin, they had both been swamped by countless Dementors in the middle of the street and then rescued by three ancient wizards who, as it turned out, knew his mother and father personally, and then just when he'd given up hope of ever finding anything of his parents possessions, out of the blue he had been handed the very thing he had struggled so desperately through all this for.

What confused Harry the most was how he could lie there feeling so detached from everything.

Emerick had spent some time recalling his visits with Lily and James. Waldo and Fudd chimed in with little details every now and then as apparently the three of them were his parents only regular visitors during their time in hiding at Godric's Hollow. They had in turn spent many an afternoon keeping Lily and her baby company when James was absent.

Emerick had remarked several times on what an extraordinarily talented witch his mother was, and Fudd had said she was 'the sweetest lass' he had ever had the fortune to meet, he said Lily had an excellent sense of humour which made visiting with her one of the things he most looked forward to. Waldo had told how she doted on her baby boy who was always smiling incessantly up at her, and Emerick said she was often to be found in the sunroom, sitting in a large armchair with her sleeping baby curled into her chest, staring out the window waiting for James to return.

It seemed they also highly regarded James. Waldo described him as a very intelligent and extremely likable young wizard who had a nose for trouble but a heart the size of a Hogwarts when it came to his beautiful wife and son. Fudd described how James always went to great lengths to make sure Lily and their son were well taken care of when he could not be with them.

He said although James never complained, he could tell he hated leaving them and would not go until he had checked over everything at least three or four times. Emerick had added sombrely that James had a great courage and strength in him that few could lay claim to, but the tension of hiding from Voldemort had started to show in him near the end; he said James had looked tired and strained the last time he had seen him.

Emerick suspected James carried the great burden of knowing far more than he was letting on; he thought it quite possible that some disturbing information had surfaced in the days before Voldemort attacked. Emerick had held Harry's look when he added quietly that James had done everything he could to protect Lily and his child that night, and that his skill and sheer nerve had managed to hold Voldemort off for some time. Harry had wanted to ask how he knew that, but Sooty had interrupted them by materializing inside the wood store cabinet by accident, Emerick hurried to let her out when she started screeching in panic and pounding on the doors with her bony fists; apparently claustrophobic.

Harry did not feel like sleeping at all. His mind ran over and over every last detail they had told him about James and Lily to make sure he would not forget any of it. As he lay there in the quiet Harry heard the latch on his door click and he turned onto his elbow as a small shadow emerged though the slight gap in the open doorway.

'Sooty?' said Harry

'Yes Mr. Potter,' came a small squeaky voice, when she stepped into the moonlight Harry frowned.
'What's wrong?'
She was looking decidedly nervous and was wringing her long bony fingers together.

'I is sorry to disturb you sir, but I is thinking you would still be awake sir ...' she looked at Harry through her wide grey eyes which looked rather watery.
'Yeah,' said Harry quietly as he shuffled into an upright position securing the sheets around him as he went. 'What's up?'

'I is not knowing how to tell you this Mr. Potter ... so, I is thinking I should just say it ...' she looked extremely tense. Harry waited a moment and when nothing was forthcoming he said 'Say what, Sooty?'

'I is not a very good house elf Mr. Potter, I is very clumsy and always gets it's wrong.' Her eyes were on her feet 'But I is very good with the little peeps as with the old ones because they is so much alike,' Harry wasn't sure he understood.
'What are little peeps?'

Her eyes grew wider still; she leant into him and whispered conspiratorially 'I is helping Lily sometimes with her little peep.'
Harry's felt his stomach lurch, 'you stayed with my mother? But your too young aren't you?'

'I is young for a house elf sir, yes but that is still many of your years. My masters said to go to Lily and keep her company sometimes, so Sooty is doin it sir.' She said 'Lily is good mistress sir, she is good to Sooty, so Sooty is doin everythin she asks. She asks me to sneak stuff for her so I is doin it.' She lifted her hand to her mouth gave a nervous giggle.

Harry frowned 'Sneak stuff? What sort of stuff?' He felt an ache growing in the pit of his stomach.
'Stuff for doin big magic Mr. Potter.' She said in awe

Harry screwed his face up 'But why would she need to sneak stuff to do magic? She was a qualified witch, it doesn't make sense.'
'She is not wanting James to find out sir.'

'Why would she be hiding it from him?' Harry shot her a look 'They were happy together weren't they?' Harry would never have dreamed of asking this of anyone else, but for some reason he did not feel uncomfortable asking Sooty.

'Ooh yes Mr. Potter!' she nodded 'they is very happy together! I is seein them many times together,' she blushed and added with a whimper 'Lily is loving James more than anything! And he is loving her back so much he is crying once.'

Harry swallowed hard 'Crying?'
'He is crying once when he is alone sir, he is scared for Lily and little peep sir.' Her eyes filled with tears 'He is good man sir, he is not knowing Sooty is there at first then he is telling me not to say anything to Lily, so I says nothink.' She waved hands despairingly

Harry's insides felt like they were dissolving; he felt guilty that he had intruded on his father's grief. He turned his eyes to the bed sheet and searched for something to say so he did not have to think of his father crying 'What was she hiding from him?'

'She is making big magic, she tells Sooty it will protect her little peep.' Sooty wailed softly. Harry instinctly withdrew, leaning back onto the pillows; unsure he wanted to hear the rest. 'She is very clever witch Mr. Potter and she is telling James she can make magic from her own death if' she lowered her voice tears streaming down her face 'He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named finds her peep.' An awful dread came over Harry as he listened, stony faced.

'She is pleading with him to get her what she needs and he is forbidding her to do it, he is telling her she is not to do it, no matter what, she is not to put herself in harms way and she is not to

mention it again.' Sooty looked frightened and it struck Harry how desperate his father had sounded. 'Then he goes to another room where Sooty is and locks the door' Harry's eyes stung as he swallowed hard. 'This is when Sooty sees him crying alone. He is good man sir!' fresh tears swelled in her eyes

'so you got the things she needed?' Harry said in a heavy voice. 'You got the things for my mum?'

'Yes Mr. Potter' she lifted the back of her hand to wipe her wet face 'She is doin it anyway because she loves her little peep so much.'

Harry turned to look out the window as a warm tear trickled down his cheek. He had never known such sadness as overcame him hearing of his mother and fathers desperation. Harry wished he felt numb again now.

3. The Last Day Of Peace?

Harry lay with his arm over his face. Sooty had left him feeling like he might burst, but now it was almost dawn and Harry felt completely drained. He had spent the earlier part of the evening wishing he felt more of an emotional connection to his parents, now all he wanted was for it to stop. The feelings that flooded him had quietly poured out as he lay in the moonlight; he had found the connection he was looking for to his mother and father, and he finally understood them.

The James Harry had seen in the pensieve had unnerved him, he had not at all been what Harry would have liked, he had seemed too human in his failings to Harry then, but now he finally understood; he accepted that his dad was very human and he had loved his family so much that he died trying to save them. And his mother Lily, Voldemort would have left alive, but she too had stood between him and her son and died to save him.

As the predawn grey of the morning filled his room, Harry got out of bed and pulled on his clothes. He went over to the small basin and scooped some water over his face, looking at his reflection in the mirror as he picked up the small hand towel and rubbed his face with it.

He studied himself for a moment, expressionless. He looked tired and drawn. A lifetimes worth of anguish and sorrow had flowed out overnight and now he was an empty shell. He moved over to the window and looked out at the dawn's rays as they splayed out across the lawn, it was a new beginning. Dumbledore's words came back to him.

'…the prophecy does not mean you *have* to do anything! … you, yourself, will never rest until you've tried! …. He will continue to hunt you…'

He breathed deeply; a new acceptance had risen within him along with the day's sun. Harry no longer feared his own weakness; he knew what he had to do. He would face Voldemort when the time came and Harry would end his reign of terror, or he would die trying. He owed his mum and dad that at least.

Harry picked up the chest from beside the bed and went downstairs. Peering into the sitting room where he had left Waldo and Fudd he discovered it empty, the fire long since faded. Across the entrance hall laid an open door from which he could hear faint shuffling coming from, and as he entered the passageway, voices began to reach his ears, voices that sounded very familiar. When he appeared at the door he saw a figure with it's back to him hunched over a large thick wooden table. Harry slipped the chest onto a bench top beside him.

'*Harry!*' he was suddenly swamped by an anxious looking Hermione. She threw her arms around him, breathing heavily. Harry had grown used to her displays of affection, and he wrapped his arms around her and hugged her warmly. It felt good to hold her; he had spent last night feeling very alone and having Hermione here made him feel less empty. He smiled down at her as she pulled away.

'When we heard what happened…' her face was searching his, her mouth struggling breathlessly to

form words '... are you alright?' her face full of concern.

'I'm fine Hermione ... really,' He said but she was still holding onto his arms '*really!*' he nodded in reassurance.
'And Hagrid? Is he okay?' she said urgently
'He's fine too, don't worry' he said as he plucked her hands off him.

'I'm glad to hear it.'

Harry looked over Hermione's shoulder; Lupin had turned around and was looking at him from the table. He looked grey and sickly 'Lupin,' Harry said guiltily. 'I-I'm sorry,' he began but Lupin held his hand up and shook his head softly.

'Don't.' he said gravely 'I know why you came Harry.' Hermione took Harry by the arm and led him to the table opposite Lupin. Harry looked around with a wry smile. His ever-present guard had caught up with him again.

Sturgis Podmore and Hestia Jones were standing by the window, deep in a whispered conversation, frequently sending glances in Harry's direction, and Elphias Doge was standing at the old fashioned stove giving Sooty instructions on how best to cook scrambled eggs. 'Fold!' he wheezed 'See? Don't stir!'

'What are you doing here? How did you know?' Harry asked as he sat down.

'Emerick sent us a message, told us you were here.' Lupin said studying Harry 'He knew we'd be looking for you once word of the Dementors got out.' His voice changed 'What he didn't know is that we had already been looking for you since mid-day yesterday.' His face was very stern. Harry sighed and closed his eyes briefly as Lupin continued. 'If it wasn't for Moody dropping in to deliver Tonks a message, we probably wouldn't have discovered you gone until it was time for you to check in,' he was frowning and looked like he was daring Harry to retort 'But I'm sure you already know that, in fact, you were counting on it if I'm not mistaken.'

'I knew you wouldn't let me come here otherwise,' said Harry, suppressing his rising anger. He was fed up with being treated like a child; tired of having everyone else around him thinking they knew what was best for him.

'Have some breakfast, Harry.' Hermione butted in pushing a plate of eggs under his nose, doing her best to avoid a confrontation between them.

'Well you are right about that at least.' Lupin carried on, ignoring the interruption 'I would most definitely have not allowed you to come!' his frown deepened 'Look what almost happened! What you did-' but before he could finish his sentence Harry let loose.

'I would have thought out of everyone, you'd understand!' Harry said furiously 'you were one of my mum and dads best friends! You would have done the same thing if you were me ... and don't tell me my mum and dad would have expected any different either, because I'm too much like them to think they wouldn't have understood!'

Lupin had a strange expression on his face, like he was looking at Harry for the first time 'You are like them Harry, very much indeed, which is one of the reasons I'm here now.' His frown had faded and his voice was tinged with sadness.

Harry sighed heavily and looked down at the table 'I know.'

'Harry, we all have to look out for each other ... for you especially, but you must understand,' He paused as a tense Hermione put a plate down in front of him 'you are Voldemorts number one target. He will stop at nothing to get to you.' He met Harry's eyes 'I am not Dumbledore, I can not protect you like he could.' He shook his head gently 'None of us can.'

Harry looked directly at Lupin 'I'm not afraid anymore.' Something in the way he said it made Lupin smile slightly.

‘I’ve never doubted your courage Harry.’

Elphias let out a frustrated grunt as Sooty "folded" the scrambled eggs all the way over the edge of the pan and onto the hot metal surface.

‘I said fold not shovel!’ Hermione immediately went into a flutter to rescue Sooty, reassuring her repeatedly that it was okay and that they had plenty more eggs to go round. Harry noticed Sooty was regarding Hermione with great caution, as you might an escaped patient from the psychiatric ward, but Hermione seemed not to notice being too busy shooting scowls at Elphias.

Emerick entered the room not long after and gave Harry a smile and a nod as he settled next to Lupin and chatted in between mouthfuls. Hagrid came down a little while later and was back to his usual self, although he seemed very reluctant to catch Lupins attention and even went so far as to sit himself at the farthest end of the table away from Harry and Lupin with his mound of eggs and toast. Everyone had emerged by early morning and there was much chatter around the table. It seemed Waldo and Fudd rarely left the Hollow much anymore and they were using a kitchen full of wizards to catch up on the latest happenings.

Harry caught snippets of conversation here and there, and he strained particularly hard to hear what Lupin and Emerick were discussing, but they were difficult to hear over Hermiones repeated attempts to quiz him. At one point he snapped at her a little impatiently when he thought he had heard Lupin say Tom Riddles name but she had looked so offended that he gave up trying to eaves drop and turned his attention to her.

He gently put his hand on hers ‘Sorry,’ he said ‘I didn’t sleep much last night.’
She smiled dully at him ‘No, I don’t suppose you did.’

~*~*~*~

When Harry saw The Burrow his heart lifted; it was like slipping on a pair of comfortable old shoes. Mrs. Weasley had launched herself at him before he had even got in the door, all in a dither; they had all been up most of the night waiting for news.

Looking around at their tired faces he started to feel very guilty. Fleur was still her radiant self, she was the only one who seemed to suffer no consequences at all from lack of sleep, ‘Arry, it eez so good to see you.’ She drawled as she kissed his cheeks, Harry’s eyes took on a glazed look ‘we have been worried seek about you! I waz beginning to theenk you would not make it to zee wedding. You are very naughty to do zat to us.’ She pouted, waving a finger at him as she sat back down at the kitchen table.

‘Eh, mate!’ Ron slapped him on the shoulder, a large grin plastered across his face. ‘It’s good to have you back.’ Harry revelled in the welcome he received; it felt good to be back in Ron’s company again though he found his eyes flitting around the room searchingly.

‘Have you had breakfast Harry?’ Mrs. Weasley was already at the stove, fry pans and plates flying everywhere.
‘Yeah, thanks,’ he said

‘Gotta hand it to you,’ Ron said ‘you really know how to get up The Orders nose!’ he was wearing a wry smile as he directed Harry to the foot of the stairs. ‘What’s that?’ he asked motioning to the small black chest Harry was carrying.

‘Breakfast will be on the table in a minute, Ron’ called Mrs. Weasley ‘So what ever you’ve got to talk about it can wait!’ Hermione smiled sheepishly at them and all three of them turned to head back to the table. ‘Not you!’ she gave Harry an authoritative look ‘You can go on up to Fred and Georges room and get into bed!’ Harry went to argue; all he wanted was to be near Ron and Hermione and he doubted he would be able to sleep anyway ‘Uh-uh’ she said sternly ‘up you go!'

‘Well I’ve had breakfast too so I’ll-‘
‘Oh no you wont.’ Mrs. Weasley cut Hermione off ‘You can stay here with the rest of us, Harry needs

his sleep!'
'But none of us have slept!' said Ron indignantly. She glared at him
'that's not the point. Harry, bed! You two, sit!'

Harry left Ron and Hermione's bewildered looks behind him as he wound his way up the stairs to Fred and Georges room, placing the chest on a large wooden tallboy near the door. His trunk was sitting at the end of the bed so he walked over to it and stashed his father's old cloak away.

Just before apparating back to The Burrow, Hagrid had handed Harry the silvery parcel having picked it up after Harry had dropped it, and stowed it in one of his many coat pockets. Harry had forgotten all about it until that moment and was glad Hagrid had thought to retrieve it. He knew he was going to need it again more than likely, especially if faced with a situation like at the Dursleys where he needed to slip away.

It seemed as soon as Lupin had found out that Harry was missing from Privet Drive, he had pounded on the Dursleys door with Moody in his wake to find out how long he'd been gone. This was pointless of course as the Dursley's didn't even know that he was missing and were in such a state over being harassed by two rather scary looking magical madmen that Lupin had not been able to get even two coherent words out of them. In the end he had given up trying and had transported Harry's trunk directly to The Burrow before he and Moody had left, leaving three very stunned and frightened people behind.

Lupin pulled Harry aside at Emericks and told him he was to stay at The Burrow until further notice, he said they had spent a great deal of time trying to ensure it was safe for him there and would be bitterly disappointed if Harry chose to disregard that fact and scarper off again leaving no clue as to where he was.

Harry was all too aware he had no place to go anyway, at this point he had no idea where to start looking for the remaining Horcruxes so it hadn't been too difficult to set Lupins mind at rest. Hagrid was to take the bike back to Hogwarts while Lupin and the others escorted Harry here. They had seemed in a great hurry to leave once they had seen Harry safely to the garden path, stopping only to give the briefest of waves to Mrs. Weasley as she flung the front door open.

Harry sat on the side of his bed unbuttoning his shirt, staring thoughtfully at the floor, wondering why they had been in such a hurry. He was getting rather impatient with the fact that The Order still felt it fitting not to tell him what was going on. He would be seventeen in a couple of weeks and then he would tell Lupin he wanted in on it all or else! Surely he couldn't deny Harry once he came of age and for him, it couldn't happen soon enough.

Harry suddenly became aware of someone watching him. He looked up sharply and there, leaning against the doorway, arms crossed over her chest and eyes full of doubt, was Ginny. He stopped unbuttoning abruptly. He felt a surge in the pit of his stomach as he looked at her; it had been her he was looking for when his eyes had strayed around the room downstairs, and seeing her now he wondered how he had ever found the strength to leave her.

'Hi,' her voice sounded like nectar.
'Hi,' he answered. Stop it! He thought as he tried to reign in the emotions that flared uncontrollably within him.
'Just wanted to see that you… that you were okay.' She frowned slightly
'I'm fine,' his answer was stunted, not wanting his voice to betray him. Ginny nodded slightly then without another word, turned and left. Harry pulled his glasses off and collapsed back on the bed rubbing his face with his hands, his eyes closed. What are you doing? Get a grip! He thought to himself. It's not that hard, just deal with it!

He breathed heavily, pulled himself back up, walked to the door and closed it.

Out of the blackness came an eerie apparition, it was Dumbledore holding his arm out before him in offering, Sirius was struggling behind him, his face contorted with effort, his hands gripping the mouth of a doorway, his body stretched out behind him as he was being sucked in. Harry reached out desperately but was slowed by an unseen force; he was fighting against the air as if he were embedded in sand. Then Snape stood before them, the same ugly expression on his face as when he had struck down Dumbledore. He had both arms raised above his head grasping a shining

object, and then suddenly Sirius roared '*Harry!*'

Harry jumped up onto his elbow, his breathing ragged and his heartbeat racing, dripping in sweat. Snape's face still burned in his mind, a lingering residue of the dream he'd been having.

What time was it? He looked over at the window; the sun was streaming through the gaps in the curtains. Harry pulled himself up and swung his feet on the floor. He sat there with his head hung low running his hands through his unkempt hair for a moment, then he shook his head and stood up, grabbed his clothes and headed for the bathroom.

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The trio had spent the following days leading up to the wedding exchanging what little information they had. Harry had told Ron and Hermione of Sooty and her revelations about his mother, both of them had eyed Harry with a mixture of shock and awe, and though she tried to hide it, Harry was sure he caught a glimmer of excitement in Hermione's eyes.

Ginny interrupted just then on Mrs. Weasley's orders to call them in for dinner. Since their first encounter he had not seen very much of her; somehow she was never in the room with him unless the whole family was present, and she seemed to spend a lot of time with Fleur, helping with last minute wedding arrangements. To Harry's surprise, Bill had asked him if he would be a groomsman, saying that the twins were going to busy doing other things and Charlie wouldn't be able to make it. Percy's name was never raised.

While Harry was at the Dursleys, Ron had spent many long hours hovering in gloomy hallways outside open doors trying to catch snippets of conversation between his father and Bill, sometimes even resorting to using a pair of Fred and Georges extendable ears.

It had become apparent the Dementors were now a formidable force; Harry had been told last year they were breeding and going by how many had turned up in Godric's Hollow there was a frightening number at large. Their random attacks had become organized ambushes where people from all over the wizarding community were targeted.

The Death Eaters had even lay siege to a number of older, well respected family homes and it was said that none were ever left behind, all were either killed or missing.

St Mungos had called in all able healers in the community they could find as their wards swelled with casualties, Mrs. Weasley, who had some skill with more minor ailments had taken to volunteering there several times a week though she had said she wasn't able to do much except reassure people. Ron had heard her sobbing one night to his father because she was finding it difficult to cope with the grief of relatives.

There was a report someone from the ministry claimed to have sited Ollivander, the wand maker previously thought missing, hovering in the shadows of the abandoned shops in Hogsmeade one evening, however when they had done a double take he was gone.

The information went on and on, all of it was pretty much as Harry had expected, but what he really wanted to know was Voldemorts plan of attack, and what The Order were doing to counter it. He was feeling incredibly frustrated as he sat in the Weasleys back yard, turning the small golden locket from the cave over and over in his hand. Hermione was leaning against Ron's shoulder stifling a yawn as he unconsciously put an arm round to support her, all three of them were exhausted having spent the last few nights meeting in Harry's room once the house fell quiet, trying desperately to work out where to start with the Horcruxes.

As yet Hermione's attempts at trying to figure out who or what R.A.B. stood for had been unsuccessful and she complained bitterly at not having access the Hogwarts library for information. They debated long and hard as to their first course of action. In the end Ron and Hermione agreed to return to Hogwarts without Harry if their letters came, it was as good a base as any and Hermione would finally have access to the extensive library, plus they would keep on studying and maybe pick up some new hexes and spells that would come in handy.

As Harry was unable to do so last time, he decided would return to Godric's Hollow to visit his mother and fathers graves. Hermione had been particularly disturbed by this but Harry had agreed to talk to Lupin about going with him, he would be seventeen and free to do as he saw fit by then so Lupin would have to agree if he wanted to keep Harry under guard.

'What's for dinner?' Ron asked
'I don't know. Your mums too busy with Fleur at the moment, she's going off for the night soon and wont be back until the ceremony tomorrow.' Answered Hermione 'your dad's taking her to the Diggory's; they were really keen to help apparently. I think they're glad to have something to look forward to for a change.' Ron brushed her hair back as she said 'Ginny and I are going first thing in the morning when Fleur's family arrive.'

'I think we should all get a good nights sleep tonight.' said Harry
'I agree' Hermione sighed 'Tomorrow's going to be our last carefree day for a long time so we might as well make the most of it.'

Harry woke next morning to a house in uproar. Fred and George came charging into the room and yanked the curtains open.

'Hiya Harry!' Fred had plonked himself on the edge of the bed, and slapped Harry on the shoulder before he'd had a chance to pull on his glasses. George was busy rummaging in one of the many boxes piled around the room.

'C'mon Sleeping Beauty!' he said over his shoulder 'Not everyday you get to see a full blown wizard wedding!'
'We're in charge of the decorations … knew mum'd come round in the end' Fred winked at Harry 'Don't know what she's so worried about.'

'It's going to be the usual thing … with our own special touch of course.' George tossed a box to the door and opened another.
'You're in for a real treat, even if we do say so ourselves.' Fred grinned
'What's a wizard wedding?' Harry was still trying to shake off sleep.
'Wouldn't want to spoil the surprise.' said Fred

'What's goin on?' Ron appeared at the doorway in his pyjamas, his hair sticking out in all directions.

'Ahh… our dear brother!' said George. He suddenly stopped what he was doing and looked from Ron to Harry and back to Ron 'Are you two having some sort of worst bed-hair contest or something?'
'Wha..?' said Ron scratching his head lazily.
'Well Ron is our clear winner this morning! Congratulations!' quipped Fred as he threw him a small golden wrapped sweet from his pocket 'and you did it without even trying!'

'That's our Ron! A natural at all the important things.' George said as he dragged another box to the door.

Hermione, Mrs. Weasley and Ginny had left already and once Harry and Ron had rushed through breakfast the four of them went outside to where Mr. Weasley, Dedalus Diggle, Lupin and Tonks were standing. They were surveying the area in front of them.

'We'll put it there; it's got some shade. It's going to be hot today and there's quite a few older and younger people coming.' Said Mr. Weasley
'Oh yes!' said Dedalus, bouncing excitedly on the balls of his feet 'Lovely spot right there. I'll get the others!' and he darted of with amazing speed for a wizard of his age.

'Wotcher Harry, Ron' Tonks hair was a long curly mauve colour and she looked much happier than she had last time he'd seen her. Lupin had his hand in the small of her back.

'Hello!' he said with a smile, Harry was surprised to see how well Lupin looked and a slight pang of guilt hit him as he reminded himself why he had looked ill last time.
'Hello boys!' said Mr. Weasley 'Got a job for you and Harry, Ron'

'Right! We'll be off then.' Said George as Fred floated the boxes across the lawn.
'Now ... Fred … George, I don't want anything too over the top, right?' Mr. Weasley was eyeing them warily.
'Muah?' said Fred innocently
'Father ... really!' chimed in George.
'Height of sophistication and understatement, that's us!' said George.
'Absolutely!' exclaimed Fred grinning 'don't worry about a thing, just leave it in our capable hands.'
Mr. Weasley watched them go out of the corner of his eye, doubt written all over his face. Harry and Ron exchanged grins as Mr. Weasley led them back inside.

Mr. Weasley had set them to the most monotonous task of all; tying little bundles of an assortment of Honeydukes sweets together; they rewarded themselves regularly for their punishing job with exploding bonbons and Fizzing Wizzbees. They had almost finished when Mr. Weasley appeared at the foot of the stairs looking very smart in his dress robes.

'Alright?'
'Yeah, almost done.' Said Harry
'Cud ff guv'n oos u berrer yob!' said Ron frowning through a mouthful of fudge.

'You'd better go on up and get ready as soon as your done. People will be arriving soon. Don't want the Groomsmen to be late!' He grinned; clapping his hands together he stalked out the back door.

When Harry and Ron finally emerged in their dress robes, people had already started arriving, Harry spotted Order members spread throughout the grounds all dressed up but looking very much on duty.

As he wondered round the grounds he looked about him amazed at the transformation. White flowers had been magicked onto every plant, bush and tree to form a spectacular curtain backdrop, and a golden silk carpet had been laid out to form a path through the middle of the white chairs that circled around a golden mesh dome raised off the ground on six thin golden pillars.

The dome was also dotted with white flowers and beneath it laid a small white platform where Harry presumed they would be standing. The shaded area outside the circle was packed with large white circular tables and on the centre of each stood a magnificent statue of a golden bird, wings half open and head held high as if about to launch into flight. The area was semi enclosed by burning torches on golden stilts.

As Harry moved through the crowd he could feel curious eyes on him and could hear quiet whispers as he passed. But today he did not care; today he would enjoy the celebrations and not worry about tomorrow.

There were many people he didn't know and some he did. To his pleasant surprise he noticed Luna waving at them, so he and Ron moseyed over.

'Hi Harry, Ron.' She had a broad dreamy smile on her face 'Nice day for it, don't you think?'
'Lovely!' said Ron 'I didn't know you were coming.'
'Oh yes. We live not far from here, just over yonder' she motioned her head 'I must say, I have been wondering how Bill is doing, have there been any side effects?'

This was typical of Luna Lovegood; she had an incredible bluntness about her, often to the slight embarrassment of others. Harry smiled.
'Not yet Luna,'
'My father says he would have a good sense of smell now at least.'

Ron and Harry both laughed through their noses. 'Maybe, haven't noticed it though.' Said Ron, composing himself.
'Probably has acute hearing too, don't you know.' Added Luna matter of factly, seemingly unaware her comments were amusing. Ron's hand went up to his mouth to stifle his laughter.

'Could be.' Said Harry with a big grin on his face, 'So are you going back to Hogwarts if you get a letter?'
'Oh yes, absolutely. I cant imagine what else I would be doing otherwise.'

Neville came up behind her ‘Hi Harry!’
‘Hey Neville’ Harry said ‘What about you, are you going back to Hogwarts?’
‘Yeah … Gran wants me to go … but I’d go anyway.’ He looked at them nervously ‘You’re going aren’t you?’

‘I am, and Hermione.’ Said Ron ‘Luna says she’ll be going back too. I imagine Ginny will be as well.’
‘Oh, good!’ he said with some relief ‘What about you Harry?’
‘No … I don’t think so.’ Harry looked at his feet, Neville was bound to start asking questions and Harry didn’t want to lie to him. He was saved by Kingsley Shacklebolt's deep resonant voice as held his wand to his throat.

‘Welcome on behalf of the Delacours and the Weasleys! If you would please take a seat we can begin.’

‘We’d better get into place’ Ron tapped Harry on the shoulder and they headed for the dome where Bill was already standing. Whether it was the light, or the fact that Bill had never looked so happy, it was impossible to tell, but his scarring seemed almost non-existent as he stood smiling nervously.

After everyone was settled and all was quiet, a small melodic song started to drift through the air. It was hauntingly beautiful and Harry found himself looking for the source of it. He couldn’t see anything but everyone else was looking towards the platform. He looked up … the song was radiating from the golden mesh dome as it glinted in the afternoon sun. It was a phoenix song. Then Harry understood.

This whole wedding was a dedication to Dumbledore. The golden mesh dome was like that which had sung to him in the graveyard years before. And the golden statues were phoenixes. Bill and Fleur must have changed the arrangements shortly after Dumbledores death. Harry felt a dull ache in his stomach.

People started turning their heads, looking up the golden carpet expectantly. Soft ‘oohs' and 'ahhs’ crept through the crowd as Harry’s mouth gaped slightly, the ache in his stomach rising as his heartbeat quickened.

Fleur was coming down the carpet adorned in layers of white chiffon with gold silken overlays hanging in gentle peaks, her hair was up in an elaborate knot and the tiara Mrs. Weasley had offered her in the hospital ward at Hogwarts sparkled in the light. Everyone was staring at her entranced. Everyone that is, except Harry.

A little way behind Hermione came Ginny. She was also adorned in white chiffon that flowed so softly around her, it gave the appearance she was floating. Her hair was up in a knot and soft strands escaped and wisped around her face. Harry had never seen Ginny like this before, only once had he seen her dressed up and that was three years ago when they had both seemed so much younger. His eyes followed her all the way down the carpet and it wasn’t until Ron gave him a nudge that he came to and thought to close his mouth. He stared at Ginny’s slender neck, straying to the gentle line of her full lips, and as she came to a halt, he found himself waiting for her to look up at him, longing for her to acknowledge him, but her eyes stared directly ahead or at her feet.

The ceremony was quite quick and a shower of bright white sparks fell from around the edge of the dome to indicate the end. People applauded loudly and Bill and Fleur kissed before leaving the dome, Harry fell in behind them, Ginny at his side. He was acutely aware of her presence and he thought he might go mad if he had to stand with her much longer, so close, and yet unable to touch her. Thankfully the crowd followed and the bridal party dispersed to the lawn area.

Fred and George put on a display like nothing he had ever seen before. There were fireworks in the shape of white doves that flew into the air and showers of white flower petals burst from gold balls they sent into the sky. Everywhere people were laughing and clapping, but the ache in Harry’s stomach did not abate.

The chairs flew to the tables as a couple of wizards flicked their wands and everyone sat down to eat. To Harry’s dismay he was seated next to Ginny on the bridal table. She engaged herself in conversation at once with a young wizard who was a family friend of the Delacours, so Harry spoke

to Hermione and Ron who were seated next to him. Hermione looked almost as beautiful as Fleur, and it was apparent that Ron thought so too as he held Hermiones hand in his under the table, stroking it gently. Harry's chest pounded as he thought of all that he was giving up.

After the sumptuous meal which Harry barely touched, people started moving off to dance and chat with others. Ginny had left as soon as she finished eating, and Harry noted with disappointment that she had cleaned her plate. Obviously she wasn't having as hard a time as he was.

As the afternoon turned to dusk Fred and George put on another brilliant display of multicoloured fireworks that culminated in a big golden cylinder exploding over their heads that spelled out a rather mischievous comment about the impending wedding night, before showering the giggling crowd with golden glitter.

Harry felt completely drained and decided to try and slip away unnoticed. He entered the house and crept up the stairs quietly, not wanting to get trapped by someone. As he passed the bathroom something caught his attention and he paused. It sounded like someone was crying beyond the closed door.

He put his head to the wood and rapped lightly with his knuckles, 'Hello?' It went immediately silent.
'Are you alright?' Still nothing. He rapped again 'Hello?' Only silence.

He headed away from the door, climbing a little higher then stopped on the shadowed landing. A moment or two passed, and then the door clicked open. Light streamed out onto the landing and a figure emerged, closing the door behind them and heading down the stairs.

'Ginny!' Harry ran as fast as he could to catch her. Grabbing her elbow he spun her around on the step. Her eyes were red and swollen and her cheeks flushed. He brought himself level with her 'Ginny,' he said softly, taking in her pained expression. Before he could think about what he was doing he kissed her. She melted into him with a soft groan and he could feel her pain as she kissed him back.

Harry didn't know how long they stayed there like that, but something made him pull away. Drifting up the stairwell from outside were faint cries growing in the darkness. Suddenly, a series of loud bangs and crashes rang out in the distance followed by yelling from desperate voices.

'Stay here!' Harry breathed and bolted down the stairs three at a time towards the terrified screams.

4. Harry's Curse and Lupin's Promise

Harry's heartbeat raced as he whipped out his wand and pushed through the backdoor. A wizard was stumbling towards him as he leapt down the stone steps.

Harry grabbed the front of his robes and yanked him to his feet. *'What's happening?'* he asked urgently, but the wizard looked too terrified to speak. Harry released him angrily, running on as flashes of light in the night sky ahead of him were going in every direction. People were rushing passed him away from the noise, screaming women pulling their weeping children behind them. There was a tremendous crash as Harry dived out into the open, taking in the scene before him.

Tables were upturned and broken and chairs littered the lawn. Several bushes that had been hit by stray curses were ablaze and the wreckage of the dome that had just collapsed smouldered in a heap on the ground. Order members were joined by other witches and wizards scattered around the grounds, wands drawn, darting around as they struggled against the many black hooded figures encircling them.

Death Eaters!

Harry bolted towards Neville who was back to back with Luna. Both of them had their wands drawn, pointing them at the four cloaked figures that were closing in around them.

'Expelliarmus!' cried Harry and a wand flew through the air. Two of the Death Eaters turned in surprise while the other dove after his wand.
'Impedimenta!' Neville caught the back of one of the Death Eaters facing Harry. Their body stiffened.
Harry leapt sideways to avoid a curse *'Stupefy!'* A red flash from Harry's wand hit the other Death Eater, knocking them off their feet.
Luna was going toe to toe with her assailant and had hit him with a Tarantallegra curse as Neville turned to the Death Eater who was now brandishing his wand again.

'George!' Harry spun round just in time to see Fred throw black powder into the air, then suddenly disappear in darkness along with three Death Eaters. George raced in after him.

Harry searched the area in front of him, everywhere there were mini battles being fought. He spotted Hermione dodging back and forth behind a tree, staving off curses as they flew at her; Ron was rushing towards her firing as he went. He jumped over a fallen Death Eater he had downed and was yelling 'Over Here!' at the two holding Hermione at bay.

Bill had taken on three Death Eaters at once, he had a wild look in his eyes and was dodging their curses with incredible speed, jumping around even leaping into the air in a back flip to escape jets of light as they soared at him. Harry looked away just as Bill's foot connected powerfully with one of them, launching them backwards.

There was an enormous struggle going on in the ruin of the tables so Harry raced into the fray. His curses flew thick and fast as he weaved in and out the wreckage, hitting two Death Eaters almost immediately before they became aware he was behind them. 'Harry, look out!' the instant he heard Mr. Weasleys voice he dove behind an upturned table. A white light flashed over his head, barely missing him. He scurried out from behind the table *'Stupefy!'* another Death Eater crumbled as the jet of red light from Harry's wand made contact. All around him Death Eaters were dropping, so he headed back over to Neville and Luna.

They were dodging curses being thrown wildly about by a Death Eater who was laughing maniacally. He quickened his pace as his blood boiled, and when he neared, he raised his wand, but before he could fire off a curse his target suddenly dropped to the ground for no apparent reason.

Harry ran up to the body, lifting it slightly with his foot, it rolled limply. He looked about him and saw two more Death Eaters drop one after the other in mid duel without any obvious cause, but a few others were fighting on, now highly out numbered. His eyes fell on Ginny, her hair was strewn across her face and her dress was covered in grass stains, she fought alongside Ron and Hermione as they downed another Death Eater. He smiled inwardly; he had known she would come, she had probably been right behind him.

With the last Death Eater on the ground, people were starting to file back onto the lawn slowly, looking for family and friends they had been separated from. By some sort of miracle it seemed all of the fallen were Death Eaters, though many of their side displayed signs of the tussle. Lupin and the others were going around the unconscious and cursed, disarming them and placing binds around their bodies.

Then suddenly, Harry was yanked backwards.

'What?' he looked around but stood his ground. A young witch he didn't know had him by the arm and was trying to drag him towards the house.

'Please! … Please help!' Her eyes were wide with fear and swollen with tears. *'Please… you have to come … she needs you!'*

Harry frowned 'who? … where?' he hurried off with the young girl; once again going in the opposite direction to everyone else 'Where are we going?' They didn't go into the house as Harry had expected, instead she led him round to the front. The young witch then let go of Harry's arm as they entered the yard and stood wide-eyed, looking terrified.

Harry's eyes wandered around the deserted yard, wondering what he was looking for 'Where are

you?' he yelled.

The old wooden gate at the end of the long pathway squeaked as it hung loosely off its hinges, it was gaping open to reveal a young girl with silky blonde hair illuminated by the torchlight. *Gabrielle?* Fleur's younger sister, who idolized Harry, was staring at him, motionless, eyes full of horror and tears streaming down her pale face.

'What is it? … What's wrong?' He walked slowly towards her, his wand hanging at his side. As he made his way up the path a feeling of dread took hold of him. He broke into a run but pulled up suddenly, stunned. A figure was coming into view behind her as it pulled off a silvery cloak.

Bellatrix was standing with a malicious smile twisted across her face and her wand tip at Gabrielle's temple.

The young witch behind Harry whimpered and he felt his stomach drop as panic began to rise in him. The world seemed to stop. Nothing existed outside the three of them. He raised his wand, pointing it at Bellatrix's head.

'Don't' he said quietly.

Laughter trickled out of her cruel mouth, her eyes gleaming in the light. 'You are so *predictable*, Potter.' She looked amused, shaking her head slightly 'Always the hero. But you never stop to think!' He looked down into Gabrielle's frightened eyes. A wave of nausea surged through him painfully. She was staring at him through watery wide-eyes as tears spilled down her cheek, too terrified to move or speak. Silently pleading. His wand arm began to tremble.

'Don't do it.' His voice came out low and unsteady. Bellatrix glanced down at the girl in front of her.

'You're really not doing them any favours.' she taunted. 'Its because she loved you, you know ... that's why she's going to die.'

Harry felt like his chest was caving in on him. Sounding more like a plea as his eyes stung with hot tears, he urged 'don't … don't do it!' hardly able to breathe.

'Aw, poor little puppy!' she mocked in a babyish voice. 'You knew this would happen. You've got nobody to blame but yourself.' She said it as if he were child. 'You knew you would get somebody killed!' Her wand hand tilted slightly.

'NO!' Two loud cracks rang out. Gabrielle went limp as a red flash soared over her into the darkness. Bellatrix was gone, and Gabrielle crumpled to the ground.

It was as if Harry had sunk into a dream ... a nightmare he could not wake from. Nothing felt real as the world faded around him. He went to Gabrielle, slowing as he neared her, dreading what he would find. *'No'* escaped his lips as he struggled to breathe. She was lying at an awkward angle on her back, her head lolled to one side. He knelt down hesitantly, and cupped her small face in his hand. As he turned her gently to him he saw the scorched area on her temple where the wand had touched it. *'No'* He was sinking rapidly ... sinking into the very earth with the weight of it.

There were muffled sounds coming from behind him but they seemed to him to be a great distance away as he stared at the lifeless face in his hands. *'… Harry… Harry!'* Lupins voice was swimming around his head and he was vaguely aware of another figure on the ground opposite him. *'Gabrielle!'* It peeled his hand off the expressionless face. Then there were more shapes and more voices. *'Harry … Harry!'* He felt himself being drawn up by the arm, still staring at the sleeping face, unable to look away *'... take him ... Get him out of here!'* A faraway voice spoke. Harry dragged his eyes from her as he was pulled away. He felt sick and wanted to throw up ... *'Get him up to his room!'* It sounded like Mrs. Weasley but she was only faint, there was a loud wailing somewhere far off ... *'Open the door!'* Hermiones voice came from the distance ... *'This way, mate'* Harry felt Ron's hand on his shoulder as he mounted the stairs. When they reached the bathroom he broke away and flung himself over the toilet. He could hear Hermione's sobs behind him as he spluttered and vomited and retched until his whole body ached.

Then somehow he was in his room, sitting on the bed flanked by Hermione and Ron. He was

weakened and shaking uncontrollably. *'I killed her...'* He said in a voice that didn't seem to belong to him. Hermione whimpered softly as he stared at the floor, Gabrielle's lifeless face burned into his mind. *'It was my fault…'*

'No ... no Harry… don't say that!' Hermiones voice was raw with emotion.
'It wasn't your fault mate …' Ron's calming voice echoed in his ear 'it was a trap …' his hand was on the back of Harry's shoulder

'It was because of me...' that strange voice again *'she's dead ... because of me...'*
'Harry … you couldn't have done anything … it wasn't you...' Hermione put her arm on his back

'I knew this would happen … I knew …'
'It was a trap … they weren't Death Eaters we were fighting in the backyard Harry … it wasn't your fault … they set you up' Ron's voice was quiet.

Harry lifted his head slowly and looked at Ron 'what are you ... talking ...?'

'Those people out there are not Death Eaters. They were just witches and wizards … must have been under the imperious curse.'

'What?' Harry felt lost, alone ... and angry, so very angry.

'That's why we were able to defeat them so easily.' Hermione said as he turned to her 'they weren't Death Eaters Harry. It was a trap … they were setting you up.' Her eyes were red and swollen.

Harry felt the hatred swell in him 'Why? ... So I could watch them murder an innocent young girl?' his voice was laced with loathing as his eyes prickled with angry tears.

'I-I don't know wh-why…' fresh tears spilled down her cheeks. Harry hung his head unable to think straight. Staring at the floor he rubbed his hand over his messy hair, he was shaking as the anger coursed through his body.

A figure emerged through the doorway and Harry knew who it was without looking up. 'Get out.' He said quietly not raising his head. There was a sharp intake of breath and he knew he had struck her deeply. He closed his eyes painfully *'GO!'*

In a flurry of chiffon she was gone. Hermione leapt off the bed sobbing and chased after Ginny.

'C'mon mate,' Ron said hoarsely. 'I think you should lay down for a bit.'

Harry stayed where he was. He did not move. He would not sleep. His body ached and his mind was numb and he had never felt as angry or as sad, or as guilty in his entire life.

~*~*~*~

Harry stared out of the bedroom window. The morning's rays shone harshly down on the scene before him. Everyone had long gone, the fake Death Eaters had been taken to St Mungos under guard and all that was left of the nights events were a few burn patches and some shrapnel strewn across the lawn. Several Order members and aurors from the ministry were planted around the grounds.

The ministry's aurors had been conspicuously absent until now, probably because Harry had not agreed to Scrimgeour's request to be the "face" of the ministry. As Harry unconsciously counted them he saw Moody emerge from the side of the house, looking up at his window. He should've known Lupin would put Moody on him. Harry felt a stab of anger; Lupin would know what he was thinking.

Realizing it was pointless trying to leave, he turned away from the window and sat on the bed. Gabrielle's lifeless face haunted him. He pulled off his glasses and rubbed his eyes in an effort to push the image from his mind. He was in no doubt what he had to do. One thought had overtaken

him from the moment Ron had left the room. He had to leave. He endangered everyone around him; everyone he cared about. Voldemort would kill all of them, one by one, to get to him.

Harry could hear movement somewhere down stairs; Mrs. Weasley would be fixing breakfast for the guard. She had come to him during the night with a potion for sleep, though she had not tried to soothe him or hug him, for which Harry was thankful. She had looked at him pityingly and told him he should sleep, placing the potion by the bed before she left. And there the potion still sat, untouched. It would not have been right to sleep peacefully, to spend the night as if nothing had happened. He had seen Gabrielle's torment and knew she deserved better than that.

There was a small knock at the door. Harry sat silently, not wanting to see anyone, his body was weary and he felt the lowest he had ever felt. The door creaked open and Harry looked up into Lupins tired face. He looked away quickly as the anger in him rose. Lupin closed the door behind him and walked across the room, pulling up a chair. Harry avoided looking at him; he did not want to hear what Lupin would say. He would tell Harry it wasn't his fault. He would try to convince Harry that staying here was best. But Lupin did not know what Harry knew, he did not know about the Horcruxes, he had not been privy to the memories Dumbledore had shown Harry. He did not know that Dumbledore had expected Harry to go on alone.

He would not understand.

Lupin sat for a moment in silence, and then finally he spoke. 'I wont pretend to know what you must be feeling, Harry.' Lupin said quietly 'And I don't suppose anything I can say, will make you feel any better.' He sighed deeply 'No one should have to go through what you did last night…'

'It was nothing to what Gabrielle went through.' Harry said bitterly.
Lupin bowed his head. 'I know this is the last thing you want to hear right now, but-'
'Then don't say it!' Harry said sharply, looking at the top of Lupins head, his anger brewing inside him.

Lupin got up and walked over to the window, he stood looking out at the wreckage below. 'I don't know what to do anymore, Harry.' Looking at him, Harry thought his face appeared pasty in the early grey light.
'If anyone is to blame it's me.' Lupin did not turn to look at Harry as he spoke sombrely. 'I was responsible for the safety of everyone here last night Harry, not you. I should have seen it was a trap as soon as they attacked. It made no sense for them to wait until there were so many people around. If Voldemort wanted to kill you he would have tried when there were fewer of us to fight.

'Instead he sent unwilling servants in under the imperious curse to fight a battle they could not win. Voldemort would not lose any of his *valuable* Death Eaters in the process of drawing you out. An extraordinarily elaborate scheme which must have involved a lot of man power and heavy planning.' Harry searched the floor in front of him, taking in everything Lupin said 'I spoke to the young girl who led you to the front garden. She told how a woman at the wedding had approached her and Gabrielle, asking whom they were … whether they knew you. She was another one under the imperious curse of course, except that she was a guest at the wedding. Gabrielle was only too eager to talk about you.

'She told the woman how you saved her from the merpeople more than two years ago, and how she had been very much looking forward to seeing you again at the wedding.' Harry closed his eyes and sucked in his pain. 'I found out later the woman had approached others, but after speaking with Gabrielle, she had found what she was looking for. When we were attacked, she lured the two young girls to the front of the house, and then all she had to do was wait until people returned to the back yard. She told Gabrielle that Harry Potter was hurt, that he was lying on the road in need of help. Gabrielle rushed out of the gate to find you and that is when a real Death Eater grabbed her-'

'It was Bellatrix LeStrange.' Harry said hatefully.

Lupin lowered his head, and after a moment he continued 'She sent the other young girl to find you, she was told to go only to Harry Potter or she would kill Gabrielle.' Lupin turned to look at Harry now. He looked sicklier than Harry had ever seen him 'I made a mistake Harry … a mistake that cost a young girl her life.'

‘Bellatrix did it. Not you …' Harry swallowed ‘and not me.’ It felt strange to say it, but Harry was beginning to understand as Lupin recounted the nights events, that there was no way either of them could have known what would unfold. It didn’t dull his pain, but it helped to clear his head. ‘She did it … she’s the murderer … and she’s the one who’ll pay for it!’ Harry was seething inside as he looked up at Lupin ‘I’m going after her.' he said flatly 'She sent Sirius to his death, she put Neville’s parents in St Mungos and now …’ he looked at his feet ‘now this. She has to be stopped,’ he looked back at Lupin ‘before she gets the opportunity to destroy someone else’s life.’ Harry was ready for an argument; his barely suppressed rage would be unleashed upon Lupin any minute.

‘She wont be easy to get to,’ Lupin said as he crossed the floor and sat himself down ‘we’ve being trying for months. I’ve got a personal score to settle with her myself.’ Harry had not expected this. ‘Harry, I realize that you come of age next week, and I’m fully aware that you have no intentions of staying here after that.' Lupin held up a hand 'I understand why,’ he rushed on before Harry could speak ‘and I wont try to stop you, but you should be aware that everything that happened last night was to push you to make this choice.’ Harry frowned at Lupin as he continued ‘Voldemort knows what sort of person you are. He has seen the lengths you will go to, to protect others. The trap was laid with the express purpose of convincing you to go it alone. Why? I can only guess that he feels it will make it easier for him to get to you. But Harry,’ Lupin held Harry’s gaze ‘you do not need to do this alone. I will be there every step of the way to help you with this. And if you must face Voldemort … then I will have your back. That I promise you.’

Harry felt a surge of gratitude to the weary figure before him, though he would have no more willingly put Lupin in danger than he would have Sirius. But knowing that Lupin felt this way lightened Harry’s heart a little, and he managed to let go of the anger that was threatening to consume him. Mrs. Weasley came in and left a tray of toast and pumpkin juice on the cabinet next to the old black chest. She looked as worn out as Lupin.

‘How’s Fleur’s family?’ Harry asked her quietly. She looked at him as if she were pondering whether to answer or not. He could see her eyes were unusually watery and he thought that she might burst into tears; he immediately regretted asking.

‘I don’t think you need worry about anyone else for the moment.’ There was that look of pity again. ‘People get through these things … they always do.’ Her voice was the softest he had ever heard it. ‘I want you to stay in here for today … you need your rest.' Her eye's flickered over the cup that sat on his cabinet 'And I see you haven’t taken your potion, so you wont have slept.’ A tear spilled down her cheek and she brushed it away hastily, embarrassed. ‘You can’t go on punishing yourself for something you had no control over.’ Her voice was decidedly shaky so Harry, fearing she would start crying, looked down at his feet. Lupin got up and put his hand on Harry’s shoulder ‘Get some rest,’ then he turned and left with Mrs. Weasley.

Harry looked at the breakfast tray and felt sick all over again, so he threw a t-shirt over the food. He lay back on the bed, his hands behind his head and thought about what Lupin had said. Voldemort may have wanted Harry to leave everyone behind, but he was unaware Harry knew his secret. He didn’t know that Harry’s best chance of destroying him was to be out there alone. Pain washed through him as he thought of Gabrielle. It sickened him as he thought of Fleur, it had been her wedding day and he couldn’t have imagined a worse ending.

There was a soft knock and Harry saw Ron’s face peer round the door. ‘You want some company?’ Harry nodded slightly, anything to stave off those terrified eyes that crept into his thoughts. Ron walked over and sat on the chair Lupin had vacated.

‘Mum said you looked terrible’ he said in agreement ‘I suppose Lupin told you what happened last night.’ Ron was frowning as if not sure he should be asking about it.
‘Yeah’

Ron nodded and sighed ‘He was wasting his time going to all that effort when you were leaving anyway.’ Ron spoke quietly as he stared off into space. Harry knew Ron meant well, but he was beginning to wish he hadn’t told him to come in. ‘Have some toast, mate’ he said as he pulled the t-shirt off and lifted the tray down. Harry sat up and looked at the dry bread again. If it meant he didn’t have to talk about last night and still have Ron’s company then he would eat. He couldn’t bare the thought of putting anything on the toast so he nibbled at the small cardboard like pieces

uninterestedly.

Hermione came in while he was chewing a particularly stubborn piece of toast. It didn't seem to want to go down at all so Harry gave up trying to eat anymore. Hermione regarded Harry closely and went to say something, but then seemed to think the better of it and sat gingerly on his bed instead. 'You should try to eat more Harry.' She was looking at the pathetically nibbled edges of his toast.

'I've had enough' he said and put the tray down. 'So how's Fleur?'
Hermione's frown deepened.
'Mrs. Weasley spent all night with her. Mrs. Delacour was taken to St Mungos, Fleur's dad went with her, she was in pretty bad shape … she kept saying over and over that her baby was dead, and no matter what Ron's mum said, she couldn't calm her…' her voice trailed off as she saw the effect of her answer in Harry's face.

He could feel the nausea building as he jumped off the bed and flew down to the bathroom, only just making it in time. There wasn't much to purge so he spent most of his time dry retching. Ron was waiting outside the bathroom when he emerged 'S'okay mate,' he said sombrely. Harry was feeling slightly embarrassed and avoided looking Ron in the face, but Ron put his hand on Harry's back and followed him up to the room.

Hermione had her face in her hands, she looked up when they came in 'I'm sorry … that was so stupid of me,' Her eyes were leaking fresh tears.
'Don't worry about it,' Harry ached from the convulsions so he sat back down on the bed, he was feeling so weak his body shook.

'I wish there was something I could do for you, mate, but I don't think it's gonna be that easy.' Ron looked extremely sober.
'There is something you can do,' said Hermione in an unsteady tone 'get him to drink that.' She gestured to the potion on the bedside cabinet.
Ron looked over at the cup and then at Harry 'How 'bout it?' he said quietly

Harry looked at the cup and thought about what it held. Sleep … *Peace*. He took the cup and placed it to his lips, looking down at the purple contents. Peace, he thought as he tipped it back and swallowed it down. He pulled off his glasses and placed them on the cabinet as he lay back on the pillow and closed his eyes, within seconds he felt the drowsiness of sleep envelope him.

Nothingness.

5. Leaving the Burrow Behind

Harry had not wanted to celebrate his birthday. He had waited impatiently for it to come for only one reason. He would be of age, he would be considered an adult in the wizarding world, which would entitle him to do magic where and when he saw fit.

He woke on the morning of his seventeenth birthday, drenched in sweat from another fitful sleep. He showered and dressed and headed down the stairs. Mrs. Weasley hugged him tightly as soon as he appeared, she did not wish him a happy birthday but handed him a plate of fried eggs and toast instead. Every meal she dished Harry up a full plate of food in the hopes that he would eat more than a couple of mouthfuls.

'Lupin will be here soon to take you for your apparation test' she said as he plonked himself down at the table.
'Where're Ron and Hermione?' he had checked their rooms before coming down, and finding them empty, had expected to see them at the kitchen table, tucking into breakfast.

'They've already eaten' she said 'they're outside somewhere' When Harry immediately got up to leave she pushed him back down in his seat. 'Oh no you don't!' she said 'you'll eat first! And a decent amount too this time.' her voice was stern but her eyes were full of concern 'You're getting

thinner every day…'

Harry pushed the oozing eggs to the side of his plate and managed to down two pieces of toast and butter. He waited until Mrs. Weasley had her back turned then left the table quietly and went outside in search of his two best friends.

He found them huddled together under the enormous willow tree, in hushed conversation. Several aurors were wandering the perimeter, eyeing Harry as he made his way over to Ron and Hermione. As he neared them, they stopped whispering and looked up guiltily.

'What's up?' Harry frowned down at them.
'Nothing' they said in unison. Harry looked from one to the other; his eyes narrowed 'Right'
'Lupin not here yet then?' Ron said quickly
'No … not yet … what were you just-'

'I know you'll be fine Harry' Hermione interrupted 'you've apparated a few times now … even conducted a side-along … you'll pass no problems.' She said with a wave of her hand.
'Maybe … but what were you-'
'And if I can pass' Ron said 'you definitely can!' Harry shrugged and opened his mouth to speak.

'Did he say what time you'd be back?' asked Hermione 'Lupin I mean'
'No, he didn't … What-'
'So how does it feel, knowing you can do magic whenever you want?' Ron grinned at him
'No different really' Harry was beginning to lose his temper 'what were you two-'

'Harry!' Harry looked over his shoulder at Lupin, who was coming down the stone steps with Tonks in his wake. He was carrying an empty milk bottle in one hand and his wand in the other. 'Ready to go?'
Harry turned towards him and nodded.

'Good. Alright!' Lupin motioned to two of the aurors nearby. 'Ministry orders' said Lupin in answer to Harry's frown 'you've got to have at least two of them wherever you go.' Harry recognized Dawlish as he jogged over and nodded at Lupin, he did not know the other man. Lupin tapped the bottle with his wand. 'Portus' the bottle glowed for a moment as it shook in Lupins hand, then returned to normal.

Harry went to place his finger on the portkey but paused and looked back at Ron and Hermione and said accusingly. 'I'm not finished with you two yet!' They raised their eyebrows as Harry turned his attention back on the bottle. He placed his finger on it, looking around at the four faces opposite him. He just had time register how over the top it seemed to have four escorts to the Ministry of Magic for his apparation test, before he felt the familiar pull behind his navel and the world began to swirl around him.

They were in the Atrium in the Ministry of Magic. It was much less bustling than it had been last time Harry was here during opening hours. He noticed several wizards standing at the entrance to the golden gates, all dressed in the same emerald robes that bore a Ministry badge on the right hand side above the chest.

'Ministry Guards' whispered Tonks in Harry's ear. The golden statues of the wizard, witch, centaur and house elf that had been destroyed in the fight against Voldemort just over a year ago had not been replaced. Instead only the platform remained, still surrounded by the pond Harry had thrown numerous Galleons into when he had been on trial two years ago.

'What's that?' Harry leant to one side to avoid a small, silent black orb, no bigger than a golden snitch that glided passed him, circled back and then proceeded to weave through them.

'It's a Stalker' Tonks continued 'It's sort of a floating eye that can think for itself' Harry raised his eyebrows 'it's extraordinarily useful. It will follow anyone it is suspicious of or has been told to watch out for, relaying the images back to the receiver.' Tonks was smiling as she watched it zoom over to some new arrivals that had just entered through the floo network. 'They are extremely rare, the ministry has one of only three known in existence.' She glanced sideways at Harry 'The Order could use one of those on you permanently.' Harry was silently grateful they did not have one.

Once through security at the large golden gates, they headed to the elevators and disembarked at Level Six where the *Apparation Test Centre* was located. They passed more of the Ministry guards as Lupin guided Harry along the corridor. Suddenly a familiar voice sounded from behind them.

'Harry!'

Harry sighed as he turned, preparing himself. 'Can I have a word with you?' Scrimgeour said as he caught up to them '… in private' he added looking at Lupin.
Harry shrugged 'I still don't have anything to tell you.'

Scrimgeour frowned and said 'Maybe I have something to tell you.'
Harry eyed him for a moment before following him back down the corridor towards the lifts.
'What?' he said flatly.

'There is a fair bit of speculation going on Harry, as to what you will do now you've come of age.' Scrimgeour spoke in a low voice. 'And after what happened the other night, the death of that young girl … well,' Harry could just make out the tell tail glistening of sweat on Scrimgeour face 'quite frankly, most people believe you will leave … disappear from public view.'

Harry could feel the anger creeping inside him but he kept his voice even 'I don't see how that concerns you. Seems to me that's my business now I'm an *adult*'
'Unfortunately, that is not quite true, young man. You're somewhat of a special case, as you well know. People would feel ... more secure if they knew you were around. After all, it is my job to make sure people feel safe-'

'I'm sure if you put the Death Eaters behind bars, find a way to stop the Dementors, and destroy Voldemort, you'd be well on the way to making people feel *secure*.'
'You're being foolish.' Scrimgeour's eyes narrowed, his voice suddenly growing cold 'You need my help … the Ministry's protection.'

Harry looked back at Dawlish and the other auror 'Take them back. I don't want them. They'd be better put to use elsewhere.'
'You wont survive a month on your own out there.' Scrimgeour said unpleasantly.
'Stan Shuntpike is still locked up I take it?' Scrimgeour's scowl was enough of an answer. 'As I've said before *Minister*, you should concentrate on the people who *do* need you.' Harry said it with deliberate pleasantness, then turned and left leaving an angry Scrimgeour at the lifts. He then followed Lupin and Tonks through a door marked *Apparation Test Centre*.

It was as easy as Hermione had said it would be, although Harry still disliked the sensation. He returned to the Atrium with the test instructor after Lupin spoke to him at length, and they took the floo to Hogsmeade. Harry had to apparate himself in front of "The Hog's Head" and then do one more jump to the boarded up Zonko's before they returned. Once he had his license, he made his way back to the Atrium with Lupin and Tonks, the two ministry aurors trailing behind, the Stalker hovering over them quietly. Harry could almost see Scrimgeour sitting in his office watching them.

'All right Harry; we'll apparate to the gate at The Burrow. Ready?' Lupin smiled faintly. Harry nodded and closed his eyes tightly.

Once at The Burrow, he went to head inside but Tonks grabbed his arm lightly, 'This way Harry' she said as she led him round to the back of the house. When they reached the backyard Harry stood for a moment looking about him, wondering what was going on.

There were more than a dozen people milling around on the grass.

'Hiya Harry!' It was Angelina Johnson who noticed them first; she was standing with Alicia, Katie and Ginny, waving at Harry with a big grin on her face. As they came forward to greet him, Harry spotted Fred and George standing with Ron and Hermione, and next to them he almost couldn't believe it, was Hagrid.

'What's going on?' Harry said, bewildered.
'We thought you might like a round of Quidditch to celebrate getting your license.' Ron was grinning

from ear to ear
'But … how …'

'Took a fair bit of organizing, but everyone was really keen to come.'
'Course we were!' said Fred 'Not everyday you get your Apparation License, is it?' chimed in George with a wink.
'I don't … understand …' Harry looked at Neville and Luna who were smiling broadly at him

'Go and get your gear on!' said Angelina, turning him back to the house. It was then that Harry realized she was in full Quidditch garb, along with all the other old team members.

He left them behind feeling somewhat dazed as he climbed the stairs to change. It struck him that this had been what Ron and Hermione were whispering about earlier, they must have organized it over the past few days ... come to think of it, Pigwideon had seemed awfully excited lately, though it had been hard to tell the difference considering his normal state of elation.

Harry was not fooled that it was to celebrate his Apparation license, and even though the thought of celebrating his birthday had repulsed him only this morning, he felt deeply touched that Ron and Hermione had gone to so much trouble.

When he emerged fully attired, Hagrid grinned at him 'Thought you might be needin this.' He handed Harry the Firebolt he had left in his hut before leaving for Godric's Hollow. The aurors and Order members split up so some could station themselves around the field, and the original Gryffindor Quidditch team (minus Wood who was overseas playing pro according to Angelina) headed to the old paddock the Weasleys used for practice, talking amongst themselves.

Lupin and Tonks chatted to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Hagrid as they walked along and Dean and Seamus were stifling smiles as Luna launched into an exaggerated explanation of how a Snorkelled Mudlug Slug breathed through it's snorkel part to a very interested looking Neville.

When Harry hit the field and launched himself into the air it felt like the weight of the world had lifted off his shoulders. He let go of everything that had happened over the past few months and flew around the paddock feeling freer than he had felt in a long time. George had brought a set of real Quidditch balls with him, including the snitch, which Harry and Ginny raced after. She did not show any sign of her last meeting with him, for which Harry was glad. He was still appreciative of Ginny's skill on a broom, even though he caught the snitch before her. She had incredible grace and yet an aggressive drive that meant they almost collided a couple of times, though laughing it off as they flew into another round.

Cheers were regularly heard from Seamus and Dean, and even Lupin could be heard saying a triumphant *Yes!* Every now and then, much to Hagrid's apparent surprise. Ron appeared to have no problem with nerves in front of so few people, and made some spectacular saves to the roaring delight of Mrs. Weasley.

'I'm tempted to let them go through just so she doesn't do that!' Ron said to Harry about her whooping.

Ron's mum was a particularly enthusiastic supporter. At one point when Angelina scored an extremely difficult goal in the makeshift hoops Mr. Weasley had set up, Mrs. Weasley threw her hands up in the air and did a little victory dance with Neville looking on nervously like he thought she might explode.

'*That* is why we never bring mum to a match.' Said Fred when he stopped near Harry.

It was the best day Harry could remember having in a long time, and when they finally retired to the backyard for dinner, the mood at The Burrow was lighter than it had been yet. They all sat and laughed and talked like there were no other cares to worry them. Harry ate so much he had to slouch in the chair to make himself comfortable, and as the evening wore on he reluctantly waved goodbye to his fellow Gryffindor students, and Luna and Hagrid. Not long after Mrs. Weasley went off to bed followed by Mr. Weasley, and Lupin and Tonks left with Fred and George leaving just Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny sitting by the fireside in the lounge.

Harry watched the flames dancing glow on Ginny's red hair for a while as they sat in silence. 'Thanks guys.' Harry said quietly 'It was a good day.' Hermione's eyes twinkled as she smiled at him, her head leaning lazily on Ron's chest. No one said anything; nothing needed to be said. The four of them sat for the longest time, savouring their last peaceful moments together before Harry finally rose and went to bed, the others trailing after him.

He lay in the silvery moonlight, thinking that this had been by far the best birthday he had ever had. A smile crept across his face; he felt very lucky to have friends like Ron and Hermione. His thoughts were interrupted suddenly and he turned his head as the bedroom door clicked open and a small figure swept through and closed it quietly behind them. It padded over to the bed as Harry lifted himself on his elbow.

That wonderful faint flowery smell filled his senses as Ginny scooted into bed alongside him with her back to him, afraid he would turn her away. He closed his arm over her and pulled her to him. He knew why she had come, he too had felt the need for her and though his head told him to make her leave, his heart ached for her to stay.

Harry had longed to feel her warm body beside him and now that he held her close he could no longer stop himself. He brushed her hair back with his hand and she turned her face to him. Bending his head, he brought his lips to hers, a fire burning inside him. She gave herself to him as hot tears trickled down her face.

It was the tenderest thing Harry had ever known, her lips were soft and warm and her taste was sweet. His kisses grew more urgent as her hands on his bare skin sent shivers through him. He could feel her unsteady breathing, her body weighted down by his. He kissed away the dampness on her cheeks and buried his head in her neck as she entwined her fingers in his hair. The need in him flared dangerously so he took some deep, ragged breaths before lifting his head and looking at her. Though her green eyes smouldered with passion, Harry could see fear behind them as they stared up at him. A dull ache pulsed through him 'I cant' he said breathing heavily.

Her eyes filled with tears *'Harry'* she said throatily *'please'* pulling his face to hers and kissing him invitingly. He lost himself in her want as he kissed her deeply, welcoming the sensation of her tongue on his. And when he finally looked down at her again he was searching her face. He could see the doubt she tried to conceal. He swallowed hard, his body shaking with desire. 'I cant' he pulled his weight off her; afraid he would give in if she kissed him like that again.

She threw the covers off and went to leave but Harry grabbed her by the wrist. 'Don't go' He whispered. She paused for a moment then allowed him to pull her back down, moulding herself to his body, and as he lay there listening to her breathing, waiting for sleep to take them, his chest pained with the thought that this could be their last time alone together.

~*~*~*~

Ginny's lips brushed Harry's cheek lightly as she slipped out of bed just before dawn. Harry opened his eyes when he heard the door click shut and threw an arm over his forehead angrily. She had offered him comfort he could not have sort for himself, but he was regretting his decision to lay with her. Every step closer to her he took made it that much more dangerous for her. He rolled on his side cursing himself for his weakness, hating himself for needing her.

As he looked at the gloomy shadows around the room his eyes fell on the small black chest Emerick had given him. It had crouched there since he had first arrived at The Burrow, unopened and unheeded. He flung his feet on the floor and pulled his wand from under the pillow and pointed it at the thick white candle on his bedside cabinet. He narrowed his eyes … *Incendio* he thought. The room remained in darkness. Harry redoubled his efforts and narrowed his eyes further still, casting a piercing gaze at the deadened candle. *Incendio!* It ignited immediately, throwing off a gentle light that filled the room by which Harry dressed.

He snatched up the chest and sat it down on the bed, examining the lock. It looked simple enough so Harry pointed his wand at it. *Alohomora* he thought. Nothing happened. Determined to practice

his non-verbal spells he tired again *Alohomora!* Still nothing. Frustrated with himself he said aloud '*Alohomora!*' fully expecting the rusted old lock to spring open; but it remained firmly shut. Harry sighed and lifted the chest to the candlelight. He peered into the lock and could just make out something jammed deep inside it.

He pointed his wand at the lock and stared hard at it *Waddiwasi!* Something shot out of the lock, collided with Harry's head then rebounded onto the floor. 'Owe…' he rubbed his hand at the smarting patch of forehead while searching for what had hit him. He picked up what looked like an old bit of chewed paper. He tossed it onto the bed with a scowl and turned his attention back on the chest. *Alohomora!* He thought determinedly, the tip of his wand hovering next to the lock. It opened with a small *flock*. Harry rested the chest on his knees so that it was close to the light and lifted the lid.

On top there was a small scroll, stained and tattered, and frayed round the edges. Harry picked it out and unrolled it carefully, studying the faded patchy writing that remained. The words near the edge of the parchment were gone but he could make out most of it…

…rest Lily,

…e home as soon as…
…merick to deliver this t…
…received news of his pla…
…will be all hands on d…
…w is my little guy do…
…bout you both, day and…
…in with Sooty to make su…
…member to use the m…
…will come as soon as…
…ss you my darling Lily…
…unior a hug from his da…
…y love, James

It was almost as though his father had spoken to him from the grave as it must have been written during the time they were in hiding. A knot formed in the pit of his stomach as he finally rolled it back up and placed it carefully on the bed, turning back to the chest again.

Harry pulled out a couple of small badly tarnished, silver figurines. It took him a while staring at them intently, to work out what they were. Both were of people, however one was of a bearded man, tall and straight with a long pointed hat and a staff grasped in one hand, the other was of a woman, dressed in flowing robes, her head adorned with an elaborate tiara. Harry turned them over in his fingers, wondering why they looked familiar to him. He placed them on the bed next to the scroll and dipped into the chest once again.

There was a pendant attached to a gold chain and an assortment of loose trinkets, all were tarnished almost beyond recognition, though he could still make out a couple of them, one of which appeared to be a miniature gold broom; if it had any magical properties, they had long since been destroyed. The other was a stubby brass candle that was burnt and stained and also appeared to hold no magical powers. The pendant looked like a wheel and it too was blackened round the edges.

After putting them aside, Harry reached in to find a blotchy white card resting on a mound of blue cloth that had yellowed stains and scorch marks around the edges. He brought the card up to the light and turned it over, and there, with smiles on their faces and a baby cradled in their arms, sat James and Lily Potter. But unlike other photo's Harry had seen of his mother and father, this James and Lily's smile did not reach their eyes. They were sitting in a brightly lit room on a long floral couch, and Harry knew it was the sunroom Emerick had spoken of. The room where his mother would sit and wait for James.

He placed it face up on the bed, alongside the other bits and pieces, and then peered into the chest to remove the last item. When Harry lifted it out of the chest he was surprised by it's spongy feel and as he brought it closer to him he realized what he had mistaken for a wad of blue material was actually a small teddy bear. One of its ears was burnt off and its shaggy blue fur was scorched and patchy in places. It only had one eye and where a little red tongue should've been poking out, there

were only traces of thin red threads dangling aimlessly. Harry pulled at the loose threads with a bittersweet smile on his face. It was grubby and tatty and worthy of the rubbish bin but it was a small link in the chain that connected him to his past so he placed it back inside the chest carefully before replacing the other items and closing the lid.

The pendant dangled from Harry's hand as he stored the chest inside his trunk. He had unconsciously decided not to pack it away with everything else and as he looked at it again he thought of his mother and father and wondered if either of them had worn it very often. He placed the pendant around his neck, tucking it into his clothes just as there was a knock at the door. Harry grunted, wondering who it could be as the dawns light was only just beginning to creep across the floor.

'Hey' Ron poked his head around the door, and seeing Harry dressed he entered and closed the door behind him. 'Thought you'd be up early. So today's the day then.'
Harry nodded and smiled faintly.

'Your not planning to go yet though … I mean, this early? Mum and dad'll want to talk to you first.'
'I've been thinking about where I should go.' Harry looked out the window 'I want to visit my parents graves, but I don't think it would be a smart thing to do right now.' He could see the ministries aurors slouched around the yard.

'Yeah' Ron joined him at the window 'There's always The Headquarters' he shrugged 'I mean, it's yours now anyhow.' Harry didn't relish the thought of returning there. Sirius had regarded it as a prison before he died, and it was one of the least homely places you could imagine.

'I think I'll go back there … at least for now.' He looked at Ron 'Maybe they've finally managed to remove Sirius's mums portrait.' he said with a wry smile.
'I wouldn't count on it mate' Ron smiled as he led Harry out of the room 'Something tells me she's one stubborn old witch!'

'Alright, Harry?' Tonks greeted him as they entered the kitchen, dangling a bit of egg-white from her fork.

'You two, sit!' Mrs. Weasley said sharply, she was bustling about with the pots and pans looking highly agitated. Harry tried to catch Ron's eye but he seemed extremely concerned with where his feet were going as he moved to the table and sat without a word. Mrs. Weasley unceremoniously plonked a large bowl full of scrambled eggs between them before she sent two plates flying their way. Harry had to duck and use his lightening reflexes to grasp his plate as it came close to taking his head off, and Ron's flew right passed him and shattered against the wall behind. Harry pulled out his wand *Reparo!* He handed Ron the newly repaired plate.

'Oh!' A dish piled high with bacon that Mrs. Weasley had been sending their way turned on its head as she blustered out of frustration. She waved her wand heatedly and the spilled bacon flew to the bin. Then she turned her back to them and started frying a new batch, mumbling grumpily under her breath.

'*What's wrong with her?*' mouthed Harry at Tonks, giving up on Ron who seemed to be avoiding him. Tonks gave a non-committal shrug as she took another mouthful. Hermione appeared not long after, looking around at their faces sheepishly. She seemed to be aware of the tension as she sat at the table and watched Mrs. Weasley float the newly cooked bacon over to them while the pan in the sink cleaned itself.

Before the bacon dish could land safely on the table however, it began to spin wildly in mid air. Pieces of bacon flew off in all directions as Harry, Ron and Hermione ducked for cover, and Tonks was on her feet and with a wave of her wand the now empty plate came to a rest in the middle of the table.

Mrs. Weasley was beside herself. *'Oh not another one!'*
'Maybe I'd better cook the bacon, Molly' Tonks said as she flicked her wrist, bits of bacon lifting into the air and flinging themselves in the bin.
'NO!' Mrs. Weasley started 'Oh … er … I mean, that's quite alright dear, I can manage.' She obviously thought the damage she was doing was still preferable to unleashing Tonks in the kitchen.

‘Morning all!’ Harry looked up and saw Mr. Weasley come through the door, Ginny trailing behind. As he watched her remove her coat their eyes met briefly, but she looked away quickly before moving to the table and sitting opposite him. There were no more accidents with the bacon after that as they sat and ate, verbally replaying some of the previous days Quidditch.

Ginny ate in silence, pushing the food around her plate impatiently, seemingly annoyed about something. Harry had never felt sorry for a mushroom before, but watching Ginny stabbing at hers repeatedly with her fork gave him the rather uncomfortable feeling that she was not seeing a mushroom at all. Once she had reduced it to tatters she shoved it to one side of the plate and started in on an unsuspecting piece of tomato.

‘Harry, I’d like to have a chat with you, if I may?’ As the breakfast was being cleared Mr. Weasley lifted himself from the table and headed for the lounge. Harry followed, feeling all eyes on them. ‘Sit down, Harry’ Mr. Weasley said as Harry entered the room. He stood with his arm resting on the mantelpiece above the cold fireplace. ‘Lupins informed me that you will be leaving us today?’

‘Yes’ Harry said quietly.

Mr. Weasley raised one eye brow ‘I cant say I’m surprised. In fact, every morning I come down I’ve been half expecting you to be gone.’ He spoke sombrely now ‘Without Moody here I’m almost certain that would have been the case a week ago. Have you thought about where you’re going?’

Harry nodded ‘To Head Quarters.’ Mr. Weasley moved over to the armchair next to Harry and perched himself on the edge of it.

‘Harry ... you're like a son to Molly and I,’
Harry felt a dull ache in the pit of his stomach as Mr. Weasley went on quietly ‘our home is your home, and it always will be. If you want to come back … if you ever need a place to go, remember that.’ Harry didn’t speak; fearing his voice would be unsteady. Mr. Weasley sighed deeply ‘Now that you’ve come of age there’s one or two things you need to know.’ Mr. Weasley was eyeing him with a mixture of curiosity and sadness ‘I think its time you became a member of The Order of The Phoenix ... if you still want to-'

‘Of course I do.’ Harry said quickly.
Mr. Weasley nodded ‘I’ll arrange to have you inducted tomorrow. How are you getting to Head Quarters? Have you arranged to meet Lupin there?’
Harry shook his head and swallowed ‘I’m going alone.’

‘No you’re not.’ Ron and Hermione were standing in the doorway watching them. ‘I told you once before mate, Hermione and I are staying with you.’ Ron was looking at Harry seriously as he walked forward ‘Hogwarts doesn’t start for a month, until then we go where, you go.’

‘No, I don’t-‘
‘Don’t argue with them!’ Mrs. Weasley appeared with Tonks at her side. Her eyes were watering as she looked sternly at Harry. ‘The three of you have been best friends for six years, and if ever there was a time you needed each other it’s now.’

‘Molly’s right,’ Mr. Weasley put his arm on Harry’s shoulder as he peered from Ron to Mrs. Weasley ‘you might as well accept it, I don’t suppose you have any choice in the matter anyway.’

Harry could see Ginny in the kitchen behind Mrs. Weasley. She was sitting with her elbows on the table and her face in her hands.

'Well...' Harry began.
‘Good! Glad that’s settled.’ Ron said, then turning his eyes on Harry he asked briskly ‘When are we leaving?’
‘As soon as we can.’ Harry said slowly, never taking his eyes off her.

6. R.A.B. and Snape

Harry, Ron and Hermione stood outside number 13 Gimmauld Place. Ron was holding pig's cage in one hand, the tiny owl flapping around excitedly within while Crookshanks, who was curled around Hermiones feet, eyed him impatiently. Sturgis Podmore and Hestia Jones were arguing behind them.

'Don't be ridiculous, Sturgis! How on earth am I going to carry that?' said Hestia, pointing at Ron's trunk.
'Well you can't float it in the middle of the street in broad daylight, can you?' Sturgis said as he struggled with Hermiones book laden luggage.

'We'll come back out for it,' said Harry over his shoulder. He and Ron were each holding an end of Harry's trunk. Hermione was loaded down with parcels Mrs. Weasley had piled on top of her before they left. She had apparently completely emptied her kitchen cupboards in an effort to ensure they didn't "fade away to nothing" while they were out of her care.

They walked through the small gate and up the path; Harry stopped and concentrated Number twelve Gimmauld Place The Black Family home expanded before their eyes, looking as dull and dingy as Harry remembered it. He pulled his wand out when they reached the front door, and tapped it near the twisted serpent-handle.

'Alohomora!' There was no familiar clicking of locks.
'No, no … you cant do it like that.' Hestia pushed her way passed Harry, she raised her wand and tapped the door *'Open Sesame!'*

Harry and Hermione exchanged looks as the locks clanked open behind the door. Ron, however was oblivious to the meaning of the password, he was tapping on Pig's cage in an effort to subdue her.
'Who set the password?' but before Harry had even finished asking he knew.
'Dumbledore. Seemed to think it was rather amusing … cant think why.' Hestia was obviously from an all-magic family, like Ron.

'Shut up Pig!' Ron said in a hushed voice. No one spoke as Harry and Ron placed their load carefully in the hall and then went out to collect the other trunk. Hestia and Sturgis relieved Hermione of some of her teetering packages and once they had retrieved the other trunk Harry and Ron stopped to look around. To his dismay Harry noticed the curtains that covered Sirius' mums portrait were still there, though the other paintings had gone. The shrunken house-elf heads had also been removed. (Harry was thankful but silently wondered what Kreacher would have to say if he knew)

'You take these,' Sturgis whispered as he emptied his parcels onto Ron 'we'll be outside on duty.' Hestia unloaded hers onto Harry and smiled wryly at him 'Welcome home!' She and Sturgis closed the door behind them leaving the three of them standing in the gloomy hall in silence.

'Let's take these to the kitchen.' Hermione whispered, and they headed through the cramped doorway and down the stairs, Ron still clutching Pig's cage and Crookshanks following. The kitchen was cold, damp and gloomy and even less friendly now that Sirius was gone. They tipped their packages onto the table.

'I'll get a fire going.' Ron said and he placed Pig on the sideboard and strode off towards the sitting room.
'Might as well get this stuff put away.' Hermione sighed and began opening the parcels. Harry picked up a piece of parchment that was lying on the bench top.

Harry,

I hope this note finds you as I feel here is the safest place for you now.

There's a few supplies in the cupboard even though I am sure Molly did not let you leave empty handed.

Try not to disturb Mrs. Black's portrait, I have found her most disagreeable of late.

I've organized for Hagrid to send Hedwig on to you, I should be back in a couple of days.

There will be Order guards on duty round the clock in the meantime,

Lupin

Harry smiled. The moon had been bright last night, so he guessed there must be a full moon due. Harry knew Lupin was no longer able to go undercover to infiltrate the werewolf underworld, of which he was secretly glad. Greyback would have seen him fighting against the Death Eaters at Hogwarts that night and Snape was bound to have given his master the names of all The Order members by now. As Harry's thoughts turned to Snape he felt his blood boil.

'Once we've got this lot sorted, we'll go up and unpack.' Hermione was stuffing the shelves, glancing at Harry every now and then. Harry did not speak for some time, his mind was whirling with the thought of how much Snape knew. He had known that whilst Dumbledore was The Orders secretkeeper, no one except him could say the location of Headquarters. Now however with Dumbledore gone, he began to wonder if Snape was able to reveal the location of twelve Gimmauld Place.

He looked at Ron who was stoking a roaring fire and opened his mouth to speak. Twelve Grimmauld Place! His lips would not form the words and no sound came out. 'Harry?' he realized Ron was looking at him with a curious expression on his face.

'We're finished here, let's go.' Harry said as Hermione put the last loaf of bread away.

Harry took Sirius's room up the top of the stairs while Ron took Pig to the room he and Harry had shared. Hermione retreated to where she and Ginny had slept last time. They made up their beds with clean linen left over from when Mrs. Weasley had been there and met back down in the kitchen around lunchtime. Crookshanks purred as he sat curled by the fire. Ron started to pull food from the cupboards and Hermione busied herself laying the table.

'I think we should take another look at that locket and note after lunch.' Harry was standing by the fire, staring at the flames as they licked high into the air. 'It's all we've got to go on.'
'I've been thinking about that.' Said Hermione, placing three cups beside the plates 'What if R.A.B. isn't a person?' Harry looked her.

'Whadya mean?' Ron said doubtfully 'What else could it be?'
Hermione shrugged 'I don't know, it's just that I've already looked up the well known powerful witches and wizards, remember? And none of them seemed the least bit likely to have written it.'
'Maybe they're not well known … whoever they are.' Ron said
'That will make our job next to impossible then,' said Harry, looking into the fire again.

Harry remained quietly by the fire as Ron and Hermione launched into an argument over sandwich fillings. The enormity of the task ahead of him seemed insurmountable, and yet Dumbledore had trusted him to go on. He had believed Harry capable of overcoming the odds. But then Dumbledore had also trusted Snape. He felt sick to the stomach every time he thought about it. But he had no choice but to go on and do the best he could. Over the past week Harry had developed a renewed sense of urgency. He was running out of time, he could feel it. Voldemort had wanted Harry to alienate himself for only one reason. He was coming for him.

'Harry,' Hermione dished up a large plate of sandwiches and sat down next to Ron. Harry turned from the fire slowly, not feeling a bit like eating anymore.
'C'mon,' said Ron 'you'll be hungry later and we're not going to stop until dinner.'
'That's right,' said Hermione gravely reading Harry's face 'we'll get somewhere with it today … I know we will.' They sat and ate in silence.

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'Arrrgh!' Hermione let out a frustrated groan 'I'm going to need more parchment but this is all I've got until we pick up some school supplies. Have either of you two got any?' She had been working

through complicated permutations of the R.A.B. letters, trying to figure out if they had hidden meanings. This was her last desperate resort to find something that would unlock what happened to the original locket, and now she had finally run out of space on her lone roll of parchment. They had worked through without dinner because none of them had felt like eating. Ron's efforts scanning through books he had found in the study upstairs had not yielded any results either. All their time spent troubling over the problem had come to nothing and it was past eight o'clock.

Harry and Ron shook their heads in answer 'Might find some upstairs in one of the desks.' Harry said as he stared into the fire again, feeling frustrated and useless. He hadn't been of any help at all, from the moment he sat down it was as if a huge mental block went up around him. Hermione lifted herself off the rug by the fire and jogged up the stairs.

'Don't suppose you've had any brainwaves?' Ron was looking exactly how Harry felt as he turned another book over in his hands.
'No ... nothing'
'You know, for all our efforts I get the horrible feeling the answer is staring us in the face' Ron said.
'Yeah ... like we're missing something.'
'Or reading too much into it!' Ron tilted his head to the ink covered parchment on the floor.

Harry didn't want to admit it, but he was beginning to think Ron was right. The lack of sleep over the past couple of months had dulled Harry's brain, and he suspected the sleepless nights spent in his room at The Burrow had had a similar effect on his two best friends. He made up his mind to try from now on to get a better nights sleep.

'Harry!' Hermiones voice from behind them sounded so strange that both Harry and Ron turned in their chairs to look at her. Her face was ghostly white as she stood with a fresh piece of parchment clutched in her hand. They jump up immediately.

'What's wrong?' Harry said urgently.
'Hermione! ... What's happened? ... Did you get bitten by a doxy or something?' Ron grabbed her hands and started pulling her sleeves up, inspecting her arms.
'No!' she breathed then looked at Harry *'I know who R.A.B. is.'*

'Who?'

'I'll show you,' Harry and Ron exchanged looks and followed her as she led them up the stairs 'I was hunting around for some parchment and for some reason I stopped to look at it' she was saying 'and there it was' She had reached the first floor and was heading into the drawing room. She finally stopped in front of the sprawling Black family tree tapestry, pointing at the very bottom of it. Harry and Ron leaned in squinting at the writing. There, in tiny black letters was the name Regulus Black.

'Sirius' brother?' Ron said incredulously, but Harry knew from the moment he had seen the name that she was right.
'Why didn't I see it earlier' he said darkly.
'He was a Death Eater, he must have been close to Voldemort!' said Hermione.

'Sirius said that his brother had wanted out before the end,' Harry spoke quietly 'when he found out the lengths Voldemort was going to, to gain power.'
Ron looked stunned 'Maybe it wasn't the usual Death Eater activities that made him turn on V-Voldemort, maybe he found out about the Horcruxes?'

'It could explain why he suddenly did a turn around.' Hermione agreed
'Regulus was a purist,' Harry said with distaste 'that's why he joined the Death Eaters, but if he found out about the Horcruxes he would have realized Voldemorts true agenda, total domination and immortality.'
'Not just elitism' Hermione added.
'It all fits' Harry said gravely.

'But Voldemort killed Regulus didn't he?' Ron asked
'Yeah ... or at least his Death Eaters did. But he must have had time to retrieve the locket before they found him. R.A.B. was pretty sure his own death was immanent.'

‘Well that’s it then!’ said Ron confidently ‘He found the locket and destroyed it before the Death Eaters got to him!’
‘But he didn’t know how to destroy the locket!’ Hermione put her hand out to Harry ‘Give me the note.’ Harry pulled it out of his pocket and handed it to her, she unfolded it ‘See … he wrote that he was going to destroy the locket as soon as he *could*.’

‘So did he destroy it before they caught up with him?’ Ron looked to Harry who was deep in thought.
'We wont know until we find it.' Hermione frowned

‘But how did he get it?’ Harry said aloud, then he looked between the two of them ‘I mean, it was protected by very powerful magic,’ his voice went flat ‘even Dumbledore had trouble, and it took the two of us. Dumbledore said it couldn’t be done alone.’

‘Maybe he took a fellow Death Eater along who wanted out too?’ Ron suggested.
‘No … Voldemort made it so that only one wizard could get to it,' Harry said darkly 'and then he enchanted it so that only two people could actually remove it.’ He hated thinking about what he had done to Dumbledore in the cave. It had all been for nothing. The locket was a fake.

Their state of excitement was slowly being replaced by disappointment. The answer they found had raised even more questions. They left the room and headed back to the warmth of the sitting room, discussing the possibilities. Hermione made some tea and they slouched in their chairs sipping it dejectedly, Crookshanks curling into her lap. Their conversations seemed to take them in circles, always the same questions popped up. It was late by the time Harry decided they were going to get no further with it tonight, so they cleaned up and headed off to their separate rooms.

Harry was feeling worn out. The excitement of finding out R.A.B.’s identity, and the consequent questions it had produced had left Harry wondering yet again about the seeming impossibility of the task ahead of him. He threw off his clothes, leaving only a t-shirt and pants on for warmth, and slid under the blankets. Before long he sank into the darkness of sleep.

~*~*~*~

There was a dull thud.

Then a slithery snake like feel intruding on Harry's skin. He squirmed slightly as he half-woke from sleep. He opened his eyes partially and tried to shift his position. But he seemed unable to move. He tried to rouse himself; his eyes opening and closing in the darkness, then suddenly, something wrapped itself around his face, sliding across his mouth and parting his lips with force. Harry let out a strangled gasp as he went to sit up, the panic rising in him, but he fought against something that bit painfully into his skin. He tried to yell but only a muffled groan escaped the dry wad in his mouth.

All traces of sleep had left him, his arms were pinned at his sides and his eyes were wide open as he thrashed about trying to break loose of the restraints that held him down. There was a sudden burst of light and his heartbeat raced. His eyes narrowed at the glare as they searched the area in front of him. A dark figure was coming into focus. Harry felt a droplet of sweat roll down his forehead as the figure moved to stand over him.

His stomach lurched painfully as he looked into the cold dark eyes of Severus Snape.

~*~*~*~

Snape’s greasy hair hung over the bed as his hand came down towards Harry’s face. Harry groaned and pulled his head away. He did not want to die like this, bound and gagged, useless and at Snape’s mercy! His eyes followed Snape’s hand as it slipped under his pillow and pulled out the wand that lay hidden beneath. Harry fought against his bonds as a wave of nausea flooded through him. Snape was going to kill him with his own wand!

‘I’d stay still if I were you.’ Snape said indifferently. Harry closed his eyes and let his head drop back on the pillow. Snape was going to kill him in the same cowardly way he had murdered Dumbledore. Harry began to shake as anger seeped through every nerve and fibre of his body.

He would not die like this! He would not lay here helplessly waiting! And with the strength of a madman, Harry suddenly thrust himself against the coarse ropes that ensnared him and for a moment it seemed that they loosened. But just as quickly they pressed in on him again, even tighter than before, cutting into his flesh. Snape watched him with a raised eyebrow.

‘You never know when to give up, do you’ seemingly bored by Harry’s useless determination. Harry squirmed; he struggled to draw breath into his lungs as the binds around him squeezed in on his body. ‘Once again you’re making things harder for yourself … you should learn to do as your told.’ Harry could feel the dampness of blood on his skin around the white-hot gouges the ropes inflicted. His eyes stung from the pain as he glared at Snape.

‘What? No witty come back?’ Sarcasm dripped from Snape’s voice. Harry seethed as he let out a muffled roar of angry frustration. ‘Unfortunately, although this conversation would be far more productive one way, it is necessary that you speak. I shall remove the gag in your mouth … however,’ Snape leaned in menacingly ‘if you should decide to yell for help, you will be sealing the fate of whomever comes to your aide. Do you understand?’ Harry felt sick as he remembered Ron and Hermione were only a floor below. He gave a slight nod; he would not call them to their deaths.

Snape straightened and pointed his wand at Harry’s face. The gag slid from his lips and retreated to the pillow. Harry ploughed his tongue around his dry mouth ‘What do you want?’ making no attempt to hide his hatred.

Snape sneered ‘As unlikely as it seems, you and I have a common problem.’
‘Yeah, you!’
‘Ah… that delightful wit of yours again.’ Snape mocked smoothly.
‘I wasn’t being funny’ Harry said through gritted teeth. ‘Get me out of these ropes!’
‘I’m afraid I cant do that, you see, I know you would attack me’ Snape’s silky voice taunted ‘and then I would have to hurt you...’ he looked down at the blood that seeped through Harry's sheets ‘again.’ he mocked distatefully.

Harry’s hatred was complete. There was no longer any trace of fear in his voice when he spoke. ‘You’re a pathetic coward who only attacks people who cant fight back!’ All traces of amusement dropped away from Snape's face as he lifted his wand and renewed its aim. ‘You’re not going to disobey your *master* are you?’ Harry goaded him recklessly ‘doesn’t he want me for himself. He wont be pleased with you if you do the job for him, will he now?’

Snape’s wand began to tremble slightly as his lip curled in fury. Harry thought that any minute Snape would lose the battle that obviously raged within. But it appeared his fear of Voldemort was greater than his loathing for Harry. He lowered his wand slowly.

‘You are so sure of yourself, Potter.' His distaste evident. Then he added smoothly 'One of these days, your wanton behaviour will get you into more trouble than even you can squirm out of.'

‘What do you want’ Harry’s jaw was clenched in rage. Snape’s face darkened.
‘I am here to offer you Bellatrix LeStrange.’
Harry’s jaw slackened as his eyes narrowed ‘What?’
‘You want her for what she did to that young girl,’ he said and raised an eyebrow ‘Not to mention that fool of a Godfather of yours.’

‘Don’t you dare talk about Sirius like that!’ Harry tried to sit up again, but winced painfully as the ropes tore at his raw wounds ‘He was a hundred times the man you’ll ever be.’ His anger dulled the pain as he struggled once more.

‘Really?’ Snape said with amused contempt. ‘Yes ... well, he did spend twelve highly productive years in prison, not to mention two memorable years in hiding on the run.' he mocked 'Clearly he is worthy of such high regard.’

‘You better hope these ropes hold because if I get free I’m going to tear you to pieces with my bare hands!’ Harry roared, he was using every ounce of strength he had left in him to fight his bonds, but once again they tightened so severely that Harry thought he might pass out unable to breathe.

‘You’re still as stupid and as arrogant as your father was! The more you struggle, the tighter they get.’ Snape sneered down at him ‘Lay still for a minute and you will be able to breathe, struggle…’ Snape raised his brow ‘and you will faint. I know you better than you know yourself, Potter. You want LeStrange … and I can give her to you.’ Harry’s blood was boiling but his head swam dangerously from lack of oxygen. Sweat dripped into his eyes as he forced himself to relax and after a moment his lungs could expand more easily.

‘Some sense at last.’ Snape said lightly. Harry could tell Snape was enjoying the control he had over him.
‘Why Bellatrix?’ Harry panted, his anger had not abated; it coursed through him suppressed only by his want to hear Snape out.
‘My reasons are my own.’ Snape said coldly ‘I will tell you where and when, and all you need to do is not-mess-it-up,’ he scowled ‘if that is at all possible.’

‘Your even madder than I thought if you think I would trust you after what you did!’
Snape scoffed ‘I do not expect you to trust me.’ He said contemptuously ‘But you will do as I say. It’s the only way you will get LeStrange … and you want her, I know you do.’ he added darkly.

Harry looked up at the ceiling. He did want her; he wanted her so badly he could taste it. What if Snape was telling the truth? What if he could deliver her to Harry so he could make her pay. The thought of it consumed him. ‘What do I have to do?’

‘I will let you know when the time is right. In the meantime’ Snape turned Harry's face to him with the tip of his wand, and leaning in he said darkly ‘you must not tell anyone of our meeting. No one, do you understand? If you do, then not only will you not get Bellatrix, but you will find I will not be as pleasant the next time we meet.’

‘There wont be a next time, *Snape!*’ Harry hissed.

Snape momentarily faulted at the way Harry had addressed him but he recovered quickly to a look of distain ‘I will release your bonds and then I will leave. Remember what I said, Potter. You tell *no one!*’ Snape waved Harry’s wand at him and Harry’s body stiffened as the bonds slunk away and disappeared. Harry watched out of the corner of his eyes as Snape put the wand back under his pillow and then flick his own wand once, extinguishing the only source of light. The room fell into blackness and the sound of the bedroom door closed, signalling Snape's departure.

Harry lay motionless, furious at having been so easily overcome by Snape. His need to avenge Gabrielle meant he would bide his time. He would do as they had agreed. But one day soon he would have his chance with Snape.

As he lay there wondering how long the curse Snape had thrown at him would last, he became aware of the burning pain from his open wounds. Warm blood trickled down his skin uncomfortably.

After a time, Harry felt his body relax.

He lifted himself painfully off the bed and bathed, washing off the excess blood carefully. The warm water stung at the gashes across his chest and legs that turned out to be deeper than he had expected. Harry threw his torn and bloodied t-shirt in a drawer and pulled out his wand. He pointed it at the small splatters of blood that covered the sheets *Tergeo!* Hermione had used the spell to clean blood from his face last year, but the sheets remained stained.

Harry concentrated harder. This time the blood siphoned off leaving starkly white sheets again. Seeing that his wounds had started bleeding again Harry wiped them off impatiently and summoned some dressings, (though basic as he was not well versed in healing) to quell any further bleeding. Ron and Hermione must not find out he was hurt. Harry knew what their reactions would be; they would be horrified and try to convince Harry to report it. Then his chance to bring Bellatrix in would be gone.

Harry was looking around inspecting the room for traces of blood he might have missed when there was a sharp tapping at the window. He automatically spun round, clutching his chest as it protested painfully. He breathed heavily, wincing as he looked to the source of the noise.

There was a flurry of snowy white feathers hovering outside the window in the morning gloom. Harry walked over to the window somewhat gingerly and opened it. Hedwig fluttered in with a gentle hoot, carrying the backpack Harry had left at Hagrids, though Harry was glad to notice it looked much less full than he had left it. She let the bag drop on the floor and landed on the dressing table, looking somewhat pleased with herself as she lifted her leg for Harry to remove the small scroll that was tied there.

He gave Hedwig an affectionate scratch that she seemed to enjoy even more than usual. 'I missed you too girl' Harry smiled warmly 'I'm glad your with me again. I'll get you something to eat.' He dug out some owl treats and placed them on the top of the cupboard, letting out a small gasp of pain as he stretched. Hedwig stayed where she was, eyeing Harry reproachfully. 'It's alright Hedwig, it's nothing.' She still did not move 'Go on, go!' he laughed softly at her concern. She fluttered up to her perch atop the cupboard and trilled gently. Harry gave her a bowl of water then sat down carefully, mindful of the pain as he read the message.

Hullo Harry,

Hedwigg has been diein to get back to you

Been pesterin me ever sins I got back from the Hollow

GRAWP says hullo too.

Hope yer sumwher safe,

don't go doin aneethin dangerus

Say hullo to Ron and Hermione fer me

Hope to see you soon

Hagrid

It warmed Harry's heart to hear from Hagrid, and for a short time he managed to forget about the nights events, turning his attention to GRAWP. He wondered how Hagrid was getting along with his Giant brother, from what he had seen at the funeral it appeared Hagrid had managed to get GRAWP under control, although he had not mentioned anything about the giants and whether they were yet teamed with Voldemort.

When he heard shuffling coming from downstairs he threw on his clothes and went down to the kitchen.

Hermione was busy making porridge in a large pot on the stove. She had already lit the fire so Harry went over to warm himself after greeting her. Crookshanks was lurking around her feet but as soon as Harry sat down he jumped into his lap, purring as he rubbed his head along Harry's chest. 'Owe' Harry pulled Crookshanks away from his wounds and held him aloft, 'Not today Crookshanks, sorry' he said quietly. He plonked the cat on the floor and went over to help Hermione. Ron joined them as the breakfast was laid.

'Had the strangest dream last night.' he said scratching his head 'I was watching the Weird Sisters play a concert but their music was really off, it sounded really flat, like the same note right through. Everyone was booing and throwing stuff on the stage. In the end they broke all their instruments and stalked off the stage.' Harry frowned.

'Now you mention it,' Hermione sat down next to him 'I remember dreaming I was on the Hogwarts express. Cant remember any of the details though, just the awful monotonous drone of the engines.' Harry looked between the two of them. Snape had used the Muffliato charm on Ron and Hermione to ensure they would not be heard.

'What?' Ron was watching Harry.
'Nothing,' he took a spoon and filled his bowl 'Hedwig arrived this morning.'
'Any news?'
'No. Just a note from Hagrid; he said to say hello.'

As the morning drew on, Hermione turned their conversation back to R.A.B. 'We need to find out what he did with the locket. Harry I think you're right; the first thing we need to figure out is how he managed to get it.'

'Yeah, I mean he wasn't anything special, was he?' Ron frowned.
'What do we know about the defences that guarded it?' She asked Harry.

'Like I said, only one wizard could cross to the island in the boat, and once there' Harry's voice lowered at the memory 'it would take two people to remove it from the potion.'
'But you went across in the boat with Dumbledore, didn't you?' Ron puzzled.

'Yes, but he said that didn't count because I wasn't considered a proper wizard until I was of age.'
'What else happened?' Hermione prodded delicately.

'Dumbledore made me promise to make him drink all of the potion protecting the locket' he said grimly 'no matter what he said once he started drinking it.'
'Why?' Ron asked.
'Because he knew it was going to be impossible for him to do it himself. He knew that whatever it was … it would cripple him.' Harry was unable to look either of them in the face. Dumbledore's desperate pleas swamped him painfully. 'I fed him that poison … glass after glass … until he was almost dead.'

'You did what you had to, mate.' Ron said quietly watching him.
'Ron's right … he made you promise for a reason, Harry.'

'Once the potion was gone, the inferi attacked because I had to use the water from the lake to give Dumbledore a drink.' Harry looked up into their horrified faces. 'They came up out of the water and grabbed me. They would have pulled me in if Dumbledore hadn't used fire to scare them off.'
'Oh Harry! That's horrible…' Hermiones eyes watered.

They were silent for a moment until Harry spoke again 'Point is you'd have to have some powerful magic behind you, not only to get through Voldemorts defences, but to detect magic as well.' Harry explained how Dumbledore had felt traces of magic.

'Regulus would have to have had someone along who was powerful enough to detect traces of magic and defend them against the inferi. He wouldn't have been in any state to do it himself after drinking the potion.' Harry said gravely
'Regulus couldn't have been anywhere near as powerful as Dumbledore.' Ron added.

'So …' Hermione recounted 'Regulus took someone along who wasn't a wizard so they could get across the lake … but who had great power of their own to detect magic and defeat the inferi … and who would also do exactly what they were told to do even under incredible circumstances.'

The three of them looked into the fire for a moment then one by one they looked at each other 'Kreacher!' Ron spoke what they had all been thinking.

7. Ginny's Other and Harry's Excuse

They were interrupted by a loud crash followed by a shrill screeching coming from above. They pulled out their wands and ran across the room, edging quietly up the stairs.

'… POND SCUM! INTRUDERS IN MY NOBLE HOUSE! TRAITORS TO YOUR BLOOD! …'

Something had obviously disturbed the portrait of Mrs. Black. She was screaming at the top of her

lungs. 'MUDBLOODS AND TRAITORS! GET OUT! WHERE IS KREACHER AND THAT UNGRATEFUL BRAT CHILD OF MINE? GET OUT OF MY HOUSE! ARGGGGH! STAY AWAY FROM ME! … GET AWAY!' Mrs. Black's screams suddenly became more hysterical as Harry peered out from the stairwell.

'Shut-up-or-I-will-curse-you-until-you-are-nothing-but-a-blob-of-paint' Ginny said threateningly 'And don't think I don't know how' Harry and the others emerged from the doorway to find Tonks battling her way out from under a heap of bags, apologizing profusely, and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley looking on dumbfounded as Ginny stood in duelling stance, wand pointing at Mrs. Blacks portrait. Mrs. Black was hunched in the corner of her painting with her elbow in front of her face. 'Nooo…' she wailed pitifully.

Harry and Ron rushed over and to their surprise the curtains pulled shut with no resistance. They turned to look at Ginny; her eyes were glittering dangerously.

'Where did that come from?' Ron was looking at his sister with a mixture of shock and awe.
'She's a horrible old bat who deserves a bit of her own back.' Ginny said angrily, pulling herself up straight again.

'Yes … well' Mrs. Weasley was eyeing Ginny uncertainly 'I think it best if we get this stuff upstairs before she starts up again.'
'Somehow I don't think that will be a problem.' Harry said eyeing Ginny appreciatively. Ginny gave him a piercing look as she picked up the small cage containing Albert, her pink pigmy puff.

'I'll put some tea on then, shall I?' Tonks appeared unabashed by Ginny's display as she turned and started down the stairs towards the kitchen, Hermione and Ginny in tow. Harry felt a stab of pain in the pit of his stomach as he watched her go. She had never looked so … cold.

'What are you doing here?' Ron took Mr. Weasleys bags and Harry picked up the ones Tonks had dropped, then they made their way upstairs.
'Induction day, remember?' he said as they piled into an empty room on the first floor.
'Take those into Hermiones room will you dear?' Mrs. Weasley nodded at the bags Harry was carrying 'Ginny can bunk in with her again.'

Harry turned and headed to Hermiones room. He plonked the bags down at the foot of the spare bed and one of them, a shopping bag stuffed with clothes, toppled over spilling some of its contents onto the faded rug. Harry bent down and grabbed a handful of clothes, stuffing them back into the overly full bag.

As he reached for the last piece of clothing; a soft pink fleecy jumper of Ginny's he was particularly fond of, he noticed a white card lying just under the bed. He picked it up and turned it over and what he saw made his stomach drop. Staring back out at him, smiling lazily was Ginny. She looked content and happy as she leaned against Dean Thomas's chest. He was grinning at Ginny with his arm comfortably around her. It had been taken the day they had played Quidditch at The Burrow.

Seeing her so intimate with another man clawed at his heart. So this is why she had seemed so cold. He brought his hand up under his glasses, and rubbed his eyes, the ache in him swelling painfully. He hadn't noticed them together that day. How long had she been in contact with him again? He chided himself for being stupid. It was what he wanted, wasn't it? He'd told her they could not be together so of course she would move on. And yet he felt … betrayed.

The hurt in him made him angry and his fists clenched. Just two nights ago on the same day the photo had been taken she had come to his bed. Is this why she had gone to leave him when he had denied her? Had she come to him because she could not go to Dean? The thought made him sick. He had been struggling to let her go but now he had been jolted back to reality. He couldn't bring himself to look at the photo again; instead he stuffed it into the bag, covering it with the pink jumper.

He went back down to the kitchen where Hermione and Ginny were huddled in conversation. Tonks handed him a cup of tea. When Hermione finally looked up she gave Harry a questioning frown. Harry was staring at Ginny, watching her stroke Crookshanks who was curled in her lap purring loudly. Albert was nuzzling into her neck on her shoulder. Barely controlled anger rippled through him, daring her to look at him. But Ginny did not look up. She went on petting Crookshanks, smiling

at him and talking softly in his ear. Hermione glanced at Ginny then back at Harry again. ‘Is everything alright, Harry?’

‘Everything’s just fine’ he said, irritated at his own pain. He turned his back on them and added a spoon a sugar to his cup.

‘Well … that’s all done!’ said Mr. Weasley briskly as he entered the room. ‘Fred and George will be here later this afternoon. Lupin not back yet?’

‘No’ Harry said leaning back against the bench stirring his tea, he was glad he would have a distraction when the twins arrived.
‘If he’s not back I think we should postpone it. He will want to be here I’m sure.’
‘Is that really necessary?’ Harry said impatiently.

Mr. Weasley was looking at him with the same inquiring frown as Hermione. ‘Yes, actually. I think it is.’ He said seriously ‘He is the head of The Order now and should be present at the induction of three new members.’

Harry looked up ‘Three?’ he said abruptly, looking around at Ron, who had just come in and sat down at the table 'You don’t mean…’ but he couldn’t finish what he was about to say, he knew how it would have sounded to Ron and Hermione who were already eyeing him challengingly.

‘No.’ Mr. Weasley answered, following Harry's thoughts. ‘Fred and George are becoming official members too.’
‘Oh … right’ Harry exhaled with relief.
‘You don’t have to sound so relieved … it wasn’t from lack of trying, believe me!’ said Ron, shooting a glance at Mr. Weasley.

‘The Order does not accept people who are still at school, Ron.’ Mr. Weasley said sternly ‘Harry will be our youngest member ever and I doubt there will ever be one as young as him again. His case is unique, as I’ve explained to you before.’ Ron rolled his eyes.

‘We haven’t got our letters yet’ Hermione chimed in ‘maybe we wont be going to school this year either.’
‘In that event, you still wont be joining The Order. I am sure there are other things for which you could be put to use’
‘Like what?’ Ron said defensively

‘We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it!’ Mrs. Weasley had been standing in the doorway listening. ‘Ginny, has that cat of yours turned up yet?’

‘What cat?’ Ron asked what Harry had been thinking.
‘No, not yet’ Ginny said without looking up, her attention on Albert.

‘What cat?’

‘There’s been a cat hanging around at The Burrow the past few days,’ Mrs. Weasley reached into the cupboard and pulled out some potatoes ‘We’ve seen it on occasion before but it’s been around a lot lately,’ She fussed about getting knives out of the draws ‘comes and goes as it pleases, seems to spend most of it’s time looking for Ginny, at least it’s always in her room. Why she’d want with another pet, I don’t know.’

‘Why don’t you just boot it out?’ Ron asked
‘Because I’ve adopted it!’ Ginny said angrily ‘and if you harm it in any way I’ll-'
‘Steady on … I wouldn’t do anything to it … I just thought if you wanted rid of it-'
‘Well I don’t! And if it turns up you leave it alone!’ Ginny said, her eyes blazing.
‘Fair enough.’ Ron shrugged ‘What does it look like so I know not to kick it out the door.’ Ginny scowled at him

‘It’s got rusty coloured long fur’ said Mr. Weasley who had been following the conversation behind his copy of the Daily Prophet ‘with white patches on it’s face and feet. Quite a young cat I think, rather smart too.’ He smiled appreciatively ‘It frightened a gnome out of my boot that would have

given me a nasty bite had I of managed to put my foot in it.'

'Hermione and Ginny, you can give me a hand with lunch.' Mrs. Weasley had knives chopping speedily as she poured a sauce into a pan on the stove.
'I'll be outside then.' Tonks appeared to have given up offering her help in the kitchen and she left to relieve for guard duty.

Harry gulped down his tea and went up to his room, the last thing he wanted to do was eat. He stood by the window and looked out at the overgrown grass in the front yard. He felt petty and selfish at his own jealousy. He should've been glad for Ginny, she was moving on and doing exactly as he had asked. But the ache within him would not abate. He was embarrassed to think part of him had held some hope that she would wait for him ... even pine longingly for him.

He walked over to Hedwig and wincing, reached an arm up for her to sit on. She fluttered down and blinked at him expectantly. 'Looks like it'll always be you and me girl' he said softly, stroking the feathers above her beak. He opened the drawer and pushed aside his bloodied t-shirt to get at the owl treats. Grabbing a handful he sat on the bed and let Hedwig perch on his knee. As he sat feeding them to her, he heard footsteps coming up the stairs.

Expecting Ron or Hermione coming to get him for lunch he said 'It's okay, I'm not hungry!' The shadowy figure did not speak as it came to a stop in the doorway. 'I'll eat later…' His voice trailed off as he saw Ginny standing there watching him. His face immediately changed and he turned back to Hedwig. 'I'll be down later.' He said gravely, his heart was pounding in his chest as she stepped into the room.

'You didn't even say goodbye' Her voice was little more than a whisper. 'At The Burrow … I thought at least you would say goodbye-'
'What was the point' Harry said callously, concentrating on Hedwig 'you're here now aren't you?' he wanted to hurt her. He wanted Ginny to know how he felt.

She hesitated for a moment then slowly and uncertainly walked further into the room, running her hand along the dressing table. As she spoke she sounded reluctant to talk, and Harry found he did not feel for her.

'Harry, I need to tell you something…' She said slowly. He watched her as she paused, her expression darkening as she looked down at the dresser. With a sudden intake of breath Harry realized why she had stopped talking. He jumped up, sending Hedwig screeching in a flurry of feathers back to the top of the wardrobe. Before he could reach the drawer he had sloppily left open, Ginny had yanked out his t-shirt, her eyes scanning the torn and bloodied marks in horror.

'What is this?' she breathed, her brow frowning deeply.
He snatched the top and threw it in the cupboard, slamming it closed angrily. 'Nothing … it's nothing!'
'Harry, what happened?' she tried to catch his eye, her voice full of concern. Harry was furious with himself for being so careless, and he directed his anger onto Ginny.

'Nothing that concerns you Ginny, so just butt out! This is none of your business!' his anger had finally reached boiling point. 'You've got no right to come in here and start asking questions! And you'd better not repeat what you just saw!' He flung his arms up and clasped them behind his head in frustration, ignoring the burning pain from his wounds.

'Arrrrgh! Why isn't anything ever easy!' He closed his eyes for a moment before looking at Ginny, who was staring wide-eyed at him. He knew this was the perfect moment so he seized it. 'I've already told you to stay away from me but you keep coming back! Listen to me! Stay out of my business and out of my life!' As he said it his body shuddered. Not from rage; he felt like he was being torn in two.

He breathed heavily, his eyes on the floor waiting to hear her footsteps running from the room. He had said what he had not been able to bring himself to say until now. He despised himself for his outburst, so much so that he was not able to look at her. There was a long silence in which she stood motionless, and then she walked up to him and touched her hand to his face. In spite of himself he pressed his cheek to her palm, his eyes heavy with the tenderness of her touch.

‘I know what you’re doing’ her green eyes swelled with tears ‘and it only makes me want to be with you even more.’ and she closed her eyes and kissed him as bittersweet tears spilled onto her cheeks. He felt sure she had been ready to tell him about Dean, but he did not want to hear it from her mouth. A mouth that was both so sweet and yet so cruel at the same time. He kissed her fiercely, punishing her for her betrayal of him. When they pulled apart her lips were red and swollen.

‘You can’t drive me away, Harry,’ her face was full of sadness, her voice unsteady ‘no matter what you say. The way I feel ... no one can take that away … not even you.’
Harry scooped her to him again ‘You make me nuts, you know that?' he breathed and this time he kissed her with all the tenderness of her words. A sad smile crept across her lips as she pulled away from him.

‘Harry! Ginny! Lunch is on the table!’ Mrs. Weasley yelled up the stairwell to them.

‘We’ll be down in a few minutes!’ Ginny yelled out of the doorway and then went to the draws and pulled out a fresh t-shirt. Harry frowned, still breathing heavily with passion. He followed her gaze down at his chest and for the first time he realized his wounds had been bleeding again, the dark patches of blood had seeped through his bandages and were creeping across his maroon t-shirt.

‘Here’ she said quietly ‘let me help you’ She lifted his t-shirt over his head and redressed his wounds with bandages she summoned, far better than those Harry had managed to call upon. He was surprised she knew such magic but she waved it off, attributing it to watching her mother. She did not ask him any more questions and Harry did not offer her any answers. There was an understanding between them, one that he could not have trusted to anyone else.

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Fred and George arrived in the late afternoon carrying a box of test items eventually due for their store. They settled in for the evening, sharing Ron’s room after a sumptuous roast served up by Mrs. Weasley.

That night as Harry laid waiting for sleep to take him with his door slightly ajar, he felt something leap onto the covers by his feet. Crookshanks! He thought, but when he lifted his head to greet him as it padded up alongside his body, he realized in the moonlight that this cat was much smaller than Crookshanks, it was also darker in colour though it had delicate white paws that gave the impression it was wearing socks, and it’s face was also patched with white fur that gave it a definite feminine appearance.

It looked like Ginny’s cat had turned up after all and as he reached out to pet it, he noticed how soft and silky it’s fur was. It nuzzled affectionately into his hand making it’s way up to his face, and purring loudly it settled, laying its head on his pillow with it’s body stretched out below it. Harry laughed softly.

‘Shouldn’t you be with your mistress? Or has she sent you to keep an eye on me?’ he mused. He continued playing with its fur and stroking its head as he laid his head back down and before long he drifted off into a peaceful sleep.

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The next morning Lupin turned up, and by lunchtime a crowd of Order members had gathered around the large kitchen table. Mrs. Black had been set off three times as they had arrived banging on the door or ringing the bell. She had launched into her usual rant, though the moment Ginny had appeared with her wand drawn she had retreated back into the corner of her painting wailing at the injustice of it all. Everyone appeared most impressed by her ability to quell Mrs. Black and it was mentioned in passing jest more than once that she should be added to the list inductees to The Order.

Once everyone had arrived, Lupin asked all non-members to leave the table and then he called on Fred, George and Harry to stand.

'Before we get down to the latest Order business' Lupin said as he looked around 'we will swear in our three new members.' Lupin looked down to the opposite end of the table where Harry and the twins stood. He spoke ominously.

'You should not undertake membership into The Order of The Phoenix lightly.' He said, looking from one to the other. 'If it is adventure and glory you seek then you will not find it here. Being an Order member is an extremely dangerous and rather thankless job,' he said seriously 'if you have any doubts about joining, you should speak now before we go any further. There is no shame in admitting that The Order is not for you.' Harry and the twins stood silently firm.

Lupin sighed gravely 'Right then, there is a short swearing in first and then we will get on with business.' Lupin shuffled through some papers on the table in front of him. Harry looked down at his feet as he felt something nudge his leg. Ginny's cat had curled itself around his legs; it's tail high in the air. He watched as it sat down partially on his foot and looked up at him with its green eyes. He smiled at it faintly amused. It had gone by the time he woke in the morning and yet he'd had the feeling that it had stayed with him all night. He turned his attention back to Lupin.

He was holding a piece of parchment in his hand from which he started reading aloud in the monotonous tone of someone going through the motions.

'You will now be asked to swear an oath of allegiance to The Order of The Phoenix. In doing so you will become privy to all knowledge The Order has already accumulated and you will also be able to partake in any sharing of new information as it comes to hand. As a member of the secret society you will be expected as individuals to uphold to the same truths and ideals as The Order itself.'

Harry swallowed; he had a rather uneasy feeling of where this was going.

'The Order of The Phoenix relies heavily on all of us acting as one,' Lupin read on, unaware of Harry's increasing discomfort 'and as such, no member is to act alone in matters directly relating to the business of The Order. As a member you will be required to share any or all information that may be relevant to our cause of which you either presently or in the future have knowledge of.'

Lupin had said it, exactly that which Harry had feared. Lupin looked over the top of the parchment at the three of them. 'Do you understand the terms thus far before we continue?'

'Yes' Fred and George said in unison.

Harry stood with a frown on his face; an internal struggle raging within him. He had wanted to join The Order ever since he knew of its existence, but how could he under the circumstances? As the long silence stretched out The Order members who had been staring at the table or looking out the small, high window disinterestedly started to turn their heads to look at him. Harry was eyeing them all uncomfortably; aware he was backing himself into a corner with his silence.

'Harry?' Lupin's tone was one of doubt as he leant his hands on the table in front of him. 'Do you have something to say?' Harry's mind was racing. Why hadn't he thought of this? He was unwittingly full of secrets that he had absolutely no intention of revealing to any of them. Dumbledore had told him to tell no one other than Ron and Hermione about Voldemort's means of immortality, and to get to Bellatrix he knew he was going to have to keep Snapes little *visit* to himself as well. Harry could not, in good conscience, join them on a lie.

'I-I've changed my mind.' Harry could think of no other way out of it. 'I don't think I'm ready to join yet.' He could feel the colour rising in his cheeks. 'I'd like to think about it, maybe join later like you said.' Harry thought the guilt he was feeling was written all over his face. 'I-I'm sorry … I don't mean to waste your time.' And without looking at them he moved quickly out of the room and climbed the stairs, leaving a stunned silence behind him.

He went straight on up to his room, not wanting to face anyone. He knew Ron and Hermione would understand once he explained the situation, after all they too shared the Horcrux secret. But Ginny,

she would think he was a coward and he would not be able to explain.

As he went to close the door behind him, the small red and white cat darted into the closing gap and ran passed him, jumping onto his bed. Hedwig watched the cat from her perch with interest as Harry walked over to it, picked it up, and holding it aloft in front of him, sat down.

'Back again … what's your name anyway?' He pulled the cat to his chest and rubbed it affectionately on the neck. 'I guess I'm going to have a lot of explaining to do when the meeting is over. I'd better come up with something good too.' he said under his breath.

'What do you think Socks?' the cat clawed gently up his chest and rubbed it's head under Harry's chin. 'Lupins never going to understand … and neither is Ginny.' He said thoughtfully, but then he was distracted by the fervent purring of Socks as she rubbed herself around Harry's neck. He lay back on his arm with her curled into his chest and he spent a long while just stroking her. She rolled on her back playfully and batted Harry's hand softly with her front paws as he smiled affectionately at her. Then there was a knock at the door.

'Come in.' Harry sat up and Socks jumped off the bed. Lupin swung the door open and entered, a grave look on his face, and as he closed the door Socks darted through it and down the stairs.

'Harry,' he sounded very serious though Harry could detect no anger in his voice. 'I want to talk to you about what happened down stairs.' Harry waited for it, wondering how he was going to get out of this convincingly. Lupin sat on the bed next to him 'I'm sorry we put you in such an awkward position.' Harry was thrown by this statement and could think of nothing to say.

'Arthur and I should have realized that you were too young still. We were carried away with your past performance and assumed too much.' Harry sat bewildered 'Of course you're not ready to join The Order, you've had enough to deal with without taking on the added responsibility that comes with belonging to such a society,' Lupin put his hand on Harry's shoulder 'and there was no need to be embarrassed. Not a single person present in that room thinks any less of you, they are all very much aware of what you have done in the past.'

Harry finally understood what he was talking about. Lupin and the others had thought his red-faced silence had been from embarrassment. They actually thought he feared becoming a member of The Order. Relief wash over him. He wouldn't have to come up with some half-baked excuse and they remained clueless as to the real reason why he had backed out.

He gave Lupin the most sheepish look he could muster 'Yeah … I just didn't feel ready after all.'
'That's quite understandable, Harry.' Lupin said sincerely.
'Suppose Fred and George are in?' he must have overplayed his disappointment because Lupin put his arm around the back of Harry's shoulders and joggled him reassuringly.

'You'll make it one day Harry, when you're ready. And I'm willing to bet you'll be the most outstanding member The Order has ever seen,' then Lupin added with a smile 'besides Dumbledore.' Then Lupin lifted himself from the bed and headed for the door. 'Would you like me to send Ron and Hermione up?' Lupin was being rather tactful about Harry's supposed embarrassment and although Harry had been glad it had worked out this way, he couldn't help but feel miffed that Lupin had believed Harry afraid of joining The Order. But he swallowed his pride.

'Yeah. Thanks.'

When Ron and Hermione entered the room Harry could see by the look on their faces that Lupin had told them his version of events. Hermione approached him as she would a sick pigmy puff and Ron looked just plain uncomfortable. It irritated Harry even more to think his own two best friends would believe it of him.

'Are you okay, Harry?' Hermione sat down next to him and touched his arm reassuringly. Harry tilted his head at her and gave her a sarcastic look.

'Before you both start' he sighed 'the reason I didn't join The Order is because you are bound to reveal all information pertaining to Voldemort that you know, which means that I would have had to tell them about the Horcruxes, alright? Lupin and the others just assumed I was scared and I didn't

correct them because it would have led to all sorts of questions that I couldn't answer!'

'Oh' Hermione removed her hand as her cheeks went pink.
'I knew it had to be something like that!' Ron sat down on Harry's other side and grinned at him 'didn't believe a word of what Lupin said.'
'Oh really?' said Hermione as she raised an eyebrow 'That's why you wanted me to come up here on my own to talk to him first, was it?'

It was Rons turn to turn pink.

'Look, it doesn't matter now.' Harry said 'We've bought some time, so lets spend it going over what we've learned so far about the locket.'
'Good idea!' said Hermione shooting Ron a disapproving look 'Well we're all in agreement that it could have been Kreacher who helped Regulus obtain the locket right?' Ron nodded as Harry picked up Socks who had wandered into the room again tailing Ron and Hermione. He stood up and carried her over to the door, pushing it closed, then sat down on the rug and placed Socks in the crook of his crossed legs.

'It's the best theory we've got to go on' he said 'so I guess the next step is to question Kreacher'
'That'll be a delightful treat.' Said Ron flatly.

'If he was with Regulus when he obtained the Horcrux he may be able to tell us what happened to it.' Hermione was looking curiously at Socks. 'Is that Ginny's cat?'
'Yeah' said Harry 'so … I suppose I'd better call him then.' He said reluctantly.
'What's its name?'
'What? Oh … I don't know, I've been calling her Socks, she seems to like it.' She was purring loudly and had her eyes squished together enjoying Harry's attention.

'Do you think he'll come?' Ron asked obviously hopeful the answer would be no.
Harry shrugged 'He's come when I've called before.'
'He has to come. Give him a call!' Hermione said.

All three of them were silent for a moment, Ron had raised his eyebrow in anticipation while Hermione grimaced and Harry was looking at them both with a wry smile. He rose off the floor and looked up at the air in front of him and called 'Kreacher!'

CRACK!

At first Harry couldn't quite work out what he was looking at, it appeared to be a house elf but it had too many arms and legs.

'He calls me!' it croaked 'the mudblood lover calls me to him, in my Mistresses home no less. Kreacher will go and speak with his Mistress, yes-'
'Harry Potter is your master and Dobby is loyal, even if nasty Kreacher is not!' another voice squeaked.

'Dobby? … What's going on? What are you doing here?' Harry was standing with Socks perched on his foot looking down in puzzlement.
It appeared that Kreacher and Dobby were stuck together, though how Harry couldn't tell.

8. Kreacher's Mischief and Ministry Woes

It was a most peculiar sight.

Kreacher and Dobby were standing back to back and did not seem able to put any distance between each other, rather like they had been glued together.

'Harry Potter! Dobby is most pleased to see you.' Dobby squeaked enthusiastically and immediately

went into a low bow. Kreacher, on the other hand, was somewhat less than awed at the site of Harry and looked extremely disgruntled as he resigned himself to being dragged off his feet onto Dobby's back with his legs dangling in the air in front of him.

'What happened?' Hermione seemed more than a little distressed at their predicament. 'How long have you been like this?'
'The mudblood speaks to Kreacher!' Wide-eyed and faking shock, Kreacher placed his long bony fingers in his ears. 'The Mistress will see, oh yes, she will see her Kreacher does not listen to it.' his crooked legs still splayed in the air.

'How did you two get stuck together then?' Ron asked as if he were talking to a couple of misbehaving children.

'Dobby, what's going on?' Harry said getting a little frustrated.
'Dobby is trying to protect Harry Potter' Dobby straightened defiantly, letting Kreacher's feet touch the floor once more. 'Dobby is seeing Kreacher sneaking, so Dobby is binding us to make Dobby go where Kreacher goes.'

'Stupid elf with funny hats knows not what he is doing!' Kreacher said loudly to himself 'Kreacher will find a way to break stupid elf's bond.'

'What do you mean, sneaking?' Harry frowned, eyeing Kreacher.

'Dobby knows Kreacher is up to mischief!' Dobby turned his head awkwardly to look at Kreacher through narrowed eyes 'Kreacher is going to betray his master, Dobby knows HE IS A BAD ELF!' his voice getting angrier with every word.

'What are you talking about?'
'*Master* knows Kreacher cannot disobey him.' Kreacher interrupted slyly, still facing in the opposite direction. 'Kreacher is doing as *Master* ordered.'

'Dobby, you can't stay stuck together like this!' Hermione sounded exasperated. 'You'll have to undo the spell!' she said as she crossed her arms.

Harry was trying to walk around Dobby to get to Kreacher but the little elf kept shuffling around enthusiastically so he remained facing Harry, eventually Harry grabbed his bony little arm to make him stay put and crouched down in front of Kreacher. Harry looked into his bloodshot grey eyes.

'What have you been up to?' he said suspiciously.
Kreacher seemed rather pleased with Harry's reaction. 'Kreacher is only following his *Masters* orders.' His continual emphasis on the word Master glowed with contempt.
Harry narrowed his eyes 'What did I tell you to do?' he asked slowly.
'Master cannot remember his own orders? Kreacher is indeed unfortunate to serve under such a lowly wizard!'

Harry clenched his jaw as Ron and Hermione looked on in anxious silence. 'What-did-I-tell-you-to-do, Kreacher?'
Kreacher bowed dramatically, leaving Dobby flailing as his legs left the floor. 'You had Kreacher follow the brave and daring Master Malfoy.' he said treacherously.

There was a sudden knock at the door and Harry, Ron and Hermione looked up sharply. 'Just a minute' Harry threw at the door urgently as he stood up. Socks scattered and jumped onto the bed. 'You're both going to have to leave,' Harry said quietly, but before he could finish the door flung open and Fred and George stepped into the room.

'Told you!' Fred said triumphantly, pointing at the two elves now struggling with each other to get the best view of the doorway. 'Knew he wouldn't disappoint us.'

'What are you doing?' Harry was angry at having been caught.

'Didn't honestly expect us to believe that tripe you told Lupin, did you?' George raised his eyebrows '*Not ready to join The Order!* Pull the other one!'

‘This, coming from the kid who swiped an egg from a brooding Horntail.’ Fred chimed in.
‘And destroyed a Basilisk to rescue our little sister.’
‘Not to mention the Death Eaters-'

‘Alright!’ Harry said impatiently ‘so you caught me. Suppose now you’re bound tell the rest of them.’

‘Don’t be daft!’
‘What ever you’ve got going on, if it’s important enough to stop you from joining The Order, then we’re not going to tell them.’ George said.
‘Right! However we do want in on it.’ Fred said unabashedly.
‘Absolutely. Anyway they made it quite clear in the meeting that we were not going to be allowed out in the field as Order members…’
‘So basically we now hold the unofficial title of Order mascots.’
‘Which is not what we signed up for, is it?’ George swept into the room and crouched in front of the elves, studying them curiously. ‘What happened to these two?’

‘They’re stuck together’ said Ron flatly.

‘Leave it to you to state the bleedin obvious’ Fred walked over to Kreacher and pointed his wand at the elf. There was a flash of white light and a whooshing sound, and then Dobby and Kreacher broke apart scowling at one another.

‘Well that’s that! So what’s going on then?’ George said as he stood and faced Harry.

The trio exchanged looks before Harry slowly spoke ‘Kreacher has been following Malfoy.’
‘What?’ Fred looked flummoxed as he looked back at Kreacher.
‘Well … where is the little toe rag?’ asked George.
‘I don’t know, I was just about to ask before you came in.’
‘Don’t let us stop you.’ Fred ushered Kreacher over to Harry. Harry felt it was a reasonable trade-off involving Fred and George in the news about Malfoy rather than giving them the real reason he had called Kreacher.

‘Well Kreacher?’ Harry said expectantly ‘Where is he?’
‘Kreacher cannot say.’ the wrinkly little elf bowed extravagantly once more. ‘Kreacher has been unable to follow the noble and handsome Draco all the way to his location.’

‘The what?’ George said dubiously.
‘Never mind,’ said Harry with a sigh, and then turning back to Kreacher he asked ‘why?’
Kreacher lifted his head smugly ‘because the stupid elf with clothes will not let me.’

Fred caught Dobby’s arm as he tried to throw himself at Kreacher. ‘Dobby is not stupid!’ he squawked angrily, arms flailing madly. ‘Kreacher cannot be trusted! Kreacher is a bad house elf!’

‘Hang on, so have been following him or not?’ Ron was looking extremely confused.
‘Kreacher humbly follows in Draco's aristocratic wake when he is at Hogwarts.’

‘Hogwarts?’ Fred, George and Ron said in unison.

‘Are you telling me that Draco is wandering around the school undetected … whenever he feels like it?’ Harry said doubtfully
‘Kreacher did not say that.’ he smiled slyly.
‘Then tell me what he is doing there!’ Harry said losing his patience with Kreacher. ‘And I want you to be specific! How often … and which rooms he goes to!’

‘Master is cunning.’ Kreacher’s smug expression dissolved as he realized his game of verbal cat and mouse was over. ‘Kreacher has been privileged to watch the dashing young Malfoy twice as he has made his way into the Headmasters office’

‘He’s been inside Dumbledore’s office?’ Hermione said as she stepped forward. Kreacher covered his ears to block her out but before he could say anything insulting Hermione leant down and yanked his arms away from the side of his head in frustration, her enormous patience with Kreacher had finally worn thin. ‘What was he doing in there?’ she demanded.

‘The mudblood touched Kreacher-'
‘*What was he doing in there?*’ Hermiones eyes blazed. Kreacher still did not acknowledge her.
‘ANSWER HER!’ Harry commanded furiously.

‘He spoke with one of the portraits.’ Kreacher bit back defeated and then with a *CRACK* he was gone.

‘Dobby! Will you keep an eye on him for me? Don’t try to stop him but watch him okay?’
‘Dobby would be proud to do as you ask, Harry Potter!’ Dobby answered, lifting his head to its full height, and with a *CRACK* he was gone too.

‘What’s all that noise up there?’ Mrs. Weasleys voice echoed through the door.
‘Just showing Harry one of our new Lung Buster Bubblegums!’ Fred opened it a crack and yelled back as Socks darted through and down the stairs, apparently scared off by all the noise.
‘For goodness sake! I’ve told you about chewing those in the house!’ she yelled back ‘All of you can come on down anyway. I’m serving up an early dinner now everyone’s gone.’

They didn’t get a chance to discuss any further the bombshell that Draco had been back to Hogwarts over the holidays. Lupin had left and Mr. Weasley was leaving on an assignment for the ministry the next morning and Mrs. Weasley insisted they spend the remaining time together as a family. She ignored the twin’s obvious annoyance, mistakenly putting it down to their disappointment at not being asked to play an active roll in The Order.

Harry was distracted by the fact that he hadn’t gotten around to asking Kreacher about the locket, and spent most of the evening in deep thought, offering a grunt in answer here and there when it was expected of him. Ron and Hermione valiantly tried several times to excuse themselves early in the hopes they could congregate in private somewhere else in the house, but Mrs. Weasley was having none of it. She was unusually determined to keep them all together.

When it was finally late enough to get away with it, Ginny announced her intentions to retire and brushed past Harry on her way up to bed. It seemed to him she had come unnecessarily close and it jolted him out of his state of self-imposed isolation, awakening in him that familiar need that only she could arouse, and only she could fill.

Yet instead of finding it a pleasant sensation Harry found it frustrating; he could not seek the fulfilment he so desperately craved and so when he finally retired to his own room he lay awake for what seemed like hours, his body tense and his mind a mess of images and emotions. Eventually he was wound up so tightly, he gave up on sleep and threw on his jeans. He sat on the bed and leaned himself on the window ledge, looking out at the frosted bluish light illuminating the street.

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Harry was gently roused by the smooth touch of warm hands on his bare shoulders.

The cool evening breeze drifted through the open space in the window as he lifted his head slowly from the crook of his arm on the windowsill. He closed his eyes again as he felt Ginny’s soft lips on his neck. He wanted to lose himself in her, he wanted to bury his frustration and unleash the passion that ebbed through him. She let her hands find their way to his and he clasped them tightly, holding onto the feel of her body as she pressed it against his back.

‘Don’t turn me away again.’ she whispered in his ear. An incredible ache racked through his body at her words, awakening a desire he could not control. He turned as he pulled her to him. Their lips met in a flare of passion, her breathing as ragged as his, her desire as complete. He eased her back on the bed as she bit at his bottom lip playfully, her hushed throaty laugh clearing his mind of everything except her.

Every nerve in him felt alive with her touch, and as he brought his body down on hers, she shuddered slightly, wrapping her hands around the back of his neck and kissing him longingly. Their lips were locked together as Harry swam in her caresses but a thought was growing in the back of

his mind. He tried to shut it out, increasing the pressure of his lips on hers, pressing his eyes tightly shut, but it refused to be denied.

Harry let out a low rumble in the back of his throat as he pulled his head up. He could see Ginny's glistening eyes in the moonlight as she tilted her head and frowned slightly, but Harry knew she was expecting him to pull away. He looked painfully into her eyes, wondering if she could understand. He could not voice the thought that had brought him to a grinding halt. He could not speak the words that lingered in his mind. But he would act on them because they could not be ignored.

Slowly Ginny sat up as Harry moved his body off her and made way for her to leave him, as he knew she would. She looked down at the bed covers unable to meet his gaze.

'I want to stay with you anyway,' her voice broke as the tears spilled down her cheeks. 'I don't care anymore' Harry lifted her chin gently 'I don't want to leave you.'

Harry wrapped his protective arms around her and held her to him as she wept silently, and finally when she was ready to return to her own bed, he kissed her tenderly, memorizing every curve of her lips.

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Their letters arrived a few days later and Harry felt some relief that Hogwarts would be reopening again this year. Now he knew Malfoy had been back to the castle he felt the overwhelming need to return there as well.

In the final weeks before school Ginny did not appear in Harry's room in the middle of the night. It was not as if there was no longer anything between them, but finally she seemed to accept Harry's choice to let her go, though he had to remind himself nightly why he had chosen to do so. Instead, Socks had kept him company most nights. She seemed to have adopted him, and Harry was becoming very attached to her, in fact some nights he found himself waiting to feel her familiar spring onto the bed and warm body curled against his before he would drift into a peaceful sleep. She was rarely about during the day though, and when he asked, Ginny had waved it off saying Socks was usually to be found in some nook of the house sleeping. Harry wondered vaguely at how much a cat could sleep.

Crookshanks appeared to pay no mind to Socks one way or the other, seemingly thoroughly uninterested when she padded into the room. On occasion Harry would discover her skulking around when he was alone with Ron and Hermione, and he would pick her up and play with her while thinking on what they would do next. Though for some reason Hermione seemed to be growing increasingly uncomfortable as she studied Harry toying with his playmate, eventually taking to searching the room and upon finding Socks, she would unceremoniously dump her outside the door before they were allowed to discuss anything, much to Harry's, and Socks's annoyance.

During their talks they had agreed that it was too risky to summon Kreacher back to Grimmauld Place. The disturbance that inevitably followed when he and Dobby were in a room together was much harder to explain away now that Fred and George had gone, so it was decided that Harry would wait until he was at Hogwarts to question him about the locket.

The day finally came for the trip to Diagon Alley for the years school supplies. With the growing threat from Voldemort's minions, and the fact that many students were not expected to return to school after the summer, McGonagall had arranged a day for the students and family's to visit Diagon Alley in relative safety to pick up their supplies while under the protection of the ministry aurors.

Mr. Weasley mused that the ministry was very keen to catch up with Harry after he had slipped through their grasp at The Burrow, returning to Grimmauld Place. Apparently Scrimgeour had launched into a red-faced rant when he had found out they had lost Harry, with Mr. Weasley himself coming under fire being accused of aiding and abetting Harry's "escape", but Mr. Weasley was able to confidently state that he was in no way able to tell the ministry where Harry was. This was of

course absolutely true as he was not the Orders secretkeeper.

For the first time, they were going to apparate into Diagon Alley as it seemed the quickest and safest way to travel now that they all had their licenses, except of course Ginny, who was extremely put out that she was going to be left behind.

'You don't need new robes Ginny, you've barely grown in size over the past year!' was all Mrs. Weasley would offer in way of comfort. Harry had immediately asked who was staying behind to guard her and Lupin had looked at him curiously, clear he hadn't thought it necessary. But the last thing Harry wanted was for Snape to pay a little visit while they were gone and find Ginny alone. Without voicing his real reasons why, Harry managed to convince Lupin that just because he wasn't there, didn't mean she wasn't in any danger, and under the helpful growingly indignant gaze of Mrs. Weasley, Lupin assigned Hestia to stay behind.

Sturgis and Tonks were gathered in the kitchen having already been enlisted for added protection, but they were not travelling with the Weasleys, rather they would go ahead first with Lupin, one at a time and position themselves so they could watch from a distance. Lupin seemed to think that an obvious presence of so many Order members gathered around the Weasleys would be akin to holding up a rather large neon sign saying HARRY POTTER IS HERE with a giant finger pointed at him. So it was that Lupin and the others left the kitchen with a series of loud cracks, followed a while later by Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Ron, Harry and Hermione.

Harry was disappointed to note that Diagon Alley had become decidedly unfriendly over the past year. More shops than ever were closed and boarded up, and the little stalls that had sprung up were increasingly poorly erected and manned.

'Alright, we'll get you three fitted out for new uniforms, you don't need to buy robes; the ones you have should last you.' Mrs. Weasley said as her eyes darted around her 'Harry, where are you dear?' she added quietly.

'Here' he said as he moved to stand near her elbow. Lupin had taken Harry aside before they left and insisted he wear his invisibility cloak the whole time they were out, also advising him not to make contact with any friends he might come across in case someone was watching. Harry thought it strange but it seemed he was almost as worried about the aurors discovering Harry's presence as he was of Voldemorts cronies.

'Good. Stay right by us … don't go wandering off or we'll lose you!'

As they moved along the street, the occasional huddle of people emerged from one of the few open stores. Harry noted that few of the students would have been below fourth year and he guessed that most of the young ones were being kept at home. Scowling at the enormity of impact Voldemort had on the wizarding community Harry had embraced so enthusiastically when he had been introduced to it, he made his way down the cobbled Alley.

What was once a warm and welcoming place had been reduced to a foreboding ghost town where the once happy and lively throng of people had become a trickle of frightened witches and wizards who constantly glanced over their shoulders. Harry couldn't stop the anger in him as it rose with every passing step. One maniac had been responsible for all of this. A madman who had become less than human in his effort to avoid death was bringing the world that Harry loved to it's knees.

They shuffled in the door of Madame Malkin's and were loaded up with new jumpers and shirts in no time. Once Mrs. Weasley had parted with several Galleons they headed to Flourish and Blotts, which must have closed since their previous visit but appeared to have been opened specially for the occasion. The windows were still boarded up making the interior very dank indeed, and dust that had been kicked up by billowing cloaks drifted in the suns rays that had pierced the cracks between the planks of wood.

Harry stood near the stairwell trying to avoid bumping into anyone, and as he scrambled back to make way for two of the youngest students he had yet seen, he brushed a stack of disused books and dust swirled up under the confines of his cloak and attacked his mouth and nose.

He sneezed loudly three times in rapid succession and as he looked up, eyes watering madly, Mr.

and Mrs. Weasley, Hermione and Ron all stood gawping at the space where Harry was standing, and they were not the only ones. Nearby witches and wizards had stopped in mid act of rifling through books, automatically grabbing their children and staring wide-eyed at the non-apparent source of noise.

'Hehe… well now …' Mr. Weasley recovered first. 'Ron, I told you not to bring your rat in here,' Mr. Weasley was a terrible liar. Nervously he turned to the increasing hub of people watching 'gets terribly allergic … very old you see … Mmm…' he added lamely.

'Right' said Ron unconvincingly, then gaining confidence in the excuse he looked over his shoulder 'Sorry …' and bent down in mock search 'I'll just get him.' and proceeded to lift up books and peer round shelves as people started looking away again.

'That was too close!' Harry said under his breath as Ron reached him, though he noted that one or two wizards looked thoroughly unconvinced.
'Yeah, I think you might be better to wait outside.' Ron said as he continued to half-heartedly look for his non-existent rat.
'I think you're right' and Harry headed past him, making his way to the door. He dodged around it before it closed shut and stood in the street waiting for the others.

He watched as people approached and hurried on down the street, wondering why he hadn't spotted any aurors yet. Maybe they were all hidden under cloaks like he was, but he doubted it as he was pretty sure they didn't have that many invisibility cloaks at their disposal. He started searching more earnestly for some sign of them, looking in the tiny darkened alleys between shops and even scanning the rooftops as he walked slowly around in a circle. Suddenly he was knocked off his feet and he hit the ground with a thud, his cloak underneath him and something lying on top of him.

'Neville!' he croaked as he tried to heave his friend off him.

Neville looked startled as he scrambled to pick himself up, eyeing Harry apologetically 'Sorry Harry! Didn't see you there…'
'Yes, well that was the whole point' said Harry exasperated, pulling himself off the ground looking at Neville's anguished face.
'I'm really sorry, Harry!'

'It wasn't your fault, I wasn't watching where I was going' he added, swinging his cloak over his head. But before he could cover himself with it, it was ripped from his hands and he was being thrust face first to the ground. 'GET OFF!' he yelled as he struggled to get his hands free. He could hear Neville's urgently high voice.

'Let Go!'

Harry, his heart pounding, squirmed under the body that was pressing down on him. He managed to twist onto his back and finally pulled his hands free. Automatically his left fist made contact with his assailants face and his right had found his wand. *'Levicorpus!'* With lightening speed he had raised the man off him and dangled him in the air by his ankle.

'Give me that…' An angry voice said and Harry spun onto his knees.

'Stupefy!' he shot at a wizard who was struggling with Neville's wand hand, trying to disarm him. The flash of light hit the man's chest and his eyes curled backwards into his head as he was thrown off his feet by the force of the curse.

Then several things happened all at once.

A woman who was coming out of Flourish and Blotts started screaming, battling her way back against people who pushed forward out the doors to see what was happening; the man who dangled in the air was spluttering threateningly at Harry as blood dripped from his nose; and many loud *CRACKS* resounded in the street around Harry and Neville signifying the arrival of a number of apparators.

Harry, who was spinning around on his feet, wand directed straight out in front of him looking for

someone to target, suddenly threw himself at Neville, and pushed him to the ground as several jets of red light soared past them. He aimed a curse at one of the wizards that now surrounded him as he scrambled to his feet, but he felt a white hot jolt in his back that threw him forward. His body skidded along the ground but he still had his wand arm free. *Impedimenta!*

Without speaking as he struggled to catch his breath after being winded, he sent a curse that caught the man approaching him off guard, his body stiffening. Harry groggily picked himself up, his eyes watering from the pain, trying desperately to locate Neville and see if he was all right, but before he could straighten his body two blasts pelted excruciatingly into his side, hurling him off his feet, his head hitting the cobbled stones with a sickening crunch.

Harry heard Lupins voice roaring furiously ... he felt the breath leave his lungs and then everything went black…

~*~*~*~

Harry's body felt stiff and sore when he finally opened his eyes. His head swam as he tried to sit up, everything blurred and the pain shot through his skull so he let his head drop back down onto the thin pillow. He kept his eyes closed as nausea threatened to overcome him. *What happened?*

He tried but he couldn't remember what had brought him to this point. As he clutched his head he felt a lumpy wet patch above his left eye, he pulled his hand away and squinted at it, the blurry image of his fingers was smeared with blood. That explained why his head was spinning at least. But why wasn't it bandaged? Why hadn't someone fixed it already?

A sense of urgency grew in him. Something was terribly wrong. With his eyes only half open and his head feeling like it was splitting in two, Harry slowly eased himself off the bed onto his feet. Nausea swept through him again as the blood left his head, and the darkness that had barely retreated closed in on him. He staggered briefly, unable to focus on the anything to stop the spinning, his head feeling like it would explode, but even as he fought the urge to throw up, he dropped to the floor and sank into oblivion.

~*~*~*~

Something was lifting him up; strong hands were dragging him as he tried to open his eyes but his head pounded so much that he felt sick. He could hear voices but they seemed very distant and he could not make out what they were saying. He was hoisted into a sitting position on a soft platform; his head feeling like his skull was crushing in on him as someone tapped his face.

'Harry! Harry wakeup! Wakeup Harry!' it echoed in his head painfully and suddenly he convulsed, throwing his chest forward he lost the contents of his stomach. There were angry voices as Harry's body went limp again; being held up only by arms clutching at his shoulders. He felt so incredibly tired and the pain in his head was so severe that he wished these people would just let him sleep.

There was an argument raging somewhere in the room as Harry hung his head and waited to blackout again. *'Harry! Wakeup!'* that annoying voice said again as he felt a hand tapping his cheek *'Harry! Don't fall asleep!'* but even as the voice spoke, Harry willed the approaching darkness to take him away.

Then someone put a hand under his chin and held his head up, something was thrust against his lips and hot liquid dripped out of the sides of his mouth and down the back of his throat as he spluttered and choked on it..

The drowsiness that had lurked comfortably near was ebbing away rapidly and the pounding in his head grew more and more real until he felt like he could bear it no longer. He swiped out at the cup and heard it crash to the ground.

'It's alright Harry … it will help you to stay awake'

'I don't want to stay awake' he croaked still unable to open his eyes for the pain.
'I know,' the voice softened 'Someone's coming to fix you Harry … but you need to stay awake until they get here' Harry groaned in protest. 'It wont be long … I promise…'

Harry realized who was talking to him *'Lupin?'* he still could not open his eyes or hold his head up to see.
'Yes'
Harry wanted to talk to him, he wanted to ask what had happened and how he came to be here, but the pounding in his head was becoming all consuming. *'I need to lay down'*

'It should be alright, he's had the potion so he wont lose consciousness.' Tonks's voice sounded strained. He felt himself being lowered and once his head was on the pillow some of the thunderous pain eased. Harry tried to open his eyes but immediately felt sick again as the light swirled above him, so he closed them and lay there listening.

'They should have Scrimgeour's head on a stick for this!' Tonks sounded extremely angry. 'I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it for myself.'
'He shouldn't have attacked us' a male voice Harry vaguely recognized replied
'What did you expect?' Tonks's said so loudly that Harry closed his arms over his face to try to quell the noise 'I mean honestly … what did you think he would do … creeping up behind him and wrestling him to the ground … your lucky all he did was hang you upside down!'

'Tonks!' Lupin butted in. Harry's memory of the incident was starting to come back to him.
'Neville' he groaned *'Is he-'*
'fine, he's just fine' Lupin said soothingly.

A short time later a woman arrived and after a brisk greeting Harry felt her slender hands on his face. 'Why wasn't this seen to straight away?' she said gravely.
'These idiots wouldn't let us in to see him!' Tonks said 'He was lying on the floor when we came in.' she said darkly
'Totally unacceptable! I will be lodging a formal complaint with the Ministry the minute I get back to St Mungos!' the woman said business like as she took her hands from Harry. He felt a gentle warmth on his forehead that gradually grew into an uncomfortable prickly heat, but the pounding in his head was slowly receding until it was no more than a dull ache.

Eventually the sensation stopped and the woman told Harry to open his eyes. He opened them cautiously and was pleasantly surprised to note that everything had finally stopped spinning, though he still couldn't focus on anything.

'How's that … better?' she asked him. He lifted himself onto his elbow and turned to look at her as something was thrust into his hand. That's why he still couldn't focus, he thought as he slid his glasses over his nose. The room and the people in it swayed gently, but it was not enough to make him feel sick.
'Yeah, much better. Thanks.' She nodded at him satisfied and instructed him to stay in bed until morning.

Lupin followed her and spoke to her quietly outside the room as she left, before coming back and sitting down on the edge of Harry's bed. The man Harry now recognized as the one he had punched on the nose and hung upside down in Diagon Alley, was standing just inside the doorway, studying the three of them nervously. Over his shoulder hovered a small black orb. Harry looked away in disgust. Scrimgeour had sent the Stalker to keep an eye on them, was he so afraid of what they might do? The cold room was bare except for the bed he now sat on and a small table that was propped against a pale green wall.

'You're in one of the ministry's holding cells' Lupin said watching him.
Harry gave Lupin a stony look 'Are they going to let me out?'

'They can't keep you here, Harry.' Lupin said 'If people find out the ministry's holding the "Chosen One" in their jail cells there will be a massive outcry, Scrimgeour can be sure of that.' He said as he looked over at the Stalker 'But as you are not well enough to be moved, you'll stay here for the night anyway-'

‘No’ Harry cut him off ‘I feel fine and I want out of here!’
Lupin looked down at the floor gravely ‘Harry, I don’t think you realize how close you came to-'
‘I’m fine now.’ Harry abruptly.

‘I can understand why he doesn’t want to stay’ Tonks said with a raised eyebrow. Lupin gave him an appraising look.

‘You’d have to walk all the way to the Atrium before we can leave Harry.’
‘Not a problem.’ Harry felt weak but his need to leave here was greater.
‘We’re in the furthest part of the ministry’ Lupin added.
‘Doesn’t matter.’

‘Molly will be relieved to see him’ Tonks added.

‘You’d have to go straight to your own bed when we got back’ Lupin said.
‘Happily.’ Harry sounded anything but happy.

‘See, we just need to decide how are we going to take him’ Tonks said confidently.

‘I suppose we could go via the floo, I don’t think you’re up to
apparating.’
‘Fine’ said Harry.
‘All right’ Lupin said resignedly, standing up ‘I’ll go and speak to Scrimgeour. I’ll be back soon.’ and he turned and left, Tonks smiling after him.

‘I’ll head back to let them know you’re coming, Harry’ she said and followed him out the door.

Harry had found the walk to the Atrium much more tiresome than he had expected. By the time he stepped into the kitchen at Grimmauld place after the whirling trip through the floo network, his head was hurting so much he was wincing with the pain again. But he was glad to be back.

Hermione and Mrs. Weasley were looking at him in shock but they both gave him overly tight hugs before Mrs. Weasley sent him straight upstairs with watery eyes. Ron looked extraordinarily pale as he accompanied Harry up to his room. Harry sat on the bed with his head in his hands. It was feeling like it might burst at any minute so Ron closed the curtains and then left, closing the door behind him.

‘You’ve got an interesting relationship with the ministry, haven’t you?’
Harry looked up in surprise. Ginny was walking towards him with a crooked smile on her face.

‘Where’d you come from?’
‘I was waiting for you’ she said as she sat beside him and lifted her hand to his forehead to inspect the damage. Harry hadn’t seen her when he came in. He was about to mention the fact when Ginny spoke again.

‘It doesn’t look too bad now,’ she dropped her eyes to his ‘though from what Hermione said, you were in pretty bad shape for a while.’
‘How would she know?’
‘Tonks told her they found you on the floor, lying unconscious in a pool of blood.’ Ginny was frowning slightly as she stood up looking at his shirt. For the first time Harry noticed the dark patch of dried blood on the shoulder. So that explained why Mrs. Weasley and Hermione had looked so shocked and the blood had drained from Ron's face.

‘Here’ Ginny handed Harry the basin which normally sat below the mirror. He rested it on his knees as she dipped the small towel in and wiped the dried blood from his face and neck. As he sat there enjoying the sensation of Ginny’s touch he thought how he could have used the Tergeo charm to remove the blood, but he found this way much more pleasant so he allowed Ginny to clean him up and strip him of his old shirt, replacing it with a black t-shirt she had once told him suited him very much. Then she told him to lye down and promptly left him before Mrs. Weasley brought in a tray of dinner.

She showed some surprise at Harry’s cleaned up appearance but said nothing before telling him she

would bring him up a light sleeping draught later. Even though Harry's head still ached, he was rather hungry so he finished off the steak and kidney pie before placing the tray on the floor, and then leaned back on his stack of pillows feeling very thankful he wasn't in the cell at the ministry.

It may have been paranoia about Death Eaters that had triggered off the events that led him to the ministry cells, but what other reaction did they expect? You don't grab someone from behind and throw them on the ground unless you're expecting a fight! What were they playing at? There was a knock at the door and Lupin entered.

'You're looking better.'
'What happened? Why did they jump me in the first place?' was out of Harry's mouth before he had even sat up properly.
'Because they're idiots.' said Tonks as she appeared from behind Lupin.
Lupin couldn't help but smile 'Yes, well … that does certainly seem to play a part in all this.' then he pulled up a chair as Tonks plonked herself down on Harry's bed.
'Starring role if you ask me.' she looked sideways at Harry.

'They were under orders to detain you if they found you, Kingsley warned me yesterday.' Lupin sighed.
'What? Why?' Harry said, feeling his temper rise.
'Since the ministry lost contact with you they have been under a barrage of public pressure to … produce you.' Harry looked at Lupin in angry bewilderment 'It didn't take long for the rumours to start that you were not missing … but dead.'
'Stupid gits almost killed you trying to prove you were alive!' Tonks rolled her eyes.

'So they watched for you at Diagon Alley and when Neville knocked you over and your cloak came off, the two closest aurors moved in. They tried to stop you from putting your cloak back on, and the scuffle that ensued brought the rest of them down on top of you.' Lupin said gravely.

'So they thought that the best thing to do would be to leave me to rot in one of their cells?' Harry said through his teeth.
'Prats!' said Tonks.
'They're afraid of you Harry,' Lupin said quietly. Harry scoffed as Lupin went on to explain 'they never expected you to be so … hard to detain. They had no idea how skilled you are, so when they realized they had nearly killed you trying to defend themselves, they panicked. They got you back to the ministry and in the holding cell before I could see how much damage they had done.'

'Arrrgh! I am so sick of it!' Harry didn't try to hide his fury 'If Scrimgeour gets in my way one more time I'm gonna-'
'I don't think that will be a problem anymore.' Lupin interrupted.
'Why should he stop now? He doesn't strike me as the type to give up that easily.' Harry said resentfully.
'Because you have him over a barrel, Harry. If you were to tell people what happened he wouldn't last ten more minutes in his office.' Lupin stood up 'Imagine the Minister of Magic almost doing Voldemort's job for him.' a sad smile played across his lips.

After they left Harry thought about what was said. He hoped Lupin had been right and that it would be the end of the Ministries interference. He would be heading back to Hogwarts the day after tomorrow and he had no idea what was in store for him after that. The last thing he needed was the Ministry trying to track him down wherever he went.

His head still ached and there was a dull ringing in his ears from the pain when Mrs. Weasley came in briefly to give Harry a sleeping draft, not leaving until he had drank it all down. He really didn't mind having some help to shut out the pain, and it wasn't long before he was feeling very light headed indeed.

Eventually the draft seeped through him and he could feel no pain at all, so he closed his eyes and enjoyed drifting lightly between states of consciousness. He felt something hop on his bed and he immediately grinned, thinking that Socks had come to keep him company yet again. But when he opened his eyes Ginny was sat on the side of his bed looking down at him, smiling.

'What are you grinning at?' she laughed playfully.

‘You’ he said with an even broader smile.
‘Really!’ her eyes sparkled.
‘I’d take you over Socks any day.’ he felt blissfully intoxicated as he reached his hand up and brushed her hair back off her face.
‘Is that so?’ she chuckled.
‘Yeah, but don’t tell her I said that.’ he said softly.
‘Oh, somehow I don’t think she’d mind.’

Harry gazed up at the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. ‘I’m going to marry you one day, Ginny Weasley.’
‘You fool,’ she laughed softly ‘it’s the potion mum gave you, your completely out of your head.’
‘And what a wonderful place it is,’ he said dreamily.

Ginny’s smile saddened slightly as she looked down at his mouth ‘It’ll be over one day Harry,’ her finger brushed across his lips as he opened them to kiss it gently ‘one day you’ll be free.’
He leant up on his elbow and kissed her softly on the lips ‘I’ll never be free’ he whispered, then he bent his head and grazed his lips on her neck ‘not from you.’
‘I wish you would say that to me some other time.’ she barely spoke but Harry was close enough to hear it.

He breathed her in, feeling even more intoxicated by her scent. He kissed Ginny's neck lightly again before looking at her drowsily through heavy eyelids, expecting to meet the same desire in her eyes, but she was looking at him with a smile on her face, highly amused at something.

‘C’mon lover boy, I think it’s time you went to sleep!’ and she pushed him back down on the pillow, curling into his body beside him. Harry hung his arm over her and nuzzled into her slender neck. She chuckled lightly to herself as he brushed his lips over her skin, thoroughly enjoying himself, though he had no idea what she found so amusing. Before long he had trouble keeping his head off the pillow, so he relaxed back and as Ginny turned in the crook of his arm to face him, he opened his eyes for just long enough to see a tear drop to the gentle smile on her lips. Before he had time to register it, he was gone.

9. An End To Division and a New Position for Harry

Harry spent the next day rather uncomfortably.

For the first time he was glad to have the distraction of getting all of his gear washed and packed into his trunk ready for the following day. He was acutely aware of how he had behaved towards Ginny under the influence of Mrs. Weasleys so-called "light sleeping draft". What was worse, he remembered everything he had said to her. A couple of times he caught her looking at him with a slight smile playing across her lips, but she tactfully said nothing.

The next morning they all piled into Ministry cars and headed to Kings Cross Station. Although Harry was loathed to have anything to do with the Ministry, Mr. Weasley had made it clear before he had left for work that they were under instruction from Kingsley, and should prove quite manageable. Harry was sat in a car separate from the others, squished uncomfortably in the backseat between two of the biggest aurors he had ever seen, Kingsley Shacklebolt was in the passenger seat.

Harry sat, shoulders scrunched into his body and his legs uncomfortably pushed together; his escorts knees splayed out because their incredibly huge thighs made it impossible for them to close their legs any further. Kingsley had seemed quite amused by their size and cast Harry an exaggerated look that suggested he thought they were quite as ridiculous as Harry did.

He noted the main foyer of the station was as busy as usual as they wheeled all their trunks behind them. Glancing at the surrounding stalls, Harry stopped suddenly, causing the auror trailing behind him to fall over his trolley. Harry heard the auror swearing over the clatter of his luggage as it spilled onto the tiled floor but he paid no attention; he walked slowly up to the stand where a newspaper headline had caught his eye and picked up a copy of the paper. On the front page was a picture of what might have been a town once with the headline

TORNADO TEARS THROUGH TROWBRIDGE

Residents of the close-nit community of Trowbridge, just outside of Bath, are this morning at a loss to explain the overnight devastation of their town. Emergency services were called out around 3 am after an anonymous call was placed that a tornado had struck the tiny town and flattened almost everything in its path. Casualties are as yet unknown. Meteorologists who were responsible for monitoring the weather bands at the time say that their instruments showed no sign of any weather disturbance and are adamant that no such thing could have occurred.

'I challenge the twits to come down here and say that!' angry local, Guthrey Pudderwell told us this morning. Mr. Pudderwell had fortunately spent the night unconscious in a barn outside the town limits after having difficulty finding his way home the previous evening. He was unable to give us any further details of the storm, however Mr. Pudderwell assured us that it must have been a windy night because on his stagger back from The Pig and Whistle, (a local drinking establishment), he had somehow misplaced his hat.

Unfortunately our efforts to interview other locals have been hampered by Emergency Officials who have kept everyone out of the site until it is deemed safe to enter…

Harry lowered the paper. Hermione, who had been reading the article over his shoulder, voiced what he had been thinking 'Giants!'
Ron, who had just joined them, grabbed the paper from Harry's hands and read it.

'They've started already.' Harry said gravely as he looked at Hermione 'How do you fight things that are twenty feet high and have a natural resistance to magic?'
'I don't know' Hermione said frowning with concern 'but I think we need to pay Hagrid a visit as soon as we can. Maybe he'll know something?'

'I don't think fighting them is going to be an option.' Ron said darkly returning the newspaper to the stand as a grumpy assistant looked on.
'What d'ya mean?' Harry frowned.
Ron shrugged slightly and shook his head 'I don't know, just a thought.' he said dismissively.

'Come on!' Mrs. Weasley had doubled back when she realized they were no longer following her 'You've got seven minutes before the train leaves, now move it!' she waved them on hurriedly.

After a very strained and teary farewell from Mrs. Weasley, they boarded the train with the two enormous aurors carrying Pig and Hedwig in tow, followed by Kingsley. They made their way slowly along the narrow passageway, and as they passed, Harry peered into the cabins, and though Ministry guards who stood just inside the doorways blocked some compartments; others Harry could see into, appeared full.

'Right you lot!' a gruff voiced man who was tall and hairy and outfitted in ministry guard robes, was standing down the opposite end of the corridor waving his arms about like he was on a tarmac attempting to land a plane, 'in 'ere' A few doubtful looking fourth year Ravenclaws shuffled into a compartment, as the door was closed behind them. 'Rest of you … this way.' he headed through the connect doors into the next carriage.

As they dragged their trunks behind them everyone in the corridor lurched forward when the train finally left the platform. Harry watched as people were sorted. He picked out Neville and Luna entering a compartment with some sixth year Hufflepuffs, and also spotted Colin and Dennis Creevey joining some other students he didn't know. They were all compartmentalized gradually until just the four of them and two very small first years, were left.

'You lot can take this one!' the gruff voiced man barred their way and opened the compartment door.

As Harry waited for Ron, Hermione and Ginny to pile in before him, Kingsley called to him from behind the two massive aurors. 'I'll be up the other end. I'll leave these two here with you.' he raised an eyebrow comically, peering over one of their shoulders at Harry, then disappeared behind the hulk as he walked away. Once inside Harry stowed his gear, relieving the guards of their cages and slouching down in between Ron and one of the small boys sitting by the window. His brown

curls gave his already pink-cheeked freckly face an even younger appearance.

The other boy who sat opposite had black hair and very low set eyebrows and looked thoroughly uninterested as he sat staring out the window. The train rattled along and Harry watched as the curly haired boys eyes roamed around the cabin, stopping on Hermione and Ginny, the colour in his cheeks rising when Ginny looked up and smiled at him. Harry smiled to himself as the boy looked away nervously, continuing on to Ron who had his attention on Pig, and then finally Harry. The boy's lips curled in a brief smile as he met Harry's gaze, then his eyes did the flick up to his scar.

Predictably his face changed immediately, draining of all colour; even his freckles seemed to pale as he gaped open-mouthed, seemingly unable to look away. The dark haired boy noticed the change in his companion and turned his head to look at Harry. His eyebrows lowered even more and his beady eyes glittered as his mouth curled downwards into a furious pout. He stood up abruptly and with all eyes on him, he crossed to the door and flung it open.

'You there!' he said rudely as he peered round the enormous guard. 'I'm not staying in here with him!' he said as he pointed at Harry 'You're going to have to move me!'

'What's all this about?' the gruff man strode into view
'Him!' he looked accusingly at Harry 'I'm not staying in here with him!'
'And why not?'
The boy scowled in wonderment 'because he's the "Chosen One", he's the one The Dark Lord's after. I don't want to be caught in the crossfire when he gets attacked!' he said indignantly. Harry and Ron exchanged glances as Ginny scoffed and shook her head.

The man looked at Harry briefly and sighed 'You're not movin, everyone stays where they are. Now get back to your seat before I set one of these two on you.' He waved a finger at Harry's escort and turned away, the conversation clearly over.

The boy turned around red faced and paced back to his seat. He plonked himself back down next to Hermione with an angry sigh and folded his arms across the front of him as he went back to staring out of the window. This time however, he looked anything but disinterested. As the houses and landscape flew by, he appeared to be looking very intently for any sign of an impending affront on the compartment containing Harry Potter.

'Well, isn't this nice' Hermione said looking around as their eyes flitted from one person to another.
'Yeah, right cosy little group' Ginny said eyeing the dark haired boy.
'There's one upside … no prefect duties!' Ron smiled at Hermiones disapproving look.

The train journey was proving monotonous beyond compare and because no one was allowed to leave their compartments to mix with friends it meant that Harry, Ron and Hermione were unable to talk in private. Harry resigned himself to flipping through *Quidditch Quips and Clueless Commentary!* An amusing little handbook Ron had bought in Flourish and Blotts. It was bound in leather and gold leaf and was filled with quotable quotes from some of the most famous people in the league, as well as some other less memorable folk who had made it in because of their game steeling commentary. Harry turned each page half expecting to come across something of Luna's efforts from last year.

After they had donned their robes, the train grumbled to an uneventful halt, and they all piled out heading down to the awaiting carriages. Hagrid was not there to greet the first years for only the second time since Harry had been at Hogwarts. It wasn't surprising though considering there were so few of them, so Hermione appointed herself to shuffle them along the platform to the awaiting transport.

It was then that Harry really noticed the difference in the number of students to previous years. In the full moonlight, it was easy to see that the usual mass of heads bobbing up and down as they descended the stairs had been reduced to around a hundred and fifty, and few, as Harry had suspected, were below fourth year.

Harry went up to an awaiting Thestral and gave it a pat on the nose. It stared out at him through its ghostly white eyes as it nudged his palm. 'My last ride with you,' He said quietly. He then joined Neville, Luna, Ron and Hermione as they sat waiting to leave. As his guard positioned themselves,

one up front on the would-be drivers platform, and one standing on the stoop at the back, Harry looked around the carriage. 'Where's Ginny?'

'Oh, she went to sit with Seamus and Lavender.' Luna said 'I see Dean's back as well. He wasn't too sure if he would be returning, you know.' Harry tensed as she looked at Ron 'I overheard him at your place telling Ginny that he didn't really see the point in coming back. Of course, she was quite adamant that he should return.' Harry felt his stomach drop painfully as the carriages started along the road. 'Looks like she managed to talk him round. He certainly looked pleased with himself about something.' She added dreamily.

As Luna spoke, a painful heaviness grew in Harry's chest, making it hard for him to breathe. He stared out the window to avoid the looks he knew Hermione would be throwing him. So Ginny had wanted Dean to come back. She had convinced him it would be worth it. The thought made him sick. Along with the hurt, Harry's temper started to rise.

Is that what she had found so amusing when she was in his bed? Had she been thinking about Dean then? Harry brought his elbow up to rest on the window ledge and rubbed his fingers on his forehead. He thought about what he had said to her and swallowed hard, trying to ease the rising heat in him. Luna spoke almost non-stop on their way into the Hogwarts grounds with Ron, Hermione and Neville, who seemed to be aware of the tension, offering only stunted answers.

Hogwarts looked much more welcoming than it had when Harry had come at the beginning of summer, but he passed it by and moved into the Great Hall without registering it.

'Harry!' Seamus came up from behind and as Harry turned automatically, his eyes fell on Ginny who had strode in with Dean, both of them smiling as they came up behind Seamus.
'Yeah?' Harry said still watching Ginny and Dean.
'It's good to see you. I didn't expect you'd be here this year after the rumours.' Seamus patted Harry's shoulder.
'I bet your not the only one.' Harry was glaring at Dean who was laughing at something Ginny had said.
'Is everything alright?' Seamus asked.

Harry tore his eyes away, annoyed at himself 'Fine Seamus … how was your holiday?' Harry forced himself to concentrate on what Seamus was saying as they crossed the large gap between the entrance door and the tables which were much shorter than usual, with only enough seating for a quarter of the usual Hogwarts intake. As he sat himself right at the farthest end, Seamus sat next to him and Ron plonked himself opposite. Hermione was looking up at the staff table as she sat herself next to Ron.

'Hagrids not here.' Hermione said frowning. They all turned to look at the long staff table up at the head of the Hall. Harry's eyes dropped to Ginny who had sat down next to Lavender and Dean.

'I wonder where he is then?' Ron said 'Did he say anything to you?'
'No,' Harry looked back at Hagrids empty chair. 'Who have they got for Defence Against the Dark Arts?' Harry could see Professor Sprout and Flitwick. Slughorn was also there chatting to Professor McGonagall and Madame Pomphrey.

Just then Professor McGonagall rose from her chair and silenced the chatter. She looked around at the students for a moment, before beginning.

'Welcome back to Hogwarts, such as it is. For those few of you who are here for the first time, I extend a welcoming hand from all of our staff and older students, I am sure they will help you to settle in under the rather unusual circumstances we find ourselves in.' Harry looked around, the first years were sitting together at the foot of the Hufflepuff table. Harry frowned and began searching for the sorting hat. He caught Slughorn's eye and received a knowing wink before McGonagall continued.

'For the first time in Hogwarts history, there will be no sorting of the first years to begin the feast.' A loud murmur erupted throughout the Hall as Harry exchanged looks with Ron and Hermione. Professor McGonagall raised a hand and waited for quiet. 'Amongst other changes being made for this year at least, our staff has been reduced, and your lessons will combine all students within your

year who are taking the same subject. You will be made aware of the full changes tomorrow morning after breakfast when you receive your new timetables. Also' McGonagall seemed to hesitate for the longest time before continuing 'there will be new sleeping arrangements explained to you after dinner.'

Everyone abandoned any pretence of hush and they all started talking rapidly amongst themselves. McGonagall looked out at the din over her spectacles, but she did not try to quell the noise. The other teachers were exchanging knowing glances as Harry looked back at Hermione and Ron who were talking along with everyone else.

'You mean they're going to mix the houses?' Ron asked, seemingly horrified at the thoughts of it.
'Well it makes sense when you consider how few students and staff there are.' She pointed out.
'But they cant do that! That means we'll be sharing passwords and …' Ron was trying to find the words 'and … everything.' He finally said.

'So long as we don't have to share with Slytherin, I don't care.' Seamus said darkly. Hermione frowned slightly at him.
'I don't think it would be such a bad thing.'
'What?' Ron accidentally knocked over his empty goblet. 'You're joking aren't you?'
'No,' she said seriously and before Ron could say anything else she put her finger to her lips and turned back to McGonagall.

'There are still a couple of items that need to be covered. Firstly, there will be no Quidditch this year.' There were multiple loud groans, especially from the Gryffindor table, though Harry, Ron and Ginny, sat in silence 'And we will not be appointing any new Prefects as I see enough have returned to adequately perform the required duties.' There were a couple of quietly disappointed groans from the Ravenclaw table. 'However, the time is right to inform you of your new Head Boy and Girl.

Harry noticed Hermione tense and a small smile crept across his lips. He knew how much she wanted this and figured she was a shoo-in. Ron on the other hand looked down at the table frowning to himself. Harry wondered if Ron really wanted the job after all. Even though he had basked in the glory of being a Prefect in the beginning, he wasn't exactly keen on the duties that came with it, and this year especially, being Head Boy would probably involve even more of the sort of work Ron liked to avoid. Harry looked back at McGonagall.

'This year, we are pleased to announce our new Head Girl, Miss Hermione Granger,' Hermione exhaled and her shoulders relaxed almost immediately. Harry could tell she was holding back an enormous grin and he was most impressed at her composure considering what must have been going on inside 'and Head Boy, Mr. Harry Potter.'

Harry had been watching Hermione but at the mention of his name his head swung round to look at McGonagall. He sat bewildered for a moment, then looked back to Hermione as if waiting for her to tell him it was a mistake, but she was smiling encouragingly at him, Ron grinning next to her.

What just happened?

Harry was frowning; he was trying to get his head around what McGonagall said, when someone started to clap. As Harry looked round at Ginny, who was smiling and clapping her hands gently, others started to join in. Slowly at first, but then the applause grew, and before he could speak what was on his mind the whole room, bar a few Slytherins and the dark haired first year, was clapping loudly and enthusiastically.

Harry looked back at Hermione. Her eyes looked slightly watery as she flushed, but she showed no sign of the shock he had expected. Harry felt intensely awkward. It hadn't occurred to him that he would be in the running for Head Boy as he wasn't a Prefect, and there was no way he could accept the position because he had no idea how long he would even be at Hogwarts. As the applause died down Professor McGonagall spoke once more.

'We will now begin the feast.' and as usual, huge dishes piled high with delicious looking food appeared on the tables before them.

As everyone tucked in Harry leaned over his plate. 'What does she mean by making me Head Boy?'

he said in a half whisper to Ron and Hermione.
'You're the obvious choice mate.' Ron said happily as he brandished a chicken leg 'They couldn't have picked a better person.'
'That's right, Harry' Hermione was spooning corn onto her plate 'you are intelligent, compassionate, and you're a natural leader.' She stopped and looked at him 'I don't know why you're so surprised' Harry was looking at them as if they new something he didn't. Seamus spoke up.

'I know I'd rather have you as Head Boy than anyone else' he said 'especially with things the way they are.'
'Me too,' Neville and Luna had been listening to the conversation 'You are the best man for the job Harry, and I'm really glad you decided to come back.' Neville said earnestly.

Harry didn't know what to say. He was heartened by their faith in him but he couldn't very well tell them that he probably wouldn't be staying for long; that would lead to too many questions. So he lifted a couple of lamb cutlets onto his plate and resigned himself to having a private conversation with Professor McGonagall when he could.

'Strange McGonagall didn't mention who the new Defence Against the Dark Arts Teacher is' Luna said, opening her protruding eyes. There was much speculation throughout the meal about who it might be. And Professor McGonagall came over briefly to give Harry the new password to the Common Room, though when he tried to engage her about his position as Head Boy, she held her hand up and told him whatever he had to say, it could wait. After all the pudding plates vanished, the students settled, whispering expectantly about the new sleeping arrangements. As McGonagall stood, a hush spread through the Hall.

'The sleeping arrangements have been made with everybody's best interests in mind, so no further discussions will be entered into.' Eyes were darting this way and that at McGonagall's ominous tone. It seemed very strange that they would not be siphoning off as usual to their houses.

'All students fifth year and below will be housed in the Ravenclaw Chambers' there was a murmur and a turning of heads. 'All students from the sixth and seventh years, will reside in the Gryffindor Tower.' Harry sat quietly as all of the older students, including the Slytherins exchanged incredulous looks. It was as he had suspected.

The Ravenclaw chambers were high up in the castle, therefore better protected and harder for outsiders to get to. And with the older students in the Gryffindor tower on the fourth floor, they had a tactical advantage should the Castle be infiltrated. Although he was not looking forward to sharing his beloved home with Slytherins, he understood the decision, so he remained quiet while McGonagall waited for the angry whispers to subside.

'All of your belongings will be waiting for you in your respective Common Rooms when you retire for the evening…' McGonagall launched into the usual spin about the Dark Forest and Mr. Filches banned substances, then they were dismissed.

Harry led the way, with Hermione bringing up the rear to ensure that everyone knew where they were supposed to go. He reached the portrait of the fat lady and was about to give her the password, when she raised her eyebrows at the site of them and said sternly…

'I don't want any funny business going on behind these walls now that you are all in together. You're going to have to learn to get along.' She pointed her finger at them 'Even if you realize it or not, its for your own good, and I for one, will be keeping an eye on you.' She lowered an eyebrow and looked down her nose at the Scowling Slytherins.

'Chizpurfle' said Harry.

'You took the word right out of my mouth' she sighed as she swung open to admit them.

Everyone milled around his or her trunks that were piled around the Common Room. Hermione wove her way to Harry and said quietly 'we're going to have to sort them out. I've counted about seventy of us all together.'
Harry looked about him, trying to gage how many of each house they had. It appeared there were less Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs than Gryffindors and Slytherins, so Harry made a decision.

'The Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff sixth years can bunk in together, everyone else can take a room for your year and house.' he spoke over the chatter.
'How come we have to share?' a disgruntled voice came from the crowd.
'Because there aren't enough rooms to go around.' Hermione chipped in impatiently 'And there are fewer of you than the other houses.'

'Well that's hardly a reason, is it? I think we should draw straws' came an indignant voice. Harry saw Ernie MacMillan turn on the outspoken Ravenclaw.
'You'll do as your told!' he said just as indignantly. A general argument broke out, centred around Ernie and the Ravenclaw, everyone seemed to think they should not be the ones sharing. Harry stood on his trunk and took out his wand. A noisy spray of red sparks shot out of the tip as he pointed it above his head.

'That's enough!' he said impatiently. Everyone fell very quiet as they turned to look at him 'Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff sixth years will share a room. If anyone has any objections they are free to spend the night outside in the hall.' There were no further protests so Harry went on 'Hermione will sort the girls into their dorms … the rest of you will follow me.'

Harry stepped down off the trunk and Hermione gave him an appreciative look. 'And you wonder why McGonagall chose you as Head Boy.' She smiled and led the girls to their rooms. Everyone floated their trunks, and they dispersed without further ado. It wasn't long before Harry was up at the top most room of the boys tower once more; the room that Harry had considered home more than any other. They unpacked and talked amongst themselves, though Harry avoided direct contact with Dean, still unable to control the resentment that swelled in him. When they finally retired to bed, Harry pulled the curtains shut and laid back with his hands behind his head.

He felt drained after the events of the evening, and no matter how hard he tried to turn his thoughts to other things, Ginny's face refused to leave his mind. He tortured himself with the memory of a couple of nights ago. He had found her amusement bewildering at the time, but now he felt a complete fool. He hated to admit the things he had said to her were unguarded and honest, and it tore him that she found it so easy to move on. But a voice in the back of his mind told him it was as it should be. It urged him to let go. He rolled on his side and tried to empty his mind, but the image of Ginny and Dean would not budge.

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The next morning, the Gryffindor Common Room was chaotic, to say the least.

Two Slytherins were bullying a sixth year Hufflepuff girl, and when Ernie and Justin Finch Fletchley realized what was going on, they leapt gallantly at the hulks that were Crabbe and Goyle in her defence. Unfortunately they stood no chance of winning a physical battle, and if it hadn't been for Ron and Harry's appearance at the foot of the stairs, there may not have been much left of either of them to rescue. Crabbe, sporting a face full of painful, pussy boils and Goyle, sprouting Cauliflower from every orifice, scrambled through the portrait hole moments later, muttering profanities under their breaths.

And twice Harry had to intervene in squabbles that had broken out between Slytherin and Gryffindor sixth years. It seemed giving out detentions first time round wasn't enough to deter them from making easily overheard caustic complaints about one another, so Harry resorted with threatening to bunk them in together until they learned to get along. This seemed to do the trick, and they all went down to breakfast complaining about Harry instead.

'This is hopeless!' Harry said angrily to Hermione when she appeared.
'I know what you mean. I found Hannah Abbott trying to throw Pansy Parkinson out of the window a minute ago.' She rolled her eyes 'Pansy apparently commented on what a good job the Death Eaters were doing ridding the world of Mudbloods and blood-traitors.'

'Didn't Hannah's mother get killed last year?' Ron asked frowning.
'Exactly. That Pansy has got such a mouth on her!' and most unlike her, Hermione added 'If I'd just

taken that bit longer to steam my robes, it would have been over before I got there.'

At breakfast, Professor McGonagall handed out new timetables to the Gryffindor students. When she got to Harry she asked him how things were going in the Gryffindor dormitories.
'Couldn't be worse. Thanks for asking.' He answered

Her mouth had the tell tale signs of a suppressed smile as she raised an eyebrow. 'You are more than capable of dealing with it, Mr. Potter.' Harry wondered where she got her information from. 'I want to see you in the Headmasters office after breakfast. I'll give you your timetable then.'
'I was just about to suggest the same thing actually.'
'Good, then you wont be late!' She said shrewdly. She gave him the password before turning to Lavender.

Harry was just reaching for the scrambled eggs when Nearly Headless Nick drifted up through the table towards McGonagall.
'Where were you lot last night?' Ron was referring to the ghosts whom Harry, along with almost everyone else, had noted were not present at the start of term feast.

Nick turned his wobbling head 'Ah! The insatiable curiosity that is the Wonderment of Youth. We were on castle business if you must know, that of which pertained purely to the ethereal entities residing in these grand and historic walls, and does not warrant an explanation to the likes of you.' He said, looking very self-important.

'In other words, mind your own business?' Ron said glumly. Nick turned his nose up and floated to where McGonagall stood. He spoke briefly to the Professor before heading down through the floor again.

'Ah ... Mr. Potter!' Professor Slughorn appeared at his side, he appeared slightly thinner than Harry remembered. 'Looking forward to another year of outstanding potions from you.' His face was crinkled into an indulgent grin that did not meet his eyes. 'Though I feel you may not be as keen as you were last year. Your performance ... lagged somewhat towards the end.'
'I'll do my best.'
'Barely need to Harry, m' boy! As I said, it's in your blood, just like your mother. Well, must be off! I am sure I will see you soon.' he said with a wink, but Harry had the distinct impression he was not as eager to be in Harry's company as he tried to portray.

Harry spent the rest of breakfast steeling looks at Ginny, who was sitting with Luna at the other end of the table, his thoughts turned to the book that currently sat in the room of requirement. If he was going to have any chance of living up to Slughorns expectations he was going to have to retrieve the princes copy of Advanced Potion Making. But did he really want to use it again?

'Harry,' He was roused immediately from his thoughts by Ginny's voice. 'Have you got a minute?' He nodded and stood as casually as he could while his insides burned, and followed her out of the hall. When she reached the marble staircase she turned, looking slightly worried.
'Do you still have that book?'
He did not need to ask what she was talking about. 'Maybe. Why?'
'I think you should use it.' Her eyes had a glassy appearance, and she spoke as if the very words leaving her mouth hurt. 'It might help you … you know … in the future.'

Harry nodded stiffly 'Why the sudden turn around? You weren't so keen on my using it last year.' he said quietly, looking at her through narrowed eyes.
She closed her eyes for a fleeting moment before looking away from him. 'Its better to know what can be used against you Harry.' He was silent for a moment as he watched her discomfort; she couldn't even look him in the eye. Harry found it hurt to be this close to her again. He turned and headed for his meeting with McGonagall.

'Fwooper!' The large stone gargoyle slid aside and Harry mounted the stairs as they spiralled up to the office.
'Enter' McGonagall was sitting behind the desk where Harry had seen Dumbledore sit so many times before. She was placing a message into a tiny envelope. She glanced up at him as he walked slowly up to the desk. 'Sit down.'

He glanced around and saw the sorting hat perched on the bookshelf, the Gryffindor sword in its glass case, gleaming not far away. He also noticed the office was still full of Dumbledores things, though they no longer whirred busily or puffed with smoke. Instead they sat quietly, uselessly; dead. The portraits appeared to be sleeping, but Harry had too much experience with them to take that for granted. His eyes fell on Dumbledore; his chin rested on his chest peacefully as he sat in a large comfortable chair. Harry felt an acute emptiness at the sight of him.

As he slouched into the chair opposite McGonagall, it struck him that he had thought Dumbledore would always be at Hogwarts. It seemed impossible to imagine the school without him, yet here Harry sat, more alone now than ever. He could never again seek the guidance of his long time mentor and friend. As Harry's eyes dropped to the floor, McGonagall stood up and placed the message in the beak of a tawny owl that waited patiently on the stand where Fawkes once sat. The owl launched into the air and in a flurry of silent feathers, disappearing through an open window. When Harry looked up again, Professor McGonagall was watching him.

'You have something you wish to say to me.' She said gravely.
Harry straightened himself uncomfortably under her gaze.

'There must be someone better for the position of Head Boy.' He waited for her to say something, but she only nodded as she sat down and folded her hands on the desk. Harry went on 'I'll be leaving again soon … and I don't even know if I'll be back' McGonagall's eyes were on her hands as Harry spoke uncertainly. 'Point is I wont be able to perform as Head Boy all the time.'

'I see.' She looked at him, her expression as stern as usual 'And how do you expect to keep up with your classes under those circumstances?' Harry felt slightly annoyed that all she seemed to be worried about was his homework.
'I'll manage … somehow. And if I cant, I'll leave anyway … permanently'

McGonagall nodded and stood up. She walked slowly around the desk and spoke without looking at Harry. 'This is how it will work, Potter. You will be free to come and go, though I will ask you to inform me when you leave so I can make other arrangements. And I think it is a good idea that you drop at least two of your subjects. You can pick them up again at a later stage if necessary.' She frowned as she finally lifted her head. 'You shouldn't be taking on too much if you are to do the Defence Against the Dark Arts classes for the younger students as well.'

Harry was silent for a moment, not sure if he had understood what Professor McGonagall had said. He decided he must have misheard her 'Sorry?'

'You heard me correctly, Mr. Potter. The new Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor cannot take the position on full time, which leaves the younger students, fifth year and below to be exact, without a teacher. This is not an acceptable situation given the threat we currently live under, I am sure you agree. You have already proven your teaching abilities by the results your Dumbledores Army students received in their OWLS. And I think it would benefit the children greatly if you were to take the lessons.'

'But I just finished telling you that I wont always be here' Harry was certain he was missing something.
'Which is why I have asked you to inform me of your leaving. You will agree that some Defence Against the Dark Arts classes is preferable to none.'

'But I wouldn't know where to start.'

'Miss Granger would be an excellent candidate to assist you in planning.' She said 'It will not take up too much of your time. The classes will be combined and you will be given the Great Hall to conduct your lessons.' Harry's head was buzzing as she added 'If they agree to it, I will organize for Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger to assist you in class. The students are all at different learning levels, so you will need the help.' She motioned Harry to stand.

Harry stood up, completely flummoxed. He had come here with the intention of giving up his Head Boy status, and instead, had somehow wound up as the Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher to boot.

‘I’ll send you a new timetable at Lunch, until then your time is free. Here is a list of all the passwords you will need as Head Boy.’ McGonagall handed him a piece of parchment as she herded him towards the door ‘If you could pass them on to Miss Granger when you are done. You can also inform Mr. Weasley he will be acting Head Boy whenever you are absent from the castle.’

‘But, I don’t-'

‘This was not a popularity contest, Mr. Potter’ she cut him off as he stood outside the large double doors ‘you are Head Boy because you are the ideal candidate. Personally I think it would be rather selfish of you to resign.’ she seemed to soften slightly as she added ‘The students will need you Harry … before the end.’

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As promised, McGonagall had Harry’s new timetable delivered to him at Lunch. It was a given that he would be taking DADA classes, but he was pleased to see she had kept Charms and Transfiguration. He agreed with Ginny’s reasoning about the prince's book, and since McGonagall had seen fit to include Potions in his schedule, he decided he would head up to the Room of Requirement later when everyone had retired to the Common Room.

Hermione was extremely enthusiastic about Harry’s new appointment, and whole-heartedly agreed to help him plan and conduct the lessons. Rather annoyingly, Ron and Hermione had sided with Professor McGonagall on every point she had put forward to Harry, thereby robbing him of any chance of justification of his doubt. McGonagall had already arranged it so they would have no trouble fitting the classes in between their own subjects; seemingly she had known they would be keen to help, and so it was that they set about planning the first lesson out of three they were to conduct each week.

Hermione made rather a quick job of it. She bolted off to the library as soon as she had scoffed down lunch, and when she and Ron met up with Harry for dinner, she handed him a complete schedule for each age group for the first two weeks, including a break-up floor plan to allow for the required space needed.

‘How did you do that?’ asked Harry stunned.
‘It wasn’t that hard. All I had to do was take out some of my notes from the classes we’d done and combine it with some information from the library.’
‘We kept in anything that might come in handy in the near future.’ Ron added.

‘This is great!’ Harry felt more comfortable with the idea now that he had a plan in front of him. He gave Hermione an appreciative kiss on the cheek. ‘Its brilliant’
‘It was no trouble, I really quite enjoyed doing it.’ She said looking very pleased with herself.

The time spent in the common room that evening was a nightmare. There was so much resentful squabbling going on around the room that everyone was on edge whether they were involved in it or not. And much to Harry’s annoyance, Ginny spent a lot of time tucked away in the corner of the room with Dean.

Harry couldn’t stop glancing their way and even though they both had their books open, they spent most of their time talking animatedly. When Dean met Harry’s glance he shifted in his seat uncomfortably and bent his head to Ginny’s ear. The anger in Harry was stewing in the atmosphere of the room as he turned his head back to the crackling fireplace to avoid Ginny’s gaze.

Hermione was returning from the girl’s dorm upstairs, where she had rushed off to after a shouting match had erupted, looking agitated.
‘Its just as well we don’t have house points this year,’ she said as she sat on the floor in front of Ron ‘They’d all be so deep in the negatives that there wouldn’t be enough jewels in the hour glass to count them.’
‘What was it this time?’ Ron asked rubbing her shoulders.

‘Don’t ask!’ she said as she rolled her eyes ‘Just be thankful your sleeping in the boys dorm with the

mess they've created up there. I told them you cant throw multiple hexes like that all at once without consequences.' She looked up as two Ravenclaw girls appeared at the foot of the stairs. One had her arm around the other who was desperately trying to shield a collection of enormous red bulbs on the end of her nose. Hermione made a disapproving noise with her tongue as they crossed the room, heading for the hospital wing.

Harry stood up, 'I'm going to fetch Snape's book. I'll be back soon.'
'Alright, I'll wait for you before we do the nightly rounds.' Hermione looked slightly uneasy as Harry headed out of the portrait hole.

He pulled his invisibility cloak out of his pocket and threw it over himself as he took off for the seventh floor. Harry thought it a wise precaution to keep carrying it with him everywhere because Dumbledore had told him to do it last year, and the situation could only be worse now that he was no longer around.

The empty stone passageways were already chilled with autumn's nighttime breeze as Harry slipped through a shortcut and up some stairs, and then to the corridor where the painting of the dancing trolls resided. He looked around to make sure no one was about, chiding himself for not thinking to grab the Marauders Map before he left, then proceeded to walk up and down outside the place where the door would appear.

I need to find my Advanced Potion Making book. I need to find my Advanced Potion Making book. I need to find my Advanced Potion Making book.

Harry looked up at the wall. No door. What? So he tried again.

I need to find my copy of Advanced Potion Making that I hid here last year. I need to find my copy of Advanced Potion Making that I hid here last year. I need to find my copy of Advanced Potion Making that I hid here last year.

He looked up and frowned. Still nothing. How can that be? He couldn't understand it. He had hidden Snapes book here and he should be able to… Then it occurred to him.

I need to retrieve Snapes book of Advanced Potion Making that I hid here last year.

After repeating it for the third time the door appeared and Harry opened it quickly, stepping into the darkness and pulling it closed behind him.

10. The Locket

Tall dark shadows loomed in on Harry as he pulled off the cloak. Tucking it back into his pocket, he pulled out his wand and lit it.
The vast room looked entirely different. The first time he had visited it, light had streamed through the tall windows that looked out over the grounds. Now only the waning moons light, obscured by gathering cloud, pierced the mass of paraphernalia that filled the room.

Harry made his way slowly in the direction he had run; book in hand, desperately searching for a hiding place last year. Impatient, but sure he had turned right at some point, he passed the mountains of broken furniture, books and banned substances, waiting for a sign of recognition; something that might trigger his memory and point the way.

He felt like he had been walking too long, and his anger, which had been simmering below the surface in the Common Room, threatened to boil. The distant rumble of thunder accompanying the outside cloud adding to his growing frustration. The openings in the alley he followed meant nothing to him. He was beginning to think he must have missed what he was looking for when an enormous, ugly and fierce looking stuffed troll came into his wands circle of light. This is it! With renewed confidence he turned right and continued on, the occasional flash of far away lightening illuminating the high arched ceiling as he searched for another familiar landmark.

Then his stomach lurched painfully. The vanishing cabinet Draco had spent most of last year restoring stood on the corner of the isle that Harry stumbled into months ago.

Harry walked slowly up to it; regarding it darkly as if it might suddenly spring open with Death Eaters spewing forth from it. But it lurked silently in the shadows now forgotten, having served its purpose. His mouth went dry as a nurtured and unrealised anger born of guilt swelled within him. How had he forgotten that he had seen it the first time he came through? He should have stopped to look at it more closely then, maybe he could have prevented... He stopped the thought angrily. He dragged his eyes away from its dark bulk as he turned into the alley and started searching for the marker he had left behind.

Using his wand light, he scanned the isle until its light fell upon a bust sitting atop a blistered cupboard. It was the ugly warlock bust wearing the scraggy old wig and tiara Harry had put there. He stopped in front of it as another searing flash of lighening flickered across the room. Reaching a hand up, he turned the cold brass handle. The door creaked loudly in the quiet darkness as it opened, and pointing the glowing wand tip inside, he bent down and pulled the book from its hiding place behind the cage.

Harry turned it over in his hands as another, louder rumble of thunder rolled overhead, rattling the contents of the room; it was just as he had left it. This was the first time he had looked upon the book since discovering the identity of the "prince". The thought that the prince had turned out to be Snape sickened him. If he had shown Dumbledore the book, if he had turned it over to him, would he still be alive? He would have recognized Snapes handwriting. Would it have been enough to prove his trust in Snape was horribly wrong?

Slamming the cupboard door shut, he headed back in the direction he had come. The anger and guilt that he had harboured for so long seethed restlessly in his body, heightened by the sight of Dumbledores doom as he passed the cabinet, unconsciously giving it a wide birth, and traced his way back along the alley, breathing heavily as his insides shook. The troll lit up briefly as another more severe flash of lightening illuminated the surroundings, and as he rounded it he spied a glint of silver out of the corner of his eye.

He stopped, just as a rumble of thunder vibrated the windows, and looked down at a large, heavy steel instrument. He paused for only a moment before picking it up and turning back into the alley he had just come from.

He strode with purpose; his mind now set on one all consuming course of action, unable and unwilling to stop himself. When he came upon his target, he stowed the book and his wand mindlessly onto the nearest surface, and in the gloom, eyeing the vanishing cabinet vengefully, Harry lifted the huge silver axe back behind him. He drew breath angrily through his teeth before he swung the bloodied blade with all the strength that his gathering hatred could muster.

The booming crash of the blow echoed in the high ceiling as the cabinet’s side buckled with the force. Harry put his foot against the treacherous wood and levered the axe out. A brilliant flicker of lightening forked across the sky outside as he leaned back, pulling it behind him again. His eyes stung and his face contorted with pain as a thunderous clap shook the windows.

He brought the axe forward with incredible force, sinking it into the cabinet again. The wood folded in on itself as it shattered, sending stabbing splinters in all directions, one scoring him across the face, but Harry barely felt it. Again, he pushed his foot against the broken wood; his arm muscles straining and beads of sweat dripping down his forehead as he pulled the axe head free.

All of the anger, all of the hatred, and all of the guilt he had clung to and silently nurtured since Dumbledores death, coursed through his veins as he stepped away and brought the axe back behind him again. He threw his weight forward and let the silver blade fly crushingly into the now bent cabinet, again … and again, with a strength he hadn’t known he possessed.

The harsh sounds of shattering wood were mixed with the deafening cracks of thunder until finally the cabinet hung broken and defeated. The axe came easily free of the limp wreckage as Harry pulled it to him one last time. Hot, bitter tears were running down his face as he lifted the axe above his head, and with both hands he delivered the final devastating blow as the last clap of thunder rang out.

Finally, Harry was spent. The storm was passing, leaving behind a gloomy stillness. Panting in fury and pain he dropped to his knees still clutching the axe. His body was racked with weariness, and his mind was dark and torturous. And his heart was desolate. He hung his head low and his shoulders slumped forward as his grief overwhelmed him.

He thought of all those he had lost … the people he had loved and who had loved him back.

Of the struggle that awaited him … the impossible task he was left to do.

And of the fears he had for those he loved … the thought of losing them too much to bear. His pain poured out silently in the dim quiet.

He might have knelt there for an hour or more, alone with his pain, but when he finally lifted his head in the darkness, it was with the resolve that he could wait no longer. He would find out what Kreacher knew about the locket and he would hunt down the first of the four Horcruxes. He would not stray from his path again; he would not give in to the temptation of ignorance. He had been selfish to think he could stay. More people would die the longer he hesitated.

He stood up, feeling utterly drained, and steeling one last look at the shrapnel he had vented himself on, he collected his wand and book, and headed for the Common Room.

Blaise Zabini was slouched with Pansy Parkinson under the unicorn tapestry deep in conversation when Harry appeared through the portrait hole. They both stopped immediately and stared at the sight of him. Colin Creevey was finishing a game of exploding snap with Neville at one of the study tables; they too eyed Harry with uncertain, even frightened looks as he moved passed them.

'Harry!' Hermione had been pacing by the fire, a worried expression on her face. 'What happened?' she rushed over to him in alarm and grabbed his arms to study him. 'Oh Harry,' she breathed on the verge of tears 'are you alright?'

'I'm leaving … tonight. But I need everyone out of here so I can speak to Kreacher before I go.' She looked at him curiously for a moment, but his demeanour moved her into action unquestioningly. She nodded, frowning and turned on the others. 'Alright, bed!' she said, her voice slightly squeaky.

'What?' scoffed Blaise 'You can't tell us when to go to-' But he stopped suddenly as Hermione drew her wand out and pointed at him.
'Now!' she commanded, her voice suddenly stern.

He threw his book down angrily and Pansy scowled as they both stood and headed to their dormitories. Colin had mounted the stairs hastily the moment he had seen Hermione reach for her wand, but Neville stood staring at Harry.

'I can help Harry.' he said as he swallowed nervously 'Whatever it is, I-I want to help.' Harry had a growing respect for Neville over the past two years, but he didn't want to involve him if he didn't have to.
'Thanks Neville … but not this time.' He said gravely. Neville nodded and walked to the stairwell. He put a foot on the first step then turned back to Harry.
'If you change your mind, I've still got my DA coin' he flashed a crooked smile and disappeared up the stairs.

'Where's Ron?' Harry just realized he wasn't in the room.
'He started rounds and told me to wait here in case you returned. I'll go and fetch him.'
'Okay' Harry lifted his head to call the house elf 'Krea-'

'Harry!' Hermione bumped his shoulder and motioned her head at the large, high-backed armchair facing the fire before she crossed the room and clambered through the portal to find Ron. Harry frowned and took a few steps to the side, and then bowed his head, reigning in the feelings that flared at the sight of Ginny.

Because Ron and Hermione were worried, she had waited for him. She had not let go to the extent he thought. When he finally looked up again, she was standing before him. She lifted her hand to Harry's face and brushed it lightly across his cheek, turning the palm towards him with questioning concern.

Harry looked down at the blood on her fingers. 'Not too subtle, am I?'
'You're leaving.' She said frowning slightly.
'Yeah' he spoke gently.
She took a deep breath and turned her eyes to the ceiling in a bid to hold back the tears that threatened. 'I'm with Neville.' She said quietly, bringing her eyes back to his. 'Dumbledore knew you could not do this completely alone. You'll need help, Harry.' Then she added 'If you need someone, call … your friends will be there for you.'

Harry brought his eyebrows together. She spoke almost as if she knew what he was leaving to do. She continued 'Whatever you're up to, he asked you to involve Hermione and Ron didn't he?'
'Yes … but how did you know-'

'they're your best friends Harry. The three of you are regularly off talking about things you don't want anyone else to hear.' Harry relaxed a little 'Just remember they are here, Harry. Remember they have a right to be involved even if you don't want to involve them. Its not fair to shut out the people who care about you.'

Harry watched her as her eyes swam with tears; he knew she was no longer talking about just Ron and Hermione. He reached up and put his hand to her cheek, moving in close until their bodies touched. Her frown deepened as she looked up at him.

'You're strong Ginny. You'll come through all of this and be happy in the end.' Harry wanted to believe this more than anything else. He could forgive her betrayal of him; he could forgive her turning to Dean, if only she would be happy.

Without being aware of what he was doing, his mouth came down to meet hers as she closed her eyes, spilling her tears. Their lips met sadly and tenderly, caressing softly as they played gently across one another before Harry pulled himself back, still unable to control the need he had for her. He reached around his neck and unhooked the pendant belonging to his parents, which he had worn almost continuously since coming upon it. He lifted her hand and placed it in her palm, gently closing her fingers over it.

'Keep this for me. I'll be back for it … I promise'

Her eyes were full of doubt as she searched his face. She kissed him quickly before turning from him and heading up the stairs. As he watched her go, his whole body ached for her. He turned to the fire and stared at the dying flickers of light. He could not bear to see her unhappy. He would let her go completely when she was ready. He would spare her the pain of being with him.

'Hey' Ron and Hermione were coming towards him; both looking painfully worried. Harry nodded in acknowledgement.
'Why the sudden change mate? I thought you'd be happy here for a bit.' Ron said with concern.
'I cant sit around and wait while more people are being killed.' Harry stayed staring at the glowing embers. 'I can't pretend that I can go on like normal. None of this is going to go away until I do something about it.'

'We'll go with you, Harry. There's a be-'
'No!' He cut Hermione off abruptly in his urgency, but then added 'you're both needed here. You'll be able to keep an eye on things and at least I'll always know where you are if I need help.'
'Harry, I've told you before, we're go-'

'If I thought it was the best thing to do, I'd agree with you Ron.' He had to convince them to stay 'we still haven't worked out what one of the Horcruxes is, and we have no idea where to find the Hufflepuff cup. You two have to find the answers, or we're already lost…' Harry's voice faded as he looked back into the fireplace.

There was a long silence before Ron spoke 'What are you going to do?'

Harry looked at them 'Call Kreacher and find the real Slytherin locket.'
Ron nodded with his eyes on the floor. 'Alright'
'Check the stairwells first just in case.'
'Good idea,' At Harry's instruction, Hermione mounted the stairs that led to the female dormitories and Ron disappeared up the boy's entrance. They came back moments later with the all clear.

'Kreacher!' The house elf appeared before them with his arms flailing as if in the middle of a fight.

'What? What's this?' it croaked, looking about. The trio stared down at him in silence. Kreacher was splattered with wet, slimy looking black mud and the cloth he draped over himself, which was already shabby, appeared to have fresh tears in places.

'Have you and Dobby been fighting again?' Ron shook his head as he raised an eyebrow. But as Kreacher gave Ron a scowl, Harry grabbed his arm and swung him round to face him, summoning all his anger as he looked into the little elf's eyes.

'I'm going to ask you some questions Kreacher and I want straight answers, do you understand me?' He was stony faced as Kreacher squirmed.
'Master knows Kreacher is-' Kreacher was about to launch into his usual routine when Harry cut him off.
'Don't, Kreacher. I'm warning you. I'm not in the mood!' Harry was eyeing the elf darkly. He waited until Kreacher stopped trying to wriggle free before adding 'Just answer my questions.'

The wrinkled old elf smirked oddly as he bowed. 'Master is more worthy than Kreacher has guessed. Kreacher will hear what Master has to say.'

Harry let go of the elf's bony little arm and perched on the edge of a nearby chair. He held the gaze of Kreacher's bloodshot eyes as he asked 'Did you accompany Regulus when he visited a cave to retrieve something very secret?' Kreacher's face dropped immediately. He stared at Harry for a moment then placed his hands over his ears.

'Kreacher cannot! Kreacher is bound to keep Masters secrets.' The little elf shook his head.
'*I* am your master now, Kreacher' Harry said aggressively 'and you *will* answer me!' then because Kreacher did not speak though his eyes widened, he snapped 'Answer me!'

'Yes!' the elf hissed.
'Did either of you manage to retrieve the locket?' Harry was careful with his wording so Kreacher could not twist it.

The elf let out a nervous squeal before answering 'Yes!'

The elf was extremely agitated, but it appeared as before, Kreacher was forced to answer. 'Has the locket been destroyed?' Harry kept his voice cold and hard. Kreacher looked like he wanted to dissolve into the floor.

'No!' he squawked, terrified.
Harry, Hermione and Ron all looked at each other.
Harry continued 'Do you know what happened to the locket?'
'Yes!' the elf looked shocked at his own words.
Harry frowned 'W-What happened after you obtained locket?' he asked slowly, aware the answers he sought lay with the right questions.

'Master Black was unable to open it before the Death Eaters tracked him down.' Kreacher's mouth appeared to be speaking almost independently of him. He dropped to the floor and started to wriggle on his back.

'What happened to the locket after Regulus died?'
'Kreacher took it!' Wide-eyed with shock, Kreacher's hand whipped up to cover his mouth in an effort to restrain himself as he struggled on the floor.

'What did you do with it?' Harry's heartbeat quickened as he pursued him determinedly.
'Kreacher gave it to his mistress as a present.' Kreacher started to writhe around on the floor,

smearing mud all over the ornate, faded rug. Hermione watched with a mixture of horror and pity.
'What did Mrs. Black do with it?'
'She counted it amongst her finest possessions. She kept it in a glass cabinet in the drawing room.'

'Of course!'

Harry spun round to look at Hermione as she spoke 'I remember! When we were cleaning Sirius's place there was a locket, none of us could get it open. That must have been it! Oh…' her face suddenly paled 'Harry, we threw it away.' She breathed.
Harry's stomach dropped. Now that she mentioned it, he did vaguely remember something like that. But they threw everything from the cabinets away. He buried his head in his hands, not wanting to think about what they had done.

'Harry,' Ron said gravely 'Ask Kreacher if he's seen the locket since we chucked it.'
'Why?' Harry sounded defeated as he spoke 'We disposed of it Ron, it'll be long gone-'
'Just do it.'

Harry looked back at Kreacher who was positively thrashing about 'Kreacher, have you seen the locket since we threw it out?' he asked expecting a resounding No.

'Yes!' Harry looked at Ron who motioned the elf. Kreacher was getting more and more urgent in his effort to stop himself from speaking.
'How did you know?' Harry turned to Ron.
'Just a guess. He was trying to sneak stuff away all the time, remember? If it meant so much to the old bat, he would've made a bee-line for it.' Harry smiled appreciatively at Ron then turned his attention back to the elf still struggling on the floor.

'Do you know where the locket is, Kreacher?'
'Yes!'
'Where is it?' Harry hurried on
'In … Kreacher's … spot.' He panted.
'What, its here?' said Ron
'Stupid blood traitor-'
'Where is your spot Kreacher?' Harry said through gritted teeth.

'Kreacher's bed at his mistresses house.' the elf exhaled, his body going limp. It appeared he had told them all he knew for he stood up looking exhausted, having fought a losing battle, and scowled at them 'Kreacher will go now!' before vanishing.

Harry stuffed his backpack with everything he thought he might need and hastily wrote a note to McGonagall, leaving the Marauders Map with Ron, and then the three of them met back in the Common Room.

'Stay out of trouble.' Ron said 'I know that's asking a lot' he smiled awkwardly.
'Wherever possible,' he said quietly
'How are we going to stay in touch?'
'via these' Hermione handed Harry one of two small emerald books.

'What's this?' Harry opened it and flicked through the blank pages.
'It's a message log. Whatever you write on the front of a page will show up on the back of the same page in this book' she waved the one she held in her hand 'and vice versa'
'That's brilliant' Harry shook his head 'How did you do it?'

'I didn't. I took them from that box of test stuff Fred and George brought round over the holidays.' Harry and Ron raised their eyebrows at her. Hermione flushed 'Well, they really do have some extraordinary magic, and I thought these would come in handy.' Harry stowed the book away and swung his cloak over him.

When he reached the large iron gates, he pointed his wand from under his cloak. McGonagall had included the gate password on the list she had given him for the Heads, with the understanding that he would need to use it on occasion. The enormous lock clunked open and the chains dropped away noisily. Harry opened the gate quickly and slipped through it, turning to lock it again.

He concentrated and found himself outside thirteen Grimmauld Place. Once he was back inside his temporary home he lit several candles and went from room to room looking for any sign of someone staying there, but there was no one about, and it looked as if Lupin hadn't been back since his last transformation just after Diagon Alley. So Harry dumped his pack on the bed and returned to the kitchen. Getting down on his hands and knees, he lit his wand and crawled into the small space that Kreacher called home.

With a sense of urgency, he rifled through the bedding, pulling out old photos and clothing that used to belong to Sirius's mother and father, then his hand hit on something small, smooth and cold. He closed his hand around it and backed out of the tiny space. Even before he opened his palm he knew this was it. It had an unnatural heaviness to it as the chain dangled through his fingers.

Harry turned it over and traced the outline of the "S" shaped serpent on the front. It seemed incredible to think he held a piece of Voldemort's soul in the palm of his hand. He finally stood and walked over to the kitchen table. Sitting down he pulled a candle close, tucked his wand back in his pocket, and rested his elbows on the table, turning the locket over in his fingers. His eyes narrowed and mouth curled in distaste. Harry knew Voldemort had killed to make it and the thought repulsed him. Though he knew it was pointless, he tried to open it, and as suspected, it proved impossible.

Suddenly the fireplace burst into roaring green flames. Expecting that Lupin was finally returning, Harry quickly tucked the locket away in his pocket. But as he watched the figure emerge from the flames Harry's heart began to pound in his chest.

All in one move he leapt to his feet, whipped his wand out and aimed it at Snape *'Petrificus Totalus!'*

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The spell bounced off Snape and collided with the wall; the sound of cracking stone tore through the kitchen as Snape glared at Harry.

'Stupefy!' Harry yelled as he backed away, trying desperately to put some distance between them. Again, the spell ricocheted off him as Snape flicked his wand, sending the iron candelabra that hung from the roof crashing down onto the table. The candle Harry had been using was thrown from the table by the force of the impact and rolled onto the chair he had been sitting on, its light flickering eerie shadows across the room. Snape snarled as he moved his wand.

'Protego!' Harry instantly blocked the spell as the ropes that unfurled from Snapes wand uselessly dropped to the floor. There was another flick from Snape. Harry dived into the sitting room, narrowly avoiding a beam of light.

'I see your skills have not improved.' Snapes voice goaded as Harry scrambled to his feet. Harry aimed at the doorway, his heartbeat racing as Snapes silhouette emerged, distorted by the flickering light.

'Expelliarmus!'

The curse hit Snape's shield and was deflected as he immediately sent a white light streaking towards Harry, throwing him backwards into the cold dark fireplace. His hand slammed painfully into the stone arch, sending his wand flying to the floor, disappearing as it rolled under an armchair. The ash and soot flurried around him in his panic to find his feet. His mouth and nose were choked and his eyes were being inundated as he struggled to open them. He spluttered as he pulled himself forward, temporarily unable to see, his heart pounding in his chest as something was thrust into the flesh under his chin, forcing his head up.

'I can still read you like a book.' Snape pressed his wand tip further under Harry's chin 'You are no better off than you were two years ago.' Harry was trying to keep his eyes open though they stung with ash. 'Do you delude yourself that you can take on the Dark Lord like this?' Snape leaned in close 'to him you have the powers of insect. And he will crush you under his foot just as easily.'

Harry cringed in revulsion at Snapes nearness, the panic rising in him. Then the wand tip was gone, allowing him to lower his head. His eyes had sufficiently watered to get rid of most of the grit as he watched Snape put a few paces distance between them, eyeing Harry suspiciously and keeping his wand directed at Harry's chest.

Harry glanced down out of the corner of his eyes to where his wand had disappeared 'Don't bother going for it,' Snape said, looking down his hooked nose at him. 'Unless you want to be incarcerated again.' He raised and eyebrow 'My last visit should put you off repeating that particular little stunt.'

'What do you want?' Harry said savagely, his chest heaving with anger. This was the second time Snape had got the better of him. There would not be a third.

'I've come to give you the information I promised.' Snape voice was silky as he pulled a small scroll from his robes and held it aloft. Harry eyed it for a moment, frowning dubiously. 'It wont bite,' Snape said sarcastically and narrowed his eyes 'not if you do as instructed.' Harry reached a hand up and took the scroll, all the while wondering why he was listening to this traitor.

'What is it?' Harry did not attempt to hide the loathing in his voice.

'It is your key to Bellatrix LeStrange.' Snape said. 'However, if you try to open it before six pm on All Hallows Eve, it will ignite.' Harry stopped fumbling with the seal on the scroll and looked back at Snape 'After six pm on Halloween, you will have a window of five minutes with which to read it, and memorize it.'

'Memorize it?' Harry eyed Snape distrustfully.
'You will find out what I mean on Halloween, not before.' Snape said unhelpfully.
Harry narrowed his eyes and scowled 'It's a trap, isn't it? If you think I'm stupid enough to-'
'I could easily force you to come with me right now.' Snape said threateningly.
'I wouldn't go without a fight!' Harry spat. Snape sneered mockingly as he shook his head. Then suddenly, his face was stony.
'You'd follow me like an eager little puppy if I wanted you to.'

Harry's chest was heaving as the anger coursed through him.
'If you want Bellatrix, you will be in the Great Hall at the Halloween feast, opening that at precisely six pm.' Snape pointed his wand at the scroll in Harry's hand.

'Why do I have to be at Hogwarts?'
'Don't ask pointless questions, Potter' he snapped angrily 'you will know only when you read the note.'
'I'm not going to endanger the school.' Harry said with his jaw clenched.
'If you do not do as I have instructed, believe me, the school *will* be under threat.' A knot formed in Harry's stomach as his mouth went dry.

'What are talking about?'

'Just do as your told for once in your life!' Snape growled, then he added silkily 'Do nothing until Halloween, as I've said, and remember' Snape took a step closer to Harry 'do not breathe a word of this to anyone in the meantime. Your revenge on Bellatrix depends on it.'
Harry struggled with his loathing and distrust for Snape, and the feeling of dread that had overcome him. He could not afford to ignore Snape's warning.

Snape was staring at Harry questioningly through narrowed eyes, and as Harry stood there, the image of him destroying the cabinet suddenly flashed across his mind, followed speedily by McGonagall's stern figure in the Head Office. Harry was suddenly aware of what was happening and he desperately tried to close his mind. Ginny's face appeared with tears in her eyes as Harry's heart lurched painfully. *NO!* He thought savagely, *NOT HER!*

'STOP IT!' He yelled as he tried to think of something else, anything else. Gabrielle's tear filled, horrified eyes swam in his mind, and before Harry could stop it, a sudden flash of gold streaked through his thoughts. 'NO!' Harry felt a sharp pain in his knees as they hit the floor. He lifted himself to his feet, panting from the effort of throwing Snape out of his mind, and glaring at Snape,

he asked furiously ‘What the hell are you doing?’

Snape was even paler than usual and his eyes looked almost possessed as he spoke.

‘You are still hopeless at Occlumency.’ He said, his voice dripping with contempt. ‘You will fail Potter, because you are clueless and lazy.’ Then he flicked his wand, but Harry was ready for it. He threw himself behind the chair. The curse hit the back of the fireplace, sending soot billowing into the air as Harry desperately felt for his wand. Snapes snide voice rang out ‘Luck will not save you in the end.’ It sounded as though Snape had retreated back to the kitchen. ‘Only a *great wizard* can defeat The Dark Lord!’

Harry’s fingers pulled the stick like thing towards his palm, closing over it firmly. He darted out from behind the chair and raced towards the kitchen, arriving just in time to see Snapes twirling black robe disappear up into the chimney. Harry slowly lowered his wand and breathlessly sunk into a nearby chair, surveying the damage.

It was early morning before he collapsed into bed after cleaning up the mess. There were still some telltale marks on the walls, which Harry could not mend with magic, but that was the least of his worries. Snape had made it clear something terrible was going to happen, something that might be averted by capturing Bellatrix. But it confused Harry as to why Snape was so willing to share this information.

Why was he sabotaging his master’s servant’s errand? Was it possible that Bellatrix was acting alone and Snape had caught wind of it? No, Harry could think of no reason why Snape wouldn’t just kill her himself. So why had he come to Harry? Then a thought occurred to him. Snape wanted rid of Bellatrix because she was competition, she was as evil and as cruel as he was.

Harry had seen the Death Eaters cower before Snape on the Astronomy Tower, so he was counted as someone to be reckoned with, and Bellatrix had described herself to Harry over a year ago in the Ministry of Magic as Voldemorts "most loyal servant". It made sense; that was why Snape had tipped him off, he wanted Bellatrix out of the way.

Harry felt a certain amount of satisfaction at the thoughts that they were fighting amongst themselves, though there remained of course, the possibility that this was still an elaborate trap of some kind. But he could not take the risk and try opening the parchment now, nor could he ignore the possibility that Snape was telling the truth, not if Hogwarts was in danger.

Snapes words repeated, over and over in Harry’s head as he lay in the dawn’s light. He knew Occlumency was important for him, especially now. He was hiding such an incredible secret, that should it get back to Voldemort, all hope would be lost. If Voldemort knew someone had successfully destroyed the ring Horcruxe already, and that the locket was currently in Harry’s possession, then he would reinforce his security around the remaining ones, making them impossible to obtain, not to mention he would hunt Harry down with a renewed urgency.

It bit deeply that Snape was right about him. Harry had none of the power Voldemort had. Luck was the only reason he had escaped him in the past. He still struggled with the most basic of things, non-verbal spells. As he rolled over trying to shut out the morning’s light, he came upon a decision; after he had destroyed the locket he would return to Hogwarts and work ruthlessly to become the wizard everyone believed him to be.

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Over the next few days Harry stayed in contact with Ron and Hermione via the message log. The speech was necessarily cryptic in case someone should come across one of the books, though Harry had nothing of importance to report since finding the locket. As each day passed his notes were becoming shorter and more impatient sounding, until on the fourth morning all he wrote was one sentence to say nothing new had happened. Hermiones notes on the other hand were far more detailed.

It seemed she and Ron had started the Defence Against the Dark Arts lessons at McGonagall’s

instructions, but had found they were struggling to keep order amongst so many students. In fact, Hermione had sounded rather flustered upon returning from a two-hour session on his third day at Grimmauld place, saying that they were only still doing it because McGonagall wouldn't let them quit. As for the shared Common Room, Hermione had written that things had taken a turn for the worst since he had left and Blaise Zabini in particular had become extremely antagonistic.

Harry felt a pang of sympathy for his two best friends, but he found little time to wonder at the goings on at Hogwarts. He had bent all of himself to the task of figuring out what to do next. He had tried to open the locket by force and failed miserably, even resorting to throwing it in the fire to see if it might magically spring open. But nothing prevailed, so his mood sank deeper with each passing day out of frustration and impatience.

The Order members who dropped in from time to time to check on him during their guard would not discuss why Lupin had not yet come back, though Harry began to suspect he was working undercover amongst the werewolves once more, an extraordinarily risky thing to do after he had been present at the struggle with the Death Eaters at Hogwarts; a fact Harry would bring up with him the minute he returned.

The fact that Snape had seen Ginny in his thoughts when he had invaded his mind, also weighed heavily on Harry. It was exactly the kind of thing Harry had desperately hoped to avoid and yet because of his lack of skill, and his increasing need for her, it had come to pass anyway. The more Harry thought about it the darker his thoughts became, and his growing unease and frustration meant sleeping was becoming more and more difficult.

On the fourth day Harry was sitting in the kitchen as he did everyday, staring at the locket on the table before him, feeling utterly useless, when he heard Sirius's mothers portrait start up. He hastily snatched the locket up and placed it in his pocket before hunching himself over his cold, half empty mug of tea. He heard footsteps coming down the stairs, and as they neared Harry resentfully hoped whomever it was would drink their tea quickly and leave. He didn't look up as they stopped at the foot of the stairs. Mrs. Black was still ranting in the distance as whoever it was made their way over to the table, and then Harry felt a slender hand on his shoulder.

He looked up expecting to see Tonks, but instead he looked straight into Fleur's slightly watery eyes. It was a meeting Harry had been silently dreading since the morning after her and Bills wedding. Even though Harry knew he wasn't responsible for what happened to Gabrielle, he couldn't help think that it wouldn't have happened if not for him. He had wondered if she would ever be able to bring herself to be in his company again, and part of him almost hoped that she wouldn't.

She leant down and kissed him gently on the cheek. 'Eet 'as been too long 'Arry' her voice was soft though heavy with emotion. Her smile as she looked down at him did not reach her eyes 'You 'av been avoiding me perhaps?' Harry quickly looked down at the table 'No' he forced. Mrs. Black was finally silent again as Fleur continued.

'Arry, we 'av been friends for a long time now, and I feel I can be honest weeth you.' She pulled out a chair next to Harry and swung it round to face him. He stared at the table intently and did not look up.

'Theengz were very 'ard for my family after what happened, and eet was eezy to blame you because we needed someone to blame.' Harry's swallowed the pain that leapt from his stomach 'But it did not take us long to realize our mistake, and Bill 'as been working very 'ard to find zee culprit, zee real person oo deserves our 'atred.' Harry's head swung round as he looked at Fleur 'Dis … Bellatrix,' she almost spat the name 'she will feel zee consequences of 'er actions very soon.'

Harry frowned 'What d'ya mean?' he asked cautiously.

'You will zee,' Just then Bill appeared through the doorway and smiled crookedly at Fleur through his scarred face. 'And when 'ee catches up with 'er she will wish she never crossed a Delacour.' Her eyes glittered with revenge. Harry was frowning intently as he turned his attention to Bill.

'What's going on? Have you found Bellatrix?'

'Cant say, Order business.' He said flatly. Harry dropped his eyes searchingly to the table. He knew

the Orders hatred of Bellatrix was likely to place them all in a great deal of danger, and he was already sitting on a way of getting to her. But he had no way of convincing them of that without telling them about Snape, which would then render the plan useless. He stood up and looked Bill in the eye, determined to get an answer.

'I have to know Bill' he said slowly 'How close are you to getting to Bellatrix?' Bill sighed and closed his eyes for the briefest moment before answering him.
'I know what this means to you Harry, but I cant-'

'No you don't! You don't have a clue what this means to me.' Harry said loudly. 'I will not be pushed out of the loop on this one. Tell me how long until you move in on her?' Bill looked taken-a-back by Harry's aggressiveness, but it was Fleur who spoke first.

'I theenk ee deserves to know.' She said to Bill as she lifted her hand and touched it to Harry's arm 'Ee 'as suffered as much as anyone else 'as because of 'er.' Harry stared stony eyed, waiting for Bill to speak.
'I can't tell you Harry, you know the oath I took.' He said gravely 'Though I promise to bring it up with Lupin when he gets here tomorrow.'

Harry knew it was useless to push the point, so he slumped back in his chair and rubbed his face in his hands.
'You look terrible,' Fleur said as she took his cup away. 'You 'aven't made yourself a proper meal the whole time you've been 'ere, I expect.' She stood up and walked to the cupboards 'I'll make us some lunch.'

'I'm not hungry, I already ate'
She turned and eyed him shrewdly 'I theenk dis eez not true'
'She cooks an excellent shepherds pie' Bill chimed in hopefully.
'No, really,' Harry got up and walked to the stairs 'I'm not hungry.' then he turned and made his way up the stairs and into the drawing room, closing the door behind him.

He removed his obsession from his pocket, holding it before him. The lack of sleep and sheer frustration he had experienced over the past few days proved a volatile mix and he squeezed the hateful Horcrux in his fist, turning his knuckles white.

Why had Dumbledore entrusted this task to me? He thought angrily. What could he do against such magic? He wasn't a great wizard as Snape had so eagerly pointed out. His chest heaved as the heat in him rose. He didn't have the experience or the knowledge to deal with this. He thought savagely. If it wasn't enough that Dumbledore had made the unforgivable mistake of trusting Snape, he had also erred beyond the ridiculous entrusting the destruction of Voldemort to him.

Harry let out a heated roar, and with the strength that could only come from utter rage, he pulled his arm back and threw the locket across the room. It hit the Black Family tapestry hard and bounced off, falling to the ground as solid as ever.

Harry yanked out his wand and pointed it at the locket. How could the fate of the wizarding world be resting on his shoulders? *'Alohomora!'* Harry said through gritted teeth, feeling utterly useless. Nothing happened. How could Dumbledore have been stupid enough to believe in him? 'Open!' he said angrily as he walked up to it. He eyed the serpent engraving, repulsed by its link to Voldemort. He was going to fail. Harry knew in his heart that Snape was right. He was beyond caring who heard him as he yelled with blind fury at the golden snake *'OPEN!'*

A hissing sound came out of Harry's mouth and a rumble like thunder grew from the locket, shaking the room. It reached a deafening level as Harry backed away from it, before there was an enormous boom and the locket sprang open.

There was a blinding flash of pale pink light and an unbearable wave of heat as Harry was lifted off his feet and flung backwards. He was slammed into the wall behind him with incredible force, and then just as helplessly, he was dropped onto his stomach like a rag doll, barely conscious.

His skin was painfully blistered and burned as he struggled to get breath into his lungs. He was unable to move as his eyes looked across the floor and found the locket lying open and blackened

under the burnt shell of a chair. His ears rang and his head pounded, and he spluttered as the air returned to his lungs, finally giving in to the encroaching darkness.

11. A Lead and A Familiar Face

Harry slowly opened his eyes. His body was drenched in sweat and his head swam dangerously as he lifted it off the pillow groggily, trying to get his bearings. In the dull night-light, Harry could see the familiar blurry sight of the Hogwarts hospital wing. He did not wonder at what had brought him here.

During his hours of unconsciousness, the opening of the locket had played out over and over in his dreams. He was burning … always burning. Sometimes the burning light that enveloped him had merely scolded him beyond recognition, leaving him scarred and disfigured like Mad-eye Moody. Other times Voldemort himself had appeared, springing forth from the opening locket, a green beam shooting from his wand as he hissed threateningly.

The room lurched sickeningly as Harry tried to sit up, the sheets clinging to his damp body uncomfortably. He fought the nausea that that swelled in him as he reached for his glasses, placing them on his nose.

Socks was sitting at his feet; she was staring at him through her rather large green eyes, her tail flicking lightly at the end. He reached down and stroked her head automatically as he looked around the room. She immediately pressed her head to Harry's palm, purring loudly, and padding up the bed, she placed her front paws in his lap, rubbing her head against his body. He wondered how long he had been there as he scratched behind her ear affectionately and lifted her to him, glad for the company. It felt like days. He was stiff and heavy as if he'd been sleeping too long.

He wiped at his beaded forehead with the back of his arm and tried to moisten his dry, cracked lips with his tongue. A light flickered outside in the hallway and appeared to be getting closer as Socks wriggled free of Harry's grasp and jumped off the bed, slinking away into the shadows.

'You're finally awake, Mr. Potter!' Madame Pomphrey rounded the entrance, candle in hand, looking pale yet relieved. She made her way over to the bed and put her hand to Harry's head. 'Thank goodness!' Harry watched her bustle over to a nearby cabinet and pull out an assortment of elixirs and potions. She poured and measured, as Harry spoke.

'How long have I been here?' he croaked.
'Not long,' she said quietly 'considering the condition you were in.'
Harry examined his raw looking hands, not wanting to think about his face.
'Will the burns heal?'
She stopped mixing vials for a moment and turned to look at him. Harry watched her face and prepared himself.

'From what Bill Weasley said, the room you were standing in was completely burnt out.' Harry looked down at the sheets wishing Socks was still there. 'All I can say is you must have very sharp reflexes and an extraordinary shield charm.' She eyed him with appreciation as she handed him a cup of mustard coloured potion. 'Your burns are already greatly healed. The redness of the skin will fade completely within a week. Drink this, it'll get rid of that dry feeling in your mouth and help you to sleep.'

Harry waved the cup away 'I've slept enough; at least it feels like it. How long have I been here?'
Madame Pomphrey lifted her eyebrows 'A little over a week.'
'A week?' Harry repeated
'You were brought here last Friday.'
'What's today?'
'Early hours of Sunday morning.' She said as she rolled back his blankets.

'Why was I brought here and not St Mungos?'
'You were brought here under Professor McGonagall's instructions.' She stopped fussing and clamped her fingers together. 'Whatever you were doing Mr. Potter, you are very lucky to be alive,

and I highly recommend that you do not attempt to cast such a spell again.'
'I didn't cast a spell' he said quietly.

'Rooms don't just blow up of their own accord.' She said sternly as she took the pillows off the bed. 'You've got some explaining to do when you see the Professor.'

Harry didn't want to say anything else about what had happened, so he waited for Madame Pomphrey to finish stripping the bed around him before asking after Ron and Hermione.

'They've been in every moment they can spare I would think, and then some. None of the other students know you are here, at the Head Mistresses orders.' she pulled out a fresh pair of pyjamas and grabbed Harry under the arm, hoisting him off the bed. Harry was surprised at how difficult he found it to move, but Madame Pomphrey appeared prepared as she helped him to the bathroom.

Harry stood under the shower, letting the cool water wash over his raw skin. He had destroyed the locket Horcrux. He had seen it lying open and charred before he had passed out, but what was he going to tell everyone when they asked what had happened?

When he returned to his newly made bed, he drank the mustard potion and slipped between the crisp, clean sheets and before long the effort of having showered caught up with him. He slept free of dreams about the locket and when he did finally awaken, it was to the sounds of Ron and Hermione in the middle of an argument.

'… He's got a right to know Hermione!'
'Yes, but its not a good idea to tell him right now … he's got enough to deal with, Ron. Wait until he's feeling better.' Harry kept his eyes closed and listened.

'He'd want to know now.' Ron said.
'What difference will it make, Hm? He's not going to be able to do anything about it anyway, and it'll just worry him sick.' Harry's heart missed a beat as he opened his eyes.

'What will?' he asked heavily. Ron, who had been pacing up and down at the foot of the bed stopped suddenly and looked at Harry with a guilty expression on his face. Hermione, who was sat in a chair beside the bed, glared at Ron accusingly. Harry eased himself into a sitting position and Hermione stood up and propped his pillows so he could lean back.

'What's going on?' he directed his gaze at Ron who seemed like the most likely source of information.
'It's probably nothing' Ron began uncertainly 'but the Order's lost track of Lupin.'
'What d'ya mean, "lost track"?' Harry's stomach lurched.

Ron looked hesitantly at Hermione before answering 'He didn't turn up last Saturday, and nobody's seen or heard from him in over a week.' Harry's mouth went dry as he frowned down at the bed sheets.
'He's back with the werewolves.'
'How do you know? Nobodies said anything' Hermione asked.
'They don't have to.' Harry said darkly as he looked back at Ron 'What did Bill say?'
'Not much … he just let it slip really … when he and Fleur were in here yesterday looking in on you.'

Harry shook his head 'How could he go back there? If Greyback sees him …' he couldn't finish the sentence, and he didn't need to. Ron sat down on the edge of the bed as Hermione settled into her chair.
'Lupins smart, Harry.' Hermione said, frowning 'He knows what he's doing.' They sat in silence for a moment before Ron spoke.
'So, how did you end up a crispy critter then?'

Harry told them both what happened, and watched as their faces darkened.

'We thought it was the Horcrux' Ron said 'so you managed to open it then?'
'Yeah, only by accident.'
'You destroyed it though mate. Accident or not, you did it.'
Hermione had said nothing; she sat staring at the floor with a grave expression on her face.

‘What?’ Harry prompted; suddenly worried that maybe he hadn’t destroyed the Horcrux by opening the locket.

‘It almost killed you,’ her eyes swelled with tears as she looked up at him ‘… and there are three more of them out there you have to destroy.’ Harry had thought the very same thing when he’d been showering, but the sight of Hermiones growing horror made him down play it.
‘Yeah, well I made it though, didn’t I?’ he tried to smile, but couldn't quite manage it.

‘Only just’ Ron said gravely ‘I don’t think you should be doing this on your own mate.’
‘Ron’s right. The next time we go with you.’ Hermione said as she wiped at her face.
‘No,’ Harry shook his head slightly ‘Definitely not.’
‘We stayed behind this time because you asked us to, and it nearly got you kill-'

‘There was nothing either of you could’ve done’ Harry cut Ron off gravely ‘If you’d of been with me you’d probably be dead, and then I really wouldn’t have any help.’ There was an uncomfortable silence, which it meant they would argue the point no further, and Harry spent the rest of the morning hearing all about the goings on at Hogwarts.

After complaining about their disastrous attempts at keeping order in their Defence Against the Dark Arts classes with the younger students, Ron and Hermione launched into a detailed, and rather curious description of their own Defence lessons. It seemed the new teacher, who refused to be addressed as “Professor”, was extraordinarily grumpy, though Ron pointed out, he did know his "stuff".

Neither of them could tell Harry what his name was as he had never bothered mentioning it, although Hermione commented that she was sure she’d met him somewhere before. When she had asked Professor McGonagall about him, she had raised her eyebrows and said he was from Hogsmeade so it was likely she had seen him on occasion and that calling him “sir” would suffice, seemingly unwilling to elaborate any further.

Madame Pomphrey ploughed Harry with various potions all that day, and he spent his last night in hospital accompanied by Socks, who had snuck in and jumped onto his bed in the small hours of the morning. He felt comforted by the feel of her soft fur on his fingertips, though his thoughts constantly strayed to her mistress. Now that he was back at Hogwarts he knew he was going to have to buckle down and learn everything he could to help him in his endeavour to face Voldemort. He would have little time to be stewing over the things he could not have, which would be a welcome distraction.

The following morning Madame Pomphrey instructed Harry to go straight to the Head Mistresses office before attending any classes. He dreaded the confrontation he knew was inevitable and as he rode the stairs to the double doors outside her office he tried to imagine the look on her face when he told her he had nothing to say. Once at the top he knocked and waited. The doors opened and Harry saw McGonagall returning her wand to the desk top in front of her.

‘Come in.’ she said, pointing to the chair. Harry walked forward but did not sit; instead he stood firmly and spoke with a stony expression on his face.

‘Professor, I know what you want, but I can’t tell you what happened at Sirius’s house.’ She looked at him over her spectacles ‘Not unless you want me to lie.’

‘There is no need to waste our time with untruths, Harry.’ The use of his first name caught Harry off guard and he faltered slightly. ‘I did not ask you here to explain yourself’ She rose from her chair and walked around her desk, Harry noticed she appeared to be shaking slightly ‘I have arranged for you to start training with the Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher this afternoon, that is of course, if you are staying with us?’

She did not wait for a reply as she continued ‘It also seems Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley have been…’she paused and raised an eyebrow, searching for the right word ‘struggling … with the younger students. I expect you will have the situation under control when you take the classes tomorrow.’ She stopped in front of the portrait of Dumbledore. Harry watched as she lifted a slightly trembling hand to her glasses and adjusted them.

‘I am not ignorant of the fact that you are doing as Dumbledore wanted.’ she said ‘Though I will not pretend that I approve of what is going on,’ Her eyes dropped to the floor, her usual stern façade seemed to be crumbling. ‘I find myself in a difficult position, Harry. I am expected to give you a free reign to do as you please, yet it seems likely to be your end.’ Harry could see the worry etched across her face.

‘I’m sorry Professor,’ he said, suddenly feeling a great deal of sympathy for McGonagall. ‘I don’t really have a choice in this either.’
She let out an exasperated breath and when she spoke her voice shook.
‘Oh, this is ridiculous! You are not much more than a boy and yet everyone is expecting you to be able to-’

‘Professor!’

Harry started as Dumbledores voice cut firmly across McGonagall’s. His eyes darted up to the painting and a pain shot through him as he looked at the now wide-awake figure. Dumbledore was sitting straight and tall in his chair, his hands no longer folded in his lap, but gripping the padded arms of the chair determinedly. The surrounding paintings were also startled out of their feigned sleep. McGonagall fidgeted her hands as she half turned her head over her shoulder, though she did not meet Dumbledore’s eyes. She turned back to Harry.

‘Be in the Defence classroom at three thirty, Potter. That will be all.’ she moved back to sit behind her chair as Harry retreated uncertainly towards the door. As he took hold of the handle and turned to close it, he could see Dumbledore’s grave face watching him as he pulled it to.

Harry sat through his first Potions class for the year with Ron and Hermione. Although he had Snapes potions book, he had no wish to use it in class and he informed Professor Slughorn that he had misplaced his old potions book and would need to borrow a school copy until he could purchase a replacement. Slughorn handed him the copy that contained a brand new edition inside its tatty cover; the one Harry had swapped for Snapes last year.

‘I say Harry, that’s some case of sunburn you’re sporting!’ Ernie spoke pompously. Harry saw Hermione tense. He raised his eyebrows non-commitedly as he sliced into a shrivelled up sea cucumber. ‘Been holidaying in the south? Fell asleep in the sun?’ he quipped with an amused glint in his eye. Ron rolled his eyes and Hermione visibly relaxed.

‘Something like that.’ Harry felt a certain satisfaction at his less than perfect potion results. Slughorn had approached his cauldron as if he were about to gleefully delve into a box of particularly delicious crystallized pineapple, only to withdraw hastily at the sight of the congealed kaki coloured gunge quivering dangerously as globulus bubbles oozed to the surface.

Afterwards the trio headed down for lunch in the Great Hall. While Ron piled his plate high with sausages and mashed potato, Harry spooned a small portion onto his plate and picked at it disinterestedly, ignoring the stares his still reddened appearance attracted. Neville sat down opposite him; his eye’s flicking back and forth from his plate to Harry. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, obviously burning to ask the same thing on every ones mind.

‘Its not what you’re thinking Neville,’ Harry said. Immediately the surrounding chatter died, though people still tried to appear busy with themselves. ‘I wasn’t attacked by anyone.’ Harry explained truthfully. Neville nodded slightly and flashed an awkward smile. When nothing else was forth coming, the talk slowly started up again and Harry followed Hermione’s glance up to the staff table.

‘Have you seen Hagrid yet?’ he asked, eyeing the empty chair.
‘No’ Hermione said ‘We asked McGonagall and she said they weren’t doing Care of Magical Creatures this year.’
‘You don’t suppose its got something to do with that Giant attack at Trowbridge, do you?’ asked Ron.
‘Nobody’s seen GRAWP have they?’ Harry frowned.

‘I don’t think so’ Hermione looked as worried as Harry felt. Just then, Ginny strolled up to the table and sat down a few places from Ron. Harry caught her eye for the briefest of moments before she

started ladling food onto her plate whilst talking with great verve to a fellow Gryffindor sixth year.

For all intensive purposes she appeared to be in high spirits, so much so that she was attracting the attention of those around her. Harry, Ron and Hermione watched curiously as a not-so-miniature Mt Everest began to form out of mashed potato on her plate. It grew to an impressive height before the girl she was talking to finally interrupted her, nodding at the mound. Ginny looked innocently down at her plate.

'Oh' she said quietly, her expression dropping slowly. She still grasped the large serving spoon in her hand and her cheeks reddened as she stared at it for the longest time, seemingly unable to look away. Harry was on the verge of getting up to go to her when a hand fell on her shoulder. Ginny looked blankly up at Dean.

'C'mon' he said as he motioned his head to the door. Harry breathed heavily as he watched her rise, sucking in the urge to call her. Dean put an arm around her small shoulders as they walked back out of the Hall together. Harry dropped his gaze to his own plate when they had gone from view, aware of the pained look Hermione would be shooting at him.

Harry arrived outside the DADA classroom as instructed by McGonagall, glad to note the passageway was empty of gawking students. He knocked loudly and then turned the large cast iron ring-handle, pushing his shoulder against the heavy wooden door and stepping into the room.

He was just about to push it closed after him when he felt the hair on his neck prickle. Before he could react, a beam of light sped towards him, knocking him off his feet. He hit the stone wall with a thud, and then winded, he slid down it slowly onto the floor. A course grunt sounded and Harry's heartbeat raced, his wand already in hand.

'You're dead.' the gruff voice said shortly. A hand reached down and grabbed him under the elbow, helping him to his feet. 'It's a wonder you're still alive, walkin' around so blindly.'

When Harry got to his feet, the rather hairy old man, dressed in grey flannel robes and a grumpy scowl on his face, turned and walked to the front of the room. Harry knew immediately where Hermione had seen this man before. It was the barman from the Hog's Head.

'I wasn't ready…'

'Precisely my point!' he growled as he reached the desk and turned, perching himself on the edge of it. 'There's no need for me to be waistin' my time teachin' you, if you're going to walk around with your head up your … well' the man eyed Harry as he began walking forward.

Harry's heart sank, Snapes words echoed through his mind as he swallowed 'I know … you're right.' Harry said slowly 'Luck is the only reason I'm still alive.' Bitterness laced in his voice.

'Luck?' the man had an almost amused look on his face 'Think you're lucky do ya?'
'That's not what I meant,'
'Ah, feelin' sorry for yourself then?'
Harry was getting the distinct impression nothing he said would be right. 'No, I just…' he paused.
'What? Just want to be left alone?'
'No'
'Just wish it would all go away?' the man taunted.
'No!' Harry said, getting increasingly impatient. 'I…' Harry struggled.
'Want people to realize you're not as good as they think you are?'
'NO!' Harry said loudly 'I JUST WANT TO BE READY!' he yelled angrily before he could stop himself.

The man leaned back slightly and folded his arms; a crooked smirk was just visible underneath his wiry beard as he gave Harry an appreciative look. Harry's chest was heaving, he was intensely irritated by this mans demeanour.

'Right! Let's get started, then. First thing …' the man unfolded his arms and stood opposite Harry. 'You need to learn to control yourself.'

Two hours later, Harry left for the Great Hall feeling utterly drained. He had been under a constant

barrage of unusual comments and criticisms from the gruff man as they had practiced-duelled, and every time he had let his anger get the better of him, he had found himself on the floor. Most of the students were already sitting down to dinner, but Ron and Hermione were nowhere in sight. He sat down next to Neville, who was gulping down chicken soup, and enquired after them.

'I don't know, Harry. One minute they were sitting in the common room, chatting to Ernie, the next they went rushing out the portrait hole.' He had a worried look on his face. 'Are you alright?'

Harry let the hot soup drip off his spoon. 'Yeah, just tired.' He got a couple of mouthfuls down before almost falling face first in the rapidly cooling broth. He gave up trying to eat and headed back up to the Gryffindor tower, climbing into bed after discovering Ron and Hermione were still nowhere in sight.

He awoke in the dark sometime later, someone shaking him urgently.

~*~*~*~

'Harry! Wake up!' Ron whispered hoarsely *'Harry!'*

'What?' Harry had been so weary when he retired that he was having a lot of trouble rousing himself.
'C'mon' Ron pulled at his arm.
'What?' he said groggily as he yanked his arm out of reached, not at all feeling like getting up.

'Just get your butt into gear and come downstairs,' Ron said seriously and retreated behind Harry's drawn curtains. Harry tossed the covers off and threw his feet on the floor. He sat there for a moment, ruffling his unkempt hair, trying to shake off his stupor.

'C'mon!' Ron urged from the doorway
Harry sighed impatiently and stood, slipping his feet into his sneakers and throwing on his dressing gown. The curtains were drawn around every bed except Ron's, which showed no signs of having been slept in at all. Some heavy breathing and the low rumbling of a snore sounded across the room as Harry scuffed along the floor. Treading heavily down the stairs to the Common Room, he arrived at the bottom to find Ron and Hermione sitting alone by the fire.

'You look terrible...' Hermione said with a frown as Harry dragged himself over to them.
'Thanks'
'Well go on then.' Ron said looking at Hermione and motioning his head at Harry. Hermione continued to eye Harry with a frown, but said nothing. Harry stood there with his hands shoved in his gown pockets looking from one to the other. His gaze finally settling on Hermione.

'What?' his curiosity making him feel more awake the longer it took for them to spit it out.
'I think I might know where to start looking for the cup.' She said with uncertainty. Harry immediately felt a jolt that would normally have made all traces of sleep leave him, but he was utterly worn out.
'Wha ... How?'
'We were talking to Ernie earlier this afternoon. He started asking about your burns,' Ron said.

'He was going on and on about sunburn, saying he'd never suffered from it,' Hermione spoke rapidly 'but that Zach had a really bad case of it years ago when he'd been on holiday in Italy. Apparently he did it two days into the trip, and Ernie said it was even worse than yours.' Hermione winced 'Said he spent the rest of the holiday, holed up inside his suite.'

'Prat.' Ron said.
'You remember Zacharias, don't you, from the DA?' she asked Harry.
'Yeah' Harry remembered Zacharias rather well. He had been an obnoxious character, who had managed to put almost everyone in the DA offside in their very first meeting at the Hog's Head.

'Well, apparently his and Ernie's parents are really quite friendly, have been for years ... you know, both being from old wizarding families, both being primarily Hufflepuff students, and so on.' She

said ‘They go to each others dinner parties and birthdays, they even holiday together on occasion, like when they went to Italy.’

‘What’s this got to do with the cup?’ Harry prompted, feeling not all together happy about being woken up to hear about Zacharias' and Ernie’s holiday mishaps. Hermione’s fingers were fidgeting with the corners of a large, tan coloured book that lay in her lap.

‘Do you remember the name of the woman Tom Riddle killed, to get the cup?’ she said quietly.
‘Yes, Hepzibah. Hepzibah Smith, why?’ The memory from the pensive was still vivid in his mind.

‘Well, you remember she said she was a descendant of the original Hufflepuffs, which is why she had the cup in the first place?’
‘Yes...’
‘Zacharias' a Smith too.’ Ron injected.
‘Exactly.’ Hermione said.

‘But ... there must be hundreds of Smiths in the wizarding world.’ Harry said doubtfully.
‘There are...’ Hermione said slowly.

‘Great, so how does this help?’ Harry said, getting a little frustrated that he was still none the wiser. Ron said interestedly ‘Hermione remembered reading about the founders of Hogwarts in, Hogwarts, A-'

‘Hogwarts, A History, yeah I know, she must know that book off by heart, by now. I still don’t see what you’re getting at.’ He said impatiently. Harry then turned to Hermione. She appeared slightly hurt and wouldn’t look at him, instead she watched Ron who had tensed visibly. He frowned at Harry.

‘I think it would be a good idea if you just heard her out, mate.’ There was silence between them as Harry and Ron stared at each other. Harry knew he had been harsh, and that his friends were trying to help him, so he breathed in his irritation.
‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it like that.’ He said quietly. Hermione nodded ‘I’m just tired.'

She eyed him with concern as she continued. ‘Well, I thought it might be worth tracing the Smith families, there was nothing recent enough in Hogwarts, A History, so Ron and I searched for hours, and when the library closed we brought the books back here so we could keep looking and it seems that Zacharias' family is related to the Smiths that are the descendants of Hufflepuff.’ Hermione lifted the book and showed Harry the cover. ‘I found a reference to them with some more help from Ernie. And Harry, they are the *only* Smiths left from that line.’

Harry glanced down at the cover. *THE HUFFLEPUFFERS A look at Graduates, Volume XII* was inscribed in large grey lettering, above the badger symbol always associated with the name.

‘I still don’t understand. So what if he is? The cup was taken by Voldemort, the family doesn’t have it anymore.’
‘Harry, when Voldemort made the Horcruxes, he made them out of “trophies”, things that were meaningful in some way.’ Hermione explained ‘Dumbledore said so himself, didn’t he?’

‘Yes,’ Harry was feeling like they were getting nowhere and his patience was wearing thin, and his head had started to hurt. ‘But I don’t see how that will help us find it. He could have put it anywhere-’

‘Just give her a chance, mate.’ Ron cut in seriously, holding a hand out in a silencing gesture. Harry swallowed, he had no idea why, but his anger had been steadily building.
‘Think about where Dumbledore found the ring, Harry.’ Hermione said abruptly, obviously getting slightly irritated now too. Dumbledore said he had taken the ring from Marvolo’s place.

‘Riddle hid it at his grandfathers.’

‘Yes.’ Hermione said pointedly ‘He chose to hide it there because he thought it was a fitting place. The ring was a Slytherin heirloom, so he put it in the last Slytherin house.’
Harry narrowed his eyes as he started to make the connection. ‘So the cup...’ he said slowly.

‘Is probably hidden somewhere that has significance to Hufflepuff.’ finished Ron.

‘Which is where Zach comes in,’ Hermione said ‘its just possible his family are sitting on the site of one of Voldemorts Horcruxes. Not particularly likely, I’ll admit, but possible.’ She gripped the sides of the book firmly. ‘He could show us the properties his family own, and he’d be able to find out from his parents if there are other places that are important to them.’

‘How are we going to do it?’ Harry said raising his shoulders ‘He’s not exactly a good friend of ours is he? And he hasn’t returned to school this year either.’
‘And he’s a right nosy git too.’ Ron added ‘He’ll want to know why we’re poking around.’ Hermione was staring at the book in her lap.
‘I might be able to get him to show me. And without having to answer too many questions.’

‘How?’ Ron asked.
Harry thought Hermione looked decidedly uncomfortable as she spoke. ‘Its just an idea, but I could use a love potion on him.’
‘What? What for?’ Ron screwed his face up.
‘Well, if he thinks he’s in love with me, he’ll show me pretty much anything I ask him to, wont he?’ she said. Ron’s mouth started to move, but nothing came out.

‘No Hermione, that’s not a good idea.’ Harry frowned ‘You didn’t see Ron last year after he ate one of those chocolate cauldrons Romilda spiked.’
‘If you can think of another way of getting what we want, then I’d like to hear it.’ She said, raising her eyebrows.
‘We’ll just ask him,’
‘That’s not an option, Harry’ Hermione shook her head ‘You know what he’s like, there’s no way he’ll do it without asking a million questions, and even then, he’d probably refuse. No,’ she shook her head ‘there’s no other way.’

‘You’re not doing it!’ Ron finally spoke
‘I’ll make sure the potions fresh from Fred and Georges so it wont be too strong.’ She went on determinedly, not looking at Ron ‘and I’ll do it bit by bit, so it wont be suspicious.’
Harry was deep in thought, searching for another way they could approach Zach, but try as he might, Hermione’s idea seemed like the best answer. ‘I’m just not keen on you doing it Hermione, what if something went wrong?’
‘I’ll be careful Harry, don’t worry, I’ve no intention of getting myself in too deep.’

‘What if he gets … frisky?’ Ron scowled.

Hermione rolled her eyes and sighed impatiently. ‘I can handle Zacharias Smith. Anyway,’ she stood, still clutching the book ‘it’ll be dawn in a few hours and we’ve got Defence classes to teach this afternoon. I’m going to get some sleep, and I suggest you two do as well.’ She crossed the room, turning before she headed up the stairs ‘Especially you Harry. You really do look terrible.’ She paused as she studied him for a minute, and then mounted the stairs stifling a yawn.

‘I don’t like it’ Ron said flatly.
‘There’s a surprise’ Harry said dryly.
‘Really, remember what Slughorn said about obsessive love being dangerous!’
‘Yeah, but if anyone can do this, its Hermione, she’s very thorough.’ He replied as they headed back up to their beds. ‘I’m not really keen on the idea either, but I don’t think we have a choice. We have to find that cup, and this is the best lead we’ve got … the only lead we’ve got.’

The next day, when Harry wandered into the Great Hall with Ron and Hermione to take the first lesson of Defence for the younger students, he had to fight the overwhelming urge to turn around and walk out again.

The Hall itself was orderly enough, with desks placed exactly how Hermione had laid out on the piece of parchment she had thrust into his hand before entering. The students however, were in supreme disarray. There were a few frightened looking first years sat at their desks, but the rest of the hall was littered with small house groups of boisterously chattering students, milling around one another, some taking great pleasure at casting noisy jibes and scowling looks at those from houses not their own.

Harry stopped just inside the doorway.

‘I don’t think they’ve seen us yet’ Ron leaned in to Harry ‘Wanna make a run for it?’
‘Coward’ Hermione said as she shot him a slightly amused glance.

As tempting as it sounded, Harry swallowed and walked determinedly to the teacher’s table. As he made his way through the rabble, Ron and Hermione in tow, the student’s heads began to turn. It was almost as though Harry was casting a Silencio charm in his wake. The din died out behind him as he passed, and the silence stretched across the room, until he had reached the step up to the table. When he finally turned to the students, there was complete silence.

‘There’s advantages to being the "Chosen One", isn’t there?’ Ron said, hardly moving his lips as he and Hermione pulled up along side him. This was far more nerve racking than Harry had imagined it, and as he gathered his wits, he wondered how on Earth he had let McGonagall put him in charge.

He stood tall, lifted his head and took a deep breath. ‘Right’ he said out of the corner of his mouth to Hermione ‘off you go.’

Hermione looked at him dumb struck for a moment, before regaining her composure and flying into Head-Girl mode. Harry could hear Ron suppressing a laugh as she gave instructions in an abnormally high voice, the students continued to stare at Harry, slowly taking their seats.

‘There’s something to be said for awe, isn’t there?’ said Ron under his breath, obviously enjoying himself.

Hermione turned on him ‘Oh, shut up!’ then she looked at Harry ‘you cant just stand here looking impressive, this is your class remember?’ And she promptly sidestepped so that Harry was left standing before a sea of expectant faces. As he looked out at them, wondering how he had managed to get roped into this, it suddenly occurred to him why he was here.

McGonagall had chosen him not because he knew the subject, or because he was necessarily a good teacher. He was there because she knew the students would listen to him; she knew they would want to learn from him. The responsibility of it finally hit home. He looked down at the piece of parchment he held in his hand, finely detailing the tasks each year was to undertake, and scrunched it closed in his fingers.

‘Third, fourth and fifth years will be learning the shield charm.’ He announced resignedly. There was an immediate smatter of excited gasps as Harry continued, thinking of Hermiones gaze that would most likely be boring into his back. ‘Split into pairs of mixed ages and houses to practice.’ A low murmuring swept across the room as students turned to look at one another.

‘First an Second years will start learning some of the basic hexes that can be used if you find yourself in difficulty.’ This seemed to go down particularly well with the younger students who normally couldn’t hope to be learning such things before their fourth year. Harry turned, preparing himself for Hermiones disapproval, but was surprised to see her smiling at him.

‘I’ll take the first and second years until you can get round to them.’ She said and proceeded to instruct them out of their seats and herd them into a clearing at the back of the hall.
‘She took that well.’ Ron gave Harry a wry smile.

The session went well, though it was not without incident. There was some much expected squabbling over who didn’t want to be paired with whom before they started, and also not surprisingly, quite a lot of over zealous hexing going on in both groups.

The kid that had been determined not to be in Harry’s compartment on the Hogwarts Express a fortnight ago, called Hunter, seemed extremely resentful at having been forced into Harry’s company once more, making no attempt to hide his agitation. Harry ignored the boy’s backhanded attempts to convince others they were foolhardy to the extreme to be seemingly happy about the close proximity of Harry.

That is, until he overheard Hunter telling the freckled, curly-haired kid Harry quite liked named

Peter Taphet, that if he were a faithful Death Eater, he thought it less likely he would come across the Dark Lord than if he was standing in the same room as Harry Potter. That was all he could take. Harry calmly leaned in to Hunter and told him in a quiet voice that he would make sure he took the time to introduce the “Dark Lord” to him the next time Voldemort dropped by to attack him.

Hunter did the rest of the lesson in silence.

When the trio finally retired back to the Common Room, Harry took out Snapes potion book and flicked through it, looking for any spells he missed last year, while Ron and Hermione collapsed into a chair together, quietly arguing over Hermiones plan to drug Zacharias with Love Potion.

At dinner, Harry shoved his beef casserole around the plate, and then left five minutes after he had sat down, heading for the owlery. He hadn’t seen Hedwig since he had arrived at Hogwarts, and started feeling rather guilty for neglecting her. He wanted to send for a new potions book from Flourish and Blotts anyway, and he knew Hedwig would be glad for something to do, and as he climbed the stairs, his thoughts turned to Lupin.

As much as he was clever, it seemed unlike him to disappear from all contact for so long, especially now he was head of the Order and they relied on him for leadership. Harry wished it were as easy as sending him an owl, but he knew he couldn’t. There was nothing he could write in a note that wouldn’t prove incredibly dangerous to Lupin if it was intercepted, so he made up his mind to go to The Burrow the following night and speak to Mr. Weasley and find out what they were doing to find him.

Hedwig ignored Harry’s first attempts at coaxing her down to him, keeping her back to him, with her beak in the air. She finally relented when Harry made to leave, fluttering down to him and perching on his arm. He stroked her smooth feathers fondly, moving over to one of the gaping windows and looking down at the grounds. Hagrids hut was still in darkness, and Harry felt a familiar knot in his stomach. He had no idea where either Lupin or Hagrid were, what they were doing, if they were okay, or even alive, though he told himself they were, convincing himself he would know if they weren’t.

He turned as he heard shuffling from the stairwell, a second later Ginny appeared carrying a bag of owl treats. Harry’s body reacted with a jolt of pain as his heartbeat quickened. Ginny, who had been watching her feet, looked up slowly, and when her eyes met Harry’s she flashed an awkward smile. Hedwig launched herself off Harry and headed straight for her, landing delicately on her arm. Pig also zoomed down from his perch and took up position on her raised hand. She shooed them off gently.

‘How are you feeling? I mean…’ she waved a hand at her face, indicating she was talking about his burns.
‘Its really good’ Harry knew as soon as he said it, it sounded ridiculous considering how he looked. ‘I mean … its better.’

She nodded, as her eyes appeared to become excessively watery. ‘I’ve been coming to see her,’ she motioned to Hedwig who sat eyeing the owl treats ‘I thought she might be lonely.’ She frowned.
‘Thanks’ Harry said ‘I don’t always have the time.’
‘I know,’ There was a long silence as Ginny stared at the floor.

‘So how’s Dean?’ it was out of Harry’s mouth before he could stop himself. Ginny looked up at him and her eyes closed briefly. She looked back at the floor, shaking her head softly.

‘I’m sorry’ Harry said stupidly ‘I-I shouldn’t have asked, it’s none of my business.’ He actually felt sick as he watched a tear drop down her face.
‘I can’t believe you’d ask me that.’ Her voice was strained.
‘Ginny … I’m sorry. It was stupid of me.’

‘He told me you’d do this, he warned me … but I didn’t believe him, I didn’t believe it of you.’ Her voice shook and Harry thought he had never seen her this upset. He felt racked with guilt and cursed himself for not having more self-control. He could think of nothing to say in his defence, so he stood there helplessly.

She turned suddenly and was gone.

Harry left the owlery and headed back to the Common Room. The passageways were clear as he stalked through them, the anger and frustration surging uncontrollably within. He climbed through the portrait hole and headed straight to the dormitory. When he arrived, he didn't bother to put a light on; instead he sat in the dark, on his bed, and waited...

Finally, the door creaked open and Harry watched as a figure emerged, the lamp flickered on and Seamus strolled over to his bed, unaware of Harry. He dug about in his trunk, throwing clothes around with his back to him. A minute or two later Dean walked through the door.

'Have you found-' before any more words were out of his mouth, Harry had lunged at him and grabbed the front of his robes, throwing him up against the wall.

'What the hell?' Dean gasped.
'Harry!' Seamus's startled voice rang out.
'What did you say to her?' Harry roared.
'What?' Dean breathed, looking terrified.
'Ginny!' Harry pressed him against the wall with renewed force. 'What have you been telling her?' Harry could feel Seamus trying to pull his arm away.

'Harry! Cut it out!'
Harry turned his head to him 'Butt out Seamus!' Seamus backed off slightly.
'What are you talking about?' Dean asked urgently.
'Don't pretend you don't know. All I did was ask her if things were okay between you two and she fell to pieces. I want to know what the hell is going on!' Harry said furiously.

Dean dropped his head back against the wall in understanding. 'She's upset at you, not me' he said more calmly.
'Why? What have you been telling her?'
'Harry!' Ron had come charging through the door 'Harry, think about what you're doing.' He said urgently. Both Dean and Harry were panting as Harry loosened his grip and took a step back, never taking his eyes off Dean.

'What's going on?' Ron asked, looking from one to the other.
'I knew something like this was going to happen.' Dean said as he avoided looking at Harry. 'Mate, you've got it all wrong. Ginny was upset because I told her something like this would happen and she refused to believe me.'
'What are you saying?' Harry said angrily.

Dean gave an exasperated sigh 'I warned Ginny that you would think her and me were dating again. I told her you wouldn't be able to handle it. But she said you would never think that, you would never believe she could be with …' Dean paused as he looked at Harry 'with someone else...' He trailed off quietly.

12. Draco's Return

Harry listened as Dean spoke.

Strangely he hadn't wanted to believe it at first. He was flooded with guilt over his stupid jealousy, so much so, he found himself desperately searching for a lie in Dean's words. But as Dean explained, it became obvious to him that he had made a horrible mistake.

Ginny had been helping Dean wade through the Ministry of Magic "Employee Guidelines" booklet, apparently his sights were set on filling Mr. Weasleys old shoes in The Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Department, at the Ministry of Magic after he obtained his NEWTs; a position that had yet to be filled since Mr. Weasley had been promoted. Dean had doubted his suitability because he wasn't from a wizarding background, but Ginny had convinced him to complete his last year of Hogwarts, telling him he would be perfect for the position, and proving a fountain of information on her father's old job.

Seamus and Ron hovered awkwardly for a while, listening, then they departed for the common room at Ron's suggestion, leaving Harry and Dean in an uncomfortable silence. Dean plonked himself on the edge of Neville's bed, obviously shaken by the altercation. It was a while before Harry spoke.

'I'm sorry, Dean. I had no right to attack you like that.' He said quietly. Dean had been nothing but a good friend to Harry over the past six years, even supporting him through Voldemorts return, when most had refused to believe it. The fact that he had dated Ginny had completely clouded Harry's judgment, and instead of trusting in his friend, he had chosen to believe the worst. 'I don't know why I did it.'

'I do,' Dean said gravely 'I probably would have done the same thing in your position.' Harry could tell Dean still had genuine feelings for Ginny, but this time it didn't stir up unwanted resentments. 'Ginny and I are friends, Harry … good friends, and I want it to stay that way.' Harry watched him as he spoke. 'If you've got any doubts about the way she feels … just look at her reaction yesterday at lunch when she saw you at the table. Even Ron couldn't have eaten that much potato!' he grinned slightly.

'She's a strong girl, Harry, but she was a mess the whole time you were lying up in that hospital ward.' Harry frowned, he thought no one but Ron and Hermione knew he was there. 'Ginny forced it out of Hermione the day you arrived.' Dean said, following his thoughts 'She knew something had happened. Ron and Hermione couldn't hide something like that from her, or the rest of us for that matter, we've been friends too long.' He held up his hand reassuringly as Harry's frown deepened 'Don't worry, only the seven of us know you were there, though what happened to put you in hospital is still a mystery.' He gave Harry a wry smile.

'Seven?' Harry asked.
'Yeah' Dean nodded 'Me, Ron and Hermione, Neville, Luna, Seamus, and of course Ginny' he counted off his fingers. 'Just the old gang.' He smiled.
'Luna too?' Harry said, feeling unusually glad for her.
'Yeah' Dean said sheepishly. 'Where would we be without her regular insights into the weird and wonderful?' Then he stood up and put his arm across Harry's shoulder, leading him to the door. 'Its none of my business, but I reckon Ginny might be wanting an apology, mate.'

Harry stopped as Dean dropped his arm and opened the door 'Thanks … and I'm sorry.'
'Don't mention it' Dean nodded and left.

Harry knew Dean was right, he had behaved insensitively and Ginny had good reason to be mad at him. He went to his trunk and fished out the marauders map, determined to find her and try and explain his behaviour, he couldn't leave things like they were. He opened the parchment and scanned it, looking first in the Gryffindor tower and then the girl's bathroom, but her name was absent from both. Frowning, he checked the library and the Great Hall, but there was still no sign of her.

He registered slight alarm, as he searched the classrooms and the passageways, but Ginny was nowhere to be found. His heartbeat began to quicken as his eyes darted over the map checking the grounds, and then suddenly, he exhaled as a smile crept across his lips, finally spotting the small ink dot with her name above it, in Hagrids Hut. But, just as suddenly, the smile died as his eyes fell on a second dot in the room with her.

Harry sickened as the bile rose in his throat. The map fell from his hand as he tore out of the room, his heartbeat racing as he leapt down the stairs three and four at a time, with only one thought on his mind. Tearing across the Common Room, heads turned and watched him as he charged through anyone who got in his way. He reached the portrait hole, clambering through it desperately, Ron calling after him. There was no time to explain so he forced out Ginny's name over his shoulder, the only thing on his mind as he ran blindly on, panic shutting out everything but his need to reach her.

Cutting through every shortcut he could, he flew down the marble stairs and out the double oak doors into the blackness of a moonless night. What if I'm too late? He pushed on furiously; the cold night air blustered around him, biting through his clothing as he bolted across the lawns. He ran towards the dull light coming from Hagrids window, then leaping up the stone steps to Hagrid's door

in one bound he flung the door open. His chest was heaving and his heartbeat pounded as he surveyed the scene before him, wand raised, searching for the target.

There was a lone candle on the table, flickering in the strong draft that wafted through the open door behind Harry. Ginny sat with her damp cheeks glowing in the soft yellow light, she had turned at the sudden intrusion, staring wide-eyed in shock at Harry.

'Where is he?' Harry said urgently as he walked slowly into the room.
'What?' Ginny breathed.
'Malfoy!' Harry said his eyes darting this way and that, making his way slowly over to her, his wand pointing around the room. It was obvious by her reaction, she had thought she was alone. 'I saw him on the map. He's here!' Harry said, not daring to look at her for too long, he grabbed her arm helping her firmly to her feet. She pulled out her wand and turned her head to look around the room. It was bathed in shadow, the dark recesses impenetrable by the weak light.

'Where is he?' she said urgently. They continued hovering around the spot, back-to-back, searching every shadowy area in the room with their eyes.
'He's hiding himself with magic,' Harry realized 'stand still and don't move.' He said and he held his breath as he listened. There was silence for a moment, then a muffled sound, and the cane umbrella basket just inside the doorway tipped over.

'Harry, The door!'

It was gaping wide open, just as Harry had left it. He swore as he pulled Ginny with him, heading carefully over to it. The sound of voices began to drift across the lawns as they reached the entrance, barring it, though Harry realized in angry frustration, it was probably too late. He shoved Ginny behind him and faced back into the room.

'Ginny!' Ron said urgently as he raced towards them. Luna, Ernie and Neville, were pulling up in front of Dean and Seamus, their wands drawn.
'What … is it?' Dean panted, his robes fluttering in the strong breeze.
'Malfoy!' Ginny said hatefully.
'Get the map! I left it up in the room!' Harry yelled over his shoulder. He saw Neville turn immediately, eventually disappearing into the darkness as he ran back to the castle. 'Keep an eye on the grounds, I think he slipped passed us.'

'Where … is he?' Hermione panted at the bottom of the stairs, her head turning along with the others, to scan the area.
'I don't know, he must be wearing an invisibility cloak or something.' Harry said 'Ginny, get down the stairs.'
'No!' She said forcefully.

'Ginny!' Ron grabbed her arm and yanked her down the stairs, stepping up behind Harry to help him block the door. It seemed to take forever for Neville to return with the map, and Harry was impatiently aware that Malfoy was probably freely making his escape. Neville finally arrived back and handed it over Rons shoulder to Harry, panting furiously.

'I looked … Harry … I couldn't … see him.'

Harry had dropped the map without countering the spell and all of Hogwarts and its occupants still stretched out across the parchment. He searched the hut, then the area around it impatiently, but saw no sign of Draco, though Tonks and Kingsley Shacklebolt's dots were moving speedily in on the group milling around the hut. Harry shoved the map in his pocket.

'Don't say anything!' he said to the others.
'What?' Seamus questioned as they all looked at him.
'Just let me do the talking.' He said quickly.

'What's … going on?' Tonks had appeared out of the dark. She stopped in front of the steps, panting from her effort.
'Er … I thought I saw someone … from my window.' Harry said as he pointed at the Gryffindor tower, his mind racing 'A Death Eater, going into Hagrids.'

'What's happened? … Is everyone … okay?' Kingsley breathed as he came into view.
Tonks frowned. 'A Death Eater? … In Hagrids?'
'Yeah'
'Alone?' she said flatly.

'Mm' Harry could tell she was dubious '… I-I don't know … they're not here now … I must have made a mistake.' Harry knew his friends were giving him curious looks, but none of them corrected him.
'Are you alright … Harry?' she eyed him.
'Yeah… I-I' he said, struggling for something to say.
'He was dreaming!' Ron chipped in. They all turned at once to look at Ron questioningly, even Harry.

'Heee … fell asleep.' He continued 'And when he woke up, he ran off, so … weee ah … we followed him' he waved a hand at everyone's doubtfully cringing faces. Tonks and Kingsley exchanged looks.
'He was sleep walking.' Ginny offered. 'Its supposed to be dangerous to wake someone like that, so we followed him.' She shrugged.

'I've never seen anyone sleep-run before' Luna said interestedly and received a gentle nudge from Dean for her effort.

'Is everything okay, Harry?' Kingsley asked.
'Yeah, er … sorry.' He said painfully. Tonks was eyeing him suspiciously.
'You were sleep walking.' she said in that way the he just knew she didn't believe him.
'Er ... that's right ...'

'Does it loads up in the dorm!' Ernie chimed in 'Woke me up when he was trying to get into Riley's bed the other night!' Harry raised an eyebrow as he looked at Ernie, the flash of gratitude that flared in him because he had leapt to Harry's defence, died rapidly. 'Scared the poor fellow half to death.' Ernie seemed to be uncharacteristically enjoying playing his part in the conspiracy.

'Right. Thanks,' Harry said, shooting him an piercing glare.
'Well … we'll have a look round before we go, just in case.' Tonks was still frowning at Harry.
'Yes, can't be too careful. I'll take this side.' Kingsley nodded and headed around the hut, Tonks taking the opposite side.

'What was all that about?' Dean whispered hoarsely as they all moved in closer to Harry.

'I climbed into Riley's bed?' Harry said accusingly to Ernie.
'Best I could come up with at short notice. Thought you could use the help.' Ernie was still smiling.
'What is going on, anyway?'
'I'll explain later.' Harry sighed 'But for now, keep it to yourselves, don't tell anyone what happened!'

'I think we'd better get back.' Hermione said quietly 'There's not much we can do if he's gone.'
'W-What was he doing here?' Neville asked turning his attention on Harry.
'I don't know,' Harry said darkly 'but whatever it was, we interrupted him.'
Ron stepped down to Hermione and put his arm around her shoulders, pulling her to him briefly.
'C'mon' he motioned to Harry.

'I'll be up later,' he said, his eyes dropping to Ginny, remembering why he had been looking for her in the first place. She seemed to be expecting it and she waited until the others had set off, before climbing the steps and following Harry back into the hut out of the wind.

Harry took the map out of his pocket and placed it open on the table. He doubted Draco would turn up again tonight after nearly being sprung, but he would watch anyway.

'Its cold' Ginny shivered and went over to the fireplace and pointed her wand at the wood that laid there. 'Incendio!' Orange flames erupted and almost immediately started to cast their warmth around the room. Harry watched the golden light flicker across her intent face as she stared into the fire.

'I was wrong about you and Dean' he offered hesitantly.

'Yes, you were.' She said without looking up. He breathed heavily as he slowly stepped to her, stopping at her back. He wanted to touch her, but he didn't dare.
'I just … don't think rationally when it comes to you,' he said 'I saw the photo of you and him at Sirius' and I couldn't help it, you looked so … happy together.'

'He's one of my best friends, Harry.' She said, continuing to watch the flames dancing in the fireplace 'And I was happy that day, not because of him, though.' Harry's pain was growing with the intimacy of the situation.
'And you've been spending so much of your time with him' Harry went on, feeling the need to justify his behaviour.
'I've been helping him.'

'I know,' Harry said 'I know now, and I'm sorry.' Neither of them spoke for the longest time. They listened to the fire cracking and hissing in silence before Harry spoke gravely 'The worst part about all of this is that I should've been happy for you.' She turned and looked at him. 'I promised myself I would let go' he went on 'knowing it was for the best … I'm just … finding it so hard.' he breathed reluctantly.

'I thought by hanging around with Dean, everyone would think we were going out.' she flashed an awkward smile. 'Not you though, I thought you'd know what I was up to. I guess Dean was right, I assumed too much.' she paused 'I was hoping it would help take some of the pressure off you, so you didn't have to keep worrying about me.' Harry looked into her pooling green eyes.

'The night Gabrielle was killed … when you came to me and I snapped at you to get out of the room ... I hated myself. I hated myself because that young girl had just had her life taken away from her, and all I could think was ... what if it had been you.' Her eyes were swelling with tears as she reached a hand up to his face.

'You have to stop feeling responsible for me all the time. I can take care of myself.' She brushed her thumb lightly over his cheek before letting her hand drop. 'You're making yourself sick Harry. You don't eat properly, you're looking so tired all of time' her face was full of concern 'you cant go on like this. You have to stop worrying about everyone else and think about yourself for a change.' Harry dropped his eyes to the floor.

'I'm alright, I've just had a lot on my mind lately.'

'Let me help you.' She quietly pleaded 'I can still be here for you without you having to worry yourself stupid, especially if I keep it up with Dean. No one has to know' He met her gaze 'you don't need to push me away. You don't need to be so unhappy. You don't *need* to be so alone.' Her voice was heavy as she added 'But you do need me, Harry.'

Finally a wet tear spilled from her eye. Harry's breathing had become strained as she spoke, the pain twisting inside his chest. It would be so easy to abandon all his cares and pull her to him, every part of his being wanted nothing more than to take her for himself, to enjoy all that she had to offer and lose himself in her. He ached to let go of the pain and find that place of comfort only she could show him.

His body trembled as he fought the urge give in, he could not forget why he had left her. If something were to happen to her, if he was responsible for her being hurt, or worse, he could never forgive himself. He had risked everything when he had lain with her in the past, and he would not do it again. He took a half step back from her, fearing his own lack of self-control.

'I can do this alone Gin. I have to do this alone.'

She looked at him almost pityingly as her tears ran freely down her cheeks.

'You need to let go too, at least for now. When its all over, maybe then if you still want to…' She cut him off as she lunged forward and embraced him. His body remained stiff with resolve, though he closed his arms about her briefly. Then he gently eased her back away from him, his expression blank. She looked up into his eyes, but Harry forced himself to keep them free of emotion, suppressing all his turmoil for one last-ditch effort at putting an end to it.

‘Its really time we grew up, there are more important things we need to be dealing with.’ He was surprised at the sound of his own voice, it came out almost cold. Ginny’s reddened eyes dropped from him as she nodded, but didn’t speak. She walked past him without looking at him and opened the door.

Harry wanted to call her name, he wanted her to give him one last reassuring look before she left, but he remained quiet as he watched her pull the door shut behind her. He walked to the table and glanced down at the map to make sure she made it safely back to the castle. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed a tiny dot moving near his own. His eyes fell on it automatically.

‘I think I’m going to be sick!’

Harry’s heart skipped a beat. He knew that sardonic drawl well even as the name registered.

~*~*~*~

Harry turned his head slowly, aware that Draco would already have his wand trained on him. Malfoy hadn’t shown up on the map a moment before, and there was no way he could have come in or out, without Harry’s knowledge.

‘How did you do it?’ Harry asked darkly.

Malfoy scoffed smugly. ‘You’d be surprised at the talents of those you despise. But then, you only ever believed in Dumbledore, didn’t you?’ Malfoy taunted ‘your ridiculous little map won’t help you anymore. I wont show up unless I want to be seen.’ The wind had picked up outside, and was howling through the thatches on the roof.

‘Still doing your *Masters* bidding, then?’ Harry said bitterly ‘I don’t need to ask how that’s working out for you.’ Draco had looked pale and drawn when Harry had seen him last; now however, he looked positively ill. ‘Stumbling already!’ Harry said smoothly as he shook his head gently. Malfoy’s hollow eyes hardened. ‘Hoping Snape will come and bail you out again, like last time?’ He goaded recklessly.

‘Watch your mouth!’ Draco said angrily, his body shaking slightly. Harry's hand unconsciously neared his wand. Malfoy glanced down at it.
‘DON’T MOVE!’ Malfoy yelled wildly. He appeared to be hovering on an invisible edge. He had a crazed look in his eyes and seemed unable to keep the end of his wand from trembling. Harry relaxed his hand away from his pocket as the wind blustered outside, rattling the windowpanes.

‘You make me sick!’ Malfoy spat ‘All that disgusting love talk between you two,’ Harry swallowed hard, Malfoy had heard, and seen, everything that went on between him and Ginny. He felt his face redden. ‘You think anyone’s interested in your tortured love life? You think your doing it hard because you cant be with your stupid girlfriend?’ Malfoy’s voice was getting higher and louder. ‘You think you know what it is to suffer? Do you? You think you know what it is to feel the pain of losing … to really lose someone y-you … you … ’ He was bordering hysterical, and his eyes were wide and watery. He seemed to be struggling to find the words. A realization dawned on Harry as he watched him.

‘He killed your family!’ Harry breathed, horror struck. Draco glared at him as the wind howled around the hut outside. ‘Didn’t he?’

Draco’s face contorted. ‘My mother…’ he said painfully. ‘He warned me. I failed him. He was right to take her.’ His voice shook ‘He could have killed my father and me as well.’ He looked almost possessed. ‘He showed us mercy.’

Harry felt a flood of sympathy for this shell of the boy he had loathed for so long, but it wasn’t enough to hide his frustration at Malfoys continued loyalty to the monster that had killed his mother.

‘Mercy?’ Harry scowled ‘He doesn’t care about you, your mother, or your father. The only reason

your dad is still alive is because he's in prison!' Outside, the rain pitted itself against the windows.

'I have been given a chance to make things right!' Malfoy said with nervous agitation. 'And this time, I will not fail!'
'You have a chance to make things right only if you turn from Voldemort, before you do anymore harm!' Harry said angrily.

Malfoy looked at Harry for a moment, his expression unreadable, and then all of a sudden he burst out laughing, barely able to keep his wand trained on Harry. It was a strange, mad sounding laugh that slowly died off as he spoke.

'You are too much, really! You always want to be the hero, don't you?' he mocked 'Think you can turn me? Think you can make me "come over to the good side?"' Harry watched as his expression grew serious and he renewed his aim, he was finding Dracos instability discomforting, and more than a little dangerous, 'No, my path is set, Potter. Has been all my life, just like you, really.'

'What are you doing at Hogwarts?' Harry asked, abandoning his attempt at getting through to him.
'Like I'd tell you!' he said spitefully, though after a moment, his face dropped and he appeared to be trying to read Harry's expression. 'I'm not here to harm anybody.' For the first time there was no trace of sarcasm or anger. 'Just stay out of my way.'
'Right,' Harry scoffed bitterly 'because I can trust you, cant I? I can take you at your word.'

Draco eyed Harry over his wand tip 'It was you who destroyed the Vanishing Cabinet, wasn't it?'
Harry tilted his head in a nod.
'How annoyingly inconvenient of you.' Draco sneered. 'I had thought I could use it again'.
'Then I'm even gladder I did it.' Harry said. The front door was rattling along with the window pains, from the force of the wind swirling outside the hut.

'It doesn't matter; I have a better way of getting in and out now. Sorry to deny you a good gloat.' Draco was sounding like his usual self again.
'I wont let you hurt anyone, Draco.'
This appeared to upset Malfoy greatly 'I've already told you, I'm not here to hurt anyone, I'm loo-' he stopped abruptly, his breathing ragged with fury.

'Looking?' Harry said sharply. 'For what?'
'Enough!' he snapped 'I'm through talking. Turn around!'
'Not a chance' Harry said darkly, his hand drifting nearer to his wand.
'Just do it!' Malfoy said impatiently.
'I'm not turning my back to you.' They glared at each other for a long moment. Harry was watching Draco closely for any sign of movement. The wind continued to howl and the rain had turned to hail as it bit against the windows and doors. Suddenly there was a loud bang behind him and Harry's head spun to see what was happening.

The door was swinging inwards on its hinges, revealing the inky blackness beyond. The wind had forced it free of the latch, and hail was streaming into the hut, extinguishing the candle and making the map fly off the table. He quickly lunged for it, as it rushed towards the flickering, dancing flames in the fireplace, grabbing it just in time. When he looked round to find Draco, the room was empty. Harry hastily pulled the map apart and checked it, but could see neither Draco Malfoy, nor anyone else around the area of the hut.

Shoving the map into his pocket, he went through the door, and pulled it firmly shut after him. Placing his arms up in front of his head to shield the worst of the hail, he dragged himself across the dark grounds and headed through the large oak doors.

'Potter! What are you doing?' Filches gruff voice sounded as he made his way across the entrance. 'Where 'ave you been, eh?' He was looking at Harry through narrowed eyes.

'Doing my nightly rounds.' Harry had stopped at the foot of the stairs. 'Maybe you've forgotten, but I'm Head Boy, which means it's my duty to be out and about at this time of night.'

Filch looked thoroughly unimpressed. 'You're not supposed to leave the inside of the castle. McGonagall's gonna hear about this!'

'Whatever,' Harry said resignedly and turned to mount the stairs.
'You're not above the rules, Potter!' Harry could hear Filch yelling after him. 'Your going down this year!'
Harry ignored the remarks, suddenly too tired to be angry. Once in the Common Room, he weaved his way over to Ron and Neville.

'Hey, What kept you?' Ron asked 'You're wet!'
'Hermione gone to bed?' Harry asked.
'Nah, she went to sort out some problem in the girls bathroom. It's a bit strange, isn't it?' he added, changing the subject 'I didn't expected Malfoy to show up here again.'

'Maybe he's here to target someone else,' Neville said 'maybe he's here for you this time, Harry.' he was looking rather worried.
Harry grunted 'I don't think so, he is up to something though.' Just then, Hermione appeared, looking very bedraggled. She was soaked, head to foot, and her shoes were squelching as she walked.

'Did you go back outside?' Ron said incredulously.
'No,' Hermione said, obviously irritated. 'I had a run-in with Moaning Myrtle.' She frowned at Harry 'She hasn't been at it in the boys bathroom as well, has she?'
'No.' Harry motioned his head for them to lean in, and he explained what happened with Draco. Neville had seemed particularly disturbed by the news of Draco's mother, Narcissa.

'I bet it was LeStrange,' he said as he stared into the fire.
'I don't know, maybe. Though I got the impression that it was Voldemort himself.' Harry said, then turning to Hermione, who was enveloped in an enormous amount of steam as she tried to dry her robes with her wand, he asked 'Do you know how he was able to be in Hagrid's without showing up on the map?'

'Honestly? No. The map shows a person, even if they're invisible, and if they are an animagus, though I seriously doubt he has the talent for that anyway, and he couldn't have apparated.' She said. Harry could tell she was mulling it over in her head.

'Whatever he's doing, I don't like it.' Ron said darkly 'the idea of him wandering around the castle whenever he feels like it…' he looked at Harry.
'I don't either.' Harry said, then added 'Though I believe him when he says he's not here to harm anyone,' Neville and Ron looked at him dubiously 'not directly anyway.'

'Lets face it Harry,' Hermione frowned 'If he's here for Voldemort, its hardly going to do any of us any good, is it?'
Harry sat in the armchair next to Rons and drummed his fingers on the armrests.

'We've got to figure out what Voldemort has set him to do.' Hermione matter-of-factly. 'The fact that Voldemort has placed him, of all people here, I just don't get it, its like before, with Dumbledore, seems to me Voldemort wants him to fail'

'Could be another angle.' Harry whispered 'Draco's fool enough to believe he is important to Voldemort still, he's eager to please his *Master* to keep what's left of his family alive, and Voldemort knows now he doesn't have it in him to kill. Voldemort may have sent him back here on a task specifically suited to him alone. Cant imagine what though.' Harry sighed.

'I think we should ready as many of the old DA as we can!' Neville spoke with surprising strength of conviction. 'Hermione, can you make up more of those coins, for the members who left them behind, or lost them.'

'I suppose so,' she said with a vague shrug.
'How many, and how long?' Harry picked up on the idea. Hermione saw Harry's determination and thought about it for a moment.
'I'll have to find out who's left, and who still wants to be involved. After that, maybe a week to get the coins organized, charmed and distributed.

‘All right, it’s a start’ Harry said, the he paused for a moment, frowning and asked Hermione ‘Can you make us a batch of Felix’s Luck potion?’
‘I don’t know. It takes such an incredibly long time, I mean, even if we start now, it wont be ready until March.’ She said.
‘I’ll lend you Snapes book, follow his instructions and it’ll come out better than ever.’ Harry was determined to get it underway, even though it wouldn’t help them on Halloween.

‘Some of the ingredients could prove hard to get.’
‘We’ll ‘borrow’ them from Slughorns storeroom.’
‘Alright’ she sighed ‘I’ll look into it tomorrow.’
‘Good’ Harry said as he walked to the foot of the stairs ‘I’m going to bed, I’ve got another session with Sir tomorrow.’

‘Oh, and Harry, watch out up there!’ Hermione added ‘Apparently Myrtle overheard Crabbe and Goyle planning some sort of revenge on you, for hexing them after they attacked Ernie and Justin.’
Harry sighed ‘Tonight?’

‘No idea, just be careful!’ she said in her Mrs. Weasley way.

13. Harry's Training and Lupins Wolf

Nothing came of Crabbe and Goyle's threat, in fact, Harry rarely saw them over the next few weeks, and as the days passed, he studied every spare moment he had, practicing non-verbal casting with Ron and Hermione and learning advanced spells, some of which, he found in books Hermione had pulled from the library, others his new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher taught him.

They were finally privy to the gruff old mans name when they overheard McGonagall call him Abe in the passageway one day, though of course, the students continued to refer to him as Sir as he was not at all the type of teacher to be on a first name basis with.

He was particularly tough on Harry during his two-hour lessons, which Harry shared with him twice a week. Considering how old he appeared, he had a lot of stamina, even though he wasn’t particularly nimble on his feet. He was however, very adept at firing curses and hexes Harry’s way the minute he relaxed, or lost concentration, leaving him bruised and exhausted at the end of each session. But he was learning to live on his nerves, gaining confidence in his reaction time and his ability.

Ron had visited Mr. Weasley, instead of Harry because he was keen to check on his mother, who must have been spending a lot of time alone now that school was in full swing. He stayed overnight, and when he returned, he said Lupin still hadn’t checked in, but Hagrid was accounted for, though Mr. Weasley wouldn’t enlighten Ron any further as to his whereabouts, he had however, promised to let them know the minute Lupin re-surfaced.

Hermione had pointed out, that with Lupin unable to make contact, it might be difficult, if not impossible for Bill to continue his hunt for Bellatrix. Harry was secretly rather relieved at the thought, though he hoped daily for news of Lupins return.

Before Harry bathed, he took to standing before the mirror in the Prefects bathroom, trying his hand at full body transfiguration. It seemed impossible for him to complete the transformation, many times finding himself staring back at some grotesquely half formed part of his body, wondering if he was going to have to walk the halls to Madame Pomphrey’s domain for all to see, to return him to normal. But he persevered; often working himself so hard he would be dripping with sweat from the shear effort of it. At meal times, on the occasions when he didn’t skip it altogether, he never lingered at the table, downing something to quell the ache in his stomach, then resuming his studies.

When he slept, his dreams were full of dark and frustrating images; snakes and menacing shadows, and the people he loved, who looked completely normal one minute, laughing and chatting, suddenly dropping to the ground lifeless, the next. One dream he had when he was still back at The Burrow had begun re-occurring. It was always the same;

Sirius, his knuckles white and his body stretched out behind him, struggling to keep from being sucked into the endless black mouth of a doorway, and Dumbledore staring wordlessly at Harry, one arm held aloft from his flowing robes, as if in offering. Harry had the feeling if he could just reach him, if he could get to whatever it was Dumbledore held in his hand, he would be able to save Sirius.

But always, Harry's struggling got him nowhere, fighting uselessly and desperately against an unseen force. Then Snape would appear, standing before them, both arms above his head, grasping a shining object. He would thrust it down just as Sirius called Harry's name in warning, and at exactly that point every time, Harry would wake, his sheets locked around him and drenched in sweat.

Day after day, he continued to push himself relentlessly. His ruthless workload took a heavy toll on him, and his clothing began to hang loosely off his lithe body. Hermione fussed over him, but Harry had little time to indulge her, and snapped at her motherly attempts to slow him down. Whenever he saw Ginny, or felt her near, a resentful anguish would rise in him, reminding him of what Draco had said, and of how unimportant his need for her was.

Harry's Defence classes for the younger students were improving gradually; the biggest problem still lay in them learning to work with each other. Harry had thought McGonagall had very good reasons for trying to unite them this year, and as much as it was proving a difficult task going against the schools thousand year old tradition, it was not impossible. In the end Harry took a leaf out of Slughorns book and introduced an incentive.

He decided to award seven students, seven vials of Hermiones Good Luck potion at the end of the year. This tact seemed to work almost instantly. The students took up their learning with a new nerve and ended their out and out squabbling, though they still appeared unable to help themselves unleashing the odd humiliating curse on unsuspecting students in opposing houses. The Gryffindor Common Room's atmosphere however, was stifling at times, scuffles still erupting when things reached boiling point.

Early in the evening, on the night before Halloween, Harry was climbing through the portrait hole, Ron and Hermione in tow, when he suddenly felt the skin on his neck prickle. He hit the floor just in time to avoid a stray curse, and as he picked himself up, he discovered there was an all out brawl and hex-a-thon raging before him. He was already tired and feeling more than little strung-out after another session with Sir, so when Harry walked in on the mayhem, his patience with their situation evaporated.

He walked passed the scuffling students unnoticed, and up to the boy's dormitories, where he opened every second door off the stairwell, flicked his wand, and tossed all the inhabitants belongings onto the landings. He came across the occasional straggling student, obviously hiding from the turmoil downstairs, and when they saw Harry tossing all their belongings magically out of the door, they tried to put as much distance between themselves and Harry as they could, regarding him dangerously. When he reached the room below his, he turned and clambered back down over the debris, locking the newly emptied rooms with a charm Hermione had come across in one of the books in the Restricted Section of the library. When he began climbing the girls to do the same, forgetting about the fact that the stairs would convert into a slippery-dip in his anger, a quiet voice interrupted him.

'I'll do it, Harry' Hermione had stopped him with her hand on his shoulder and a worried look on her face. He waited as she climbed the stairs and repeated his actions on the girl's belongings, barring anyone trying to enter the stairwells to see what was happening. By the time she returned, word was spreading that people had been thrown out of their rooms. There was a lot of whispering and scowling, all fighting forgotten, as many of them eyed Harry nastily in anticipation. He finally climbed a couple of steps and turned gravely.

'You were warned if you didn't grow up and learn to get along, then you would be thrown together, until you do.' His chest was heaving angrily 'those who's belongings now lie on the stairwell, can move into another room, I don't care which. And as this is your doing that has caused this upheaval, you will not be calling on the house elves, if there aren't enough beds, tough!' He said threateningly 'I've locked the doors, and they will stay locked until you change your attitudes!'

Hermione and Ron were watching Harry intently as a murmuring swept through the faces, growing steadily from quietly angry protests to louder, more prominent, outrage.

'Who do you think you are?'
'YEAH!'
'It was bad enough the way things were!'

'WELL, OBVIOUSLY IT WASN'T! BECAUSE YOU STILL DON'T GET IT!' Harry yelled furiously. All went quiet as sparks shot out from the end of his wand as it hung by his leg.

'This school is under threat. At anytime, Death Eaters, or worse could come marching in here and start killing, just because that's what they do!' You could have heard a pin drop as Harry opened them up to his fears, fed up at their ignorance.

'You're not safe here; you're deluding yourself if you think you are.' He glanced at Zabini, Crabbe and Goyle, who were scowling angrily at him 'No matter what house you are from.' Harry was gradually calming as he went on. 'Neither are you in any more danger than if you were at home. But your stupid, petty squabbling could actually get you killed. If we were attacked right now, almost all of us would fall.'

Harry raised his wand, pointing to the ceiling 'and the younger students in the Ravenclaw tower … what hope do you give them if they had to stand alone? They are family too, in some cases, your brothers, your sisters … ' Harry's words appeared to be sinking in. 'you cannot pretend none of this is happening, nor can you hide in ignorance. Voldemort is closer than you think. No one is safe.'

Again Harry eyed Zabini and his fellow Slytherins 'Voldemort kills his own as easily and as cruelly as he kills innocents. And if he took Hogwarts, then our school, our families, our entire future, will be lost.' He glared at them, waiting for some sort of backlash, but he was met with grave silence.

'We don't stand a chance if we can't unite.' The room was completely still. Harry looked at their stunned faces, then he dropped down from the step and crossed to the portrait hole, the students parting as if worried they might bring undue attention to themselves. He climbed through it and was gone, leaving silence in his wake.

He was still bitterly imagining the uproar in the common room that would have ensued after he left, when he pushed the front door of Number twelve Gimmauld Place closed behind him. Someone must be staying, he thought, as he registered the dull glow of a lamplight, drifting up the stairs from the kitchen. He tucked his invisibility cloak away and descended the stairs noiselessly, another trick he was learning from his Defence teacher, who had taken to teaching him tactics for what he called 'keeping yourself alive before, during, and after battle', eventually emerging at the foot of the stairs.

'Lupin?'

A figure was hunched over the thickly wooden table. The head turned slowly, menacingly, to look at him. Harry grabbed the doorframe to steady himself at the shock of finding himself standing under the gaze of a semi-transformed werewolf. Lupins upper body was heaving slowly and heavily, and his hands were stretched out before him on the table, his long claw-like fingernails imbedded in the wood. His robes were torn and matted with dark stains, and his bloodshot eyes glittered dangerously at Harry.

Harry was frozen to the spot. He had not thought to note the moon was only just passed full, and he certainly hadn't expected to find Lupin here suddenly, when they had no news for weeks. But he was here, and he was still partly transformed, and he was eyeing Harry in a most discomforting way.

'Lupin…'

Lupin didn't move, whether due to the pain of the transforming, or the slight, but very unlikely possibility he recognized Harry. Wincing, Harry realized the dark patches on his robes were blood. The stench of it had hit his nose. Harry took a half step backwards as he saw Lupin's face, it was distorted and animalistic, his mouth was bloodied and alien to Harry. He had no idea how to react,

so after standing there for a while, he moved slowly and cautiously, one foot at a time, into the kitchen, keeping his eyes locked on Lupin.

Lupin did not move, just watched Harry warily with heavy eyelids. After a few uncomfortable minutes, Harry decided to make some tea in the hopes that the normalness of the action would settle his nerves, but as he reached for the cups, he stupidly knocked one crashing to the floor with a shaky arm.

A vicious howl echoed through the empty stone kitchen.

Harry froze.

That was thick! He chided. When it appeared Lupin had calmed slightly, Harry resumed his slow movements of making a pot of tea, being meticulously careful to not make any clattering noise, which might set him off again.

Finally Harry placed the teapot and cups on the table, and then hesitantly sat down opposite Lupin, alert to him, but not looking him directly in the eye. They must have sat there for close on an hour, Lupin slowly losing his wolf features, his breathing becoming more natural, Harry could even hear the sound of his bones crunching and reforming every now and then, as Lupins face contorted with the pain, the occasional gasp escaping his lips.

It was a slow and horrible process and it pained Harry to watch his friend have to endure it. A new appreciation of loathing and disgust for the beast that did this to Lupin, Fenrir Greyback, grew inside of him. At one point near the end, Lupin had looked in so much agony his eyes rolled back in his head and he let out a long strangled moan. Harry automatically reached out for his hand, whose claws had finally retreated to fingernails, and clasped it firmly. Lupin gripped his fingers, squeezing them painfully for a moment, and then releasing them.

It was over.

'I made some tea.' Harry pushed an empty mug across the table and heated the pot with his wand, then poured them both a drink.
'Is it always like that?' he asked gravely.

'If I'm lucky, and I have someone to sit with me.' Lupin looked up at Harry from under his eyebrows. 'That was an incredibly dangerous thing to do, Harry. If you'd have come in only moments before, I might have ripped you to shreds, or worse.' Harry new he meant he might have bitten him and turned him into a werewolf. 'Its worse when I'm out with-' Lupin stopped abruptly.

'I know you're back with them.' Harry said darkly.

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Lupin and Harry sipped at their tea. Lupin did not seem to want to elaborate on his time with the werewolves, so Harry drew his attention to the dark stains on his robes.

'What's all the blood?' He asked hesitantly.

'Blood?' Lupin said blankly. He followed Harry's gaze to his chest and pulled at his robes, trying to see what Harry was talking about. Harry watched as Lupins breathing quickened. A look of repulsion spread across his face at the still sticky smears of blood. Turning his eyes on the table in agitation, he muttered 'I don't understand', and then looked up at Harry, frowning. 'I can't remember … I thought I got back in time.' Lupin had a pained expression on his face. 'I-I remember … I-I think…'

Harry swallowed his hot tea hard. 'You wouldn't have hurt anyone. Not you!' Fear swept across Lupin's face as he stared down at the blood on his chest. Harry struggled to help him remember. 'Think! What's the last thing you remember?' he said, trying to hide the fear in his own voice.

'I-I … I was …' Lupin stumbled. Harry could tell he was in shock, already thinking the worst. 'I-I was

trying to get back here … before I transformed. I was ill, didn't think I'd make it … had trouble seeing the path at my feet by the time I got here … yes!' Suddenly he looked back at Harry 'I got back here in time, I remember. I remember standing outside and saying number twelve Gimmauld Place! I came inside ... down here … and lit a fire in the sitting room…'

His face dropped as he glanced over his shoulder to the doorway behind him. Harry looked beyond into the semi dark room from where he sat, a strange sense foreboding came over him so he stood and walked slowly to the sitting room, he leaned his head in and scanned the area. The room was in darkness, but for a faint orange glow from the dying embers in the fire, illuminating odd shapes nearby. Harry pulled out his wand and pointed it at the hanging candelabra. As the room flickered into light, the shadows receded, and the shapes became distinguishable.

Harry gasped, as he stared at the horror before him.

'What?' He could hear Lupins chair scrape along the floor behind him, as he pushed it away from the table. He came up behind Harry and stopped for only a split second, before pushing past him and moving swiftly to the centre of the room where he kneeled beside the broken body that was strewn face down across the bloodied rug on the floor.

Harry realized this had been why the smell of blood had been so strong. The armchairs were both overturned, one had been ripped and torn to shreds with sharp teeth and claws, the other looked as if it had been sprayed with blood, smeared in an ensuing struggle. The coffee table was snapped and collapsed in the centre, and the lounge had been thrown against the wall, a large crack in wall above it covered it with brick dust.

Everything in the room had been violated, candles were broken and laying on the floor, cushions with white cotton filling bursting from ragged tears littered the area, and blood streaked across the wooden floor where it appeared the body had been dragged. Lupin was hunched over the figure with his hand on its shoulder, pulling the torn clothing back from the bite marks. As Harry walked silently over to them, he could hear Lupins heavy breathing and knew what he was thinking.

He had killed an Order member who had either been here already when Lupin arrived, or had walked in on Lupin during his change. Harry crouched down on the opposite side of the body, eyeing Lupin with a mixture of pity and fear. Lupin had his eyes closed, seemingly unable to bring himself to turn the body over and see who it was. Neither of them spoke, as Harry exhaled and put both his hands under the side of the body, heaving it up slowly, and letting it roll onto its back.

He looked hesitantly up at the face. It must have been an Order member he hadn't met, for there was nothing familiar about the bloodied face. He looked at Lupin, unsure of what his reaction would be, and was surprised to see him staring at the face with fury. All of a sudden Lupin growled and tossed the body face down again.

'What?' Harry said, immediately sensing something wasn't right.
Lupin breathed heavily in relief, looking at Harry.

'This was one of Fenrir's spies! A Death Eater called Rosenberg! A thoroughly nasty piece of work. He was used when it was necessary to have someone that wasn't inflicted with the turning at every full moon.' He shook his head 'He must have followed me back here, it seems Fenrir is still wary of me.' Lupin stood up and Harry followed, getting to his feet.

'But how did he get in here?' Harry frowned.

'I stupidly said the location aloud when I came here to enter, the password to the door I suspect too. I was almost out of my mind by that time. As secretkeeper Harry, I'm not restricted the same way you are.' He was shaking his head again 'I left it too late to seek solitude before I turned, and in doing so I risked Voldemort finding out where the Head Quarters is. If Rosenberg had of reported back to Fenrir, everything would have been exposed ... eventually.'

Lupin ran a shaky hand through his hair. 'A stupid risk that could have destroyed all the progress we've made so far, not to mention the lives of everyone who comes in and out of here.' He looked pityingly down at the body again. 'I imagine he tried to hide himself, but the smell of human flesh is rather easily picked up when you're a werewolf in such close quarters.

'Considering he's rejoiced in watching Fenrir hunt first hand, even set people up for him in the past, he should have known better. Unfortunately, he will be missed when he doesn't check back, which means I'm going to have some explaining to do.' Harry's sympathy for Rosenberg was rapidly disappearing. 'I'm going to get cleaned up,' Harry could tell he was disturbed by what he had done. Lupin left the room and returned a short time later, washed and in fresh robes.

Harry helped him clean up the mess, though they still had to decide what to do with the body.

'I think we'll put it in one of the rooms, I'll send for Bill and Sturgis. I need to find out what they've been up to while I was gone anyway.' Lupin said, and released a silvery patronus out of the high, tiny slit-like kitchen window. He levitated the body and floated it up the stairs.

Harry had removed the last of the blood from the floor when Lupin reappeared and stopped at the foot of the stairs, watching Harry as he picked the cups off the table and placed them in the sink.

'I think we need to have a little chat, Harry.' He said sternly. Harry looked at him blankly, and then suddenly understood the change in Lupin. He had seen the burnt out drawing room when he was looking for a place to put Rosenberg. 'Leave that, and come and sit down.' He commanded as he walked back to the table. He stood with one hand on the back of a chair, eyeing Harry's guilty expression knowingly. Harry sat down with a sigh. He knew this moment was coming; he had been dreading it ever since Dumbledore had died.

'I think we've both skirted the issue of what you and Dumbledore were up to, long enough.' He leaned both hands on the back of the chair and glared down at Harry. 'What ever it is you are doing, it is proving far more dangerous than I am sure even Dumbledore could have bargained for.'

'No it isn't.' Harry said flatly 'It is exactly what he expected.'

'I find that very hard to believe, Harry.' He sounded angry now. 'I have played along with this … this thing between you two, its gone against my better judgment, but I've given you the room you've asked for. I haven't pressured you because McGonagall told me that you made it quite clear you had no intentions of telling anyone what's going on. She said Dumbledore had instructed you to say nothing. All of this may well be true. But look at you Harry, you look tired and drawn, and bordering on mal-nourished!' His voice was gradually building into a quiet shout.

'It's clear to me, whatever it is you are doing, it is not only extraordinarily dangerous, but it's taking too heavier a toll on you physically and mentally. You cannot expect me to stand by and watch you do this to yourself.' He was frowning as he added 'I assume you are responsible for what is left of the drawing room?'

'Yes.' Harry answered, feeling his own temper rise.
'Am I also correct in assuming you were in the room at the time it was destroyed?'
'You are.'

They were glaring at each other, the atmosphere between them electric. Harry could feel himself readying to do battle. It infuriated him that Lupin seemed to be insinuating he was behaving irresponsibly. He had no idea how Harry had struggled with the weight of the task Dumbledore had left him! It wasn't like he didn't know he was in over his head!

Lupin's eyes scanned Harry's face. He appeared to realize the reaction he was provoking, and closed his eyes before taking a deep breath, and exhaling it wearily.

'Enough, is enough, Harry.' his anger slowly dissipating. He pulled the chair out and sat down with his elbows on the table. 'Help me to understand what's going on.'

Harry's anger also ebbed, aware Lupin was acting out of concern. He lifted his hand to his face and rubbed at his forehead, wondering how to answer. He could feel Lupins eyes boring into him. He would not lie to him, his relationship with Lupin had grown well beyond such action, and he was only too aware Lupin would not be fobbed off with a weak excuse this time. So he decided on the truth.

'Dumbledore discovered something about Voldemort, something that no one else knows; not even his Death Eaters.' He said. Lupin shifted in his chair expectantly. Harry thought carefully about what to say next.

'If he finds out that Dumbledore knew, if he realizes what I'm doing, then I wont be able to finish what Dumbledore started.' He watched Lupin for his reaction.

'Why is it so important?' Lupin frowned through narrowed eyes. It was Harry's turn to shift in his seat uncomfortably.

'Because ... it's the difference between me killing him,' his eyes dropped to the table, not wanting to see Lupins reaction 'or him killing me.'

There was a long silence as Harry ran his finger over the scratched, uneven wooden surface unconsciously.

'Dumbledore told you this?' Lupins voice sounded strange, so Harry lifted his gaze to him. He nodded his head. Lupin's expression was grave, and also unexpectedly angry. It was a while before he spoke again.

'I fear that is all you have to say on the subject then?' Lupin stood and walked to the kitchen bench.
'Its important you understand,' Harry said quietly, turning in his chair 'I'd ask for your help if I could, if I thought it would do any good.'

'I think I finally do understand.' He said slowly 'But I can't pretend that I don't find it more than a little frustrating.'
'I know, but there isn't anything else to say. The more people who know-'
'The greater the chance Voldemort will discover what you're up to.' Lupin finished 'It's okay. Under the circumstances it seems you might be safer doing things your way.' He said. He was focused on Harry with a look of grave concern. 'But remember, if you find yourself in trouble ... if you need to call on someone, I'll be there for you, no matter what.'

Harry would have liked to say a word of thanks to his father's once best friend, but a lump had swelled in his throat at Lupins words. Instead, he nodded before turning back to the table.

'Why did you come anyway?' Lupin asked as he started pulling food from the cupboard. Harry had almost forgotten since so much had happened.
'I left something behind that I need for school tomorrow.'
'It might be best if you stayed the night now.' Lupin stopped and eyed Harry 'I'm not exactly the best cook in the world, but it'll be edible. And you look as if you could do with a decent meal.'
'Okay,' Harry stood and walked to the stairs 'I'll let Hermione know I won't be back until morning.'
'How?'
'Fred and George's handiwork, I'll bring it down and show you.'

As soon as Harry reached his room he closed the door and went over to the wardrobe. He pulled the scroll Snape had given him from his crumpled backpack. It had lain there since the night it had come into his possession, safest well away from Ron and Hermione's enquiring eyes. He turned it over in his hands, feeling relieved, yet slightly nauseated to be looking at it again, before replacing it and retrieving the small emerald message log. He wrote a brief note to advise Hermione of when he would be back, placed it in his pocket, and then he washed up and headed back downstairs.

Lupin was appreciative of the twins seemingly endless inventive magical abilities as Harry explained how it worked, and even though the log contained nothing anyone else could read in to, Harry was still eager to whisk it back into his pocket after Lupins initial flick through. As Lupin stirred the pot on the stove, Harry tried to steer the conversation to what Lupin had been doing the last few weeks, but he would not be drawn into the subject, no matter how determined Harry had seemed.

Eventually he asked straight out what he thought Bill might have been up to, but understandably, Lupin explained that he wasn't able to tell him, even if it wasn't for the oath he took, as he had had no contact with anyone from The Order the whole time he had been underground. So Harry had to content himself with waiting in the hopes that Bill turned up in answer to Lupins call.

Between reluctant mouthfuls of tinned stew, he took the opportunity to express his unease at Lupins own situation. But as Lupin had readily pointed out, everyone was taking risks these days, and it was a necessary price to pay if it could make a difference in the war against Voldemort.

It was the early hours of the morning by the time Harry crawled between the sheets, Bill still yet to show. And though his mind was buzzing with the contents of his backpack, he managed to sleep fitfully until dawn. Bill still hadn't turned up when Harry appeared downstairs, though Tonks was there. Harry quizzed her immediately about Bill, uncaring that his interest in him all of a sudden appeared suspicious. He was bizarrely comforted by the fact that Tonks was adamant Bellatrix was still at large, but was unable to get any further information from her. She was somewhat preoccupied, and Harry noticed with dismay she seemed to tremble slightly when Lupin came into the room. Something Lupin also appeared to notice.

He told Harry that Sturgis and Kingsley had already taken Rosenberg away, all the while his eyes flickering to Tonks who had her back to them, pouring cereal into bowls. Harry hated to see the uncomfortable way they dealt with each other for the rest of the morning, but he had bigger things to worry about today.

With no further word on Bill all he could hope was that he was still a way off trying to close in on her. He left before first classes were due to start, taking his backpack with the scroll still inside, and after some awkward goodbyes, and a knowingly concerned look from Lupin, Harry reached Hogwarts, strolling up the grounds in the early morning light, making his way to the Common Room.

14. Neville's Return of the DA

As Harry passed the Great Hall, the clattering of plates and the chattering of students filtered though the open doors. He kept his cloak on until he reached the fat lady's portrait, where he slipped it off again, giving her quite a start.

'Ooh!' she said, sweepingly clutching at her chest 'I do wish you wouldn't! I lose ten flakes off my paint work every time you do that.'
'Sorry' he said. She breathed pointedly for a moment, continuing her dramatics, and then she straightened, obviously feeling her moment was over.

'That was quite a speech you gave last night.' she said, eyeing him with snobby appreciation.
'What happened after I left?' he asked hesitantly. An amused smile played across her lips.

'I've been hanging here for so long I've lost count of the years, and I have seen a thing or two in that time.' She looked at him under her brow 'One thing I've learned, is never underestimate the teenagers ability to ignore the truths of wisdom. What you said is exactly what they needed to hear, even if they don't know it yet.'

Harry sighed, 'Lobalug.'
'That's not the password.'
'What? It was last night when I left.' Harry frowned.
'True.' She had her hands, one over the other in front of her. Harry waited for a moment until it was clear she was not likely to say anything further.

'Well?' he said impatiently.
'Well what?' she raised an eyebrow. Harry let out his breath impatiently and turned to head down to the Great Hall.
'Where are you going?' the fat lady said indignantly.
'To find someone who will give me the new password!' exasperation laced his voice.
'Poppycock!'

'Pardon me?' Harry turned.

'The password, its "poppycock". One of the Slytherin sixth year Prefects chose it.'

‘Poppycock?’ He repeated. The portrait door swung open.
‘Like I said, ignorance in the face of wisdom.’ she added from behind the door.

The common room was practically empty, only Neville and Colin Creevey were sitting at one of the tables under a window. They looked extremely concerned over whatever it was they were writing, so much so, they didn’t even notice when Harry crossed the floor and climbed the stairs to his room. As soon as he had placed the scroll safely at the bottom of his trunk, he shoved the backpack under his bed and pulled out some fresh clothes to change into. He welcomed the full day of classes ahead, figuring it would help to take his mind off the coming evening, which loomed over him like a dark shadow.

When he finally caught up with Ron and Hermione outside Charms class, they both looked tired and hassled. Harry was grateful they didn’t start in on him for leaving them behind to deal with aftermath of his speech, but he couldn’t help feeling guilty anyway as he tried to fill them in on his conversation with Lupin.

It proved awkward however; as Neville, Seamus and Dean kept hovering in the hopes that Harry might start sharing some of his information with them now as well. But this was not the sort of information he could share, and it made him feel doubly guilty when they finally gave up, taking the hint. He decided to not tell any of them about Lupins attack, not even Ron or Hermione. He knew how Lupin felt about it, and it seemed to Harry that even though it had been a Death Eater that had been killed, Lupin was far from proud of it, and would wish as few people to know as possible.

Charms class seemed to drag, the normalness of it grating on Harry’s nerves, making him moody and snappy. After waiting impatiently for weeks for his moment with Bellatrix, Harry was finding these last few hours unbearable. He wanted Bellatrix stopped and brought in to pay for her crimes, but the fact that it was Snape who had handed him the means to do it, left a bad taste in his mouth.

It was an understatement that something about it all didn’t sit well with him, but what choice did he have? Bellatrix was destructive to the core, she held little or no regard for human life, except possibly her own, Harry thought viciously. He had to take the only opportunity he'd been given.

Harry went to the Great Hall with the others for lunch, though when he sat down to face the piles of steaming hot, meticulously prepared food, he had absolutely no appetite. As he sat watching people load their plates, Hermione started spooning peas and corn onto his, shooting him challenging looks.

‘Don’t bother. I’m not hungry.’ He said. She looked at him through narrowed eyes.
‘What’s going on Harry?’
‘Nothing.’
‘Come off it,’ Ron interjected ‘we know when something’s up. Spill!’

‘I’m waiting for the Halloween feast tonight.’ Harry said truthfully. Hermione was still regarding him suspiciously.
‘Oh really?’ she said sarcastically ‘I expect you’ll eat loads then, of course.’
‘That’s right.’ Harry said, getting more than a little irritated.

‘Hey,’ Neville had just arrived at the table. He sat down opposite Harry and handed Hermione a bit of parchment. ‘This is the lot, so far. They’re all set, they’ll be ready when needed.’ Hermione skimmed it quickly.

‘I had hope there’d be more than this.’ she frowned.
‘I reckon there will be soon.’ Neville said, smiling at Harry.
‘What is it?’ He asked.

‘A list of people in the DA.’ She said as she handed it to him. There were twelve people on the list. Harry, Hermione and Ron came first, followed by Neville, Dean and Seamus, then Ginny, Harry’s stomach tightened at her name, then Luna and Ernie, Susan Bones, Hannah Abbott and lastly Colin.

‘No real surprises there,’ Ron said, reading over Harry’s shoulder.
‘I haven’t seen you organizing this.’ Harry said, looking at Hermione questioningly.

‘That’s because I didn’t. Neville did! All I did was enchant some more coins.’

Harry smiled at Neville who was blushing slightly. He had come to school this year with a determination that even surprised Harry. ‘Actually, I was thinking … we need to appoint a coordinator, someone in charge of keeping everyone updated. Make sure we’re all on the ball. What do you think?’ he asked.

‘I-I thought that’s what you three did?’ Neville said tentatively.
‘Harry’s right,’ Hermione chimed in. ‘we’re swamped, what with the Defence classes and everything. You’d be perfect for the job!’
‘Well … I-I guess…’
‘Excellent!’ Ron interrupted ‘That’s settled then, lets eat!’
Hermione prodded her finger at Harry’s plate. ‘All of us!’ she said sternly.

Maybe it was Neville’s pleasure at his new assignment, but Harry was suddenly not in the mood to argue. He picked up his fork and pierced a piece of cauliflower coated in cheese sauce, and lifting it under Hermiones watchful gaze, he shoved the whole thing into his mouth defiantly. Once he started chewing, it wasn’t as difficult as he’d expected, and he finished off the cauliflower and started on some Brussels sprouts, aware that he had a long afternoon ahead of him.

Neville rushed down his food and then jumped up from the table and made a swift exit as Harry put his own fork down with still half a plate full of beefsteak and mushrooms left. He looked to the staff table.

McGonagall’s eyes were roaming over the students, and Harry automatically followed her gaze. Everyone was chatting and tucking into their food as always, and it struck Harry how vulnerable they all were. Sharing the Gryffindor tower with the whole of the sixth and seventh years, and conducting the younger students in Defence Against the Dark Arts classes, meant that unlike previous years, he recognized everyone’s faces as he looked around.

Things had changed so much, that he couldn’t help wondering if Hogwarts would ever be the same again. His thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the entrance of an assortment of brown and grey owls, flying in through the high windows and circling around the enchanted ceiling. Harry didn’t bother to look for Hedwig, having pretty much given up on receiving any mail.

A magnificently sized tawny frogmouth owl landed in front of Hermione importantly. Its markings were striking; it’s grey and brown feathers looked extremely well groomed and it’s blue-black flecks lining the edge of its face and wings gave it a very regal appearance. Lifting its beak and leg in the air at the same time in a haughty and obviously well practiced manner, it waited for Hermione to untie the scroll from it’s leg before launching itself with its impressive wingspan and swooping silently and elegantly over the tables and back up and out through the windows.

‘Bloody show off.’ Ron said sullenly, clutching Pig in his fist in an effort to stop him from leaving footprints all over his mashed potato as he danced around enthusiastically on Ron’s plate. He pulled a message from Mrs. Weasley off the little owls leg, as Hermione opened the ornate blue wax seal on her scroll, unravelling it. She started reading it and then stood up, flushing brightly, and made to climb over the bench seat to leave, but Ron grabbed her arm, looking up at her guilty expression.

‘Read it here.’ He said, his face suddenly serious. Harry had guessed the same thing as Ron had, and took hold of her robes to urge her back down between them. She swung herself back down slowly and reluctantly opened the scroll once more. ‘What does it say?’

Harry had never heard Ron speak so gravely to Hermione when she was so obviously embarrassed, he normally took the opportunity to tease her into a further state of red-faced flustering. He could sense there was trouble brewing.

Harry and Ron both leaned in so no one else would be privy to the contents of the letter as she took a deep breath, and read out quietly.

‘Dearest Hermione’ she spoke in a squeaky telltale voice that she was very uncomfortable sharing this with them. After reading ahead a couple of lines to herself, she seemed to decide she could not go through with reading it aloud, and held the letter away from her so that Harry and Ron could

peer over her arms.

‘I was rather surprised, and yet somewhat delighted, to hear from you. I always suspected there was a little spark between us. You were frequently attentive to me in our DA classes together. I will admit, of course, I noticed you too, though I have to say, your abrupt manner was a trifle off-putting.’

‘Prat!’ Ron said ungraciously, ‘Never figured out it was just him you were abrupt with then?’

‘You obviously tried to catch my eye on more than one occasion last year, but I always rather thought you had another target for your affections in mind. Still, it is said you should never try to second guess a woman in love.’

‘Git!’ Ron scoffed, obviously cheesed-off . Hermione was cringing in her chair.

‘Friends of the family are hosting a Champagne and Lobster dinner party next week, there will be a number of young suitors attending, both male and female, and although I am one of the most sort after bachelors that frequents these suppers, I have yet to procure myself a partner. I am prepared to take you as my date, though you must remember we move in high social circles and your conversation and dress standard would need to suit.’

‘What an insufferable snob.’ The distaste in Hermione's voice unmistakeable.

‘I await your reply; though don’t leave it too long, I am likely to be snapped up soon by some other lovely young lady otherwise.

Yours most sincerely,

Zacharias Smith’

‘Doesn’t sound like he's exactly head over heels,' Ron muffled a smirk with his hand. 'Maybe you haven't made the love potion strong enough.’

‘I haven’t used it yet!’ Hermione scowled at him ‘This is just his own delusional take on things.’ Ron suddenly didn’t seem to find it so funny anymore.

‘What? You mean he likes you anyway … without the potion?’
‘Is that so hard to believe?’ she said a little angrily.

‘Well, no. Its just … we didn’t bargain on that, did we?’ Harry watched Ron, as he gradually turned pink. ‘I mean, its going to make the potion's effects stronger isn’t it? And what happens when you’re finished with him? He might not be easy to get rid of. What are you going to do then?’

‘Ron, it’s a potion, when its worn off he’ll go back to normal, normal for him anyway.’ Hermione said, rolling her eyes.
‘Yeah, but he likes you, and by the sound of things, the only reason he hasn’t approached you because you treat him like the pretentious boob he is!’ he frowned.
‘It wont be a problem Ron, he’s far too narcissistic to swoon over me for long once the effects wear off.’ She waved her hand at him impatiently.

‘I don’t know’ Harry said.
‘Not you too?’ she sighed.
‘It could be difficult, now that he’s already shown a genuine interest you. A love potion’s usually used on people who lack those feelings isn't it. Don’t you think it will heighten the effect?’ Harry said cautiously, knowing Hermione wasn't in the best of moods now.

‘Maybe, until it wears off, but its only for a short time. Don’t worry!’ she said, looking from one to the other. Ron did not look as if she had put him at ease at all, and Harry couldn’t blame him. Zach was extraordinarily arrogant and was rather thick skinned. He wasn’t the sort who was used to taking no for an answer. Harry wondered if under the circumstances, he would have let Ginny do it in her place.

It was then that Harry realized he hadn't seen Ginny. He looked around searchingly. Lunch was almost over, and the plates would be cleared any minute.

'Where's Ginny?' he asked of no one in particular, his voice louder than before.

'I saw her up in the common room before I came down.' Lavender, who was sitting nearby offered 'I asked her if she was coming, but she said her and Luna had something to do.' Harry frowned, for some inexplicable reason he had the distinct feeling her absence meant she was up to something. Before he could think about it any longer, the plates vanished and the remaining people in the Hall straggled out.

Harry headed off to his private session with Sir, while Ron left for the Common Room to study, and Hermione drifted off to Arithmancy. Harry had learned over the past few weeks that he could expect anything when he entered the classroom, so he was already preparing himself as he walked down the corridor.

A strange feeling was growing in him, and he scoffed at his own over-sensitivity, before hearing the faintest crackling sound behind him. He reacted before he could think, and dropped to the floor, rolling on his back with his shoulders off the ground, and his wand gripped firmly in both hands, staring in the direction the hex had come from. The coat of armour behind him clanged and clattered as the beam of light hit it. Harry was panting as he scrambled to his feet, still unable to see where the attack had come from.

'You walked straight past me.'Sir grunted 'I could have hit you at point blank range.' Harry was searching the area in front of him. Slowly Sir came into view, seeming to melt out of the wall, the disillusionment charm he had been hiding under reversing.

'How am I supposed to fight something that's invisible?' Harry said wearily as he got to his feet and replaced his wand in his robes.
'If you can't figure that out, then you're not going to last long.' He said with out looking at him, as he opened the door to the classroom. Harry followed him in.
'You're asking the impossible.' he said under his breath.

'The impossible?' Sir turned on him suddenly 'What is it you think we have been doing here, Potter?' Harry could tell this was one of those questions Sir deliberately asked, knowing Harry would not give him the answer he wanted.
'You're teaching me how to duel and-'

'Wrong! You already know how to duel; you've proved it on quite a number of occasions. Do you think McGonagall would've trusted the education of the younger students to you if you couldn't teach them how to defend themselves?' He turned away from Harry again and walked down to the cleared area in front of his desk.

Harry stayed where he was. Sir had a way of making him feel incredibly stupid and naive at times like this. 'What was your instinct as you were walking down that corridor?' he asked Harry challengingly.

'I felt like I was being watched.' He said reluctantly.
'And yet you chose not to act on it. Why?'
'I though I was being paranoid.' He said quietly, his eyes on the floor space between them. Sir jutted a finger at him pointedly.
'Trust your instincts. They are the main reason you are standing here today.'
'How do I know when I'm right?' Harry asked, walking towards him slowly.
'Feel it. I was under a disillusionment charm and that leaves a mark. Magic leaves a mark.'

That night in the cave Dumbledore had been able to sense enchantments, pinpoint them with an accuracy that had mystified Harry at the time. Now that he thought about it, Harry had also been quite certain that years ago his invisibility cloak had not fooled Dumbledore when they had stood in the same room as each other whilst he wore it. Sir was watching Harry when he finally met his gaze.

'Can you teach me to sense magic?' he asked, it seemed almost impossible to Harry.

‘You already can, though you still have a long way to go if it’s going to be of any real use to you. You have to learn to trust your instincts.’
Harry nodded slightly. Then another thought occurred to him.

‘Can you teach me Occlumency?’
‘Learning how to sense magic is the most useful ways of detecting when someone is trying to enter your mind. You can block it before they even get close.’ He seemed intensely focused on Harry.
‘But that’s the problem; I can’t block it, I’ve tried.’ Harry said gravely. Sir studied Harry for a moment.

‘First things first, if you’re going to stay alive long enough to worry about having your thoughts read, then you need more drilling. I think its time we moved outside.’

They spent the rest of the session hovering on the edges of the Dark Forest, Harry moving through the trees, waiting for Sir to strike. It was the most arduous session Harry had been put through yet. A couple of times Harry spent almost twenty minutes by his reckoning, waiting for some sign of Sir’s attack. It was too easy to drop his guard when he was tiring from a constant state of alertness, and Abe seemed to know exactly when to strike to get the maximum impact.

On the first lengthy wait, Harry had wielded a spectacular shield charm just in the nick of time, trusting in his instinct, though he had already cast the shield charm several times previously as a false alarm. The second time however, he was wearying, and found himself flung against a nearby tree trunk, unable to react in time to deflect the stun. When Sir had enervated him back to consciousness, he had felt extremely agitated and a embarrassed that he was still getting caught.

His body ached and he felt stretched, pushed to the point of exhaustion as he headed back up to the Common Room. When he climbed through the portrait hole, he was met by wary looks from the other students that littered the area. Harry knew it was primarily because he looked terrible, and he suspected they still feared he might launch into another rant given any sort of provocation.

Ron and Hermione, were sat with most of the other DA members, only Ginny seemed absent, yet again. They all looked up at him with varying degrees of worried or dubious expressions.

‘What is he doing to you?’ Hermione asked, a deep frown etched across her face. It appeared she spoke for all of them as they stared at him.
‘Preparing me.’ Harry said flatly ‘I’m going to get some sleep. Wake me around five will you?’ he directed at Ron.
‘Maybe you should stay in bed for the night, you look awf-’

‘NO!’ Harry directed far to sharply at Ron, his tiredness getting the better of him. ‘I don’t want to miss the feast, I mean.’ He added in a more controlled voice.
‘You wont really be missing much,’ Dean said.
‘Yeah, it’s the same thing every year, nothing special.’ Added Seamus. Harry sighed in a clearly irritated way.

‘If you wont wake me, I’ll stay up.’ He said as he threw himself on the sofa beside Luna. He noticed instantly that Ron and Hermione were glaring at him questioningly. He knew what they would be thinking. He had shown so little interest in food lately, that they were finding it hard to swallow that he was suddenly so desperate to go to the Halloween feast to gorge himself.

‘I’ll wake you.’ Luna volunteered ‘You won’t want to miss the Puffle Crubwoofats!’

‘Er … the what?’ asked Hannah hesitantly.

‘Puffle Crubwoofats. They only come out on Halloween, and even then only every sixteenth one.’ She said. ‘And tonight is the night.’ She said, her protuberant eyes widening in anticipation.
‘And what, dare I ask, is a Puffed Snub-hoofer?’ Ernie asked.
‘Puffle Crubwoofat’ she corrected him ‘It a pumpkin headed creature that runs up to your front door, knocks, and then runs away again.’

‘What’s the point in that?’ Ron screwed his face up.

‘When the owner of the house comes out, they appear from behind the bushes in groups of five or six at a time, then they light their heads up and perform a most interesting re-enactment of the greatest love story ever to come out of their culture.’

‘Er ... why?’ Susan looked completely befuddled.
‘Oh, it’s a long story-’

‘Well, I think I’ll hear about it another time, Luna’ Harry stood up again ‘don’t forget, wake me at five, okay?’
‘Have a good sleep. Anyway’ Luna turned back to her reluctant audience ‘Legend has it...’

Harry was once again aware that Hermione and Ron’s suspicious gazes were following him as he headed up the stairs. It was just after three pm, which meant he had almost two hours to catch up on some sleep. He had no idea what he would be called upon to do this evening, but in his current state, he wouldn’t stand much of a chance against Bella, so some sleep was essential. He didn’t bother changing, or getting under the covers. He collapsed onto his bed, pulling the curtains together to shut out the light, and laid back.

When he finally awoke, he remembered nothing after his head had hit the pillow. Luna came into focus, standing over him as he put his glasses on. The room was dark, lit only by a low lamp.

'Harry'
‘Thanks Luna, what time is it?’ he asked groggily.
‘Almost six,’ she said vaguely.
‘What?’ Harry suddenly threw his feet on the floor, shaking his head clear. He stood up and opened his trunk hurriedly, fumbling with the latch in his haste. ‘Why didn’t you wake me earlier?’ he said angrily.

‘The others seemed to think I should let you sleep. I had to sneak away from them in the end as they were heading to the Great Hall. I managed to lose them on the stairwell.’

Harry barely heard her as he rummaged through his gear, finally locating the scroll and slamming the lid down behind him. He took off out the door, Luna calling after him to wait, so he turned and took a few steps back towards her, grabbed her hand, and pulled her after him, going as briskly as she would allow.

‘You really are looking forward to the feast, aren’t you?’ she said dreamily.

15. The Seige Of Bellatrix

‘You go in!’ Harry let go of Luna’s hand as he slowed outside the Great Hall. 'I’ll be there in a minute.’ He picked up his pace again as he veered off to the clock tower, wishing he had bothered to replace the watch he had drowned in the lake years before. He stopped beneath the enormous clock face and looked up as the gigantic pendulum swung before him. He backed away so he could see the hands more accurately.

He still had roughly three minutes. He took off, back inside and brought himself to a controlled walk before he stepped inside the Hall, positioning himself just inside the doorway.

The room was decorated in true Halloween tradition. Black candles and glowing pumpkins, and magical bats circling the star filled ceiling. Everyone was already enjoying the Halloween treats that lined the tables. As he stood there, adrenalin coursing through his body, waiting to hear the deep resonating chimes of the clock tower once it struck six o’clock, he noticed Ron and Hermione determinedly walking towards him. He tucked the scroll behind his leg and shifted from foot to foot, his nerves alive with impatience and foreboding.

‘What are you doing?’ Ron winced as he pulled up in front of Harry ‘You’re sweating ... are you ill?’
‘Probably, but that’s not the only problem, is it?’ Hermione looked at him through narrowed eyes.

‘Not now!’ Harry would have to put them off for a couple more minutes. Whatever was about to happen, he couldn’t bring Snapes name into it. If this was going to be the downfall of Bellatrix LeStrange, then he instinctively wanted to guard where the information had come from.

Snapes motives had haunted his thoughts over the past few weeks, and nothing Harry pieced together seemed very likely. He clung to his idea that Snape and Bellatrix were competing to be Voldemorts top man, but however he had looked at it, he couldn’t figure out why Snape had chosen to eliminate his competitor using Harry. Unless of course, this was a trap, which had seemed less likely the more he had tossed it around in his head. Snape had already proved he could reach Harry easily at Grimmauld Place, so why would he go to such trouble to ensnare him? Too much could go wrong by waiting so long.

‘We’re beginning to really worry about you, mate.’ Ron said gravely ‘I thought you trusted us? You used to tell us what you were up to. I can’t figure it out,’ he shook his head ‘what’s changed? We know something’s going on, we know you’re keeping something from us.’

‘I can’t explain it to you.’ Harry said shortly, listening for the first clang of the bell.
‘That’s not good enough, not anymore.’ Hermione frowned ‘you’ve been expecting something, haven’t you? And judging by the way you’re behaving, it’s about to happen.’ taking in his fidgeting.

Harry could feel his movements were uncoordinated and nerve driven, as he avoided their questions and waited for the low echoing toll of the bell.

It should come any second now.

‘I’ll call you if I need you.’
‘Need us for what?’ Ron pried
‘I don’t know yet.’
‘Your not making any sense.’ Hermione continued to watch him.

He was so close to finding out what Snapes warning was all about. Any second he would know what to do. He looked at his friend’s worried faces; they were about to find out anyway.

‘I have to open this in here,' he said agitatedly, lifting the scroll for them to see 'and I don’t want anyone else to see it until I know what it is.’
‘What is it?’ Hermione frowned.
‘*I don’t know*, a warning maybe.’
‘We can see it though, right?’ Ron pushed.
‘I won’t know until I’ve read it!’

‘Harry, this is sounding ridiculously dangerous, where did you get it?’ Trust Hermione to ask the hard questions. Harry looked around the room, not at all sure what he was looking for. ‘Who gave it to you?’ she demanded.

DONNNNNG!

Harry straightened suddenly and drew a deep breath. This was it. It was finally time.

He placed the scroll between both hands and placed his fingers under the wax, trying to lift the blood red seal. It wouldn’t budge. He gripped the edges of the hard wax firmly and squeezed, snapping the seal instantly. It hissed and fizzled as a small ribbon of smoke rose from the crack.

For a split second, Harry thought it might burst into flames, fearing he had got it wrong somehow. But the whiff of smoke dissipated and Harry unrolled the parchment with shaky hands. His eyes scanned down the writing, immediately recognizing it as the same cramped hand that Snapes potions book had scrawled all through it. Ron and Hermione were watching him, their own suspenseful agitation growing as he studied the parchment.

He took a sharp intake of breath.

‘What?’ Ron asked ‘What’s it say?’ Harry began to shake his head.

‘I-I don’t believe it…’ he said quietly, baffled as he kept following the writing down the page.
‘Harry! What is it?’ Hermione’s alarmed voice intruded as he tried to take in what he was seeing.
‘I-I don’t understand…’ He swore as his breathing became rapid, his fear rising.
‘What is it?’ Hermione repeated loudly. Ron moved to look at the parchment.

‘It’s a warning, and a spell, but… ’ feeling panic rising in him, Harry continued ‘There are symbols … I’ve got no idea what they mean. It looks like each has got a set of instructions to them.’ He swore again. All thoughts of hiding the contents of the scroll were forgotten in his need. ‘If I don’t figure out what all of this means in the next four minutes, Bellatrix will succeed at doing something a hell of a lot worse than what she did at the wedding.’ he said, a sick feeling growing in his stomach as he held out the parchment.

Hermione grabbed the piece of paper as she and Ron squinted at the tiny wording, reading down the page. He watched as a look of horror crept across their faces. Ron swore and Hermione’s eyes watered.

‘Where did you get this?’ she breathed ‘Is it right?’

Harry ran a hand through his already unkempt hair. ‘I don’t know. We can’t afford to ignore it though, can we? If we do and it is right … then we wont be able to prevent her …’ his mind raced at the thought.

‘But Harry, who gave this to you?’
‘Don’t ask me that, it doesn’t matter’ Harry snapped, annoyed at her persistence. ‘The point is we have to act on it.’
‘But this could be a mistake?’
‘Whatever it is, it is not a mistake.’ He said angrily. He felt like too much time was slipping by while they argued the point. Hermione looked back at the parchment.

‘Hang on mate, calm down. Hermione?’ Ron tried to ease Harry’s growing temper before throwing a look at Hermione. ‘Can you tell what he’s supposed to do with the symbols?’
‘I should be able to, but I’ll need time. Its some form of runes, but its complicated, they’re worked in with the spell.’ she said with a frown.

Harry glared at her. ‘We don’t have time. The parchment won’t last. We need to commit it to memory.’
‘To memory?’ Hermione’s eyes grew wide. ‘Now?’
‘Yes!’ he said impatiently.
‘If we get it wrong, even a little, the spell wont work.’ She said.
‘That’s why we need to stop wasting time!’
‘But-’

‘Harry’s normally right about this sort of thing Hermione.' Ron added quickly. 'He was right about Malfoy, wasn’t he? He was right about Snape?’
Harry swallowed; Ron had unknowingly touched on the doubts that plagued his mind.
‘What if we each memorize a symbol and its instructions; it shouldn’t be too hard between the three of us. Lets have a look at it.’ Ron waved her to hold it out for all of them to see. She held it up and Ron and Harry closed in on it.

‘I should be able to work it out, but we have to get it right. I’ll take the first one Ron, you take the second, and Harry, you memorize this last one. And remember, some of the symbols can look almost the same, but their meanings are very different. We have to get it right!’ she spoke quickly as they studied the page. They were silent for a moment, and Harry registered out of the corner of his eye Ron mouthing the words as he read over them.

‘How long do we have?’ Ron asked finally.
‘We must be almost out of time.’ Harry said and he started reading over the instructions for the fourth time.

‘What happens when the time is u-’ But as Ron spoke, the parchment began to bubble as if it were immersed in acid. Hermione dropped it, gasping as smoke began drifting off the page slowly. They watched it fizzle on the floor, curling in on itself as it blackened, until eventually there was only a

delicate charcoal skeleton left. Ron crouched down, but it crumbled the moment his fingers touched it. ‘So, what do we do know?’ he asked as he stood again, rubbing his blackened fingertips together.

‘We have to warn McGonagall.’ Hermione said as she looked to the staff table. All of the teachers appeared oblivious to the trio at the other end of the room, though as he looked around, Harry noticed Neville was staring at them from the Gryffindor table. He beckoned him over to where they were standing, and Neville jumped up with surprising speed.

‘Neville can warn her, or we’ll be stuck here as soon as she finds out what’s going on.’ He explained.
‘You’re right. There’s no way she’d let us out without proof we can help.’ Ron concurred.

‘What’s happening?’ Neville already looked extremely worried as he looked between them.
‘Something’s coming to Hogsmeade Neville … something bad, and I need you to alert McGonagall.’ Harry said, holding Neville’s gaze.
‘Of course,’ Neville nodded as he swallowed.
‘She would try and stop us if she found out what we were up to, so you’re going to have to give us time to get away. And get the DA ready, but stay here, okay?' Harry said, his hand on Neville’s chest 'you're backup only, just in case our defence doesn’t work. We've only got one chance at this Neville. One go, or she'll succeed in destroying the town.’

‘Who?’ Neville asked. Harry watched for Neville’s reaction as he spoke.
‘Bellatrix LeStrange.’ He knew this would have an impact on Neville, and sure enough his face changed, hardening to a look Harry had never seen on him before.
‘Are you okay?’ he asked slowly.
‘I’ll do it, you can count me in, Harry.’ Neville said.

‘Tell McGonagall Bellatrix has found a way to control Quintapeds, and she’s going to unleash them on Hogsmeade in less than an hour.’
Neville’s face dropped ‘Quintapeds?’
‘Yes’ Hermione said pointedly.
‘We think we have a way of stopping them. We’re going to head there now.’ Harry said quickly.
‘Give us fifteen minutes before you go to McGonagall. She’ll know what to do.’
‘Alright’ Neville said ‘but how will I know if you need us?’

Harry thought about it for a moment. He hadn’t really seriously considered bringing the DA to the fight; there would be enough witches and wizards in Hogsmeade that would be forced to make a stand when it came to it.

‘I’ll send my patronus, a stag. If you see it from the tower, that’s the signal to come.’ Neville looked a little unsure, but nodded slowly.
‘Remember, give us fifteen minutes, okay?’
He nodded again and Harry, Ron and Hermione left the Hall.

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‘Quintapeds!’ Ron said darkly as they closed the Hogwarts gates behind them, resetting the locks.
‘Disgusting creatures.’ Hermione said dejectedly.
‘They’re just Voldemorts style, aren’t they?’ Harry remembered vividly what he had read about them in Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them. They came from a small, unplottable island off the Northern most tip of Scotland, and had a mythical background due to the fact that nobody was really able to get close enough to study them owing to their liking for human flesh. What was known about them was that they were rather hairy and had the unusual claim of having five legs.

The trio disapparated, and then re-appeared outside the Three Broomsticks. The golden light that spilled out onto the street from the pub looked warm and inviting, and as they peered through the windows they could see that it was a busy night for these times when few would venture out after hours. The Halloween spirit was captured with large photos of hag-like witches scowling down from the walls, and ghostly shaped candles dotting the tables.

‘Wish we could go in for a firewhiskey or two before we get started. Now we’re actually allowed.’

Ron said glumly.
'C'mon, we have to get this set up before they get here.' Harry led them away from the comforting chatter into the dully lit and quietly haunting streets.

Harry pulled out his cloak and threw it over them. They huddled together and wrapped their arms around themselves in the chill as they moved swiftly, not daring to run. Snapes message had warned Death Eaters might be at large so they had to avoid being seen. Harry found himself trusting in his gut feeling more and more, reminding himself of what Abe had told him earlier that day.

Harry had known when he read the parchment that he couldn't do it alone, and Snape knew his limitations, as much as he knew Hermione's talent. The spell would take all three of them. This was the reason he had insisted Harry be in the Hall when he opened the scroll, it was the best way to ensure he would be around the help he needed.

The cool night air bit through their meagre clothing. The sky was cloudless and starry, and the moonlight lit up the surrounding houses and hills in its bluish glow, giving no hint as to the danger that lurked. They walked some distance past the little teashop Harry had once gone to with Cho, on their first, and last date. He pulled off the cloak.

'It said to put the first mark somewhere here, right?' he asked as he watched Hermione pace the ground.

'The position of them doesn't have to be perfect, what really matters is getting the symbols right.' She said 'As long as they make a triangle, it'll work.' She took out her wand and pointed it at the ground. Ron and Harry watched as she drew a white shape on the cobbled pavement resembling a large W, mirror reflected at the bottom peaks, drawing it out in exactly the order that had been written below the symbol on the parchment. Next to it she put what looked like an upside Y with a bar across the bottom and joined the two symbols with three parallel lines, one above, one through the centre, and one below. She stopped and breathed out loudly.

'That's one.' She said.
'Let's go.' Harry urged. Ron was rubbing his arms against the chill as Harry threw his cloak back over them. They walked back down the way they had come.

The streets were empty; the only people they passed along the way was a tall weathered looking man, and a mildly pretty young woman with shoulder length blonde hair.

When they reached the lane that led out to the back of the town, they stopped, emerging from under the cloak.
'This will do.' Hermione said 'Ron?'

Ron took his wand out and did the same as he had seen Hermione do, this time the symbol was a square with a diamond laid over the top of it, and something that resembled the letter P, but with two extra arms attached next to it with what looked like feet. Ron was repeating it in the exact order he had read, when he suddenly stopped, unsure of where to put the joining lines.

'Ron!' Hermione glared at him. He frowned at the ground and then moved his wand to complete the mark, finishing his part of the spell.
'I hope that's right.' She chided.
'It is.' He said guiltily.
'We'd better get moving.' Harry said before Hermione could say anything more scathing.

When Harry had completed the last of the symbols on the road that led to the Shrieking Shack, they headed back to the Three Broomsticks.
'McGonagall would have called The Order by now.' he said as they hurried up the street, trying to keep their feet beneath the cloak.
'I wonder how many of them will come?' Ron muttered. It was true that they all seemed so busy these days that it was unlikely there would be many of them able to be reached.

'As long as this works, and its not just some elaborate plan to get Harry standing unprotected in the middle of Hogsmeade, we should be alright.' Hermione said, glancing at Harry. 'Rune triangles were

used in the old days. Its said that power can be channelled through the corners and forced to meet in the centre, colliding and combining at the same time.'

'If we got it right. It's going to take one heck of a spell to banish a hundred Quintapeds!' Harry added under his breath. Hermione didn't answer; instead she shuddered, the thought of getting it wrong seemingly to ghastly to contemplate.

When they reached the outside of the pub, they stopped and eyed the people inside.
'They've got no idea what's coming, maybe we should warn them.' Hermione's face creased with concern.
'They're safer inside.' Harry said and removed the cloak. He motioned his head at the two figures walking towards them. McGonagall and Slughorn had apparated into the middle of the street, Harry not at all surprised to see them.

'Potter! What's going on? What's all this talk about Quintapeds attacking Hogsmeade?' she asked it angrily, but he could tell she was worried.
'Surely you can't be serious? Quintapeds are wild, they wont be working for the-'
'They are.' Harry interrupted Slughorn. 'He's found a way to control them, and Bellatrix is bringing them here, tonight.' McGonagall's lips thinned.
'How do you know?' she asked.
'I just do.'
Slughorn looked thoroughly unconvinced, fearful even, but McGonagall took Harry aside and spoke to him in a hushed voice.

'How do you know?'
'If I told you, you wouldn't like it.' Harry said.
'Try me.' She retorted. He tried to read her expression, her mouth was set harshly, but her eyes held doubt. He took a deep breath.
'I cant.' He breathed out resignedly. As much as he wanted to share this particular piece of information with her, he instinctively knew he shouldn't.
She sniffed impatiently. 'I really think if Dumbledore trusted me, you could too.'

'It's not a matter of trust.' He said, 'If anyone else were to find out, well … next time there wouldn't be a warning.' He almost couldn't believe he was saying it. Did he really think Snape would tip them off a second time?
She looked intensely irritated. 'What is this way of stopping the attack Mr. Longbottom was talking about?'

'It's a spell, a complicated one, but we've already set it up.'
'Set it up?'
'Yes, Hermione says it follows the old ways, but it's powerful. We've put down a rune triangle.'
She raised her eyebrows. 'Miss Granger came up with it?'
'No.' There was a couple of popping noises nearby.
'You stay put. Do you understand?' she poked a finger at him.
'I'm not going anywhere.'

Lupin and Tonks began sprinting as soon as their feet hit the ground, their cloaks billowing around them. Harry heard another crack behind them and turned to see Hestia standing underneath the Three Broomsticks sign.

'What is it? We came as soon as we got your message.' Lupin slowed and eyed Harry with a frown. 'What are you doing here?'

Harry was impressed at the ease with which McGonagall deflected Lupins questions, while informing the three new arrivals of the Quintapeds impending attack. She explained what was about to happen expertly as if it had all come from her.

'I have to get back to Hogwarts, in case the students come under threat. I have confined them to their dormitories, but I fear they will not all stay there.' She glanced at Harry out of the corner of her eye. 'I'll leave you to deal with things here, Remus. Professor Slughorn…' she motioned to him and he nodded, looking rather relieved to be leaving.

'Of course.' Lupin said. They disapparated, leaving Lupin staring at Harry.
'We don't have much time.' Harry said pointedly.
'What's this spell McGonagall was talking about?' Lupin asked.
'The three of us can do it,' Harry answered 'but you have to let the Quintapeds into town.' Lupin frowned 'you've got to draw them in so we can banish them. It only works inside the triangle.'
'Are you sure about this Harry? There are still a lot of people in Hogsmeade.' Ron and Hermione were watching him. He could be wrong, but he had to make a choice.
'I'm sure.' feeling rather sick as he said it.

'What's going on?' The appearance of so many people outside the pub had attracted some of the patrons from inside to investigate.

Harry heard a couple more cracks, and saw some more Order members joining them, as Lupin herded the wizards back inside. It was obvious he had the same thought as Harry; he wanted to avoid an all out panic. Lupin sent Kingsley into the pub to explain what was happening; knowing that some people would chose to go home to their families. By the time the Order had navigated a plan to draw the Quintapeds in, Harry, Ron and Hermione moved to make their final mark on the ground.

There was a distant sound of wands firing, growing from the main entrance to Hogsmeade, along with the intermittent cracks of wizards appearing to help in the struggle. Word must be spreading, Harry thought, watching as Lupin made sure the new arrivals were informed of the plan.

Then a few things happened in quick succession.

A wizard came running up the main street, seemingly surprised at the gathering before him, yelling and panting desperately that huge hairy monsters had entered the town through the front gate, and would be in the centre within minutes. Then an Order member that had been sent to keep watch, apparated before the pub and informed Lupin the creatures were circling the town, and would be moving in from all sides. The lookout posted at the door of the Three Broomsticks ducked back inside to pass on the news that the monsters were here, prompting them to pull down the blinds in what seemed to Harry, a futile effort to avoid detection.

He saw the tall weathered man grab hold of the young blonde woman's arm in an effort to restrain her from leaving the building for which Harry was glad, it would be difficult to have even more people on the streets to defend. She looked extraordinarily angry as the last blind was closed and they disappeared from view, throwing the street into gloomy foreshadowing.

'Alright, everyone get into position!' Lupin yelled at the remaining wizards who hadn't left to help defend innocents. They took up positions at the surrounding street entrances, effectively encircling the trio. Harry, Ron and Hermione stood in the centre of the main road, Hermione directing them nervously as each drew a long straight line across the ground in front of them, joining the ends to make the final triangle.

'That's it!' she said, her voice unmistakably shaky. They moved to stand within the triangle and turned their backs on each other. The surrounding night sky was flashing with shots fired from the numerous wizards on the outer edges of the town, and the crackling of misfired curses hitting the surrounding buildings was growing louder.

Then all of a sudden, the noise dropped off and things went deathly quiet.

All Harry could hear was Ron and Hermione's rapid breathing, as he held his own breath. The quiet stillness was worse than the fighting. The other wizards tensed, and it seemed to Harry the silence lasted hours, but it must have only been a few short seconds.

Then people were yelling again, their voices much closer than before, the flashes of light erupting once more, this time bouncing off the nearby shops and houses. Order members started appearing in the main street as they backed away from the onslaught, firing hexes pointedly. Harry knew the creatures were close as Lupin and the others joined in the struggle, wishing he were free to go to their aid. But he had his job to do. Then he caught his first glimpse of a Quintaped.

Its sturdy, hairy legs, as tall as a man, appeared first. Then its dense, low-slung body came into

view from around the building in front of him. It was a monstrous sight as its wide mouth with jagged teeth became visible through its thick brown fur. The two wizards standing before it backed away from the spider-like Quintaped as they fired at it in terror.

'I hope you know what your doing!' Lupin yelled urgently over his shoulder, still from some distance away. Harry's heartbeat raced. He had to be right about this. If he was wrong, if the spell didn't do as Snape said it would… Suddenly Harry was overcome by a wave of nausea. He could hear Hermiones gasps and Ron swearing behind him, and looking around he could see the creatures were appearing on all sides. There were stunning flashes shooting through the air before him, but they seemed to have little effect, the beasts starting briefly, as if they had been struck, then renewing their slow approach with fevered anger.

'Lets do it!' Ron said
'We have to wait until the last possible moment.' Harry said determinedly, but his thoughts were not as sure. This was all wrong. This is exactly what Snape wanted. They would have no hope of defending the town when the spell failed.

'Harry!' Lupin was firing off curses from his wand as he pushed Tonks behind him, backing towards the trio as the monsters pressed in.

Not yet, Harry thought. He watched as the circle of wizards closed in on them, he could feel Hermione's body trembling against his.
'Harry…' her voice quivered softly. It's not time, he thought, aware at Hermione's growing doubt at his continued silence.
'They're getting awfully close, mate!' Ron sounded angry. Harry watched as the defenders of the town started touching shoulder to shoulder, the horrific beasts flashing their teeth and eyeing them greedily.

Almost there.

Harry could see the tears in Tonks eyes as she frantically fired off shots. The Quintapeds were thick in the streets, pushing in on one another in their effort to get to the reluctant feast.
'Get ready,' he said finally, as he raised his wand in front of him. The three of them stood in the corners of the triangle, back to back, their shoulders touching, and their arms stretched out, pointing their wands directly above their heads.

'Harry!' Lupin was only a couple of feet away from him now. Tonks turned to look at Harry briefly, a silent plea in her eyes.

'Do it!' Ron's voice urged.

'NOW!' Harry yelled forcefully.

Three beams of greyish white light streaked from their wands and soared into the endless sky as they recited the words that had been spelled out for them. Harry could feel his wand starting to vibrate as the beams became thicker, brighter, the spell gathering momentum. The Quintapeds were slowly becoming more aware of the glowing spectacle; many closest to them had stopped attacking, and were beginning to back up, unable to get far, trapped by the masses pushing in behind them.

Harry looked up as his wand shuddered. The beams of light coiled around one another, intertwining and strengthening, becoming one. The air around him became turbulent and suffocating. Cloaks were flying about the wizard's bodies, being drawn into what felt like a vacuum, sucking the very air into the triangle violently. Harry could feel the power coursing through his body; it was unlike anything he had ever felt before. He was overcome with a desperate need to vent it, and yelled to his companions to release the spell. His voice carried away with the force of the rushing air but he could feel they were acting as one. Slowly they brought their arms down rigidly in front of them. The light flashed and crackled as it separated into three brilliantly white arcs that emanated from the wand tips, and remained joined above their heads.

Harry's body jolted as the power flow reversed itself. The ground beneath them shook as the surrounding buildings vibrated threateningly, the Quintapeds desperately trying to scatter in fear as

Lupin grasped Tonks and shielded her body, the others bracing themselves.

Suddenly, a dome of light exploded over the trio's heads and expanded rapidly. Harry's body relaxed instantly as the power left him. He watched, as it was unleashed on their unwitting targets.

The spell had a devastating effect.

High pitched, ear piercing squeals filled the air as the light passed forcefully, yet harmlessly over the people, and racked over the Quintapeds. They writhed at its touch, their legs curling underneath their bulbous bodies before shrivelling as if all of the life had been sucked out of them. Harry looked away repulsed. He had not expected it to be so vulgar and the guilt swelled in him. Hermione had her face buried in Ron's shoulder, his hand resting on the back of her hair protectively. They were both as appalled at the resulting carnage as he was. The beasts screeched and gurgled as they collapsed in on themselves, falling like hairy dominos.

As the screams of the monsters faded, Harry became aware of another sound; a bloodcurdling shriek from a woman's voice. It was not a yell for help, but a scream of blind fury and frustration.

Bellatrix!

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Harry gripped his wand with both hands, searching for his target.

Bellatrix was standing before the laneway, black cloaked, mask in hand as she looked around at her fallen army. A dozen Death Eaters stood in her wake, all surveying the hairy bodies that littered the streets.

'You!' she screeched as she caught sight of Harry and lifted her wand. 'You've interfered for the last time!'

'Harry!' Lupin called out as a red jet of light shot towards Harry, but he was ready for it. He dived and hit the ground, and as he scrambled to his feet, he saw Ron, dragging Hermione by the hand as he ran for the cover of a nearby Alley. As another jet of light screamed towards him he took cover behind the bulk of a dead Quintaped. The noise of the curses hitting solid brick could be heard as the Order members joined in the fighting, yelling instructions to one another as the Death Eaters moved in.

The door to the pub before him opened suddenly. A middle-aged wizard brandishing his wand leapt out onto the street, only to be pushed to ground by Hestia as a green beam of light soared above them.

'Julie!' Harry heard Madame Rosmerta yell from within as the young blonde woman from before, ran out of the doorway, crouched with her wand in hand, taking cover behind a nearby cart.

He could feel the beads of sweat forming on his brow as he peered out from behind the hairy mass to see beams of light shooting in every direction. The wizards who had stood together against the Quintapeds, now scattered as they urgently sought cover. He searched the area before him with only one target in mind.

Bellatrix was moving through the main street, eyes fixed on the spot where he had taken shelter, obviously just as determined to seek him out. Knowing he couldn't stay where he was, he took a deep breath, and threw himself forward. Scrambling to his feet, he bolted towards the nearest cover; a small laneway that lay alongside the boarded up Zonko's.

He felt the curse fired as it careered towards his back, and dived onto the hard cobbled pavement. The white beam soared over him by only inches and collided with the building before him, sending bricks and mortar flurrying down over Harry.

He clawed his way to his feet again and in a low crouch, moved quickly through the hairy mounds to

the entrance of the laneway, panting as he reached the safety of a sidewall of the corner house. The adrenaline was pumping through his veins as he wiped the sweat away from his forehead with the back of his sleeve. He glanced out into the din and saw Bellatrix bearing down on the cart where the young woman was taking refuge.

Images of Gabrielle's horrified face suddenly filled his mind.

'No!' Came from under his breath as he darted out from behind the building and fired off a stunning spell in silence, hoping to catch Bellatrix off guard. But she knew exactly where he was, and had been waiting for him to strike. She deflected the spell, though appeared surprised at the force of it as she stumbled backwards a few steps. Harry was about to strike again when the girl suddenly appeared in his line of fire as she ran towards him.

'Get down!' he yelled angrily. The woman dived as Bellatrix fired off another curse. Harry ducked behind the corner of the house as the beam hit, tearing a gash in the orner of the brickwork. He stepped back out and aimed his wand, but Bellatrix was nowhere insight; she must have made it to the cart. He covered the blonde woman as she scrambled to her feet and ran passed Harry into the cover of the Laneway.

'You should have stayed in the pub!' he said aggressively over his shoulder at her.
'I couldn't!' came her angry reply, but before she could say anything else, Harry grabbed her arm and raced down the darkened Alley.
'C'mon!'

They hurtled down the Laneway as if the Devil himself were chasing them, weaving in and out of the hairy lumps in their path. Harry kept glancing over his shoulder, expecting Bellatrix to appear, shooting a deadly beam at them.

'You have to find cover.' He panted, and as they neared the end of the alley. Then Harry felt it. He thrust Julie in the opposite direction to him at the T-junction, diving behind a stone wall as a green beam of light flashed passed and contacted violently with a bird bath in a front garden, exploding it on impact.

'Run!' Harry yelled at the girl. She turned, bolting up the street in the opposite direction. He looked out from his stone cover just in time to see Bellatrix vanish from the laneway. He swore and jumped to his feet, running for the small street entrance some ways diagonally opposite.

CRACK

He turned, running backwards. Bellatrix appeared in the middle of the road at the end of the T-junction, behind the wall Harry had been crouched, expecting to have taken him by surprise. He aimed a stun at her silently, his heartbeat racing. She turned in time to see it and deflected it, though again it knocked her back a few paces as it rebounded off her shield. She looked infuriated as Harry lost sight of her behind the houses that lined the street he had entered.

'Harry!'

He swung round to see Neville coming in the opposite direction up the street.
'I told you not to come unless I gave the signal!' Harry said urgently as he raced towards him. He knew Bellatrix would be right behind him.
'C'mon!' he grabbed Neville's arm and pulled him with him.
'It's only me.' Neville panted as they headed for the road in front. 'The others … are watching Hogwarts.' He panted.

'This way…' They had reached another T-junction, and veered off to the left. Harry pulled Neville with him as he made for the edge of town. He needed cover to face Bellatrix, and the forest that lined the back of Hogsmeade would give him that.

They tore down the street and Harry kept glancing over his shoulder, sure he would see Bella appear out of thin air any minute. They reached the end of the road and scanned the dully lit street. The buildings here were all in darkness, no comforting lights on in the windows and no movements behind the curtains; they stood deserted, whether from the immediate threat or past troubles. Not

too far off there was a struggle taking place, he could see the flashes of light in the sky above the houses down the street, he could hear the clashes of curses as they hit the buildings near the trees in the surrounding forest.

Harry looked to the Alley some way down the road.

'There!' he said as he guided Neville, pushing them to run towards it. The roads were now free of Quintaped carcasses so they ran flat out, pulling to a stop as they came upon the darkened Alley. Harry studied the shadows that led off into the trees beyond for a moment, and then suddenly a flash came soaring towards him. He pushed Neville with him as he dived behind the corner house and watched as the beam of light pelted into the building opposite, scattering debris onto the street.

'Stay here!' He threw at Neville, who was crouched in the shadows under a windowsill. If he could make it to the trees, he would have her! Jumping to his feet, he thrust himself beyond the safety of the house, lunging into the darkened alley.

He hugged the side of the buildings, trying to conceal himself in the shadows. A green beam of light shot towards him, sending him scrambling into a nearby doorway to avoid it. The curse smashed into the wooden door behind him, splintering the wood in all directions and showering Harry with debris. He waited for a moment then dodged back out, and worked his way along, darting from doorway to doorway, watching for another attack. Then another flash of light sped towards him, causing him to take cover behind a stone balustrade lining the stairs in front of him to avoid it.

He wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his slightly trembling hand as he sat with his back against the stone, panting. He had been so determined in his effort to not let Bella get away, that he had allowed himself to become trapped. He was wondering wildly how he was going to get out of there while Bellatrix was fixed on him, when he heard a gurgling sound that made his stomach lurch.

He edged his shoulders up the stonework and turned to peer over the top. His eyes widened and his heart skipped a beat.

Bellatrix was standing on the path at the end of the road as a large hairy, spider-like Quintaped came creeping into the street from around the building. He threw his back against the stone again, swearing under his breath. Of course, there would be some who were outside the triangle!

'What's the matter Potter? Afraid of one little Quintaped?' Bellatrix laughed from a distance. 'After killing so many, this one shouldn't be any trouble for you!' Harry slowed his panting so that his breathing made less noise. His only hope was that it would pass him. He could slip out and run for the trees before it realized he was there.

He could hear the muffled thump of its clubbed feet, and a low rumbling noise gurgling from the back of its throat as it slowly inched its way towards him. Harry leaned down carefully and glanced around the edge of the stone, pulling swiftly back in and drawing his breath at the closeness of the monster. It was headed straight for him. His heartbeat raced as Bella continued to delight in his impending doom.

'If your interference means I must die at my Masters hand, then you will die too.' She said viciously. Harry's chest heaved as a hairy leg came into view only a couple of feet from where he was sitting. His panic rose as a second and then a third leg brought the body of the beast alongside him.

'You should not have crossed me, Potter!' She hissed.
Harry sat as still as he could, yet he knew the beast had not needed to see him, it had smelt him. As he turned his head it barred its teeth at him, its giant yellow eyes glittering dangerously, hungrily.

'He wants you for himself, but I will have my revenge!' she ranted.
Harry started edging back on his hands and feet towards the doorway. He paused fleetingly as he lifted his wand and fired a stunning spell, but as before, it had little effect The monster only seemed infuriated by the sting it must have felt from it, and lunged at Harry, just missing his foot as he scrambled to his feet and backed himself against the doorway, pushing at it furiously. Bellatrix's laughter rang out.

‘Say goodbye, *Harry Potter*.’

The sweat from his body was making his clothing cling to him in the chilly night air as he watched the creature bring its body towards him. He fired off two more curses that both battered into the beast, but had little effect except to anger it further. It was no more than four feet away when it’s jagged teeth bared menacingly and it opened its mouth to lunge at him again.

Instinctively, Harry produced a shield charm as its putrid breath inundated his nostrils, causing the beast to stumble backwards a few feet as it was repelled. Harry pushed out of the doorway, and leapt over the balustrade, hurtling himself at full speed towards the trees. As he ran, he registered vaguely a figure making its way towards Bellatrix along one of the shadowed paths, and as it sank through his thoughts, he stopped just short of his cover, whispering under his breath.

‘Neville!’

‘And what have we here?’ Bellatrix’s mocking laughter that had followed Harry as he ran, turned into a wicked simper at the sight of Neville. Popping noises rang out as half a dozen black-cloaked figures appeared, partially obscuring Bellatrix from Harry’s view.

‘It’s time to go!’ one of them said ‘It’s over Bellatrix! We have to get out of here.’
‘No!’ she bit out, ‘I’m not finished yet.’

‘Don't do it, Bellatrix!’ Harry said loudly, keeping his wand trained on the new arrivals. Neville stood in the middle of the pathway that lay between the houses and the forest, pointing his wand at her. The Death Eaters turned at his voice, wands drawn. A beam of light shot out, as a curse was fired from one of them, but his wand was thrust skyward by another’s angry hand, sending the curse careering harmlessly into a nearby tree.

‘It’s Potter!’

Harry wiped at his face with his shoulder, impatiently trying to remove the sweat that stung his eyes. *What is wrong with me?* His mind felt like it was beginning to fog over as he gripped his wand in both hands.

‘Neville, get out of here.’ He said in a low warning.
‘She’s going to pay, Harry. She’s going to pay for what she did to my mum and dad.’ He answered. Harry could see that his wand was shaking slightly as he swallowed nervously. It was obvious Bellatrix recognized him as she grinned maliciously.

‘Another one who wants to go the same way as his parents! You want to feel their pain, don’t you?’ she taunted Neville cruelly.

‘NO!’ Harry said aggressively as he started to move slowly towards Neville. ‘Its me you want!’

‘Oh, now don't hog all the attention, let the boy have his moment.’ she said as laughter trickled from her cruel mouth, her wand directed on her challenger. Harry saw the Quintaped out of the corner of his eye, in the shadows of the buildings behind Neville. It was slowly making its way towards them.

‘He’s been waiting his whole pathetic life for this,’ she glanced at Harry dangerously ‘and I would stop moving if I were you. I could just kill him right now.’ Harry stopped with Neville still a good fifteen feet away. Neville shot out a curse suddenly, but it was flicked aside by her carelessly.

‘Crucio!’

Neville’s shield proved useless. His face contorted and his body curled. And as he screamed in agony, he dropped to the ground, his wand rolling away from his hand.

‘It’s me you want Bellatrix. Leave him alone.’ Harry felt sick with Neville’s pain, wincing as the screams inundated his ears. He started firing curse after curse at Bellatrix as she walked towards Neville’s writhing body, but the Death Eaters stood between Harry and his target, taking all of their

effort to keep up with him, though they did not retaliate at first. They appeared in particular to be struggling with the force of the stun he was casting at them, stumbling backwards in their attempts to block it and swearing angrily.

The screaming echoed through the forest behind Harry.

'STOP IT!' Harry took off towards Neville again, but the cloaked figures moved forward to block him. One of them hissed at Bellatrix.

'We don't have time for your games.'
She giggled evilly as Neville's screams became hoarse from the pain. Harry knew what Neville was feeling; he too had felt it before.

'STOP IT!' He roared.

Finally the cries stopped. Bellatrix glanced between her cohorts at Harry with a triumphant grin on her face as Neville grasped his wand and picked himself up off the ground, groggily stumbling to his feet.

'Don't move!' Harry yelled to Neville, he could see the Quintaped was lurking in the nearby shadows. But Neville stretched himself to his full height, and ignoring Harry, aimed his wand at her once more.
'No,' barely escaped Harry's lips at Neville's determination.

'Are they breeding you utterly stupid these days, boy?' she asked him mockingly. Neville was staring down his wand at her. She flicked aside a curse he sent her way and it rebounded into the house beside her, at the end of the street. A loud crack rang out as it sent broken bricks onto the pathway, but Neville fired again, this time missing Bella as she dodged her shoulder out of its path.

'You are wasting time! We have to get out of here.'
'You're right,' Bellatrix said darkly in answer to her robed companion. 'I am wasting time'. Harry knew what she was going to do before she did it. He knew she was going to revel in Neville's pain.

'Don't do it!' Harry's furious command had come too late. She had deflected another curse Neville sent her way with almost no effort, and hit him with the Cruciatus curse again.

Neville hit the ground as before; writhing in agony, and screaming uncontrollably. Harry swayed as he fought back the bile in his throat, firing uselessly at her again. 'STOP IT!'

She closed in on Neville and kicked his wand away, and then stepped back again, watching on in silent pleasure, her mouth curling into a twisted grin. The Quintaped had paused and appeared to be watching the unusual actions of its intended pray as it writhed in unimaginable pain. Harry vaguely registered another figure moving swiftly through the shadows of the street, heading towards them, but Neville's screams were filling his head, which was already becoming increasingly woozy, making him feel sick again.

His body was shaking as the chilly night air pierced his damp clothing. He lifted his shaky shoulder in agitation, wiping the relentless sweat away from his forehead. He couldn't think straight with the noise and his mind searched desperately for a way to put and end to this. He opened his mouth before he could think what he was saying.

'IF YOU STOP IT, I'LL GO WITH YOU!'

'What?' Neville's screams finally died, as Bellatrix turned on Harry.
'Leave him alone.' Harry said more quietly this time. 'I'll go willingly to Voldemort if you let him go.' His wand arm trembled as he stared over it at Bellatrix. His eyelids were starting to droop heavily and his felt the ground swirling beneath him.

'You expect me to believe you'll come to your death if I let this useless idiot go?'
'I give you my word.'
'No...' Neville croaked as he staggered to his feet.
One of the Death Eaters spoke up.

'Lets take him and get out! The others will be here soon.' he hissed. Harry watched her as she looked at him through narrowed eyes.

'Our little boy hero wants to lay down his own-?' but Bellatrix was cut off by a flash of white light and was knocked to the ground. Neville threw himself on top of her as another flash of light coming from the shadows behind the Quintaped, which had started to move in on them again, pelted into one of the Death Eaters who had their backs to the street.

Harry started firing on them in their confusion, and the hit one immediately with a stun, sending the masked figure careering backwards with such force that he took two of his companions with him as he hurtled to the ground. Then from the shadows of the street, two more curses came flying into the fray. One was deflected, but the other contacted its target, flinging him to the ground.

Harry kept attacking, and so did the person in the street, keeping the remaining four cloaked figures too busy to interfere with Neville and Bellatrix, who were still struggling on the ground. But, with three of them now returning his fire, Harry was unable to keep his shield up long enough and took a hit from two of them at once. The white-hot beams thrust him off his feet and sent him crashing backwards. There was a sickening crunch in his rib cage as it collided with a tree trunk, and pain ripped through him as he slumped to the ground.

'Watch it, you idiot!'

Harry heard the dreamlike echo of one of his assailants muffled voices as he lifted himself slowly off the ground. Pain forked out across his rib cage, and he shook his head as he staggered to his feet, trying to clear the fog that threatened to overtake him. He clutched at his side with one arm, and reached up and wiped the sweat from his eyes with his wand still clutched in his hand. He stared out on the scene before him, dazed and shaking.

Three of the six Death Eaters were down, and two were firing up the streets in search of who ever lay hidden. One was watching Harry nervously, taking in his battered condition, but did not move to attack him.

'Neville!' Harry tried to yell it, but it was impossible to get enough air into his lungs. The Quintaped was creeping up behind the unsuspecting Neville, who was busy struggling to keep Bellatrix from wriggling like a wildcat underneath him as she clawed for her wand, which lay just out of reach. All three Death Eaters now faced Harry as he glanced up the street, battling to keep upright. He caught site of a blonde head poking out of a doorway. Julie!

'LOOK OUT!' She yelled in warning, watching the Quintapeds approach on the two struggling figure. As soon as her voice rang out, the three-cloaked figures span around.

Harry took his opportunity and raised his wand with an unsteady arm firing a stun at one of them. It pelted into the masked figure, making him groan before falling to the ground. The Quintaped appeared ready to strike, its controller no longer a threat as she lay beneath Neville, and it eyed its intended meal greedily. In desperation, Harry sucked in the pain and yelled out to Neville, and turned all of his curses towards the Quintaped, as Julie fired on the masked menaces.

The curses that hit the Quintapeds hairy hide, only made it flinch, as if bitten by an annoying insect. Bellatrix had stopped struggling. She had spotted the Quintaped, and was waiting for it to strike Neville, who had Bellatrix's wand in hand. He finally turned to see what Harry was yelling about, his eyes widening as the beasts mouth boar down on him. Neville moved quickly, rolling off Bellatrix and across the ground, looking back just in time to see the ghastly mouth close over her.

'NOOOOO!' her blood-curdling scream rang out as the teeth sunk into her sides and lifted her from the ground.

The two Death Eaters that were left were backing away uncertainly, firing at the creature. The monster bit down on its screeching Quarry, and the sound of bone crunching could be heard as its prey spluttered, then fell silent. Blood ran down the yellowish fangs and dripped onto its fur as it turned and headed for the trees, Bellatrix's limp body hanging from its jaws.

With two loud cracking sounds, the Death Eaters were gone.

Some way off, Julie spoke to Neville as she approached him, but Harry could no longer see them clearly. Their voices seemed to drift into nothing as he hung his head in his hands in an effort to keep the darkness at bay. Wiping at the sweat in his eyes, he tried to keep focused on the ground at his feet when a muffled cry made him look up. Neville's still form seemed to glow an eerie green colour for a second, and then he crumpled to the ground.

Harry joined Julie, automatically firing a stun at the Death Eater who was trying to get up from the ground. As the curses hit, his head dropped back and his body skidded along the gravel from the force.

Neville! Suddenly, nothing felt real. Blackness was edging in on his world, but he knew he had to stay awake. He knew he had to see the motionless figure laying on the path for himself. Then he would see he wasn't dead.

Clutching at his side, he walked unsteadily up to the blonde girl who was crouched over Neville. Her shoulders were shaking as she wept into the palms of her hands. The vision of Neville's body shifted before Harry's eyes, doubling and swirling sickeningly. He turned from it, unable to look at it anymore. He knew where he had to go. He knew someone who could make sense of this, set him right. He limped off up the street, out of the darkness and into the light.

The buildings lurched ominously and Harry was having trouble keeping his feet, but he stumbled on. He was finding it increasingly difficult to walk the road, which for some reason appeared to be becoming lumpy and hairy. He fell a couple of times, and though the pain took his breath away, the dazed feeling in his head helped to numb the real pain.

As he rounded a bend he couldn't remember ever having been down before, he saw a sign that no longer looked familiar. He couldn't remember where he was going, or why, by the time he staggered barely conscious towards the darkened doorway.

He eased his body weight against it painfully. The heavy door opened and Harry stumbled forward, leaning himself against a wall as the door close behind him. He breathed in stabbing pain, dropping his head back and closing his eyes to the blur. Exhaustion swept over him as his legs began to give way, his body slowly sliding down the wall behind him.

He vaguely heard the door re-open, followed by urgent footsteps. Harry felt a strong hand grip his arm and heave him to a standing position.

'Thought you'd come here.' A gruff voice said as Harry's left arm was thrown over someone's shoulder. 'C'mon, lets get you up to a room before anyone sees ya.'

16. Julie

Blurry images faded in and out as Harry struggled with the shadows that engulfed him. Whenever it seemed he might break free, the pain that tore through his limbs would eclipse the light, pushing him back into his dark isolation. Sometimes his body burned, and he would feel like he was standing in the drawing room at Grimmauld Place, opening the locket all over again.

And then there were times when he felt cold, the kind of cold that is born from within the depths of your very soul. Every now and then, determined voices would seek him out, beckoning him from the darkness. He would feel himself being lifted, only to splutter and choke on liquids that were being forced into his mouth. The blackness seemed endless, his struggle, hopeless.

Then finally, he began to break free.

He could feel the shadows gradually lifting and the darkness ebbing away as he slowly came to. He opened his eyes to the dim orange light that flickered across the canopy above him. His body ached as he lifted a shaky hand to his head, and ran his fingers through his hair. Even though he was awake, his mind felt numb, like he was still asleep. He turned his head, spying the bedside cabinet

and groggily lifted himself onto his elbow, reaching for his glasses. They clattered against the wood as his trembling hand fell on them. Pushing them onto his face, Harry looked out on a room he had never seen before.

He was lying in a four-poster, canopied bed. The cream floral sheets and quilt were old and worn, perhaps once they were white, but yellowed with age, yet they were clean. The dark grained wooden furniture that littered the room showed years of wear by its many scratches, and the wooden flooring had a large, threadbare rug in the centre upon which an old matching floral arm chair and lounge stood. They were positioned around the fireplace, whose small flames cast the only light with which to see by. Someone was lying on the couch; blonde hair was poking out of the end of a salmon coloured woollen blanket.

Blonde hair.

Harry looked down at the floor thoughtfully. Blonde hair. He felt like that should mean something to him. His head began to hurt as he tried to make the connection in his mind. He closed his eyes as the room started to swim. There was a huge emptiness inside of him, physically and mentally. It was like he was missing something. Something important. The door creaked open.

'Just closed shop, thought I'd come and have a look at ya.'

'Sir?' Harry croaked, confused. He had no idea where he was, but the last person he expected to see was his Defence teacher. Abe breathed out heavily as he crossed the room. He picked up a glass decanter that was resting on the mantle piece above the fire.

'You'd be wanting a drink, I expect.' Sir's gruff voice was comforting somehow and Harry slowly raised himself into an upright position, though his vision shifted unnaturally as he did so, causing everything to drift into two. He closed his eyes again to clear the sickening images from view. 'Just take it slow now,' Sir said as he poured some of the contents of the jug into a cup. 'Here.' He said, and he thrust the cup towards Harry.

Harry took it with a shaky hand and put the full cup to his lips, gulping the contents deeply, trying to quench the parched feeling in his mouth. As he pulled the cup away, he felt an incredible heat down the back of his throat, enough to make his eyes sting. He gasped as Sir took the empty cup and refilled it.

'That'll put a few hairs on your chest' he said, 'and a few other places you wouldn't want it … if you drink enough of it.' He added as he handed Harry the cup again. The warmth was spreading pleasantly from his throat to his stomach, filling some of the emptiness he felt, so Harry threw the second cup down the back of his throat, making his eyes water even more.

'He shouldn't be drinking that, Aberforth. He's not well enough.' The blonde girl had woken and was sitting upright, glaring disapprovingly at the two of them. Sir rolled his eyes at Harry as he refilled his cup to the brim again.

'Wont do him any harm.' And over his shoulder, he added 'Firewhiskey's one of the oldest medicines around.' He shook his head at Harry. 'Healers. There all the same.' Harry drank the firewhiskey down, welcoming the sensation of heat.

'When it comes to some things, yes.' She stood up and came over to the bed. Harry watched her as she took the jug from Sir, and grabbing the empty cup from Harry's hand, she placed them both on the cabinet. She was a young woman in her early twenties, not unpleasant to look at, with pale skin and shoulder length blonde hair, a few freckles across her nose and unnaturally deep brown eyes that had a soulful stare. He thought her features looked familiar somehow, he was almost certain he'd seen her somewhere before.

'You don't remember anything, do you?' she said quietly, eyeing him with those impossibly deep eyes.
'That depends,' Harry said, beginning to feel the effects of the Firewhiskey.
'On what?' Sir asked.
'On what I'm supposed to have forgotten.' Harry said with an intoxicated grin.

The warmth of the Firewhiskey was seeping through Harry rapidly, making the cold emptiness within him retreat. His body didn't seem to be trembling as severely and his head was no longer feeling heavy, in fact, it felt rather light.

The woman sighed 'You've never had Firewhiskey before, have you?'
'Nope.'
'Honestly Aberforth, you cant just go ploughing him with drink. I bet the strongest thing he's ever had is butterbeer.'
'So what if it is?' Harry said, getting a little irritated at her inference that he was a kid.

'I didn't mean it like that.' She aimed at him, then turning to Sir, she added 'He has to remember. The longer we put it off, the harder it'll be.' She seemed way too serious to Harry.
'C'mon Julie. It's better like this, something to soften the blow.'
'What blow?' An uneasy feeling was creeping over Harry as he watched them drowsily. They both turned and looked at him. Julie breathed in heavily and sat herself down on the bed. Sir grabbed the old wooden chair against the wall and pulled it before him, straddling the back of it.

'Two nights ago, you used a spell' Aberforth said gravely 'a dangerous spell … ancient magic that is rarely seen in this day and age. It saved a lot of people from a horrible death, but it wasn't without its side effects.' Harry's eyes dropped to the floor searchingly, which was swaying gently. Like Julie, it seemed familiar, but he couldn't see it in his mind, he couldn't remember it.

'You would have been alright, you would have felt drained like your companions, but you would have slept it off harmlessly. But you were already ill when you performed the spell,' Julie said quietly 'you just didn't know it yet. The power that you called upon used a lot of your own energy, and considering the condition you were in, it took rather a heavy toll on you.' Harry was frowning at her, though he could still feel a stupid grin on his lips. 'We need to help you remember the whole night, before bits of your memory start accosting you in your effort to piece it together. I can use legilimency to help put you in touch with the memory you're suppressing. Connect the dots, so to speak.'

'Suppressing?' Harry slurred slightly.

'If I can succeed in bringing the whole memory out in one go, then you'll be able to make sense of it, and face it. These sort of memories have a way of coming back in mangled pieces until you're tortured with an incomplete, and twisted knowledge of what happened.' Even through the haze of the Firewhiskey Harry swallowed uncomfortably. 'Trust me, its far worse leaving it to come slowly, than bringing it to the surface all at once, quickly.' She paused and went on nervously. 'There is the risk that I wont be able to bring it all out on my first try. It could be too difficult. That being the case, its always much harder to get in again a second time because …' she frowned and added uncertainly 'because you'll be, well … you'll-'

'Just do it.' Harry said dully, a sinking feeling had been growing in him along with the muzziness of intoxication. Something bad had happened, something he had to remember.
'But, you should know, if I can't get to the whole mem-'

'It doesn't matter. If it's worse to wait, then it's better to try, right?' he said with his eyelids drooping. He knew there was something missing, and he felt a great need to fill in the emptiness inside of him. He did not want to put off finding out the truth. He had to know what had brought him here. He needed to know, and maybe the Firewhiskey had helped him want to face it. She watched him in silence for a moment, and then she asked him to sit on the side of the bed.

He pulled the sheets back, barely registering he was still in his jeans and a t-shirt, rather than pyjamas, and swung his feet on the floor, his head swimming in warning as it seemed to trail behind his movements and his body trembling again. He closed his eyes and hung his head, running a hand through his hair in an effort to gather himself. Abe and Julie both stood, Abe offering his chair up to her as he turned it round the right way. She sat down and met Harry's gaze as he lifted his head.

'Ready?'
He nodded, and then a thought occurred to him.
'You wont be able to see anything else in there will you?' he asked 'I mean, you're going straight for the most recent memory, right?'

‘Don’t worry,’ her mouth curved almost into a smile ‘I wont be fishing around.’ He breathed out and nodded slightly, rubbing his sweaty palms on his jeans.

Abe stood behind her as Harry met her eyes. She had her wand in hand, and under the determined gaze of her immensely deep eyes, he felt uncomfortably like she could see right through him, passed his veneer, and deep into his very heart and soul.

Then it started.

It came slowly at first, starting with the memory of his last lesson with Sir. Moving through the trees, the dappled light shining through the leaves, then was standing in the Great Hall, talking to Ron and Hermione. Next, the trio were in Hogsmeade, drawing unusual symbols on the ground.

Harry’s heartbeat was quickening as the images gradually sped up. Each image Julie uncovered was being swamped with the accompanying memories. The monsters were coming and power surged through his body, light arcing across the sky as the Quintapeds writhed.

Harry flinched. The sweat was beginning to form on his brow again as the images came more rapidly. He was running through Hogsmeade, looking for cover, Julie at his side, then she was gone and Neville was in her place. They took cover and he instructed Neville to stay put.

Harry's breathing was becoming ragged now as the images flashed faster across his mind. He was running for the trees, but Neville was there. Next Neville was writhing on the ground in agony, and then Bellatrix was on the ground beneath him as the Quintaped neared.

‘No’ Harry breathed aloud. His stomach lurching painfully as the images bombarded him. This was all coming too fast. Something awful was about to happen, something he no longer wanted to see.

Neville rolled away and the Quintaped crunched down on Bellatrix … Two cloaked figures vanished … Julie and Neville greeted each other knowingly. The images swirled. It was coming too fast. He wasn’t ready for it.

‘NO!’ he said urgently.

But before he could break the link, he saw it. A green flash of light, and Neville dropping helplessly to the ground.

He panted as he threw Julie out of his mind.

His whole body ached with the weight of it, and he felt like he was going to be sick. He looked up at her tear stained eyes. She had lived it all again through him. He hung his head in his hands, lost in his grief.

‘It worked then?’ Sir’s gruff voice interrupted.
‘Yes.’ Julie said in a strained voice. There was silence for a moment as Harry stared at the floor, trying to slow his rapid breathing.
‘I’ll leave you to it.’ Harry heard Sir's heavy footsteps clod across the floor, and then the creak of the door as it opened and closed again behind him.

‘I’m sorry.’ Julie said miserably. ‘I knew him too, but not like you.’ Harry looked up at her. ‘His grandmother was a good friend of my mothers…’ she trailed off when she saw the look on Harry’s face. He stood up, swaying gently, and without speaking, went into the bathroom and closed the door behind him. He grabbed a towel from the cabinet, stripped, and ran an overly hot shower before steping into the scolding waterfall.

Harry’s desolate tears mixed with the hot flow of water. He leaned his hands against the tiled wall, supporting himself under the punishing water as steam filled the room. His body still shook from fever, and the effort of showering, along with the grief of Neville’s loss, exhausted him. By the time he emerged from the bathroom, his skin raw from the scolding heat, his legs barely carried him out of the bathroom and across the room to his bed.

Julie was back on the couch. She lay motionless as if asleep, but he doubted her mind was at peace

enough for that. There was a note on a small piece of parchment next to the bed, instructing him to drink the contents of the cup beside it, and go back to bed. And though Harry loathed the thoughts of sleep and dreams, his body wouldn't do otherwise. He drank the potion down and slid under the sheets, fingering his scar, until he drifted into a restless sleep.

His dreams were full of hatred and heartbreak, as he relived the one event he would do anything to forget. He had grieved as he stumbled his way to the Hog's Head that night, before he had faded and lost his memory of it. He had felt like someone had reached in and ripped his insides out, and now … now that grief was slowly changing, gradually being replaced.

The night played over and over in a never-ending nightmare as anger and sadness coursed through him. He felt frustration because of his weakened state when it happened, knowing he should have prevented it. He was angry with Neville for coming to town, when he had told him to stay at Hogwarts. Feelings of regret swelled in him because he hadn't made Neville leave the minute he'd run into him, and a terrible fury flooded him at the Death Eater whose name he didn't yet know, who was responsible for killing the one person in this world that least deserved to die. The injustice of it swamped him, as he burned with fury in shadow.

He felt a cool damp cloth being pressed against his forehead, and opened his eyes. Julie was watching him as she mopped his brow; her eyes kind and sympathetic.

'It'll be okay.' her whispering voice said as she brought her lips down, brushing the skin she had cleared of dampness. His mind felt numb, as if he were still dreaming. He was searching for an escape, for something to embrace that would put an end to his pain. Reaching out, he grabbed her arm as she lifted it away to leave, unwilling to let his only source of comfort go. She eyed him almost pityingly, which angered him.

She thinks I'm a kid … She feels sorry for me! He could feel the anger wash through him, and driven by a need even he hadn't acknowledged, or maybe because he was still under the effects of the whiskey, he lifted himself to her abruptly and kissed her.

Her lips were unyielding to his determination at first, but then they parted to momentarily caress him before they faded. He collapsed back on the bed, throwing an arm over his forehead in frustration, his eyes looking out of the window, looking anywhere but at her. He felt her rise off the bed and held back the pain and anger that stewed below the surface. He had wanted the touch of another; he had craved a distraction from the image of Neville shrouded in a deathly green light.

The bed dipped and Harry turned to see Julie slipping between the sheets beside him. She had taken her jeans and shirt off, and was wearing only her white bra and briefs. He lay watching her, as she positioned herself on top of him.

Harry reached out to her in his time of need, and placed his hands on her thighs, slowly running them up to her hips. He found the feel of her soft skin extremely soothing, and as she brought her mouth down to his, he closed his eyes, pushing his haunting thoughts as deep as possible.

Her lips were warm and tender, and their touch eased him in his moment of grief. A longing he had been harbouring for what seemed like forever, awoke in him again, yet this time, he was not overcome with the need to douse the inner flames that erupted in him. They kissed without heavy emotion, like all the troubles of the world had disintegrated, and Harry revelled in the uncomplicated comfort.

She pulled away from him and slid her hands behind her back, unclipping her bra and dropping it thoughtlessly to the floor. Harry pulled his t-shirt over his head and lay back, taking in her femininity in the orange firelight, which gave her skin a healthy peach glow. She pressed her body against his, and as their lips met, Harry rolled her onto her back.

He dragged his lips lightly along the line of her neck, and made his way to her throat, the pain within him fading behind his want. His hand ventured up her inner thigh, and as it lingered, she arched her back, her breathing becoming more rapid. Harry lost himself in the pleasures he had been denying himself too long, and because the act was one of need, not love, there were no fears of repercussions. It was safe.

He kissed his way down her bare skin, and as his lips closed over her breast, a small gasp escaped her open mouth. His breathing was becoming ragged, her pleasure increasing his own excitement. He lifted himself to seek out her lips once more. She kissed him with an urgency that he returned, and as she reached down and undid his jeans, his tongue met hers, his own ache growing with the soft want that escaped her lips. He pulled away from her reluctantly to throw his jeans off, and then settled on top of her with his full weight as he kissed her deeply.

Her hands wandered feely over his back, making his skin come alive beneath her touch, and he started to feel a great need to complete what they had started. His hand found her underwear, and eased them down her thighs, and dragging his lips away from her neck, he pulled them off around her feet.

He came down on her intimately, carefully, seeking solace and an end to his aching want, and as they shared in their final moments together, Harry pushed all of his anguish deep inside, freeing himself to burden her with his pain, and finally finding the release that would help him face tomorrow.

~*~*~*~

During the night, Harry and Julie had lain in the dark and talked, both unwilling to sleep. It hadn't taken Harry long to realize that he liked Julie a lot. She was kind and generous, and very free spirited and independent, if not a little haphazard in her approach to life.

She had examined his rib cage, and aside from some residual bruising, it felt like new, though his fever lingered, and she informed him it would for another day or two, telling him if he expected to recover fully, he would have to eat properly and get more rest. She said his body was worn out, and would crash and burn again if he didn't start doing the right thing. Eventually Harry drifted into sleep, more at peace with himself now he'd had something to take his mind off Neville.

He woke later on that morning and dressed, leaving Julie still curled asleep under the covers. He headed down the stairs; his body still sweating, and feeling weak and sore. Julie had said Ron and Hermione would have slept the effects of the spell off, but the damage it had wreaked on Harry made him anxious to see for himself if they were okay. He felt responsible for getting them involved in it in the first place, and his guilt would only be quelled at the sight of them looking normal and healthy. Neville's death was the latest in a string of burdens he'd had to shoulder. He felt anymore would be too much. Anymore, and he would finally sink with the weight of it.

Harry threw the invisibility cloak over himself as he looked around the grimy, empty bar. Sir was nowhere in sight, so he made his way across the room and unlocked the door, stepping out into the brightness of the aftermath of an early snowfall. He pulled his thin jacket about him and set off through the foot deep snow towards Hogwarts, his mind lingering on Julie's sleeping form.

She had gotten to know Aberforth rather well while dating what she called, “a vile sack of festering pus”, who had regularly dragged her along to the Hog's Head, ordering her to sit at the bar and wait for him while he met with numerous shady characters. She spent the time chatting to the barman, and one night about a year ago, Aberforth had spotted her natural talents for healing, when a particularly nasty incident involving her boyfriend, broke out on the street outside. She hadn't gone into details, but the event had disturbed her enough to finally leave him after two years of misery.

Harry had barely reached the edge of town before his body began to tremble again, whether from the fever, or the coldness of the biting breeze on his sweaty clothing. As he trudged through the gates of Hogsmeade, the road at his feet started to drift gently to and fro before his eyes, making the empty pangs in his stomach turn to nausea. He hadn't reached the halfway point, when his limbs began to ache, the extra effort required to lift his feet through the snow, exhausting him. He wished now he had slept last night, his thoughts turning back to his conversation with Julie.

Aberforth had prodded her into setting up her own premises in Hogsmeade, called “JAFZ” or “Julies Ache-Free Zone”, which she also resided above in a small flat. She would never be qualified to work in St Mungos, unable to further her studies in healing having barely scraped through her owls at

Hogwarts before leaving in her 5th year, but she hated hospitals anyway, so she really didn't mind. Sometimes she worked for little or no money, when ill people came to her with empty pockets, but she made enough to get by, and had even recently employed her friend Pen part time to help with the bookkeeping.

By the time he reached the huge iron gates of Hogwarts, Harry found it hard to focus on them. They seemed to loom over him, drifting dangerously. When they were closed behind him again, he continued on across the grounds, stopping just outside the double oak doors to remove his cloak and lean against the wall for support to gather his strength. Once the world stopped swirling sickeningly, he pulled himself off the wall and walked into the entrance hall, heading up the marble stairs.

As much as he yearned to see Ron and Hermione, he dreaded each and every step he took; the guilt over what had happened, and the knowledge of what waited for him in the common room, hung over him like a shadow in the empty hallways.

He could feel the Fat Lady watching him as he made his way slowly towards her, keeping his eyes fixed on the ground at his feet. The long trip from Hogsmeade, had left him feeling feverish and worn out, so he wiped the sweat from his brow on the back of a shaky sleeve, before saying the password without looking at her.

The Fat Lady had grown rather fond of Neville over the past few years, having had frequent incidents with him over forgotten passwords, and her silence as he stood there, waiting for her to swing open, confirmed his worst fears. She blamed him, just like everyone else would. The painting finally opened to reveal the entrance, and as Harry eased himself through it, he heard a muffled sniff from her canvass.

His stomach dropped painfully.

He swayed as he walked into the common room. The low talk that had wafted through the room as he entered, died to complete silence. He stood there for a moment, wishing the ground would swallow him up, but their was no escaping what had happened.

His eyes fell on the only people in the room who were moving as he waited. Harry was swamped in bushy brown hair as Hermione threw herself at him. He had thought he would want his friends to rush to embrace him, but now that Hermione had him in a tight squeeze, he found he couldn't hug her back. Harry's arms hung loosely at his sides as she pulled away, her eyes swollen and watery.

'Are you and Ron okay?' he asked through shaky breaths as he fought to keep focused.
'We're fine, which is more than I can say for you.' Ron was frowning deeply at Harry.
'What about Lupin … Tonks … the others?' he asked.
'They all made it.' Ron said solemnly.

'Harry, where have you been? McGonagall told us what happened … she said you were with someone who was looking after you, but…' she trailed off shaking her head, taking in his appearance and wiping at her damp cheeks with her hand.

Aware that all eyes in the room were on them, he said 'I'll tell you about it -' stopping abruptly as he saw Ginny emerging from the girl's dormitory. He felt the sweat beading on his face as he dropped his gaze to the floor.

She walked silently to him and lifted a hand to his forehead. 'Your ill, you shouldn't have come back alone.'
'We should take you to Madame Pomphrey!' Hermione said quickly.
'No!' Harry said abruptly. He didn't want to spend the night in the hospital ward, and he didn't like them fussing over him suddenly. It felt wrong that they should be so easy on him.

'Upstairs' Ginny quietly, and firmly took him by the hand, directing him up to the boy's dorms. Harry went; glad to be out of the watchful gaze of the other students. When they reached the Gryffindor seventh year's dorm, Ginny went over to the window and closed it against the strong chill. When she turned, Harry was staring at Neville's bed, transfixed by the loneliness of it.

Neville's belongings had already been removed. Nothing remained. Except the knowledge that as far as Harry was concerned, this was Neville's space. As much as he didn't want to think about it, he couldn't stop himself. Neville was one of the things about Hogwarts that had made it home. Neville had always had faith in Harry. He had always trusted him. Guilty tears prickled at his eyes.

A soft touch on his arm made him turn. Ginny quietly spilled warm tears down her cheeks as she looked at him, but now that he thought about his encounter with Julie, he could no longer look her in the eye. She took a step closer and held him, but it did not comfort him, instead it doubled his guilt. He knew he would have to tell her, he knew he wouldn't be at peace until he did. And then it would change everything. He knew. This would be the thing that would drive her to let go. But he could not do it yet, not while her grief was so raw.

She pulled away; surprised that he did not return her embrace. A flicker of doubt registered in her eyes, but she turned from him and pulled his bed sheets back.

'Hermione's gone to tell McGonagall you're back.' Ron said heavily as he entered the room.
'Get in to bed.' Ginny said as she stripped him of his jacket. 'I'll bring you up something to eat.' Ron cleared his throat as he hovered awkwardly by the cast iron fireplace.

'What about class?' Harry asked as he sunk between the sheets.
'Saturday, mate. No class till Monday.' Ron frowned in obvious concern.

'Don't you remember what day it is?' Ginny started to wipe his forehead with a hand towel she had dipped into the water jug, but Harry grabbed her arm.

'Don't' he said without looking at her. 'I can do it.' Taking the cloth from her and pressing it to his forehead, he laid back and put his head on the pillow, closing his eyes. He didn't want her to touch him. He didn't want her pity. He didn't deserve it. He could sense she and Ron were exchanging glances in the silence that followed, but it wasn't until she left the room, that Ron spoke.

'Where've you been?'
'The Hog's Head.' Harry said, opening his eyes again to stare at the canopy above him.
'Why there?'
'It's where I ended up,' he placed the cloth on the bedside table 'after...' Ron didn't wait for more.
'So you were with Sir?' he said sceptically.
'Yeah, except he's not just "Sir" anymore.' He turned his head to look at Ron 'His names Aberforth. Aberforth Dumbledore. Professor Dumbledore was his brother.'

Ron screwed his face up. 'What … him?'
'I know now why he looked familiar to me the first time I saw him years ago at the pub. I'd already seen a photo of him. Moody showed it to me at Sirius's place.' Harry stared at the ceiling again. 'He was a bit younger then, not so hairy as now, but it's definitely him.'
'How come he never said?'
'No idea,' Harry had wondered the same thing. There was silence for a moment.

'You alright?' Ron asked. Harry closed his eyes again. He didn't want to go over everything that had happened. He would tell Ron and Hermione soon, just not right now. 'It's just … you're …' Harry looked at him as Ron lifted a finger hesitantly to his forehead, pointing at it 'you're playing with your scar.'

Harry hadn't even noticed that he was running his finger back and forth over it. He pulled his hand away quickly. 'It's fine, it doesn't hurt.' He tried to sound normal, but didn't quite manage it. He had told the truth, his scar wasn't hurting, but it itched with a strange feeling of pins and needles.

Hermione came in a short time later with a tray of porridge and toast, plonking it down on his bed as he sat up.

'We should have made you eat more.' She said gravely, 'I knew you were falling ill. I should've made you eat.' He didn't feel a bit like eating right at that moment, but listening to Hermione made him feel incredibly guilty, and he knew if he wanted to get well he was going to have eat more, so he worked his way through the porridge while Ron and Hermione told him what happened to them in Hogsmeade.

After the Death Eaters attacked, they ran for cover in a nearby alley, and found themselves being pursued by two of the black-cloaked figures. They ran from street to street, dodging curses, occasionally flinging one off of their own, but a terrible tiredness was creeping up on them. Hermione said it was as if they'd drunk a sleeping potion, and then were stupidly trying to run off the effects.

Eventually they were slouched against a vacant house, battling to keep their feet when the persistent Death Eaters, who turned out to be Amycus and Avery, (names Harry recognized immediately) closed in on them. Ron and Hermione tried to claw their way out of their stupor, but their was no fighting it, and laughing at the state they were in, huddled in a doorway almost passed out, Amycus and Avery raised their wands.

Ron said a curse that seemed to come from nowhere, knocked Avery off his feet, and when Amycus turned in search of the caster, he was hit by a red flash and knocked unconscious too. That was the last thing either of them remember. They woke up in the hospital wing the next day.

'Must have been Lupin.' Harry said. He had finished his porridge, and was lying back on the pillow again. He closed his eyes as his own tiredness began to get the better of him.
'Get some rest,' Hermione said. 'We'll be back to check on you later.'
Harry only vaguely heard her as the warmth in his stomach from the much needed intake of food spread pleasantly through him, and slowly lolled him to sleep.

'Harry…' a soft echoing voice called to him from afar. He was floating. Or was he drowning? He was suspended in a sea of inky blackness, drifting with the current. Up ahead of him he could see a light. He was slowly making his way towards the murky red glow.
'Harry…' there it was again. He pulled his body round to look over his shoulder. But there was nothing but blackness behind him.
'Harry!' the voice echoed louder and he knew its sweet sound. He turned from the red glow, and then someone was shaking him. Opening his eyes, he looked into Ginny's worried face.

'I've brought you something to eat.' Her brow creased, as she stared at him. She was sitting on the side of the bed in the low light of a single lamp.
'What time is it?' he asked, lifting himself up.
'It's six thirty, everyone's in the Hall having dinner. How are you feeling?'
'Tired.' He said as he took the tray she handed him. He eyed the roast with a sigh. At least the plate wasn't piled high.
'I didn't put too much on,' she said uncannily.
'Thanks' He cut the meat and placed it in his mouth.

Ginny stayed with him while he ate, keeping her conversation light as she talked mostly about Hedwig. Harry asked after Socks, wondering why he hadn't seen much of her around the castle since his stay in the hospital wing, and Ginny told him she had disappeared almost three weeks ago. When Harry looked startled she added that Socks had been the same ever since she'd known her, which was almost a year. Far longer than Harry would have guessed since Ginny had never mentioned her before.

The normalness of their conversation helped take Harry's mind off things that would have affected his appetite, so that when he finally put the tray down at his feet, there were only a few pieces of carrot and a roast potato left.

'Harry…' Ginny sounded unsure of herself, heavy with emotion as he sat back on his pillows, still finding it difficult to be under her gaze. 'Neville came to me before he left for Hogsmeade. He said something that I think you should hear…'

Harry looked Ginny directly in her slightly glazed for the first time since he returned, feeling a dull ache in his chest.

17. Hagger's Council and Harry's Abandonment

Harry woke late the next morning to an empty room. Easing himself onto his elbow, he pushed the curtains that shrouded his bed aside and looked through the window. It must have been close to midday. The clear blue sky seemed glaringly inappropriate to him, so he closed his curtains on it and retreated to his dank solitude.

His body no longer ached with fever, and for the first time in a long time, his stomach panged in hunger. Rubbing his fingers forcefully through his hair his thoughts turned to Ginny. She had sat with him until he had fallen asleep, even though he had made excuses for her to leave, still finding it uncomfortable to be in her company. Harry knew she had mistaken his attempts to dismiss her as feelings of guilt over Neville, never suspecting he would have betrayed her. But betrayed her, he had. Yet she had sat by his side and passed on Neville's parting words to her in an effort to console him, and they had seemed to Harry to be hauntingly final, like he had known he would not return...

The moment Harry, Ron and Hermione had left the Great Hall, Neville had gone back to the table and told the Gryffindor DA what was about to happen, giving the trio time to get away. Seamus and Dean had then proceeded to seek out their fellow DA Hufflepuffers and Ravenclaws, arranging to meet in Hagrids empty hut.

They slipped out of the Hall one by one, minus Neville, who finally went to see McGonagall, who of course reacted swiftly to the news by ordering all students back to there dormitories just as they expected. In the ensuing confusion, Neville was able to slip away unnoticed, joining the others as they planned their next move.

Horrified at what could happen with an army of Quintapeds on the loose, it was decided they should follow Harry's request and remain at Hogwarts, taking on the job as Home Guard, ready to warn the castles occupants should the monsters venture to Hogwarts.

They set themselves up around the outside of the school in groups of two, lurking in the shadows of the castle, waiting. Ginny and Luna were standing, watching the Gates from a recess not far from the Hogwarts entrance, when Neville approached them. Ginny had said that he had appeared odd to her, much calmer than usual, especially given their situation.

'I-If Hogwarts comes under threat, signal with a patronus, and get back inside.' They both nodded, and then Neville took Ginny by the arm and pulled her aside. 'I have something to do, so I-I wont be here. But make sure you don't stay out here if those monsters come. You and Luna stick together, okay?'

'Where are you going?' she had asked him, but he had just frowned at her.
'Harry won't understand, but you … you can help him to. It's what I have to do, the same as he has his destiny.' Ginny was beginning to see where he was going with this.

'Neville, I really don't think you should-'
'Don't worry,' he interrupted her gravely 'I know what I'm doing. It'll be okay.' He had held his hand up to her, silencing her protest. 'Just tell H-Harry that. Tell him its what I have to do, and its okay.'

'Oh, look!' Ginny turned at Luna's whispered warning, just in time to see Professor McGonagall and Slughorn hurrying out of the massive oak doors, and down to the gates. She watched, crouched into the shadows as they went through, locking it behind them, and when she turned back to Neville, he had gone.

Harry pushed the conversation he'd had with Ginny from his mind and finally pulled the curtains back from his bed, and squinting in the brightness that poured into the room, he pulled his clothes on and headed down the stairs.

He passed two students as he went, neither of who would meet his gaze as it fell on them. Harry felt stabs of anger in his chest as he continued down the stairwell. When he reached the bottom, the few people who milled around the common room chatting to one another suddenly seemed to find the floor very interesting, as they stood shuffling their feet in silence.

Those who had been flicking idly through spell books took a sudden interest in them, burying their noses deep as if their very lives depended on the knowledge that lay within. Harry ignored their obvious avoidance of him and crossed the floor, leaving through the portrait hole without looking back.

As he made his way through the corridors, he passed yet more students who seemed suddenly fascinated with the drab stone walls or the scuffed floor, and by the time he entered the courtyard, he was beginning to feel like the invisible boy, when a voice broke into his thoughts.

'Harry'

He looked over his shoulder to see Luna Lovegood coming towards him from under the giant willow tree, where her fellow DA members lingered. The anger in him faded instantly as he saw her abnormally large eyes glistening with barely held tears. He walked over to meet her half way, stopping awkwardly in front of her.

She and Neville had been good friends, maybe even more than that, and he could sense she needed something from him. She stepped forward and hugged him, and for some reason, even though he had loathed any touch until then, he didn't pull away. In fact, he hugged her back, and even found some solace in her embrace.

'Neville would have followed you anywhere,' she said in her far away voice. Harry tightened his arms around her briefly as he swallowed back the pain. 'He was right to believe in you.' She said, pulling away as the others came up behind her. 'We still … believe in you.'

A hand came down on his shoulder and Harry looked up to see Seamus standing beside him with Dean at his back. He scanned the forlorn faces before him. Ernie and Susan were looking on with pained smiles, and Hannah and Lavender both had quiet tears running down their faces as Justin nodded at him reassuringly. The Creevey brothers, though their faces were long and pale, both held their thumbs up in approval. Having their support in the face of so much grief brought a lump to his throat. Unable to talk, he nodded his head in thanks, before turning from them and heading to the lake.

Harry felt like his life was slowly crumbling down around him. Things had gotten so difficult, and messy, that he was beginning to feel like he'd lost his way. Where once he had known the direction he must take, full of determination and conviction, now … now he felt like he was wandering blindly in the dark, the path lost to him forever.

Trudging down the sludgy snow scattered slopes, he registered a puff of smoke rising into the air out of the corner of his eye. Turning, he realized it was coming from Hagrid's hut, so he abruptly changed direction and headed over to it, his heartbeat quickening along with his footsteps at the thoughts that Hagrid was back. He at least, was okay. As he climbed the stairs, he could hear muffled voices coming from within. His hand was raised, ready to knock, when he heard something that made him freeze.

'I'm really worried about him, Hagrid.' Hermione's voice was unmistakable. *'You should see him. You'd barely recognize him. He doesn't eat, he looks ill all of time. He's pushing himself too hard. If he's not careful he wont…'*

Harry thrust the door open having heard enough. Hermione was seated in one of the huge wooden, oversized chairs at the table, with Ron standing behind her, and Hagrid bent over the fire, poking at it with a long forked metal prong. Three startled faces looked over at him as he glared at them angrily, infuriated that they were discussing him as if he needed watching. He had taken care of himself his whole life in one way or another, and the last thing he needed right now was his closest friends ganging up on him. Doubting him.

'Harry!' Hermione's faced flushed bright pink guiltily. 'How are you fee-'
'I don't appreciate being talked about behind my back.' Harry said angrily through gritted teeth, his excitement over seeing Hagrid safe and sound, overtaken by his ire.
'We weren't,' Ron said with surprise 'we thought you were still sleeping or we would have-'
'Oh really, you weren't?' Harry glared at them. He had felt under a great deal of pressure lately, even before the added burden of Neville's death, but he had thought he'd been dealing with it all

rather well. He had thought he was facing up to his responsibilities. They couldn't possibly understand what it was like for him.

'I think it's time you two wen' up to lunch,' Hagrid said looking at Ron and Hermione from under his brow, then turning Harry, he said 'and you … you and I have some catchin' up to do.'

Hermione stood up, eyeing Harry with uncertainty, and he noticed her hand sought out Ron's, closing around it so tightly her knuckles whitened.

'We'll see you after lunch,' Ron said. Harry stepped aside, suddenly unwilling to vent his anger on them further. He had seen the hurt look on Ron's face, and he chided himself for being so tense. They were his best friends. Rightly or wrongly, they were concerned about him. The door clicked shut behind them before Hagrid spoke again.

'Looks like we both have some s'plainin' to do.'

Harry sat himself stiffly in Hermione's vacated chair, eyeing Hagrid warily. Hagrid stopped prodding the burning wood and without looking at Harry, he went to the cupboards and busied himself with making a pot of tea.

'I was gonna come up and see yeh later, but its better yer here. Ron tells me you've been busy.'
'You could say that.' Harry aimed at Hagrid, who still had his back to him. He blames me. He thought. He blames me for Neville's death. Hagrid had never turned on Harry in all the time he'd known him, but now it seemed even he would not forgive Harry for letting Neville die. A sickening ache panged through him as his anger melted into regret, his body sagging in the chair.

'I'd do anything to take it back, Hagrid.' He said quietly. Hagrid stopped spooning tea into the pot as Harry added under his breath 'Anything.' He bit down on his pain as he dropped his gaze to the floor, which had become a blur. The harsh sound of Hagrid scraping a chair across the wooden floor, grated in the thick air as he sat down.

'I knew you'd be blamin yerself. As sure as I knew you would have done everythin you could to save him. An' all I can say-'
'I didn't do everything I could,' Harry lifted his gaze to meet Hagrid's pained frown. 'I was obsessed with catching Bellatrix … I wasn't watching out for Neville. I could have stopped him … I could have ordered him back to Hogwarts, instead I-'

'Not from what Ginny tells me, you couldn't.' Hagrid interrupted him. 'Neville wouldn't have come back here no matter wha you migh have said. He 'ad one thin on his mind when he left here. An' it seems to me, he knew he weren't comin back.' Hagrids eyes were bloodshot and swollen as he sniffed back the tears.

'He should have come back. He defeated Bellatrix. He avenged his mum and dad. He won.' Harry said, his voice becoming more strained as he spoke. Hagrid was looking at him in deep concern.
'Remember wha he said Harry. Remember 'is partin message. It were fer you. That's how much he thought of yeh. Remember tha'!'
Harry swallowed painfully and rubbed his eyes under his glasses.

'I want it all to stop, Hagrid.' He said. He hadn't meant to off-load, but Hagrid was the only one he knew who wouldn't be terrified to hear the "Chosen One" saying he wasn't up to the job. 'I'm so tired of it all.' He straightened his glasses and looked at Hagrid. 'I don't think I can do it anymore, even if I wanted to. I can't go through it again. I cant watch anyone else I care about die.'

'I know wha yeh must be feelin, but yeh know there's nothing for it. Yeh have to go on. There's no escapin it.' Hagrid's tears that had threatened ever since he sat down now came tumbling down his chubby, flushed cheeks.

Harry spoke softly, yet gravely as his eyes search the table, looking for the right words 'I feel like … like I'm ... dying inside.' Hagrid sniffed heavily and wiped at his face with his hands.

'Its only natural, but yer strong Harry,' he said defiantly, standing again to resume pouring tea into two cups 'Dumbledore believed in you, an tha' should be good enough fer anyone, including you.'

‘Dumbledore believed in Snape,’ Harry said darkly to himself ‘it was his fault I wasn’t in any condition to help Neville.’

‘Whadya mean?’

Harry looked up. At first he was stunned at what he had just let slip, but then he thought maybe he had meant Hagrid to hear. He had a need to share his experience with someone, and Hagrid somehow seemed like the right choice.

‘Whadya mean, it was Snape’s fault, eh?’ Hagrid said irritably, frowning intently, then something seemed to dawn on him. ‘He ‘ad somethin to do with tha spell, didn't he? It were one of 'is!’ Harry stared guiltily from under his brow at Hagrid’s angry face hovering above him.

Hagrid took his silence for agreement and scoffed, slamming the two mugs of tea down on the table so hard that one of them broke, spraying hot brown liquid all over the table, the floor, and them, shocking Harry out of his gloomy despair. He jumped to his feet as Hagrid bellowed. ‘Wha’ the bloody ‘ell is goin on? Ron and ‘Ermione said there was somethin strange with yeh! Wha are yer up to, eh? Wha have yeh gotten yerself in fer?’ Harry had never seen Hagrid this angry before, and he was regretting his moment of weakness, but there was no going back now.

‘Before I tell you, I need to know,’ Harry said, his heartbeat racing as he watched Hagrid ‘Does Legilimens work on you?’
‘Wha?’
‘Just tell me! Can other wizards see into your mind?’ Harry knew Hagrid had resistance to magic because of his Giant lineage, and hoped it meant that it worked on Legilimens as well.
‘Of course they cant! … Sept maybe Dumbledore!’ Hagrid said, waving an arm about angrily. ‘Wha the bloody ‘ell do yeh need to know tha fer?’ Harry breathed out in relief.

‘Snape … paid me a visit.’ He said hesitantly.
‘Paid yeh a visit?’ Hagrid repeated with an undertone, still incredibly angrily. ‘You’ve seen tha maggoty wretch?’
‘Yes … twice,’ Harry swallowed. Hagrid opened his mouth but no sound came out, seemingly too outraged to know what to say. He clamped his lips together, making them disappear in his wiry beard, his eyes glittering dangerously as he leaned over the table and thrust a finger at Harry.

‘You’re playin a dangerous game mixin with the likes of ‘im!’ Hagrid said threateningly.
‘It wasn’t something I had much of a choice in actually.’ Harry said, starting to lose his temper.
‘He’s no good, I’m telling yeh! He killed Dumbledore, an he’ll probably use the killin curse on you an’ all, once he’s finished with yeh.’
‘It’s a risk I have to take.’ Harry said slowly through gritted teeth.
‘I cant believe you’d be fool enough teh …’ Hagrid seemed to be so mad, he didn’t know what to say. ‘YOU’LL GET YERSELF KILLED!’
‘HE’S THE ONE WHO WARNED US ABOUT THE ATTACK!’ Harry yelled back.

Hagrid looked stunned as they stood there, glaring at each other for a moment. Then Harry planted himself in the chair and told Hagrid about Snapes' visits, and how he had given him the scroll.

‘So the spell was ‘is, then?’
‘Yes.’
Hagrid looked down at his enormous hands as he fidgeted with his fingers.
‘Killed all of them critters, it did…’ He said, fresh tears starting to form in his eyes again. Harry raised his eyebrows.
‘They would have eaten people Hagrid.’
‘Only cos they were put in the middle of a buffet. Never harmed no one out on their little island, did they? Kept to ‘emselves, didn’t they? It’s not their fault.’ Hagrid brushed a tear from his cheek. Harry had not revelled in the monstrous Quintapeds deaths, but he wasn’t all that sorry either.

‘I didn’t know the spell was going to be like that.’ He said tentatively. ‘I didn’t know what it would do,’ Harry’s voice darkened again ‘Snape neglected to tell us that part. Just like he neglected to tell us we would be sitting ducks for the Death Eaters when they moved in.’
‘Whadya mean?’ Hagrid met Harry’s gaze.

‘The spell had a tranquillising effect on us. It almost got Ron and Hermione killed. If it hadn’t been for Lupin, they wouldn’t have made it back.’ Harry’s anger boiled at Snapes callousness.
‘Wha about you? ‘Ow come you didn’t fall asleep?’
‘It affected me differently; Julie said it was because I was ill at the time, already coming down with a fever ... something to do with my body temperature, I don’t know. But the point is Snape put Ron and Hermione’s lives in danger by not warning us!’

‘Oh, you’ve met Julie then have yer?’ It was an innocent enough question, but Harry’s guilt made him react evasively. He sat back in the chair without looking at Hagrid.
‘Yes’
‘Nice girl … got a good heart. It was her who fixed yeh up then?’ Hagrid asked raising an eyebrow. Harry nodded. Hagrid was looking at Harry curiously.

‘Hagrid’ he began ‘you can’t tell anyone about Snape, not Lupin or any other order member; not even McGonagall, okay?’
‘I don’t like it Harry. I mean, you said yerself tha’ he didn’t care enough to warn wha the spell would do to yeh.’ Hagrid frowned ‘Now its over, it’d prolly be best to tell ‘em.’
‘No,’ Harry shook his head slightly ‘If we do that, he’ll never be able to warn us again.’
‘An yeh think he will?’ Hagrid asked, his beetle-like eyes widening.
‘I don’t know, but I do know if we expose him, he won’t be in a position to, even if he wanted to.’

They both fell quiet for a moment, before Hagrid went to a cupboard, pulling out something that Harry could only assume was bread, though the thud it made as it hit the bench top made it sound more like a boulder, and then grabbing a knife that looked more like a saw, he started to hack through it.

He offered Harry a sandwich, and though his stomach still grumbled with hunger, he had sworn off Hagrids stoat sandwiches years before. Hagrid persisted, echoing Hermione’s criticism saying he had dark rings under his eyes and looked thin, so that eventually Harry realized the only thing that would placate him was if he agreed to leave straight away, and head to the Great Hall for what was left of lunch.

‘Where have you been, anyway?’ Harry turned in the doorway as he left, to look at Hagrid.
‘I’ve bin getting back teh me grass roots, yeh might say.’ He said as he pulled what looked like a leg of cured ham off the ceiling, though Harry doubted it was anything as normal as that.
‘Has it helped?’
‘these things take time. I left GRAWP behind, so I can’t stay long either, just in case. I came back to talk to McGonagall and Lupin.’
‘Lupin? Is he here?’
‘Aye. ‘Least he was an hour ago, and it looked like he was in no hurry teh leave.’
Harry turned and passed through the door.

'Be careful Harry. Don’t trust 'im. And don’t turn yeh back on 'im either.' Harry didn't need to ask whom he was referring to.

He hurried back to the castle, bypassing the Great Hall and speeding up the passageways and stairwells until he reached McGonagall’s office. Shouting the password before he’d even reached the gargoyle, he continued as it leapt aside. He rode the spiralling stairway up; stopping only when he was outside the office, where he could hear Lupins raised voice through the closed doors.

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Harry knocked on the door, unwilling to overhear something that would annoy him for the second time that day. Opening the door at McGonagall’s command, he was surprised to see not only Lupin, but Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Aberforth, and Julie as well. Lupin had fallen silent the moment Harry had knocked, and as soon as Mrs. Weasley had seen Harry, she rushed at him, flinging her arms around him, and fervently patting him down as if looking for injuries, apparently unaware she was gripping him so tightly he was struggling for breath.

‘Mrs. … Weasley…’ Harry managed to get out as he started to come over faint.

'Molly, let him breathe.' Lupin said, obviously aware of Harry's discomfort. She pulled away from him, her eyes swollen with tears.
'This wont do Harry, this wont do at all!' seemed all she could bring herself to say.

'Harry, I'm glad you're here,' Mr. Weasley made his way over to him and put his hand on Harry's back, directing him into the empty chair in front of McGonagall's desk. Harry sat down reluctantly, all eyes turned on him. He knew what they were thinking. They were scared for him, certainly, but there was another, more unnerving reason they wanted to talk to him.

Lupin perched himself on the corner of McGonagall's desk with his hands dug deep in the stretched pockets of his shabby fawn cardigan, staring down at him. McGonagall was sat behind the desk, looking decidedly uncomfortable as she motioned Mrs. Weasley to sit in the vacant chair beside Harry.

'We need to ask you a few questions Harry, and I want you to answer them as truthfully as you can.' Mr. Weasley said as he positioned himself with one hand resting on the top of McGonagall's high-backed chair. Harry was beginning to wish he'd gone to the Great Hall for lunch, instead of coming up here looking for Lupin. It hadn't occurred to him that he would have to face them all together like this. McGonagall refused to meet his enquiring gaze as Lupin spoke.

'How did you know about the attack on Hogsmeade?'
It was straight and to the point, and Lupin had asked it in a manner that left no doubt in Harry's mind he was expecting a good answer, and would settle for nothing less. As Lupin gazed at Harry from under his brow waiting for a response, Harry shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

'It just sort of … came to me,' he said finally, thinking of Snapes un-welcomed visit at Grimmauld Place.
'Came to you?' Lupin eyed Harry with determination. Harry looked him straight in the eye, with at least as much conviction as he spoke.
'Yes.'
'What, like in a dream?' Mr. Weasley asked frowning at Harry.
'Not exactly, more like a nightmare.' Harry added under his breath.

They were not happy with his answer. Harry could sense the frustration and anger building behind Lupins apparent cool persona, and he could feel the tension coming from McGonagall and Mr. Weasley as they watched them.

'I know you have been given responsibilities that you cannot share with us, however, I'm warning you Harry,' Lupin paused and held Harry's gaze 'If you continue to shut us out so completely, we may not be able to help you when you need us the most.'

'I know'
Harry breathed out and stood up, uncomfortable at seeming so vulnerable in the chair. He began walking around the office, glancing at the surrounding paintings that snorted and snuffled as they "slept".

'Harry dear, we're trying to help you.' Mrs. Weasleys voice quivered as she spoke. Harry did not look at her, but continued to walk the rim of the room, eyeing the paintings, stopping when he got to Dumbledores portrait. He looked as peaceful as ever, seemingly oblivious to the worries that plagued them all. Harry studied the portrait, waiting for what he least needed to hear, and yet knowing it was coming.

'You must understand Harry,' so it was Mr. Weasley, who would say it, Harry thought. 'All of us are invested in this war, every last one of us. Don't you see, without our help, more people are going to get killed? By not telling us what's going on, you're effectively asking us to leave the fate of our families, our friends, and everyone else for that matter, in the hands of … of a seventeen year old boy.' There it was. Disappointment flooded Harry as he hung his head for a brief moment before lifting it again and turning on his accusers.

'Voldemort chose me. He started this. I did not appoint myself. And it was Dumbledore who taught me that I would have to meet his challenge.' Harry's voice was cool, emotionless, like there was nothing left inside to feel. 'I watched Neville die three nights ago, and Gabrielle, just over three

months ago. I watched Dumbledore murdered a month before that. And I watched Sirius killed almost a year before that.' Harry paused. The room was silent except for Mrs. Weasleys sobs, which she tried desperately to muffle with a handkerchief held to her mouth. 'Voldemort chose me.' Harry repeated. 'I used to fear the future because I felt like I had no control over it, but things are different now. Now I choose Voldemort.'

Sir and Julie had said nothing the whole time, only watching from the sidelines, almost like uninvited guests. But at this, Sir leaned sideways and whispered something in Julies ear. She nodded faintly, looking at Harry under heavy eyelids.

'I am partially responsible for Neville's death. I know that.' Harry vaguely registered their pained looks, but he continued on, not wanting their sympathy 'But he knew what he was doing that night. He went out there against my wishes to make things right for himself, and his family. And he did. And I can only hope that I can do the same when the time comes.'

Harry felt his anger rear 'Voldemort will stand accountable for what he's done ... for what he's doing. And right now, the best way to defeat him is to keep my word to Dumbledore.' Harry's steadiness was being threatened by a dull ache that had been growing within him. 'Don't you think I'm not doing everything I can to prevent further deaths? I've lost people I loved too! People who were trying to help me ... I don't want to lose anyone else...' Unable to continue, Harry battled to keep himself together as he looked from Lupin to McGonagall, noticing the doubt in their faces.

'I know this is hard for you to comprehend, but there was no other way I could have dealt with the attack on Hogsmeade. You were informed about it within minutes of me knowing what was going to happen. I was not about to put anyone else in danger if I could help it. There was no other way. You must understand! There was no other way ... ' in a fit of desperation, Harry swung round to Dumbledores portrait. 'Dumbledore, you know better than anyone … say something! Please! Tell them I didn't have a choice!'

For a few seconds it appeared everyone waited with bated breath. Harry watched the portrait intently, relying on the fact that Dumbledore would not abandon him in his hour of need. After what felt like an eternity of silence, while the sleeping form of Dumbledore did not stir, but snoozed on, Harry began to feel the attention of the others redirected to him, staring into his back. Perhaps they felt sorry for him, or maybe even thought him mad. Harry turned from the painting, despondent and feeling foolish.

'It appears there is nothing left to say.' He walked to the door, ignoring Mrs. Weasleys distraught calls, and rode the stairs back to the passageway where the Gargoyle leapt back into place behind him. He felt alone, betrayed. Why hadn't Dumbledore backed him up? Had he been so wrong in what he did?

He made his way to his dormitory and started filling his backpack with clothes and anything he might need in the near future. He wrote a note to Ron, leaving the marauders map with him, and grabbing the chest that contained the last of his parent's possessions, he headed down the stairwell, crossed the common room, and climbed through the portrait hole. As he yanked his invisibility cloak free of his rather full pocket, a voice he had not expected to hear made him turn.

'Leaving then, are you?' The Fat Lady was looking down her nose at him, her hands grasped in her lap, and her face stony.
'That's right' Harry turned his back on her, not sure he could bear to hear her satisfaction.
'I never pegged you for a quitter.'
'What?' Harry turned on her, his anger evident in his tone.
'A quitter!' she said shortly. 'Never thought you'd give in so easily.'
'Yeah, well it looks like that's just one more thing about me people don't know.' Harry was feeling rather savage.

'You're proving them right by running away, you know.'
'I'm-not-running-away!'
'Really?' she raised her eyebrows at him. 'What would you call it then?'
'What do you care? I'd have thought you'd be glad to see the back of me.'
'And why is that?' She watched him for a moment as he had trouble meeting her gaze. 'Ah, of course, guilt… The most soul destroying of all self induced miseries.' She was watching Harry so

intently, that it unnerved him greatly.

‘You were no more to blame for Neville’s fate, than you are to blame for being the "Chosen One".’ Her voice cracked as she said Neville’s name. Harry closed his eyes briefly then resumed walking. He passed along the many corridors and stairwells, and as he descended the marble staircase, he almost collided with someone.

‘Sorry’ Harry said, without looking up.
‘Harry’
He was yanked from his thoughts by a familiar and welcome voice. He looked back to see it was Julie who he had collided with, and now she was stepping down the stairs towards him.

‘I was just on my way up to find you.’ She looked almost apologetic for imposing on him. ‘Aberforth said you would leave.’ But Harry welcomed her intrusion.
‘He was right.’ Harry said.
‘I know a place you can stay, for now at least. Aberforth seemed to think it might be the safest place for you at the moment … if you’re looking for somewhere, that is.’

Harry had no idea where he was headed when he packed his things, though he had a pouch full of Galleons, thanks to Bills foresight, but he was also aware that he was highly recognizable, so it had to be somewhere he could lay low.
‘Sure,’ Harry answered ‘Where?’

‘I’ll take you.’ Julie took his hand and led him down the rest of the staircase. Harry’s eyes barely left the floor as they made their way down, deep in his own thoughts. When they reached the foot of the stairs, she stopped and embraced Harry in a warm hug. 'They don't understand, Harry. They mean well...'

‘I know.’ He said quietly as he squeezed her back. He had been feeling at a loose end, and was glad to have someone who could ground him again. She was in tune to what he needed, and he found he did not want to pull back from the comfortable feel of her.

Ron and Hermione came strolling into view over Julies shoulder. They had just left the Great Hall, Hermione carefully carrying a plate full of food. He let go of Julie sharply, aware that Ron's gaze had instantly fallen on the two of them.

‘I was just bringing you up some lunch.’ Hermione said uncomfortably as she looked between Harry and Julie. ‘I thought you might be hungry…’ her voice trailed off.
‘Doesn’t look like he has food on his mind.’ Ron said coldly as he eyed the two of them. Julie stepped back from Harry in an effort to distance herself, picking up on the awkwardness of the situation.

‘I-I was just leaving,’ was all Harry could manage.

'Leaving?' Ginny was stepping forward from the Great Hall entrance where she had obviously been watching them. Her eyes flicked from Harry to Julie, and then back to Harry again, taking in his backpack as she walked towards them. She stopped by Ron’s side and with deadened eyes, she spoke to Harry. ‘Aren't you going to introduce us?’

‘Er … this … this is Julie. A healer. Er … she’s the one who helped me ... a-a-after Hogsmeade.’ He swallowed nervously. Ron looked at Julie with a piercing glare as Harry continued, ‘Julie, er … Ron Weasley,’ Julie smiled warmly at him, and took the few steps towards Ron, reaching out her hand to shake it, which softened Ron somewhat. ‘And this is Hermione,’ Harry added, motioning to Hermione as she off-loaded her plate full of food onto Ginny to shake Julies hand. ‘And …,’ Harry did not meet Ginny’s eyes ‘Ginny, Ginny Weasley.’ Julie turned to Ginny.

‘I’m sorry, I’d shake your hand, but I’m rather … overloaded at the moment.’ Ginny said, her hands clutching the food plate still, ‘Where are you going?’ she directed at Harry. Harry shrugged, and Ginny took him by the hand, pulling him away from the others.

‘What you are doing?’ She asked, her tone flat and her eyes dangerously overcast.
‘Well, I-I don’t know where I'm going-’

‘That’s not what I mean,’ She said gravely, her eyes glistening, ‘what's going on, Harry?’
Harry looked everywhere but at Ginny, her pain and suspicion too much for him to face. That seemed to be all the answer she needed.

Lifting her arm, she threw the plate of food at the wall, narrowly missing a disgruntled looking portrait of a Victorian gentleman who unceremoniously scrambled for cover. Harry dropped his parent’s chest, sending it crashing to the floor in an effort to grab Ginny's arm, attempting to stall her and explain, but she struggled free and scurried up the stairs with bitter tears filling her eyes.

18. Julie's Pen Friend

‘Is she your girlfriend?’ Julie asked apparently to thin air, but Harry was concealed under his cloak, trudging alongside her as they headed to the Hogwarts Gates, glad she couldn’t see him.

‘She was, once.’ He had wanted to chase Ginny up the stairs, to try to explain himself, to make her understand, but the warning look he had received from Ron held him back.

They continued down to the gates, and once through, Harry looked about him. ‘Where to?’

‘Outside the Hog’s Head I think. We’ll go from there.’

They disapparated and appeared almost instantly outside Sir’s pub. Harry followed Julie silently, still stewing over Ginny’s pain. He could only imagine what she must be feeling, and going by her reaction, he was beginning to understand she might never find it in her heart to forgive him.

A sickening ache swelled in him as he thought of when he had tried to restrain her, how she had fought to get free of him. It should never have come to this. And to make matters worse, Ron was going to be almost as bigger hurdle for Harry. He hadn’t said a word after Ginny had flung the plate passed Harry and then run from him. He had only glared at Harry as if he too, was feeling as betrayed as Ginny.

Harry stopped as Julie placed a rather ornate looking golden key in the lock of a small purple door, jiggling it several times in what looked like a well practiced knack. He glanced up at the sign above the narrow studio. “JAFZ” it said in large purple letters, and underneath in very small writing, there were several symbols that Harry recognized to be runes, though their meanings were lost on him.

Julie walked in and waited for Harry to enter, before closing, and locking the door behind them. Harry removed his cloak and realized he was standing in a waiting room of sorts, though it was nothing like any he’d ever been in before.

The chairs were ordinary enough, but it was the walls that caught his eye. They were not covered with the usual health warnings and advertisements for medications; instead they contained two full-length moving murals.

One of which was a small grassy hill, dotted with purple and white heather, where the long grass and the shrubs rippled gently in an invisible breeze that wafted pleasantly over them, and running through the middle of the field, a trickling stream with an old stone arched bridge connected the two banks, completing the scene. In the background was one of the most beautiful sunsets Harry had ever seen, with its fiery oranges and pinkish-purple glow adding to the surreal appearance of the picture.

On the adjoining wall the other picture, though quite different from the first, was just as beautiful. A log cabin, nestled in small mounds of the purest white snow was surrounded by massively tall, straight pine trees, which were being constantly dusted with large, feather-light snowflakes that drifted soundlessly down to the ground. The snow on the branches glittered as if someone had draped tiny white fairy lights through their perfect branches, and a warm orange glow shone from the cross-pained, cottage windows as a lazy ribbon of smoke drifted from the chimney atop the snow-laden roof, giving the cabin a homely and inviting feel. Studying the two murals, Harry had the feeling he could almost walk right into them.

‘I wouldn’t mind losing myself in them some days.’ Julie said, as if reading his thoughts. ‘Come one, I’ll take you upstairs to my flat. It’s not very big, but it’ll do for the two of us.’ They mounted the stairs marked “STAFF ONLY” and Harry found himself in a one room apartment that had a small kitchenette containing minimal cupboards and a sink, a leather lounge which was quite new looking, though it was scratched around the arms, a canopied double bed that was reminiscent of the ones at the Hog’s Head, a small fireplace, and bathroom leading off from the lounge.

‘I’ll fix you some lunch.’

‘I don’t have much of an appetite.’ Harry said dully.

Julie eyed him as he flung his backpack in the corner, and leaned on the back of the couch.

‘That girl, Ginny … you love her?’ she asked as she moved to stand in front of him.

‘I … I don’t know.’ He did love her. He knew it now more than ever, but he was not sure he wanted to talk about this with Julie, or with anyone for that matter. He had managed to keep Ginny separate, protected, and he would prefer to keep it that way.

‘So does she know? About us, I mean.’ She had moved in so her leg leant against his. Harry met her eyes, frowning slightly.

‘Us?’ He asked, beginning to feel uncomfortable.

‘I didn’t mean it like that.’ She smiled at him quickly and took a step back. ‘Though from what happened, I’m guessing she’s figured out there was something between us. Am I right?’ She was looking for Harry to open up to her about it, but he was not willing to go into it with her.

‘I’d rather not talk about it. It’s not important.’ He said.

‘Sure.’ She shrugged. ‘Make yourself at home,’ she turned and descended the stairs ‘I’ll be back in a minute.’

Harry went to the bathroom and washed his face and hands, staring at himself in the mirror. He was still tiring all too easily and figured he ought to take Julie up on her offer of food. When he emerged, she was standing at the kitchen, pulling lunch things from the cupboards.

‘Maybe I will have something to eat, if that’s okay?’ he said as he came up behind her.

‘Good to see you’ve come to your senses. You need three meals a day if you want to be at your peak, Harry. Here,’ she picked up a cup filled with the same purple liquid she had given to him after she had brought back his memory of Neville. ‘Drink this.’

‘I don’t need anymore sleep.’ He said waving it away.

‘It’s not a sleeping potion; it’s … a tonic of sorts. It’ll help you recover your strength.’ She pushed it at him. ‘Go on!’ He took the cup, hesitating for a split second, and then drank it down as she watched. ‘You’ll feel better in no time.’ She said as she smiled. She turned back to buttering the bread when there was a knock at the door.

‘I forgot.’ Julie said as she rolled her eyes. ‘Pen’s coming over tonight to help go through the books. Would you mind?’ she asked as she handed him the butter knife. He took over throwing some sandwiches together as Julie greeted her visitor.

‘Harry!’ He looked round as Julie came up the stairs clutching an armful of paperwork. ‘This is Pen,’ she motioned her head to the young woman traipsing up the stairs behind her, also loaded with what appeared to be entry books ‘an old friend of mine. We used to go to Hogwarts together.’

‘I know who she is,’ Harry said as he turned to look at the new arrival appraisingly ‘Though I don’t think we’ve ever been introduced.’ As they dumped their night’s work onto the small round kitchen table, Harry leaned over and offered Pen his hand. She took it hesitantly, and smiled shyly at him.

‘So tell me Miss Clearwater, how is Percy these days?’

Penelope Clearwater had stayed till quite late in the evening, helping Julie with her paperwork, and though Harry had tried to make small talk during dinner, casually slipping in the odd enquiry after Percy, Pen had seemed unwilling to discuss him, saying only that he was away on business rather a lot with his job, and indicating he was somewhat secretive about what it was he was actually doing for the Ministry. In the end, Harry gave up and left the two of them to their work, retiring early because there was little else to do while he was cooped up in Julies flat.

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When Harry woke the next morning, rubbing his scar idly as it panged, his whole body ached as he swung his legs to the floor. He had had to lay in the same uncomfortable position on the couch all night, because it was at least a foot and a half too short for him, making it almost impossible for him to move during his sleep.

Julie had offered to share her bed, but Harry had decided to settle for discomfort and keep his distance from her. Even though Ginny may never forgive him, he had neither the intention of repeating his betrayal of her, nor giving her any reason to suspect he that may have. After easing himself off the couch, Harry pulled on his shirt, took out his message log with the vague hope that Hermione might have tried to contact him, and as he flicked through the pages, he was surprised to see that she had seemingly been trying to contact him urgently since yesterday.

Her first message was that she felt sure there was a rational explanation for what they had all seen in the entrance, and that Harry should return as soon as possible to sort it all out before his absence assured his guilt. Further down the page, which she must have written first thing this morning, she had said that Ginny had refused to discuss what happened with either Hermione or Ron, and according to her room mates, had spent the entire night staring out of the window, ignoring others pleas for her to get some sleep.

Harry’s stomach twisted painfully at the thoughts of her so alone.

The next message was also urging him to return to the castle to patch things up with Ron as it appeared he had taken the events almost as hard as Ginny, and every time Hermione had tried to mention Harry, Ron had scowled her threateningly into silence.

There were several more entries, each shorter than the last, all urging Harry to come back, until the final message, scrawled hastily and limited to one line said:

‘Meet me at the Hog’s Head at 11am. URGENT!

Harry looked at the clock on the wall in the kitchen. It was already 10.45, so he dashed to the bathroom, careful not to wake Julie, and ran some water through his hair in an attempt to push his fringe down over his scar, and then grabbing his things, he headed to Sir’s pub.

He didn’t stop to think to use his invisibility cloak, his mind overrun with worry about Ginny. Hermione hadn’t mentioned her in the last couple of entries, and every possible horrible scenario had started to plague his thoughts, all coming to the same thing, wondering desperately if she had done something rash.

He arrived at the Hog’s Head with five minutes to spare. Sir saw him and nodded to the corner of the room where Hermione was already seated. She had not seen Harry enter as her nose was buried in the latest copy of the Daily Prophet, but when Harry reached her, he yanked the paper from her hands, staring down at her impatiently. Hermione looked up startled.

‘Ginny’ he breathed. ‘Is she …’ guilt swamped him. ‘Is she okay? Is she still at Hogwarts?’

Hermione nodded in understanding ‘She’s still there. Don’t worry. I spoke to her at breakfast.’

Harry breathed out heavily in relief and collapsed into the chair opposite Hermione.

'You need to come back, Harry. And not just because of Ron and Ginny.' She was looking at him earnestly as she picked up the copy of the Daily Prophet and tossed it in front of him.

'What's this?' he said, picking it up to study the article. Hermione had a worried look on her face as she watched Harry's eyes skim the front page.

'They're out, Harry. All of them!' Her brow furrowed as she looked for his reaction. 'A couple escaped form Azkaban about a month ago, one of them Avery, of course. But now …' she hesitated as if it were the last thing in the world she wanted to say 'they're all out.' Harry's anger showed on his face as he continued to scan the column. 'They killed several of the ministry guards … a-and three aurors.' Harry looked up at her suddenly. 'No-one we know' she said quickly 'but it looks like the Ministry has completely lost control.'

'Malfoy will be out too then?' Harry said in disgust as he threw the paper across the table.

'Yes, and no one seems to have a clue where they are.' The two of them were silent for a moment before Hermione spoke again.

'Harry, tell me about Julie.'

Harry took a deep breath and let out a defeatist sigh as he thought of what he should say. Life was becoming complicated enough with the mistruths he had already had to tell about Snape, and everything he was feeling over what had happened with Julie was only making it worse. It was time to tell the truth, and he felt he could trust Hermione implicitly, even if they didn't always agree.

'Sir called in Julie to help me when I fell ill after that spell we used on Halloween. He needed someone who would keep quiet about where I was, but had the healing skills to help me. She nursed me back to health, feeding me potions, and healing my broken ribs, but because of the spells effects I lost my memory of that night, so she had to performed legilimency on me so I would remember what had happened to Neville.'

Harry had been staring at an extremely small, and rather strange little man hidden in the shadows of the corner of the room as he spoke, but now he met Hermiones tentative gaze. 'It sounds strange, but I don't think I was myself. I don't know why it happened, but Julie and I … we … She knew Neville too, quite well through his grandmother, and I don't know … I can't explain what it was, I was so angry … and frustrated, that … for some reason … I couldn't help it ... I didn't set out to spend the night with her.' Harry sighed as he avoided eye contact with Hermione.

He finally looked up at Hermione as her eyes glazed over, ready for her to abandon him too, but instead she took his hand and squeezed it.

'Oh Harry, I'm so sorry you had to go through all of that.' Her eyes brimmed with tears. 'I'm not saying what you did was right. But I think I understand.'

'What I understand is I've messed up my friendship with Ron, and I've done something horrible to the one person in this world I never wanted to hurt.' He said gravely.

'That's why you need to come back. You have to make things right before you lose the chance to.' She suddenly changed her tact. 'Your bag was already packed when you came down the stairs.' she said. 'Why did you leave?'

Harry told her about what had happened in McGonagall's office, how they had railroaded him, and when he needed it most, Dumbledore had abandoned him. Hermione eyed him curiously.

'Dumbledore would never turn his back on you Harry.'

'You weren't there. That's exactly what he did. He had a chance to back me up, but he left me hanging.' Harry's anger surfaced again at the thoughts of it.

'He must have done it for a reason. Dumbledore's always been there for you ... think about it. Why

would he stay silent when he knows you desperately needed to hear from him?' She looked at Harry pointedly. 'He's ignored you before, and you didn't know it at the time then either, but he had good reason to.'

Just then, Aberforth brought a plate of bacon, eggs, tomatoes and toast, and plonked it down in front of Harry.

'I didn't order anything.' Harry said, looking up at him.

'Its on the house, eat it before it gets cold.' As Sir sidled away, Hermione stood up.

'I have to go. I'm meeting Zach in a few minutes at the Three Broomsticks.' She looked rather nervous.

'Really?' Harry raised an eyebrow. He'd been so caught up in his own dealings that he hadn't enquired after her for some time. 'How's it working out?

'Its fine' she replied in a high-pitched voice. Harry knew that tone in Hermione.

'Remember Hermione … if he's too much, get out! We can always find another way.'

'Please go back to Hogwarts.' she said soberly. 'I'm just not sure you're … in the best place for you right now.'

'I'll see, maybe in a couple of days. Give everyone a chance to cool off.'

When Harry returned to Julie's, she had left a tonic on the bench waiting for him, and he drank it down in the hopes he would feel more like his old self soon. He waited in the empty flat for hours, and when she finally turned up, they shared a dinner of curried lamb and rice she had brought back with her, and then they chatted by the fireside.

Before long, Harry was having trouble keeping his eyes open. He went to settle himself on the couch, but Julie eventually talked him around to sharing her bed, laughingly promising to resist him. So after downing her tonic, Harry collapsed on top of the sheets, not bothering to undress, and drifted off into a bottomless sleep.

It was still night when Harry was awoken, though the full moon cast a silvery glow through the room giving off enough light so that he could clearly see his surrounds. It took a moment for him to shake off his post sleep stupor before he realized that Julie was lying against him, slowly unbuttoning his shirt. He reached his hand up and clasped it firmly over hers, stopping her from going any further.

'No...' Harry said with disappointment as he met her gaze. She looked hurt at Harry's rejection, and pulled her hand away before sitting up.

'I thought…' she paused for a moment. 'No one would have to know,' she said quietly 'I wouldn't tell anyone, if that's what you're worried about.'

Harry raised himself into a sitting position and put his feet on the floor. 'What happened ... shouldn't have, and it cant again.' He said soberly, staring at the floor.

She remained silent so Harry turned to look at her.

She was staring blankly in front of her, clasping the sheet to her chest. 'You're right.'

Harry raised himself off the bed and headed for the couch, pulling off one of the blankets as he went.

'I'm sorry, I guess I just figured that it wouldn't hurt.'

'I understand,' he said as he lay on the couch and threw the blanket over him. 'But it would.' He knew he had hurt her, and if he hadn't already hopelessly lost himself in Ginny, he might have

taken her up on the offer. But there was too much at stake. He didn't want to hurt Ginny knowingly again … no matter how the need in him grew.

Harry woke the next morning to the sounds of Julie opening the door to a client downstairs. He knew it would be wrong of him to stay any longer, so he went to the bathroom, stripping off his clothing and throwing it in the corner, and stepped into the shower.

He returned to the lounge with a towel wrapped around his waist, and threw his backpack up onto the couch, pulling some fresh jeans, a shirt, and a jumper out. After dressing, he filled the pack with anything he'd left lying around the room, and then grabbing his parent's dented chest, he headed downstairs.

'Harry!'

He swung round to see Julie staring at him. She excused herself from her client who was looking rather put out as he laid out on an old hospital bed with an eyeball hanging from its socket, and hurried to head Harry off.

'Where are you going?' she asked as if it was the last thing she expected him to do.

'Back to Hogwarts.'

'Why? You know you can stay here as long as you want.' She almost seemed nervous.

'I know, and thanks … really.' Harry looked at her worried expression. 'Is everything okay?'

'Of course!' she said quickly. 'I'm just worried about you. Er … um, wait here for a moment!' she rushed off to one of the back rooms, leaving Harry to stare around the waiting room. The impossibly clear water trickled peacefully over the odd sized pebbles in the meadow picture, and the log cabin sitting nestled amongst the trees, whose branches bent under the weight of snow, had fresh footprints leading up to the door, the windows still giving off their warm golden glow.

'Here' Julie had returned with a crystal bottle filled with dark purple liquid, almost black in appearance. 'Take this. It's the potion … in concentrated form, so you only need seven drops mixed with water. M-Make sure you take it everyday un-until its finished.' As she handed it to him, her eyebrows creased.

'Thanks,' Harry said as he took it from her and shoved it in his backpack.

'I'm sorry, for the way I behaved before…' she said uncomfortably. 'I don't know what came over me, it wasn't right, and … I'm sorry'

'Forget it.' Harry said with a reassuring smile.

'Come back anytime, okay?' she gave him a light kiss on the lips. 'I'll be here if you need me.'

Harry nodded and turned, walking out the door and disapparating to appear in front of the Hogwarts Gates.

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His return to Hogwarts had been much as he expected. Ron had made himself rather scarce whenever Harry entered the same room, sitting some distance from him in class, and either retiring to bed long before was necessary, or not appearing at all until the early hours of the morning when he could be sure everyone else was asleep.

Harry grew frustrated that his dreams seemed to be filled with Julie since his return to Hogwarts, and it was not as if they were just having a friendly chat, some were dreams of the sort that were similar to the ones he'd only ever had about Ginny, and others were almost motherly. He couldn't understand it. He had thought he'd left her behind, sure his loyalties lay with Ginny, but it seemed

subconsciously, she was still very much in his thoughts.

There was another thing about sleep that had come to disturb him too. At first he found himself often waking in the morning, rubbing his finger along his scar as it tingled and panged against his forehead, but as the weeks passed, he would wake suddenly, sitting bolt upright in bed, clutching at his scar as it stung painfully.

But this was something he kept to himself. He had no idea why it was suddenly bothering him, but ultimately, as much as it disturbed him, he knew it wasn't likely to end until Voldemort was stopped.

Meal times in the Great Hall were so uncomfortable that Harry had decided to take his food down in the kitchen, where he was waited on eagerly by Dobby, and offered the occasional pungent morsels of food that were long past their best by Kreacher. But it was still preferable to sitting through Ron's dagger-like stares, and Ginny's hurtful avoidance of him, and even though Hermione had tried talking to Ron, it seemed as long as Ginny suffered, he was intent on making Harry suffer too.

Running the Defence Against the Dark Arts classes was proving more tiresome as well since Ron had stopped turning up to help. It was left to him and Hermione to manage the seventy odd students between them, though since the trio's rather famous battle at Hogsmeade, which had been spread all over the front pages of every wizarding paper and magazine within days of the event, a rather convenient effect had taken place.

The students had built up a familiarity with him over the previous months, making it difficult at times to keep order, but "The Unstoppable Chosen One" (as the Daily Prophet had described him) that had returned, rejuvenated their awe.

All except of course, Hunter, the one first year that seemed to think Harry was like a walking magnet for Voldemort. Three weeks before the Christmas break, Harry had begun teaching the students patronuses, and most, as expected, were struggling to produce even a wisp of grey smoke, but two weeks in, many of the older students were able to produce one at will.

Peter Taphet, the curly-haired first year he had met on the train, was one of those students who was still unable to produce even the wispy grey smoke, and Harry ventured over to him during one particular lesson because he had a rather worried look on his face.

'What's up?' Harry leaned down to the young boy. He had liked Peter from the first meeting, but had developed quite a soft spot for him after finding out from Professor McGonagall that not only had he lost both of his parents just over a year ago in Voldemorts first attempts at recruiting upon his return, but that he had also watched them being tortured to death as he peered through the wooden slats of the cupboard they had thrust him into. He'd had the misfortune of being placed with his only living relatives that could be found - muggles, who just so happened to be virtual clones of the Dursleys.

'I-I don't think II have a happy enough thought, Mr. Potter.' Peters cheeks flushed as he stumbled over his words. Harry crouched in front of him and gave him a wry smile.

'I didn't have one either when I was first learning how to do a patronus.' He said kindly. 'Sometimes you have to look deep inside yourself to remember what it is that makes you truly happy. And if you can find that thought, or memory, then its yours forever, and no-one can take that away from you.'

Peter nodded slowly, but still seemed to be unsure. 'What's your happy thought, Mr. Potter?'

Harry smiled. 'It's not always the same. As you grow, new situations create new happy thoughts.' Harry stood up and rubbed the boys hair affectionately. 'Don't worry, you'll find one Peter, if not from your past, then I'm sure you will in your future.'

'I've got a happy thought for him!' A sarcastic voice intruded. Harry closed his eyes briefly as he turned to the familiar voice. Hunter had obviously been listening, and was grinning with malicious glee. 'You'll be stuck here at Hogwarts Taphet, since your relatives don't want you home for Christmas, so you'll have almost four weeks free of being in the company of the Dark Lords number one target. That should cheer anyone up!'

Harry started to move forward, compelled to grab Hunter by the scruff of his neck, and point out at least one other person Peter should be happy about not being around for four weeks, but he felt Hermiones hand on his shoulder, gently holding him back.

She brushed passed him and stopped in front of Hunter, crossing her arms in front of her body determinedly. 'As you are so keen to be out of here, I feel sure I can oblige you. There is a little job that needs doing, which I think you would be perfect for. Follow me.' Hunter eyed her suspiciously, but didn't dare refuse, so he turned on the spot and trailed her reluctantly out of the Great Hall.

Once DADA was dismissed, Harry had an hour free before lunch, then he had his session with Sir, but he was feeling so tired again, still not fully recovered from his illness, that he decided to take the opportunity to lie down for a while.

Once upstairs he pulled out the bottle of potion Julie had given him and mixed five drops with water, before downing it in one go. The potion was good, though unfortunately the effects didn't seem to hold him all day. He lay back on the bed and closed his eyes.

But as usual, he was finding it hard to shut down his mind, and it wasn't long before he gave up and headed back down to the common room, feeling much more invigorated now the potion had had a chance to work through him. When he emerged at the bottom of the stairs, he looked around for someone to talk to, feeling full of energy.

At first, the room appeared empty, then spying the back of Hermione's bushy brown hair, he made a beeline for her, only to slow when he realized she was in the middle of an argument with Ron. They both had their backs to him, so he decided not to reveal himself.

He had been shut out of their dealings with Zach because Ron still had not forgiven him, but Harry was getting increasingly worried about Hermione lately. She had seemed distracted much of the time, and Harry had sensed things were not going as smoothly as she had hoped. He stood silently, listening.

'He only wants to show it to me because I asked him about places that were important to his family, Ron! You need to get a grip! He's too young to be thinking about marriage! Anyway, there's other ways for me to get what I need without resorting to that!' Hermione sounded much more stressed than she would have liked to let on.

'What's that supposed to mean, other ways?' Ron asked suspiciously.

'Oh, don't be such a fool!' Harry could tell Hermione's temper was hanging by a thread. 'I'm talking about other methods that don't include a love potion.'

'Hermione, you've been working on this for weeks, and you've been ploughing him cherry "love" liqueurs all this time. Don't you think the fact that he's brought up the family wedding chapel is a humungous hint? I mean, who talks about stuff like that when you've only being seeing each other for such a short time ... he's becoming obsessed!' Even though Harry could not see Ron's face, his ears were visibly red, giving away how much it bothered him.

'Something tells me this is it, Ron. We're getting close on this one.'

'We're not the only ones getting close on this one!' Ron said darkly. 'Don't think I didn't notice the condition you were in when came back from your date last weekend!'

'What are you insinuating, Ronald Weasley?' she asked, and Harry knew trouble was coming.

'You're in over your head, and I'm telling you now,' Ron leaned over and point a finger at her 'If he oversteps the mark, love potion or not, I'll hex him so badly, they'll never get him to look the same again.'

'He hasn't over-stepped the mark,' Hermione said, and to Harry she sounded rather unconvincing. She sighed heavily. 'I just wish we could sit down with Harry and discuss this. He's the one who knows Riddle, he'd have a better idea than anyone whether it might be a good place to look.'

‘Then talk to me,’ Harry said as he walked forward. ‘You’re right, I do know more about Tom Riddle than anyone else here.’ Harry looked at Ron who was all of a sudden concentrating on re-tying his perfectly secure shoelace. Harry’s temper got the better of him as he watched Ron. ‘Your pettiness is not only putting Hermione at risk, Ron, but everyone else as well.’

Hermione looked taken-a-back at Harry’s lack of tact, and Ron looked like he was on the verge of taking a swing at him. Harry ignored their glares.

‘You can't shut me out of this. It’s me who has to destroy the cup. We have to work together. You don’t give Ginny enough credit to face her own problems.’

Ron jumped up suddenly, but Hermione moved just as swiftly, placing herself between them.

‘As much as I hate to admit it,’ She gave Harry a look that said in no uncertain terms she did hate to side with him after his callousness. ‘Harry’s right. We need to do this together if we’re going to have a hope of figuring it out.’

‘Why don’t you fill him in then if you’re such pals?’ And Ron turned to leave.

‘We are dealing with something bigger than your loyalty to Ginny’s hurt feelings.’ Harry said coldly. ‘In fact, its bigger than all of us! If you cant find a way to put it behind you, at least for now, then you’re going to end up hurting Ginny, and everyone else you care about far more than I ever could.’

Ron didn’t seem to have a response to that, so Harry sat down on the couch and looked between them. ‘Tell me what you’ve found out.’

Hermione explained how she had accompanied Zach on several dates, always bringing him a box of his favourite liqueurs laced with love potion to seal his fate. Each had a day of the week imprinted on it as a "romantic" gesture of Hermione wishes that he take just one each morning to remind him of her. Hermione said he was so arrogant he hadn't questioned her wishes, and revelled in eating one every morning with the knowledge that she would be swooning over him.

Ron chimed in at this point, his anger at Harry obviously overpowered by his jealousy at Zach’s attentions on Hermione, and had sarcastically pointed out that Zach had been sending her messages everyday, and more often than not, up to three times a day, proclaiming his adoration for her. Ron had then slipped in a comment at what she must have done to get such a reaction from him, and Harry, who had been ready for something like this, had to react quickly, grabbing Hermione’s half raised hand that had been heading for Rons face, easing it down again in an attempt to stop their frustration escalating any further.

Apparently, not long ago, Zach arranged for her to meet his family. Not just a small gathering with his parents either, but his entire extended family.

Hermione said that when she had arrived, they had all greeted her warmly, and it wasn’t long before the women, who had been huddled in a corner discussing her excitedly, pulled her aside and started talking wedding arrangements (this part she had wisely tried to keep from Ron, but she now found it impossible since they were all together).

Ron’s face was dark and broody as it was revealed that the original Hufflepuff family had used the same church for marriage ceremonies for centuries, and although the original church had been destroyed long ago, a new one had been erected on the same site, and the tradition had been handed down to this day.

During her visits to Zach’s, Hermione had already checked out the house and grounds the Smith family lived in, and it wasn’t nearly old enough as it should be to hold any sort of special place for one of Voldemorts “trophies”, so the church seemed the next best place to look, although she had to admit, it too was a long shot being that the only connection was that many of them had married there, and there was no connection to Voldemort himself, as there had been in the other hiding places. Harry too had doubted Voldemort would care for such a site, but it needed investigating just the same, if only to rule it out.

So Zach had taken Hermione there on the spur of the moment one afternoon, but it had been closed up, so he had arranged to meet her there so she could wander through at her leisure before passing an opinion on whether she would want to wed there. Harry registered Ron's brewing anger, so he turned his attention on Hermione, eyeing her darkly.

'I hope you're not doing anything you're … *uncomfortable* with to get this information, Hermione.' Ron shot a look at her too at Harry's question.

'Well … I wont pretend it hasn't had its … awkward moments,' Harry saw her eyes seemed to grow distant as she spoke. 'But we have to follow it through.' She looked at Harry, afraid to meet Rons penetrating gaze. 'We have to investigate every possibility. We all know what's riding on this.'

Harry hadn't liked the sound of her answer. 'I'm coming with you to the church. When are you going?'

'This weekend.'

'Don't think for a minute you're going without me.' Ron said indignantly. 'I've got a bad feeling about all of this. I don't think it's going to be as easy as you think when it all turns out for naught and you want to put Smith off.'

'Fine. You can both come.' Then she added quickly. 'But I don't want any fighting between you! We're all in this together, and quite frankly, I'm fed up with being caught in the middle!'

'I wont if he doesn't.' Ron said bluntly.

'This is too important to let our squabbles get in the way,' said Harry without looking at either of them 'anyway, my issue is with Ginny. She's the one I should be apologizing too. She's the one who needs … It's her I want to…'

'To forgive you?' Hermione prompted. Harry changed the subject immediately.

'I'm going to lunch, you coming?'

'I'm hungry too' Hermione got up from the chair, glaring at Ron. To Harry's surprise, Ron rose and made to follow them, and suddenly, with all three of them heading to the Great Hall for lunch together, things didn't seem as hopeless as they had.

19. Chapel of Betrayal

Harry, Ron and Hermione passed through the gates of Hogwarts on their way to the church where most Hufflepuff graduates took their vows. The day was grey, gloomy and unwelcoming, and the air was chilled below freezing, so they dressed in layers of clothing in an effort to shut out the cold.

They had on the warmly knitted jumpers that each of them had received from Mrs. Weasley for Christmas last year, and their heavy winter cloaks, not to mention boots made from waterproof Niffler fur (one of the softest and warmest skins available).

The ground was tiresomely laden with snow, which they sank almost knee deep into as they trudged away from the gates.

'Couldn't we have waited for another time to do this? When we could actually walk across the ground, rather than having to wade through it?' Ron asked grimly.

'No, we couldn't!' Harry said sharply.

'We don't have time Ronald.' Hermione said. Then she stumbled suddenly, Harry grasping her arm and yanking her to her feet, stopping her from ending up face first in snow.

‘Where is this place anyway?’ Ron said gloomily ‘If it’s any further North of here, I’m going back to get your smorbal.’

‘It’s called a snorkel, and they’re used under water, not under snow! Anyway, I seriously doubt you’ll be needing it in London!’ Hermione said wryly. ‘Stop complaining and grab my arm.’

‘I hope you know what you’re doing.’ He said to Hermione as he staggered awkwardly toward her. ‘You’ve never done a side-along before, let alone with two people.’

Ron’s sulky warning may have had more impact if it wasn’t for the fact that he had just walked straight out of his boots, leaving them behind him embedded in the snow. Both of his big toes were exposed through well-worn holes in his motley old socks, and holding them up in a desperate, and fruitless attempt to avoid them touching the snow, he danced around, swearing as he tried to dig his boots out.

‘Stop messing about, Ron!’ Hermione said impatiently. He gave her a withered look as Harry interrupted.

‘Are you sure you can get us all there?’ he asked her.

‘Of course I can!’ she haughtily.

Ron had finally replaced his boots, though he walked as if his feet were embedded in concrete.

‘I’d rather not be splinched, if it’s at all possible. There aren’t too many parts of me that I can spare.’ He said.

‘Especially the grey-matter type.’ Hermione quipped under her breath.

‘Look, lets just get on with it, shall we?’ Harry had been listening to Ron and Hermione taking cheap shots at each other all week, and had had just about enough of it. Ron and Harry each gripped one of Hermiones arms firmly and closed their eyes as the uncomfortable compression started to set in.

A few suffocating seconds later they were standing on a rather dingy looking deserted street, which had dirty snow swept into the guttering, and several many story buildings rising either side of the road, all in a neglected state of disrepair.

Hermione headed off immediately, crossing the street and stopping before a very old, rather plain looking building, which was only identifiable as a church because it had a rather rusty steeple atop of its small peak on the roof. Ron moved off to follow her, patting himself down to check all of him had made it, while Harry stamped the excess snow off his boots, before trudging over to join them.

‘Doesn’t exactly look very romantic, does it?’ Ron smirked.

Hermione huffed without looking at them, and climbed the few stone steps, and turning the iron ring handle, pushed the door in, disappearing into the darkness beyond.

Ron lifted his head, scanning the building glumly, before climbing the stairs and following Hermione into the darkness beyond. Harry trailed them, his mind barely on what he was doing. The moment he had arrived on the street opposite the church, a strange feeling had come over him, like maybe he’d been there before.

It took a moment for Harry’s eyes to adjust to the dim light that streamed through the dirty windows, penetrating the dusty air in the small chamber they now stood in. There were about a dozen pews, skewed awkwardly and uncaringly before a small, plain altar that stood upon an unassuming platform which was covered in a tatty, multicoloured carpet reminiscent of the type you would most likely find down at the local “Horse ‘n’ Hound”, rather than a “House of God”.

Two candelabras coated with old candle wax stood upon the altar, which was shrouded in a rather dusty, yellowed embroidered doily that was stained with what looked to be blood, but upon closer inspection turned out to be red wine.

Cobwebs could be seen hanging from every arched rafter and window recess, and the worn burgundy cushions that were thrown higgledy-piggledy across the pews looked like they might disintegrate if anyone ever actually dared sit on one.

The drapes that hung from what appeared to be a line of three old disused confessional boxes, were greyish and threadbare, and had chunks missing from the bottoms of them as if they had quite literally eroded.

As Harry wandered the recesses, inspecting the old statues that were placed between each of the windows, Ron picked up a cushion, smacking it with his hand in an effort to clean it up enough to sit on. He had to lean back, holding the cushion at arms length, coughing and spluttering loudly, as he choked on the dust that billowed from it.

'Well, Hermione … this must be every girls dream.' Ron said. She looked at him scathingly, though as she continued to eye the dilapidated décor, Harry saw her cringe ever so slightly.

'Maybe it just hasn't been used in a while…' she said, trying to sound positive, but clearly finding it very difficult to understand what on earth Zach had been thinking. 'Probably just needs a bit of a clean up.'

'A clean up?' Ron said trying to suck in the grin that curbed his lips. 'Nothing short of blasting it out of existence and rebuilding would bring this place up to scratch!' He said, obviously pleased about something.

Harry silently agreed, but decided not to involve himself.

As he walked behind the alter, he reached out and pulled aside some worn red velvet curtains that hung draped over a life size painting of a rather stately looking lady and her pet creature.

'Hermione, come and have a look at this.' He ran his fingers over the small mounds of the brush strokes, curious as to what the animal was.

'Ah! There you are, my angel!' Harry and Ron spun round immediately as Hermione winced painfully, preferring to pick up a dusty old tome from the pedestal rather than face her "intended beau". 'I must apologize for being inexcusably late, mother was fussing over which tie I should wear.' Zach waved his hand dismissively as he waltzed over to Hermione and placed his arms firmly around her waist.

'I tried to point out to her when one has so many excellent ties, all one really need do is leave it to Spider, he has the most outstanding fashion sense of any House Elf I've ever known.' He leant in to kiss Hermione's lips, though missed and getting her cheek instead as she strategically turned her face, flicking a page over idly.

'And I see you have brought along one of your little friends,' He appeared to have to drag himself away from Hermione as he made his way over to Ron, whose face was like thunder. Ron stood up and grabbed another cushion, and then just as Zach approached him with his hand extended, he began beating it sadistically. Zach doubled up as he choked and wheezed, encased in a plumb of ancient dust.

'Oh, sorry 'bout that.' Ron said flatly and placed the cushion on the pew beside him. 'Thought you might like a seat.'

'That's …' a coughing fit ensued as he tried to speak 'quite alright…' he said between splutters. 'Actually,' he cleared his throat as his eyes watered, 'this isn't really the best place to sit and chat.' He returned to Hermione, once again seemingly unable to keep his hands off her as he pulled her back to him. She was facing Harry, giving him a rather embarrassed look, when Zach finally noticed he was there.

'Oh,' he said, less than enthusiastically, 'I hadn't realized *you'd* be coming.' Harry could tell Zach was feeling threatened by him. The story the Daily Prophet had run some time ago about he and Hermione being an item was possibly still lingering in his mind.

Rather than reassure him, Harry chose to use Zach's obvious discomfort to intimidate him, not at all happy with his need to have his hands all over her.

‘Of course. Hermione and I have known each other a long time. I want to see what she is letting herself in for, and going by the state of this place,’ Harry let his eyes roam the dank chamber ‘it’s a good job Ron and I came.’

Zach raised his eyebrows in surprise. ‘You can’t seriously think I’d get married in this place, let alone subject the light of my life to such filth!’

‘Well, what are we doing here then? I thought you said this is where all the prominent Hufflepuff marriages take place?’ Hermione struggled to turn in his firm grip to face him.

‘They do, my lovely!’ Zach said brightly. Harry could see Ron’s fists clenching and unclenching as he watched the two of them. ‘But not in this section! This is the only part of the original church that still stands. The street frontage has been kept the same drab way to keep the muggles out. The real hall lays beneath.’ He finally released Hermiones waist, and grabbed her around the shoulders instead. ‘I'll show you.’ He said smugly.

Hermione and Zach entered one of the dilapidated confessional boxes, and as Ron went to squeeze in after them, he gave Ron a rather pompous look and directed him and Harry into an adjoining one.

‘Press your wand tip to the small gold button next to the window grate.’ He said, and within seconds, they could feel the floor of the boxes dropping from beneath them rapidly.

Harry and Ron steadied themselves by spreading their feet apart, but it was apparent, when they eventually stepped out of their box, that Zach had taken the opportunity of Hermiones unsteadiness, to pull her to him, seemingly willing to stoop to any level to keep her close.

Ron reached in and yanked her free as Zach was apparently loathed to let her go even after they had stopped. Her face as red as Rons, and her eyes turned to the floor as Zach, for the first time since seeing Ron and Hermione together, eyed him off challengingly. Harry removed his beanie, the warmth of the underground hall seeping through him immediately, and keen to keep things as pleasant as possible turned everyone’s attention to unexpected site that greeted them.

Never would he have guessed, after just descending from the neglected chamber above, that there would be such a place of well cared for beauty, below. It was obviously a well-kept secret as there was nothing about the outside building, which indicated that rather high society wizard weddings took place here.

Hermione walked through entranced at the wondrously high arched ceiling that was similar to Hogwarts Great Hall’s except instead of reflecting the weather, it housed floating cherubs who threw flower petals from small cane baskets hung over their arms, and twinkling fairies that darted gently to and fro, sprinkling translucent, glittering fairy dust on the four of them as they passed below.

The décor itself when they first entered, was a warm lemon colour with white and silver trim, but it gradually faded and changed to various other colour schemes that were just as beautiful, including lilac and palest blues with gold trims and Salmon pink and white, trimmed with a pale mushroom cream.

Great archways enclosed the aisle to the altar, which was raised on a three-tiered platform, and was decorated in an assortment of some of the most beautiful flowers they had ever seen. Harry watched Hermione as she walked hypnotically to the altar, glancing at Ron every now and then to ensure he wasn’t about to lose it and blow their cover wide open. But Ron did not seem aggravated or ready to explode at all, which was surprising in an even more disturbing way than if he had looked livid. Instead he looked crest-fallen as he sat down dejectedly in one of the beautifully ornate pews, which along with the rest of the décor kept changing colour.

Harry, feeling it safe to do some real looking around, ventured off around the hall, inspecting every statue and icon, including the stained glass windows which were lit from behind magically as they were underground. He went over the altar, the pews, and even the small rooms off to the side, but

he found nothing out of the ordinary.

‘Does it always do this?’ Hermione asked dreamily at the colour variations.

‘Oh no,’ Zach said as he came up behind her, obviously over the moon at her reaction. ‘This has been set up so that we can choose any colour scheme you want. On the day it will stay the way you choose.’ Hermione was still staring at the ceiling. Zach spun her around to face him, and positioned his face within inches of hers.

‘You can have it any way you want. It’ll be everything you ever dreamed of.’ He bent his head to close the small gap, and kissed her. She kissed him back for a moment, seemingly swept up in it all, but then she pulled away from him quite suddenly. Harry just made out her mouthing “not now” to Zach, before he saw Ron rise and make his way back over to the confessional boxes.

Moving swiftly to intercept him, Harry yanked him inside one of the booths. ‘C’mon Ron, you know she doesn’t like that prat! She’s doing all of this so we can find the cup.’

‘I can never offer her all of this Harry. I’ll never be able to make her happy like he could. You know it as well as I do. She’d be better off with someone like him.’ He said gravely.

‘I think you’re reading more into this than there is. So she likes the chapel, but you and I both know Hermione’s not that shallow.’

'You two ready to go back?’ Zach pulled the curtain back, eyeing them curiously, Hermione still firmly by his side.

‘Yeah,' said Ron, his eyes seemingly unable to meet Hermiones.

‘What about you?’ Zach turned to Hermione. ‘Ready beautiful?’ Hermione nodded and they entered the booth next to Ron and Harry, and all of them began their ascent.

After being in the pristinely magical surrounds of the chapel underground, the chamber above looked even worse than it had before.

‘I’ve got to head back, if I’m not back within the hour, mother will have half the wizarding world out looking for me.’ Zach tried to move in on Hermione again, but this time she was not so distracted, and stepped towards the door so she could usher him away quickly. She gave Harry a meaningful look, and he followed her closely, dragging Ron by the sleeve of his jacket until Zach grudgingly let her go, and disapparated.

‘Did you find anything?’ Hermione directed her question at Harry, as it was clear Ron wasn’t likely to be particularly receptive.

‘No,’ Harry said, his voice laced with disappointment as he replaced his beanie. ‘At least not down in the new section, though I didn’t really get much of a chance to check the old part out thoroughly.’

‘I imagine we’ll be back,’ Ron goaded. ‘Hermione’s gonna wanna pick her colour scheme yet.’

‘You’re so right as usual Ronald!’ She said angrily, her voice dripping with sarcasm ‘That’s *exactly* why I’ll need to come back. Its always been a dream of mine to get married at the age of seventeen.’ Then as an after thought, ‘If I’m really lucky I’ll be pregnant before I even leave Hogwarts!’ Her anger was raising her voice to almost a shrill. ‘No need to study ever again, I’ll just stay at home like the good little wifie, bringing up a dozen screaming little brats. Still, there is one upside, none of them are likely to have red hair!’ Ron scowled as he kicked the crumbling little stonewall, sending a cloud of dust into the air.

‘You won’t need to worry about that, that’s for sure! Why don’t you and Harry head back together?’ He said nastily ‘I think I’ll stop in at the Three Broomsticks for a while. I hear Madame Rosmerta’s been asking after me since the battle of Hogsmeade. Seamus says she’s been wanting to thank me, and I think its about time I took her up on it!’

‘Hah!’ Hermione mocked. ‘Fine!’

‘Fine!’ Ron returned angrily and started to walk off, but in their need for someone to back them up and justify their behaviour, they both noticed Harry was no longer with them.

He was heading determinedly down the street, now some distance from the two of them, eyeing a rather grim, square looking building, surrounded by high railings that had a set of iron gates leading to a baron looking courtyard.

‘Harry! Where are you going?’ She asked rather testily.

Harry continued on in the same direction, nearing the building that seemed to draw him hypnotically towards it.

‘Harry!’ Hermione’s voice was becoming more urgent now. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Oi! Mate, what are looking at?’ Ron was yelling.

As Harry approached the building, he was unable to speak, unable to answer their calls. Pulling up before the large iron gates, he placed a gloved hand on one of the bars as if by touching it, it would become undeniably real.

He could hear Ron and Hermione’s footsteps quickening as they came up behind him, but he could not yet draw his gaze from the deadened building. The minute his eyes had fallen upon it, he knew he had seen it before. In fact, he had not only seen it before, he had been there.

Ron and Hermione were panting as they came to a halt at the gates, trying to understand what it was that had held Harry’s attention so completely.

‘What?’ Ron breathed as he bent over and placed his hands on his knees, the cold air making it all the more difficult to draw in breath.

‘This is it’ Harry said, almost not daring to speak it aloud, both his gloved hands now clutching at the cold metal bars on the gate.

‘This is what?’ Hermione said, breathing heavily as her eyes roamed over the impossibly dull building.

Harry let go of the gate and took a step back, taking it all in. ‘This is where Tom Riddle grew up.’ He still spoke as if he said it too loud, it would disappear.

‘What?’ Ron said unbelievably as he straightened to get a better look.

‘Are you sure?’ Hermione too, had taken to almost whispering, whether following Harry’s lead, or more likely, was awed at the realization that this was the place where the darkest wizard of all time had spent his childhood.

‘This is the orphanage Dumbledore came to when he offered Riddle a place at Hogwarts.’ Harry still couldn’t quite believe he was suddenly faced with it. ‘This is where he brought me in the pensieve.’

All three of them stood silently watching the building for a time, and then Harry took a step forward to the gates and lifted the latch. It creaked open ominously as he passed through it.

‘What are you doing?’ Hermione half whispered.

‘It looks like someone still lives here’ Harry said as he craned his neck back, staring up at a small light on in one of the third floor windows.

‘So what if they do?’ Ron was also whispering, obviously affected by the disturbing history of the place. ‘How’s that going to help us find…’ he cut himself off before blurting out aloud the reason they had come.

Harry ignored them and made his way up the few stairs to the door, and lifting his hand, hesitating

for the tiniest moment, he knocked lightly, looking back at Ron and Hermione standing outside the gate. He waited with great anticipation, but no answer came.

He knocked again, more forcefully this time, and waited. It was becoming obvious that no one was in, and just as he started to descend the stairs, he heard the rough clanging of a massive bolt being slid open on the other side of the door. Abruptly it swung inwards, revealing a rather skinny, frail old woman.

She had grizzled grey hair that stuck out in all directions from a poorly twisted bun, and a number of spiky looking grey whiskers protruding from her chin. Her rather wrinkled features seemed to bare the weight of a hard life, and her clothing was drab to the extreme, yet was overlaid in stark contrast by a bright floral apron that seemed glaringly inappropriate.

'Yes?' she demanded in a crackly old voice, somewhat out of breath.

'Oh, er … I don't mean to bother you-'

'Of course you do! Why else would you come knocking on my door?' As she spoke, she showed her crooked, yellowed teeth that looked like they were barely hanging from her receding gums, and in between those crooked, yellowed teeth, were black gaps where it seemed that some of her teeth had finally lost the battle to cling on.

Harry tried to avoid looking at it.

'Er … um, I-I was just wondering if you know anything about the orphanage that used to be here?'

The woman paused for the longest time, just staring at him, and then a small smile crept across her crooked mouth.

'What's your name boy?'

Harry didn't know if this woman was muggle or witch, but with his beanie on his scar was hidden out of sight. 'Harry' He said 'Harry Potter.'

'Of course you are!' she said. She glanced around him at the two teenagers hovering at the gate. 'Friends of yours?' she said accusingly.

'Er … yeah,'

'Well, its all the same to me if they want to wait out here in the cold.' She held the door open just enough to allow Harry to pass through, and as he stepped over the threshold, he looked back nervously at Ron and Hermione. They exchanged glances and walked slowly to the open door as Harry disappeared behind it. The iron-gate clanged shut behind them, making them both jump as they half glanced over their shoulders.

'Well, come on then!' the old woman crackled impatiently. 'You get to my age, you don't have time to be waitin' on people as slow as you two!'

Ron turned to Hermione, all thoughts of their previous pettiness forgotten. 'I'm not sure this is such a good idea.' He said under his breath as they continued to approach slowly. 'There's something about her-'

'You don't trust?' Hermione finished, looking just as apprehensive. But with Harry already inside, what choice did they have? They mounted the stairs, and Ron, taking Hermione by the arm, all the while placing himself between her and the grizzled old woman, entered to hallway. The door was slammed shut and bolted behind them.

~*~*~*~*~

Harry stood in the familiar black and white tiled entry hall, staring up the stone stairs, pulling off his

gloves, half expecting the younger looking Dumbledore and the eleven year old Tom Riddle to come strolling down towards them. But it appeared the place was empty now, though it had an unpleasant smell that reminded Harry of Mrs. Figgs, the squib that lived down the street from the Dursleys. The frazzled old woman was watching Harry silently as he shoved his gloves idly in his cloak pocket and pulled off his beanie. Tom's old room was up there somewhere, just meters from where he now stood.

Without realizing it, Harry's hand had gripped the balustrade, and he had one foot already on the lower step as if he were about to climb the stairs. Then, as his face turned to the second landing, an unnaturally cold draft seemed to pass right through him. His hair ruffled almost unnoticeably causing a shudder to ripple down his spine as he felt the breath leave him momentarily.

'Harry?' Hermione came up beside him, but even her familiar voice was unable to drag his eyes from the floor above. 'What is it?'

'Didn't you feel it?' he breathed.

'What?' she frowned as she followed his gaze. Ron joined them at the foot of the stairs.

'What are you looking at?' He asked, watching their expressions.

'Look if you will, that's why you're here isn't it?' The woman's gravely voice drew all of them to turn their heads and look at her. Her lips curled into a dry smile as she looked directly at Harry. 'I wish I could be of more help dear, but you wont find anything. This place has been empty for more than sixteen years. There's nothing here now but some useless old furniture, plenty of cobwebs and…' she trailed off.

'And what?' Harry dropped to the foot of the stairs again as he turned to face her. 'There is something else here too, I know. What is it?'

'What makes you think so?' she said, smiling as she raised an eyebrow. Harry's eyes narrowed.

'Because I can feel it.'

The old woman cackled at Harry's words. 'It is not my place to understand what may lurk here.' Her laughter died as quickly as it had been born. 'As Dumbledore knew well.'

'Dumbledore?' Harry asked 'He put you here?'

'He did.' Harry had the impression she did not like Dumbledore.

'What do you know about this place?' He pushed.

'It was an orphanage once.'

'And the Chapel down the road?' Harry asked intently. The woman's mild expression changed at the mention of the chapel. Her face dropped.

'I know nothing about the Chapel.' She said flatly.

'But it would have been the local chapel for the orphanage, wouldn't it?' Hermione asked innocently.

'That was before my time. For all I know, they never visited the chapel.' The woman eyed Hermione out of the corner of her eye.

'Why are you here?' Harry asked her 'What did Dumbledore ask of you?'

'He told me to mind the place. Watch over it. He knew that you would come.' She said slyly.

'How is that possible?' Harry interjected abruptly. 'I didn't know myself until just now when I stumbled onto the place by accident.'

The old woman seemed to grow nervously impatient at Harry's continued questioning. She waved her hand at the stairway.

'The room you seek is on the first floor, third door to the right.'

Harry watched the woman for a moment, eyeing her curiously as she avoided his gaze, before turning back to the stone steps.

'Don't take too long, dear!' she said in a falsely honeyed voice as Hermione and Ron fell in behind Harry.

They climbed the stone stairs as if it were the last thing they wanted to do. When they reached the first landing, Harry glanced over his shoulder to see if the woman had followed them, but she was nowhere in sight.

'She lied.' Harry said as he looked down the hallway.

'What are you talking about?' Hermione asked in a hoarse whisper.

'She lied about where Tom Riddle's room was.' Harry was speaking softly so that the three of them had to crowd their heads together.

'How do you know?' asked Ron.

'I went to Riddle's room with Dumbledore when he brought me here in the pensieve. It's off the second landing, not the first, and it was the first door.'

'But Dumbledore put her here. Why would she lie?' Hermione asked sceptically.

'I don't know.'

'Maybe she wasn't lying.' They both turned to look at Ron 'I mean, yeah, she's a bit weird, I know,' Weird was putting it mildly as far as Harry was concerned. 'But maybe she doesn't know you're here to see Riddle's room.'

'If Dumbledore put her here, she would know why I came.' Harry stated darkly.

'Maybe the room you should be looking at is that one down there.' Ron continued as he motioned his head to the doorway. 'Not Riddle's old room at all.'

Harry went quiet as he thought about what Ron had said. But it didn't seem right. Something told him it was Riddles room that would be the only important place here to both Harry and Voldemort.

'What do we do?' Hermione's whispers were getting quieter, but more urgent. Harry looked about him for a moment.

'Ron, you wait outside the door down there,' Harry pointed to the chipped and flaky wooden third door down the hallway. 'And whatever you do, do not go into that room! Hermione, you come with me.' Harry started to move off towards the stairs again.

'Hang on, what am I supposed to do if she comes up looking for you?' Ron asked.

'Hold her off with chit-chat… and if that doesn't work …' Harry winced as he shrugged 'Hex her.' He continued up the stairs with Hermione in tow.

'Great!' They could hear Ron mumbling as he headed down the passageway. 'Hex an old woman that Dumbledore put here to guard the place!' he scoffed 'Brilliantly cunning plan.' His voice trailed off as Harry and Hermione stopped in front of the first door after quietly making their way to the second landing.

Harry put his hand on the door handle.

‘WAIT!’ Hermione reached out and placed her hand over his to stop him from turning the handle. ‘If this is Tom Riddle’s old room, and that old woman didn’t want us to get in here, then maybe its protected.’ Harry looked into her worried eyes and pulled his hand away.

‘Hermione, I have to get in there.’ He knew there was a link, a reason the Hufflepuff chapel had led him straight to the orphanage where Riddle grew up. As they stood there, the temperature dropped dramatically, and Harry shuddered, grabbing Hermione’s arm.

‘Can you feel that?’

‘What?’ she was studying his face, trying to work out what it was he was talking about.

‘Cold.’ He said. Hermione looked down and saw the Goosebumps on his wrist above the hand that gripped her.

'Are you all right?'

‘I have been waiting for you, Harry Potter.’

A chilling voice that seemed to come from no direction in particular, swept around Harry and echoed through him.

‘Who are you?’ he asked, his heartbeat racing as his head turned, urgently seeking the source of the ghostly being. His eyes fell on Hermione, who by the way she was looking at him, had heard nothing.

‘I am the one who will help you into his room, and I ask for only one thing in return.’ The voice rasped as the cold seeped through Harry’s thick clothing. His breath was coming out frosted as he started to shiver.

‘What?’

‘Harry, are you okay?’ Hermione was watching him as he clasped his arms about him, shrinking in the cold.

‘You must avenge my trust in him. You must swear ... no matter what the cost to you ... you will destroy him!’

The voice hissed in what sounded like a hundred whispering voices. Harry lowered his head as images of the people Harry cared about flashed before him, lingering on Ginny.

‘I can't.’ He whispered.

‘Harry!’ Hermione had his face in her hands, trying to get him to look at her.

‘Swear it, and you shall enter!’

‘Harry! Look at me!’

Harry pulled his gaze to meet hers. He rallied every ounce of strength and conviction from her compassion for him.

‘I'll do it.’ He said, still shaking. ‘Whatever it costs me ... I swear.’

‘Who are you talking to? What are promising?’ Hermione persisted.

‘Once I disarm the room, my job is done. You will be on your own.’

The voice passed through him again.

‘Who are you? Are you a ghost?’ Harry repeated.

'I am the true heir of what you seek. I am neither ghost, nor living. I bargained my death away so I could carry out this one task ... You will know when it is time to enter.'

'Harry! What's happening? Who are you talking to?' Hermione's urgent voice penetrated Harry's concentration as the terrible coldness left him.

A whooshing sound came from inside the room and directly after, a flash of bright light splayed out from under the gap in the door. Hermione was gripping Harry's arm painfully as they both waited.

The room was silent.

'It's time.' Harry said, prying Hermiones hand off his arm. 'You wait here.'

'Harry. No way!' She said frowning at him. 'You don't know what's waiting for you beyond that door!' He gave Hermione a reassuring look.

'Its okay to enter now, and I'd rather you were here keeping an eye out, just in case.'

She nodded resignedly. 'Be *careful*.'

He reached out and turned the small round brass handle, and as it squeaked with apparent disuse, Harry took a deep breath and stepped over the threshold, easing the door open. The first thing he noticed lying in the middle of the floor was a distorted image of a shadowy transparent body that still had some solidity to it. Truly it was neither ghost nor living, and yet now that it had form, Harry knew who it was immediately.

He trod carefully around the figure and headed straight to the wardrobe. He opened it not nearly as apprehensively as he perhaps should have, already knowing that he would not find what he was looking for in such an obvious place. He then made a thorough search of the entire room, which because of the spells that had guarded it, was exactly as it had been when Harry had visited it in the pensieve. After maybe five minutes of rummaging around in the scantily furnished bedroom, he sat on the dusty, squeaky bed, defeated.

What was he looking for? It was the first time he had bothered to ask himself the question, relying purely on instinct that something had drawn him there. Not the cup, certainly not here. As he sat, his thoughts turned to what it must have been like for Riddle to grow up in such a place. It was grimmer even than where Harry himself had been raised, but the similarities were undeniable.

He thought about how many times Riddle must have sat on the edge of this bed wondering why he didn't fit in, which in some strange way seemed to mirror his own existence. He couldn't count how many times he had sat on the edge of his bed wishing he had been anywhere else. Knowing he was treated differently from those around him. Knowing he had his secrets.

Secrets.

Harry had his secrets as a boy, and had found what he thought was an ideal hiding place for them, and it had even proved to be just that as his spot was never discovered in the whole time he had used it. Without hesitating, he dropped onto his knees and inspected the floorboards underneath the bed. They were laden with years of dust, and to Harry's disappointment, they appeared to be smooth and even, and showed no signs of tampering with.

He ran his hands along the boards, collecting dust and feeling for anything that might indicate a slight anomaly, something that may indicate he was right, that he and Tom shared more in common than either of them could ever have imagined. He flicked off the sticky fluff that clung to his fingers, and his thumb jabbed painfully into a floorboard, and as he brought it up to his face to inspect the damage, he noticed the board he had hit was sitting slightly raised at one end. His thumb forgotten, he leaned under the bed and jiggled the board until it finally came loose in his hand. Lifting it away, he felt somewhat daunted at the similarities between himself and Voldemort.

It was a short while before he could bring himself to look into the cavity, though it was impossible to see anything in the darkness under the bed, so Harry pushed the bed aside, its metal legs scraping noisily across the floor. Just as he was about to reach his hand in, Hermione poked her

head around the door.

‘Is everything okay?’ she asked with a worried look on her face.

‘Fine. Keep an eye out, I wont be much longer.’

‘Okay. And Harry…’ she stopped midway from closing the door. ‘Be careful.’ He smiled, not really understanding what he thought was so amusing, but as soon as she closed the door, he reached his hand back in and felt around with his fingers.

His finger hit upon something that felt almost like nothing. He might have missed it but it was slightly lumpy, though short, yet flat as well, almost like paper, yet not paper. He scrambled his fingers around it until he had a firm grip and lifted it out, not knowing what to expect, yet definitely not expecting what he brought out of the dark hole, and into the light near his face. He pocketed them immediately, then placed his hand back into the open space, but unable to detect anything else, he replaced the floorboard and bed, and headed for the door, again looking at the shadowy figure on the floor.

Her face, which from the position of her body Harry would have expected to be contorted in pain, was instead peaceful looking. A slight smile curled her lips below her eyes that were open, but not looking surprised or shocked at her demise, instead looking satisfied, like she had achieved something that had been a long time in the making. Harry walked to the door and turned to take one last look at what was once Hepzibah Smith, before turning the handle and being faced immediately with Hermiones concerned expression.

‘I think its time we gott out of here.’ He said.

‘Did you find anything?’

‘I don’t know. I got something, but I don’t know if it will help. I’ll show you later, but we need to get out of here. Have you heard anything from downstairs?’
‘No.’ she said ‘but I agree we can’t afford to stay any longer.’

They collected Ron who was still standing outside the third door on the first floor, looking rather relieved to see them, and as they reached the bottom of the stone steps, they had expected to be accosted by the old woman, but she was conspicuously absent.

Taking advantage of the moment, Harry led Ron and Hermione to the front door. Unbolting it, they headed down the few stairs to the metal gate they had entered through. Once it closed behind them, they all breathed more easily as they followed Harry back down the street.

‘What are we doing going back there?’ Ron asked as he looked up at the steeple.

‘I don’t know. But I found something in Riddles room, and I'll just bet it’s got something to do with finding the cup.’
‘Yeah, well fine.’ Said Ron. ‘But why here? Why the Chapel? We’ve already been through this place.’ He said, then turning to Hermione he added. ‘Unless of course, Hermione just can’t stay away.’

‘You know Ron, you can be such a-’

‘This has got nothing to do with Hermione.’ Harry cut her off before a full on war broke out. ‘There’s a reason why the orphanage is so close to the chapel. Hermione was right, they must have used this chapel for the kids in the orphanage, and it’s the perfect place for Tom Riddle to identify Hufflepuff with.’ Harry crossed the road to the chapel, Hermione at his heels, and Ron walking sulkily some paces behind them.

The three of them climbed the stone steps and Harry turned the ring handle to let them in. As before it took a few minutes for their eyes to adjust to the darkness, but Harry was on a mission this time. He knew somewhere here there was the connection he was looking for. He took the strips from his pocket that he had retrieved from under riddles bed, and lit his wand to study them more closely. They were short, black and flat, but with a slightly lumpy texture, and had a small hole in one end of each of them. Hermione and Ron peered over his shoulder to see what it was he was so

interested in, and when he explained to them it was what he had come out of Riddle's room with, both of them exchanged dubious glances. Harry sighed.

'Look, I know it doesn't look like much, but it has to mean something. Why would he go to all the trouble of protecting the room, and hiding them so well if they were rubbish?' He was saying it as much to convince him as them.

'So what should we do?' Ron asked. 'Keep looking up here?' he took his wand out and lit it too.

'I don't think he would have left the cup in the new section, it just seems … unlike him. I think he would have hidden it somewhere that had a bit more history to it.' Harry started to walk around the recesses again, eyeing the statues, looking for any clue as to where the two slightly rough black strips he held in his hand could possibly fit. Ron wandered up the centre of the aisle between the pews, and Hermione, who had also lit her wand, took the other side of the chapel.

They walked around for what seemed like ages, in such a small space, and found nothing, no clue what so ever. Hermione suggested that she go back in one of the booths to check the new part out again, but Ron immediately volunteered himself, and rushed into one of the confessional boxes as if nothing would give him greater pleasure. Harry had to smile as he watched Ron descend. He knew why Ron had gone down there. He was afraid if Hermione saw the chapel in all its glory one more time, it might just be enough to tip her over the edge.

With Ron gone, Hermione and Harry teamed up and went over everything again as they had before, still at a loss to figure out where the two stripes might fit in. They had pretty much given up, and were waiting for Ron to return, when Harry pulled back the red velvet curtains to the painting he had looked at the first time he had come in, and once again studied the stately looking woman and the unusual looking creature that was barely visible, poking out from underneath her extravagantly flowing pale yellow dress she was adorned in. Hermione scanned the picture, running her wand light over it to get a better look.

'Strange isn't it?' she said.

'You mean the fact that it's in such good condition compared to everything else in here?' Harry had noticed it too.

'What's that?' Hermione poked her wand light at the creature, whose only visible part was its face.

'I don't know, looks a bit like a ferret.' Harry chuckled as he thought of Malfoys time as a ferret.

'Harry, give me those stripes!' Hermione said seriously. Harry handed them over, and as he did so it occurred to him why she wanted them.

'You don't think…?' He watched as she placed them over the creatures face so that they ran down along the nose, and the eyes fitted perfectly into the holes at the tip of each one. Without any obvious means of adhesive, they stuck there perfectly, like they belonged. Now that they were there, it looked liked they were never missing.

'It's a badger!' Harry said, and just as he leaned in to take a closer look, the painting seemed to dissolve almost completely before there eyes. There was still a faded outline of the picture, almost as if looking through a printed fly wire, but it no longer presented a solid barrier, and as Hermione stuck her wand tip through the portal, they heard Ron emerging from one of the booths, mumbling grumpily about having buckets of glowing fairy dust dumped on him as he dusted himself off.

'Bloody Hell!' Was all that Ron managed as he came up behind them and looked at the portal. 'Guess you figured out what the stripes were all about then?'

'I can't see a thing beyond the veil, Harry.' Hermione was still waving her wand around, but it reflected nothing on the other side of the screen.

'I'll go first.' Said Harry 'Wait for me to give you the okay that it's alright to come through.' He stepped through the veil and disappeared from sight.

It was pitch black on the other side of the portal, except for the dim light that seeped through the screen, and Harry was treading slowly around the edge of the portal to make way for the others when his foot slipped. He caught himself just in time, but he realized that beyond the narrow ledge he was standing on, there appeared to be a deep cavern, an endless drop where the few pieces of stone he had knocked of the shelf with his foot did not seem to reach a bottom, they just appeared to drop, and keep on dropping. Harry's heartbeat quickened as he slammed himself against the side of the black stone wall. It took a moment for him to catch his breath before he called for Ron. He yelled for him to come slowly and carefully, and to stick to the side, so as Ron crept through the painting, he too inched his way along the opposite side to Harry, who then called Hermione.

As she stepped through eager at their discovery, her foot caught on the picture frame, and she fell through the portal with such sudden awkwardness that both Ron and Harry had a job to grab one of her arms each. She hung above the inky and seemingly endless blackness, both of them gripping her desperately. She was looking up at them with a horrified expression on her face as he legs dangled helplessly, unable to stop herself from glancing down, and terrifying herself even more.

'Hold on!' Ron said in a shaky voice as he tried to stop his grip from slipping, whilst still clinging to the wall behind him.

'And don't look down!' Harry added, then looking at Ron, he said 'Ron we'll pull her up on the count of three. Ready?' Ron nodded, but his grip slipped as his eyes widened in fear so that now he had hold of her by her wrist only. Hermione let out a terrified shreak.

'I wont let you go!' Ron sounded determined and Harry had no doubt in his mind Ron would rather fall with her than let go of her hand.

'On three.' Harry said. 'One … Two … Three!' They both pulled with all their might. Hermione used her feet to help push herself up the side of the rock wall. As she came higher, both Harry and Ron let go of the wall to grab her under the arms and pull her to the safety of the ledge. The minute she found her feet, she threw her arms around Ron's neck and clung to him as if her life still depended on it.

'Are you okay?' He asked quietly, one arm around her shoulder and the other softly on the back of her hair. She pulled away nodding, quiet tears dripping down her face that even Harry could see in the dim light. The three of them stood there for a moment, shaken by what had nearly happened. It was Ron who spoke first.

'You should wait on the other side Hermione.' It was less of a request and more of an order, but to Harry's surprise she did not take offence.

'I'm fine, really!' she said quietly 'Anyway, it looks like you're going to need me.'

Harry would have felt much more comfortable knowing Hermione was out of danger, but he also knew she was right. They had only just passed through and were already stuck. He knew they were definitely going to need Hermione's skills to figure this one out.

'There must be a way across!' Harry said in frustration.

'There will be, but it'll be hidden, we've just got to figure out how.' Hermione seemed to gather her wits extremely rapidly under the circumstances. 'Maybe we should edge around a bit further.' So they set off. Harry went off to the left, and Hermione followed Ron to the right. 'Use your wands!' Hermione said, but as they drew them and tried to light them, nothing happened, it seemed they didn't work in the bottomless chamber. They crept further apart, but there appeared to be no way across.

'This is useless! What we need is some sort of light, a way of showing us where the path is!' Ron said loudly so as Harry could hear him.

'Hang on!' Hermione said. Harry tried to look at Hermione, who had that wonderful tone that crept into her voice when one of her brilliant ideas emerged. 'Ron, do you have any more of that fairy dust?'

‘What?’ he said screwing his face up.

‘Fairy dust! Do you have anymore on you anywhere?’

‘I dusted it off, why?’

‘Check your pockets, anywhere it might have gotten caught in your clothing!’ she said growing more urgent. She started checking her own, and managed to come out with some tiny smatterings of the magically glowing dust. Ron started pulling handfuls of it out of his pockets.

‘They went nuts when I was down there last time, I’m telling you!’ he said as he dumped it into Hermiones beanie, which she had removed for the purpose of collecting as much of it as she could. Once Ron had emptied all of his clothing. Hermione took a small pinch of it and threw it into the chasm.

‘What d’ya do that for?’ Ron said incredulously, but Harry had already caught on, and searching his own clothing, he pulled out some small pinches and began throwing into the darkness before him, moving around slowly and throwing a little more each time, with Hermione doing the same thing some distance away.

‘I’VE GOT IT!’ Hermiones excited voiced echoed through the chasm and Harry looked up to see that lying at Hermiones feet was indeed a pathway of sorts. Lit by the translucent glowing dust, it looked incredibly narrow, and as she threw more of the fairy dust further out, the path seemed to dip slightly, the drop off again. ‘Follow me!’ Hermione said as she stepped out onto the path, ignoring both Ron and Harry’s protests as she sprinkled the dust sparingly, revealing a stone stairway that descended for some distance as they followed it.

Harry could see by the light of the glowing dust that Ron was looking rather green, so Harry followed closely behind him, in case he started to lose his balance. Down and down the stairs went, turning left then right, all the while headed away from where they had come in. Hermione was just beginning to think she might run out of the magical light when they rounded a giant column, which they had been circling for some time, and spotted an opening.

‘Through here!’ she said as she rushed on.

‘*Hermione! Wait!*’ Harry yelled after her. He was as keen to get off the narrow stairs as she was, but they had no idea what they were walking into. Ron appeared unable to talk; possibly afraid he would lose his breakfast if he did, so he followed silently, edging along, until he too reached the opening.

As Harry followed, his scar panged painfully as his eyes adjusted to light. It appeared Hermione had already lit the old-fashioned flame torches, which hung from the dank stone brick walls. She was standing in the middle of the room looking around her in tense awe. Ron too appeared glued to the spot as he eyed the threatening ancient fixtures that littered the stone cellar. As Harry was looking around him, clutching at his scar, a very bad feeling was creeping over him. This was not safe, this was a set up, and he knew it was a trap from the moment he laid eyes on the dungeon.

‘GET OUT! NOW!’ He roared at his two friends, but it was too late.

Suddenly the grate Ron had been standing on dropped out from beneath him. Ron dropped out of sight as the grate slammed back into place. He groaned painfully, and seconds later his fingers were sticking through the metal mesh, and incredibly, his wand was speeding through the air and out of sight. As Harry ran to him and wrapped his hands around the rusty iron, pulling at it with all his strength, he was interrupted by Hermione's screams. An enormously loud metal clanging sound accompanied her wails, and as he looked, he could see Hermione being encased in a metal cage that immediately closed in on her, making her jump as the base slid across under her feet. The cage was then yanked roughly high in the air as Hermione clung to it.

‘GET HERMIONE!’ yelled Ron. He could see her in the cage as it swung wildly. She was trying to cling onto it but was being buffeted around as she gasped, falling against the harsh metal bars until she was thrown to the bottom of the cage.

'HERMIONE!' Harry pulled out his wand as he winced with the pain of his scar, but it shot out of his hand instantly, and then to his horror he felt heavy iron cuffs clamping themselves around his ankles, and huge, thick iron chains that were attached, were pulling him forcefully to the wall. Other metal chains with cuffs on the ends were flying through mid air towards his arms as he fought to avoid them. But it was no use. His wrists were clamped and drawn roughly backwards until they were secured severely against the cold stone wall, along with his feet, which were spread a small distance from one another.

The pain from the overly tight wrist and ankle clamps, and the thick, heavy chains that were pressed tightly against him was searing into his flesh, but he had little concern for himself. He yanked his head back to see if Hermione was okay, but it appeared she had been knocked out and was still lying awkwardly on the bottom of her harsh metal prison. Harry looked down at Ron, his fingers were still poking through the grating.

'HERMIONE! HARRY!' he called urgently.

'I'm … here … Ron…' Harry was finding it difficult to speak, not only from the pain, but he had been winded as he had crashed into the stone wall behind him. He looked back up at Hermione. A painful groan escaped her lips, and Harry's relief that she was okay was short lived as he saw her wand fly from the cage and into the hands of a sight that quite literally took his breath away.

20. Ice of Hatred

A figure seemed to almost glide towards Harry from out of the shadows as chilling terror struck through him. Tall and thin, robed in black with an inhumanly white face, and venomous red eyes that shone eerily against the darkness that lurked behind him. His slit-like nostrils flared slightly as he closed in on Harry, a satisfied smile sitting lightly on his thin lips as he stopped close enough to touch Harry.

Harry's scar burned furiously as he closed his eyes and tried to apparate out of his bonds, but nothing happened. No familiar compression, no suffocating feeling. When he opened them again, he was staring straight at Voldemort.

Harry's wide eyes and rapid breathing appeared to be amusing Lord Voldemort.

'You cannot simply appear and disappear in here.' He said in his cold, rasping voice. 'What would be the point of setting such an elaborate trap?' He had all three of their wands grasped in one hand, and his own in the other, and without taking his eyes off Harry for a second, he spoke to someone in the darkness behind him.

'Take these!' he said aggressively, holding the trio's wands out to the side of him 'And do not be foolish enough to leave them in here.' Harry watched as a much shorter, slumped figure emerged. It was the woman from the orphanage. She approached Voldemort in a semi-bowed position, and after taking the wands, backed away from him subserviently.

'Yes, My Lord' her crackling voice shook in fear as she disappeared through a narrow, arched doorway opposite the one Harry had come through.

'Harry?' Ron's voice came from the pit, squeaky and unsure. Harry suddenly felt sick. He knew Ron couldn't possibly see who was standing in the room with them from where he was, and he had never heard Voldemorts voice before. Voldemorts eyes left Harry's slowly, his head tilting in the direction of the pit as his faint look of amusement dissolved.

'The-The old woman, sh-she was a traitor!' Harry accused Voldemort desperately in an unsteady voice. It was the first thing that came to mind to stop Voldemort from turning his attention on Ron.

Voldemort's sinister eyes flicked back to Harry.

'Sh-she told you we were here.' Harry continued quickly 'She betrayed us. She betrayed

Dumbledore's trust, just like Snape!' Anger was seeping into his voice now, though he was still filled with terror.

Voldemort's smile returned, his harsh lips parting as he let out an indulgently icy laugh that sent chills down Harry's spine.

'It would seem your famous protector had it wrong yet again. But alas,' Voldemort flicked his hand airily as amusement sparked in his eyes 'that is not the case. The woman from the orphanage was loyal to Dumbledore … to the last.' He was still smiling evilly as Harry shrunk under Voldemort's gaze.

'Wormtail!' Voldemort called, but yet again, did not remove his eyes from Harry. Harry saw the old woman return, her eyes nervously on the floor as she approached, not looking at Lord Voldemort, or at Harry. Harry waited for the treacherous Pettigrew to show, dreading his return.

Then he understood.

The figure standing half-hidden behind Voldemort was not the woman Dumbledore had entrusted to mind the orphanage. It was Peter Pettigrew who was fidgeting nervously with his hands.

'Yes Master?' the old woman's voice came out because of the polyjuice potion, but with the realization, Harry only saw the man who had betrayed his parents to their deaths. His fear was being overcast by his rage at Pettigrew. Still wincing from the pain his scar ached with, Harry's jaw stiffened and his eyes narrowed and he could feel his blood burning with fury.

'Ah yes,' Voldemort hissed softly. He was watching Harry's every reaction intently. 'Now you understand. I see the desire that fills you. I wonder,' He paused to flash a look at Wormtail. 'If I were to release you and give you your wand, would you kill him?'

Harry's eye's turned on Voldemort as hatred coursed through his veins. 'Do it, and find out.' He ground out, his gaze being drawn back to the dithering figure of the old woman who was shifting extremely nervously.

'An amusing idea, granted.' Voldemort was looking at Harry appraisingly. He lifted his hand suddenly and traced his cold white finger along Harry's scar. The second it touched Harry's skin, the pain that had plagued his scar as soon as he had entered the dungeon turned into intensely overwhelming, skull splitting agony. Harry clenched his jaw in an effort to quell the groans that escaped him, feeling like his forehead was readying to burst open, and then abruptly, the finger was gone. He gasped as the pain settled to a throbbing pang.

'Still hurts you so?' Voldemort said mockingly.

'Harry?' Ron was trying to pull himself up so he could see out of the grate, but was unable to see where the three of them were standing.

'SHUT UP RON!' Harry snapped. His anger and pain had driven him to yell so abruptly, but it was his fear for Ron's safety that had urged him to say it. An awful dread started to fill Harry as Voldemort looked impatiently in the direction of the pit.

'Oblige Potter, Wormtail.'.

Harry's heartbeat pounded against his chest so strongly he was certain everyone in the room could hear it.

'*No!*'

The old woman smiled wickedly to her self and moved slowly towards the pit. Harry's anger had been flooded by utter terror once again. He turned on Voldemort who was watching him with sadistic pleasure as Ron's fingers disappeared from view.

'NO!' Harry started struggling violently against his restraints.

'NO...' being all that would come to mind.

'*NO!'* Each more desperate than the last as he continued to throw himself against the iron that held him. 'Don't!' His eyes were beginning to sting with tears. He felt utterly wretched as he continued to pull with all his strength at his bonds, knowing what was about to happen, knowing he could do nothing to prevent it.

Voldemort was not smiling anymore, his stony expression unfathomable.

The old woman drew a wand from the front pouch of her floral apron.

'Please ... please, please don't!' A bitter tear spilled down Harry's face. *'Please...'*

She pointed it into the pit.

'Wormtail.' Voldemort's cold voice immediately stopped the woman in her tracks. 'Do not kill the boy.' He said, eyeing Harry.

A flash of red light shot out of Pettigrew's wand and there was a dull thud, and Harry knew Ron was lying in heap on the floor of the pit. Alive.

He slackened exhausted against his constraints, sickened by the fact that he had shed a tear in front of Voldemort. Sickened that he had begged for Ron's life. Voldemort's evil voice hissed.

'You see? I too can be merciful.' Harry wearily raised his head to meet his gaze. 'You will understand soon enough.' He narrowed his heartless eyes. 'Yes ... soon enough.' He lifted his wand, pointing it directly at Harry who instinctively winced. He felt warmth run through the metal that held him in place as it glowed briefly, and then summoning Wormtail, he entered the narrow archway, his billowing black cloak disappearing from sight.

Harry hung from the clamps, feeling utterly drained. He looked up to see Hermione still lying on the bottom of her cage; glad she had remained unconscious. His scar still seared with heated pain and his wrists and ankles burned as blood seeped slowly through his clothing, but he barely felt the throbbing. Suddenly he was so tired.

It was some time later before the now recognizable Pettigrew emerged from the doorway. Harry found as he watched him approach through heavy eyelids, he couldn't help but smile. He was still wearing the drab dress and bright floral apron.

'Drink this!' Pettigrew held up the cup he had been carrying with his silver hand and tried to place it near Harry's mouth.

Harry turned his head away, his hatred of the man returning.
Pettigrew smiled poisonously. 'It'll help you feel better.'

Harry kept his face away from the cup. A struggle ensued as Pettigrew tried to force the drink into Harry's mouth, grabbing his head and thrusting the cup to his face, but Harry managed to avoid the silver hand. Eventually Pettigrew let him go and Harry relaxed, but there was a flash of light and a searing pain shot through his stomach. Harry slumped forward, barely conscious. His head was roughly yanked back and freezing cold liquid ran down his throat.

When he next opened his eyes, it was to Ron and Hermione's quiet voices.

'We cant apparate, and without our wands, we don't have a hope' Ron half whispered.

'Just keep looking for a way to get it open. If one of us can get out, maybe we can retrieve the wands if they're not too far away.'

There was an awful ache coming from the back of Harry's head, and pain was shooting up his arms as he tried to support his weight on his feet. There were dried bloodstains on his clothing around his wrists and ankles from his earlier struggle, and yet though pained by his injuries, he felt oddly refreshed now he had come to, and his scar no longer burned. He looked up to see Hermione

running her hands around the floor of the cage, and turning on the pit, he could see Ron's fingers searchingly inspecting the edges of the grate.

'It's no use.' Harry said. Hermione clawed her way to a standing position to look at him and he could see Ron trying to pull himself up again. 'Voldemort set the traps, you wont get through them.'

Hermione's relief at seeing Harry okay could not be quashed by the news. 'Harry!' her eyes were brimming with tears. 'We were so worried … you're alright!'

'Harry?' Ron's more sedate voice came from the pit.

'Yeah?' Harry said starting to pull at his bonds again.

'You alright?'

'Yeah'

'Me too … thanks to you.' Harry stopped struggling as Hermione looked down into the pit at Ron. 'That's two I owe you, mate.' Ron said solemnly.

'What are you talking about?' Hermione asked, the colour draining from her face.

'Nothing. Don't worry about it.' Harry said a little impatiently. He knew very well how she would react to Ron almost being killed and he did not fancy listening to her hysterics.

Harry resumed his seemingly pointless struggle against his bonds, but fresh blood started to seep from his old wounds making him gasp angrily.

'Harry don't, you're just hurting yourself.' Hermione was wincing as she watched him. He stopped at her words, growling in frustration.

'So it is Voldemort.' Hermione said fearfully, settling at the bottom of her cage.

'The old woman in the orphanage was Wormtail using polyjuice potion.' He said darkly 'I thought I could smell something pungent ... he must have had a cauldron of the stuff somewhere.' Harry yanked his arms against the bonds in frustration. 'I should have known that smell was the potion. I should have recognized it!'

'The same is true for us Harry, it's not like we all don't know what it smells like.' Hermione said gravely.

'No point in beating ourselves up about it now,' Ron said glumly 'we have to figure out a way out of here.'

Harry knew there was no way the three of them were going to get out. They were at the mercy of the Darkest Wizard of all Time, and without their wands, they had no chance of fighting back. None at all. They had somehow wound up exactly where Voldemort had wanted.

Harry's thoughts were interrupted by Pettigrew, who had finally changed into his black Death Eater robes and was heading towards him with another cup in his silver hand. Hermione stood up to watch as he approached Harry. At the sight of Pettigrew, Harry's anger bubbled though his vanes.

'Forget it!' Harry said savagely. 'I'm not taking that stuff!'

'You feel better, don't you?' Wormtail tittered, bringing the cup up before him. Harry narrowed his eyes, his anger raging as he looked at the despicable rodent before him. He wanted to rip the chains from the walls and throttle this pathetic excuse for a human being.

'Keep away from me!' he threatened.

'Have it your way' Wormtail said in a sly undertone, and once again Harry was pelted in the chest with a curse that left him almost unconscious. After the icy liquid was thrown down his throat,

Wormtail left with Hermione and Ron both yelling in the distance.

~*~*~*~*~

'Potter!'

Harry lifted his head and glared into Wormtail's eyes menacingly, his strength returning with his fury at the sight of him. Pettigrew took a couple of steps back warily.

'What's the matter?' Harry asked darkly. 'Afraid of a bound and wandless wizard?' Harry had never felt such hatred as he had for this creature before him. His whole body ached with it.

Pettigrew was holding another cup. Harry eyed it knowingly. It was giving him strength, it did make him feel better and he had wasted precious time resisting it.

'Give it to me.'

Pettigrew frowned and with nervous, jerky movements, he came closer, pulling his wand out as he did so.

Harry let out a low laugh. 'You should be afraid of me.' Wave after wave of anger and distaste flowed through him. 'When I am free, you will be the first one I come for.'

Pettigrew feared Harry, he could see it, and it pleased him. The rat backed away speedily after administering the icy liquid, leaving the room in a hurried shuffle.

'Harry?' Hermione was looking down. He tilted his head back and looked at her, his rage still rippling through him. 'Are you feeling okay?'

Most of the pain had abated from him hanging by his wrists because he had been there so long, they were numb; it was more of a dull ache, though now he was awake and taking the pressure back on his feet, an unpleasant pins and needles sensation was starting to creep up his arms.

'Fine.' He said shortly. 'How long have we been here?' He asked, letting his head drop back on the cold stone, his neck aching from being hung forward for so long.

'I don't know … days I would think.' She frowned at him 'Harry, don't take the potion. It's-'

'Have either of you had water?' Harry interrupted.

'No. Ron was asking for water in his sleep just now.' She rested her cheek against the cold metal bars. 'We're not going to get out of this, are we?' She asked almost reluctantly, sounding defeated. Harry would not lie to save her feelings. Something was slowly changing in him.

'No … we're not.'

In the quiet that followed, he could hear Hermione's stifled sobs, which flared his anger. Crying about it wouldn't help! His scar bagan to sting again and unable to control himself, he started pulling against his chains with all his might, ignoring the pain in his fury at being caged. The chains rattled and clanged noisily and he could vaguely hear both Ron and Hermione calling him, but he was lost in his aggressive struggle, unaware of anything, or anyone else in the dungeon, until two red beams of light shot out in quick succession, silencing the voices immediately.

Harry stopped suddenly, panting from his efforts and blinking through his sweat at the figure standing in the middle of the room. His scar was hot with pain and the new lacerations burned under the metal. He felt his overwhelming anger ebb as an involuntary shudder ran down his spine. There was something incredibly creepy about Voldemorts expression as he approached Harry.

'You're anger and hatred will be quenched soon enough.' He said darkly. 'You shall have your wish,

when you are ready.' Harry's great hatred was reflected in Voldemorts poisonous eyes, and the realization disturbed him. He was being consumed by his anger. He could feel it eating away at him, overtaking him.

'Wormtail will no longer suffice as your only minder. It is time to send for another.' Voldemort seemed to find something amusing; a wicked smile edged across his bloodless lips as he turned from Harry.

'Water…' Harry croaked, weak now he had stopped struggling. 'They need water.' All of the invigorating strength that had possessed him moments ago was gone.

'But of course.' Voldemort stopped with his back still on Harry. 'I can be generous, as well as merciful.' He left without looking back, leaving Harry feeling grateful to his captor.

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It wasn't long before Wormtail brought in two cups. Harry watched him, despising him, hating him more with every slimy movement the rodent made. He went to Ron then Hermione respectively, enervating them back to consciousness. He then levitated the cups to each of them before turning to Harry with his face turned down, unwilling to meet his eye.

'You will have to wait until your potion is due.'

Harry yanked his arms threateningly against the chains and Wormtail seemed to jolt nervously at the sound of it before shuffling out of the room.

'What about you?' Hermione said. She was looking pallid and sickly as she stared down at Harry.

'I don't need it.' He said harshly.

And he didn't. No thirst, no hunger, and little pain considering the black and purple bruising around his slashed wrists. His ankles must have looked the same, though his shredded and bloodstained boots hid what lay beneath.

After they drank their water, Hermione took her turn to sleep, and after waiting for the sound of her steady breathing, Ron expressed his concern about her dwindling condition. But Harry could offer him little comfort in the end. He was starting to fade, the exhaustion had been slowly sweeping over him since Voldemort had left, and he was losing the battle to stay conscious. His head had dropped forward again, and the pressure was lifting from his feet as he sunk further down the wall, his arms and shoulders paining under his weight. Then he passed into darkness once more.

'So … the Dark Lord finally has his prize.'

A horrible rasping voice brought Harry out of his darkness. As he slowly came round, Harry became aware of a stench, a smell he remembered lingeringly at first, then as his mind sharpened, he remembered well. Lifting his head, he opened his eyes in disgust. Fenrir Greyback was standing before him, smiling viciously. The repulsive smell of body odour, sweat and dirt accosted Harry's senses. The hood was down on his filthy cloak, making Fenrir's dirty matted grey hair visible, and his pointed teeth showed menacingly as he disgustingly ran his tongue around them.

'Shame he wants you alive … for now. A taste of the flesh of the "Chosen One" would be sweet indeed!' He then licked his lips repulsively, and Harry felt himself sicken. 'I could take just enough to leave you alive.' His eyes lit up and his yellowed, claw-like fingernails tapped his thumb as if he were readying to pick a delicate morsel of food.

'Yes' he hissed, his eyes widening as if he were convincing himself of the idea. 'You would still be his, if not wholly.' He let out a barking laugh that made Harry wince. 'Wholly' he laughed again 'Holey … Get it?' He seemed to be amusing himself but his vulgar humour made Harry's stomach churn.

‘The Dark Lord himself instructed you not to touch him.’ Pettigrew was hovering by the archway. The instant Harry saw him his hatred began to surface again.

Greyback grunted as he turned to Wormtail.

‘I’ll have my chance one day ... when he is finished with him.’ He started away from Harry, and as he passed Pettigrew and disappeared, Wormtail eyed him with distaste.

Harry let out a harsh laugh.

‘You think you’re better than him?’ Harry bit out. The sickening repulsion he had felt when Greyback had been in the room was fast being eclipsed by the unadulterated hatred that Harry seethed with the moment Pettigrew was in his sights. ‘You judge him after what you did?’ Pettigrew approached Harry warily.

‘You don't know everything … you also judge-’

‘I know enough.’ Harry cut in loathingly. ‘You betrayed your best friends! My mother and father died because of *you*.’ Wormtail swallowed nervously.

‘There was a time you had the chance to kill me, and you didn’t.’ his voice was quivering now.

‘I WAS WRONG!’ Harry roared, throwing himself forward suddenly and making Pettigrew step back.

‘Harry!’ A girlish voice pleaded from above.

‘Give-me-the-chance-again-and-you-would-not-walk-away.’ He said through gritted teeth. Pettigrew looked far more disturbed than he should. These threats were coming from an imprisoned person and yet it seemed he truly feared Harry. Harry started yanking at his chains again out of frustration as Pettigrew made a hasty exit.

‘Harry, don’t!’ The girl said weakly from her cage, he looked up at her and found it repugnant that she had tears streaming down her face.

‘Hermione?’ The pit voice said. ‘Hermione, are you alright?’

‘No...’ The girl said. Her voice was tired and croaky as she slackened against the cage. ‘I’m sick to the stomach.' she said weakly. 'Harry, whatever that potion is, it’s changing you, and you have to fight it. You have to see what its doing to you…’ her voice was becoming faint. Harry turned his head from her impatiently. He did not understand what she wanted of him.

‘It keeps me upright and you want me to fight it? It might be my only hope of getting out of here.’ He said tonelessly.

‘No Harry.’ Her voice sounded dull and hopeless.

‘Hermione?’ Came from the pit urgently.

‘It is a way out.,’ She continued wearily, as if almost asleep. ‘But not the right one.’ Harry looked up to see the girl’s eyelids droop heavily. ‘Don’t lose... what makes you different... from him ... Harry…’ Her eyes closed and her face slid down the bars.

‘Hermione!’ The voice from the pit kept yelling urgently, but the girl did not move. Harry stared at her blankly, unable to feel, to care. Yet something niggled at him annoyingly. He searched the floor lazily in front of him for what it was that was trying to fight it’s way through to him.

He looked back at the girl in her dangling cage, listening to the other boy’s calls getting more and more urgent. But he felt numb.

After a while, he realized the boy had been calling his name for some time.

'HARRY!' he sounded hurt and angry. 'WHAT THE BLOODY HELL IS HAPPENING TO YOU?'

He didn't answer.

'HARRY! ANSWER ME!' The boy's calls went unheeded as Harry stared out in front of him blankly.

It was a long time before the boy finally stopped trying to rouse the girl or get Harry to answer him. He pounded on the stone walls of the pit before eventually falling quiet. Harry must have dropped off because he found himself awoken by Wormtail pushing his head up with his silver hand. Fenrir was standing not too far behind.

As Wormtail pushed the cup to his lips and started tipping it down, Harry recognized immediately that the warm liquid was not the same potion he had been taking. He tried to thrust his head away, but the silver hand that gripped his face and held his jaw open, could not be moved. He choked down the liquid and was about to start viciously accusing Pettigrew of trying to poison him, when he felt a scorching heat in his rib cage. The pain from it overwhelmed him and he collapsed into darkness.

When Harry came to sometime later, it was not as before. He was weary, not the least rejuvenated by whatever it was Wormtail had given him, and the pain... He eased his weight onto his feet again and let out an involuntary groan as his neck and shoulders seared with burning heat.

'Harry?' The boy called from the pit. Harry glanced at it to see fingers poking through the grate, but he did not answer. He was tired, and angry; so angry that Wormtail had not given him what he needed, what he sought, what he craved. He did not have the strength to struggle with his bonds so he stared blankly in front of him, waiting.

'Harry, what's going on with you?' The boy continued to talk in a quiet tone. 'Hermione hasn't woken for hours, and you act like you don't care.' The voice from the pit seemed to drone on slowly, and quietly. 'Hermione was right. You need to stop taking what ever it is they're giving you. It's changing you. You need to remember why we're here in the first place.'

Cold silence reined.

'What you did to Ginny was bad enough,' It continued more angrily. Harry turned his eyes on the pit as the fingers disappeared. 'But this just might be unforgivable.'

Something in that name the boy mentioned stirred Harry. A pang shot through him, though it was something he did not recognize. Curious, he hung quietly for the longest time, trying to picture her.

'Ginny.' He breathed quietly as he stared at the stone floor. What was it that distantly taunted him in that name?

'What? What did you say?' came the suddenly urgent request from the previously deadened voice in the pit. But Harry was tired, so very tired. He closed his eyes and let the pain wash over him.

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When next he woke it was to the feel of Wormtail's silver hand on his jaw again. He did not have the strength to fight; it was a struggle to stay conscious enough to drink. He vaguely heard Wormtail griping nervously to himself about the Dark Lord coming as the cold liquid seeped through Harry, before he let Harry's head sag onto his chest and scurried away again.

After a time, the pain that raked through him started to ease, and before long he could feel enough relief to take the weight on his feet again. His strength returning, he looked around him.

There were no familiar fingers coming from the pit, and looking up to the cage that he had not thought to check last time he was conscious he could see damp hair flowing out through the bottom of the bars.

Something still niggled at him, but whatever it was, proved unreachable; he felt detached; numb. When Wormtail appeared Harry eyed him under his brow threateningly, but all Pettigrew did was look at Harry, as if inspecting him. He seemed apprehensive as he watched Harry's determined stare.

'You still want to kill me, don't you?'

'Let me down and find out.' Harry said darkly. Pettigrew dithered pathetically.

'We shall see. Fenrir will be returning shortly.' He pointed his grubby, claw-like fingernail at Harry. 'He's the one you should be worried about.'

'He's not the one who owes me.'

When Greyback returned he made his way into the dungeon the same way Harry and the others had come. As he passed Harry, his eyes widened in delight and he licked his teeth obscenely at him, repulsing Harry. Amused by the effect he had on Harry, Greyback barked a gloating laugh before retreating through the arch out of sight.

As Harry hung in the quiet, he bided his time dreaming up ways he could dispose of both Pettigrew and Greyback when he got free. Alone and in the silence he waited, occasionally flicking a glance at the pit or the cage, wondering why they interested him so. He half-hung, half-stood there for many hours. Eventually his eyelids started drooping from boredom more than anything else, and just as he was sliding down the wall; his eyes closing for the last time, a familiar feeling swamped him. He lifted his head and snapped his eyes open.

Staring back at him were two chilling red slits.

Harry yanked himself up on his feet, the Dark Lord scanning him suspiciously, lingering on his wounds. Harry had the uncomfortable feeling he was watched for a while before approached. His heartbeat raced as the red eyes narrowed.

The Dark Lord then turned from Harry and walked very slowly and deliberately to the pit. Harry watched in confusion, his eyes dropping to the floor and back again to the black cloaked figure as an unknowable ache ran through him.

The Dark Lord stopped easily on the edge of the grate and smoothly drew his wand, aiming it in the pit.

'Don't.' Escaped Harry's lips quietly. Nervously. Uncertainly. As if he had no idea why he had said it.

The Dark Lord turned his head to look at Harry but did not lower his wand.

'Why?' He asked silkily.

Harry was sweating; he could feel it running down his face as his eyes darted everywhere but at his captor.

'I-I d-don't know, I …'

'Wormtail!' the command went out icily. Pettigrew entered through the door in a half bow, his fingers fidgeting nervously.

'Yes master?' his quivering voice asked.

The Dark Lord had lowered his wand and was heading back towards Harry.

Harry, fearing the consequences of his actions, avoided the red eyes, and instead focused on the pathetic, hateful rodent that trailed behind his master.

'I am losing patience.' The Dark Lord sounded gravely displeased. His tone was enough to cause a

wave of dread to envelop Harry. 'Concentrate the last dose.'

'Yes, my Lord!'

'And get the other two on their feet ... They will be the ultimate test.' Whatever this meant, Harry could tell it almost soothed the Dark Lords anger. Wormtail squirmed and wriggled away quickly, Harry's loathsome, penetrating gaze following after him.

The Dark Lord studied Harry, frowning. 'I will return tomorrow.' He said to himself. Harry shifted uncomfortably under his gaze, strangely aware that his scar no longer bothered him in The Dark Lords presence. The black cloaked figure turned from Harry wearing an evil smile on his thin, washed out lips. 'You shall start with something easy.' he said as he walked away. '…Wormtail … I think.' A slow, evil laugh came from him as he disappeared through the archway.

Harry was left staring after him in relief, glad The Dark Lord had not punished him in his displeasure.

Shortly after, Greyback and Wormtail entered the room. Fenrir stood eyeing Harry as Pettigrew administered potions to the other two occupants of the dungeon. As the two prisoners slowly started to revive, Wormtail approached Harry with a cup. Harry did not move, he did not fight; he knew without it, his body would give in. He gulped the freezing liquid and waited for its effects.

Once their jailors left, Harry, who was beginning to feel very tired, having not slept in he didn't know how long, let his eyes close. But as he was drifting off, voices interrupted him.

'Hermione? … Hermione?' came the voice from the pit.

'I'm okay.'

'What about Harry? Can you see him?' There was a creaking of metal followed by the caged voice again.

'I can see him, but he looks like he's passed out again.' The voice was wobbly as it added 'At least, I hope that's all it is.'

'I don't know that he deserves you worrying over him.' The pit voice said gravely 'He wasn't too worried about you.'

'It's that potion!' the caged voice sobbed in between words as it spoke. 'Its not Harry!'

'I don't think Harry even exists anymore.' The pit voice said quietly. 'I think we've lost him, Hermione.'

'Don't say that!' The caged voice said desperately. 'There must be some way we can reach him! There must be…' it trailed off desperately.

They both seemed to go quiet, and Harry finally felt himself edging into darkness.

'Maybe there is a way.' The pit voice said slowly, 'I mentioned Ginny earlier, and I think he was about to say something but he passed out again…'

At the sound of her name, her image flashed before him, and Harry opened his eyes.

'Ginny?' the girls voice said. '*Of course!* Harry! Harry! Are you awake? *Harry!*'

Harry ignored the calls, though something was stirring inside him uncomfortably.

'Harry! Wake up!' The girls voice was getting more determined.
'Harry! *HARRY!*' came from the pit. 'Snap out of it!'

He listened, but did not act.

'It's not working … maybe he isn't just sleeping…' the girls voice began to sob again. There was no answer from the pit. 'Oh Ron … what if none of us make it? Our parents, your family…' the girl seemed highly distressed.

'We'll make it.' The boy said gravely. 'Somehow, we'll get out of here.'

'Imagine … imagine when they t-tell Ginny…'

The uncomfortable feeling in Harry's chest surged at the mention of her name again.

'She's going to lose all of us at once! Her brother ... I've known her so long now, we're like sisters! We've always been so close because of Harry. Ginny never used to shut up about him!' her sobs we're almost a laugh.

A frown was slowly creasing across Harry's brow as he listened.

'I thought it was a bit of an obsession at first. I told her to g-get on with her life ... n-n-not to wait for him to notice her. But she never cared for anyone the way she c-cares for Harry.'

Harry could not move as he listened. An ache was swelling painfully where there had been only emptiness.

'A-and when I saw them together last year, I knew she m-meant it. She did love him ... even after J-Julie' the girl's voice kept stumbling on hurriedly. 'She was so hurt ... but she said that if-if it made him happy, she would let go. Ron ... you should know ... she-she told me she only wanted him to be hap-happy. She said she'd go on loving him no-no matter what happened.' she rambled on.

The pain swelled rapidly in Harry and he began to feel sick.

'That's the kind of lo-love you'd give everything for! Re-real love. I don't think he understood ... I don't think he ever kn-knew…' she trailed off as she wept.

It was like someone reached in and took a hold of Harry's heart, shattering the ice off it. Almost like it hadn't been beating until now. With a rushing intake of breath, painful tears swelled in his eyes as he thought of Ginny. How they had parted. What he had done to her. How she would remember him. It was as though his soul was thawing, and everything that had slowly drifted away came flooding back to him.

Harry was raising his head to talk to Ron and Hermione, when several loud noises seemed to come through the door to the cavern. It was the unmistakable sound of curses hitting solid rock.

21. The Wolf and the Rat and the Cup

Two Death Eaters appeared at the door to the cavern as Pettigrew darted out from the opposite archway.

'What's happening? What are you doing in here? You were ordered not to enter under-.' But one of the cloaked figures cut Wormtail off.
'We're under attack! We had no choice!'

Harry's insides sparked as he eyed Pettigrew, his hatred seething, but on hearing the voice from the lumpy looking Death Eater, his stomach dropped. The voice was that of Amycus, one of the infiltrators that had stood upon the tower the night Dumbledore was killed.

'Not so brave when it's not a sick old man outnumbered by half a dozen murderers, are you?' The two Death Eaters turned, seeing Harry hanging there for the first time as he spoke.
'*You?*' A woman's voice that almost certainly belonged to the other's sister, Alecto, hissed in surprise. They both seemed unable to stop staring at Harry as another small explosion came from

the cavern behind them.

‘So this is the secret the Dark Lord has us guarding!’ Amycus leered at Harry with narrowed eyes. Harry was so tired he was slouched against the wall having trouble keeping his head up as he stared back at Amycus through heavy eyelids.

‘You’re obviously not one of his most trusted servants if he hasn’t told you then.’ Said Harry, enjoying the venomous look he received for his trouble.

‘What’s happening? Who’s out there?’ Wormtail’s eyes were wide as he dithered in the archway nervously.
‘There is a group of them, came through the doors already firing. They wont be able to find their way down here though. I wiped the track behind us.’ He answered.

Harry watched Wormtail as he scurried to the cavern entrance to look through the doorway.
‘They’re coming!’ he squealed with a look of utter terror on his face as he turned back into the room.

BOOM!

Another explosion, louder this time, rang through the metal that held Harry to the wall. Alecto took up position behind the equipment that littered the dungeon, waiting. Amycus moved to the entrance of the cavern, trying to flatten himself to the wall, ready to take out anyone that came through in the back.

Harry started laughing lazily, as if half asleep, as he hung from his chains. They turned their heads to him, staring at him as if they eyed a madman.
‘I’d rather be hanging here than be in your shoes right now.’ Harry said as he eyed them with a vengeful grin.
‘Shudup!’ Amycus said angrily.
‘If you’re lucky, they’ll kill you quickly…’ Harry added. He was getting an immense satisfaction from watching them squirm.
‘I’m warning you…’ The stocky Death Eater threatened, eyeing him from under his brow.
‘You have good reason to be scared.’ Harry taunted. ‘You better hope they get to you before I-.’
‘SHUT UP!’ in the time it had taken Amycus to walk a few paces from the wall towards Harry, two figures poured in through the narrow entrance.

Beams of light of all colours were darting through the air in front of him, but Harry had eye’s for only one person as he watched Wormtail retreat through the archway, leaving the others to battle it out. He started tugging at his bonds in angry frustration, his hatred gathering his strength in his desperate need to pursue his parent’s betrayer.
The voices that had been silent until now rang out again. Hermione screamed suddenly as a curse slammed into her cage.

‘HERMIONE!’ Ron shouted from the pit.

Harry struggled desperately with the metal clamps, furious to get to Pettigrew. Then all of a sudden, he was enveloped in gold light and his bonds dropped away from him.

He slumped to the ground momentarily, unused to the weight of his limbs again, but recovered quickly as he stumbled toward the archway, not bothering to stop and see who it was that released him.

He entered a long tunnel-like hallway that stretched out in opposite directions. Which way? He thought impatiently. He turned to the right, and hobbling down the tunnel with all the strength he could muster, nursing his wounded wrists, he edged carefully into the first opening he came to.

It looked like a makeshift kitchen. Two cauldrons sat atop a pile of burned wood, one much larger than the other. There was a bench top and some cutlery lying around, and cups like that which Pettigrew had been forcing liquids down Harry’s throat, but no Pettigrew.

Harry ducked back into the tunnel, limping as fast as he could, the sound of fighting growing ever

more distant, slowing as he rounded the next doorway. The room he was standing in was completely black.

Lumos! He thought automatically as he brushed the sweat out of his eyes in annoyance. A sudden white glow fanned out from the gaps in a nearby cabinet. Harry yanked it open, and there on the shelf was his wand, the end obediently alight. Lying next to it were two others, but Harry reached only for his, holding it up to scan the room. It appeared to be Wormtail and Fenrir's sleeping quarters. A rusty old iron spring bed was in the corner, and a mattress on the floor near where he was standing, both laden with crumpled up bedclothes, but still no Pettigrew.

He extinguished his wand as he made his way to the last doorway off this end of the tunnel, vaguely registering noises some distance at his back, but he had no interest in what he had left behind. With almost feverish anguish at the thoughts of Pettigrew escaping him again, he lunged through the narrow gap and directed his wand at the only thing that moved.

Pettigrew stopped suddenly at the sight of Harry, a look of sheer terror crossing his face as his mouth gaped open. He was standing near a small platform in a room that had gold markings etched on the floor.

'How did y … w-what are you … ' Pettigrew stumbled as he stood, seemingly frozen to the spot. Harry knew he must have worn a look of unadulterated hatred on his face, because it flowed through his veins like ice. He approached Pettigrew slowly, his chest heaving as he breathed in his disgust for the creature hunched before him. He stopped a few feet short of Pettigrew, his face twisted with the thoughts of revenge, as he watched the treacherous rat squirm.

'You can't kill me' it warbled as it twisted it's hands together. 'You're Harry Potter…' the voice strained in desperation. Harry narrowed his eyes and aimed the wand at Pettigrew's heart.

'I-I-I changed the potion…' it said. 'Y-You c-c-can't do it. You shouldn't be able to … I-I-it's been almost two days … enough time…' it blabbered on, wide-eyed and full of fear. Harry took step forward. He wanted this cretinous thing dead. He wanted it to pay for what it had done. It didn't deserve to live. His eye's blazed as the creature huddled into itself, not able to meet Harry's burning gaze. With the wand honed in on Pettigrew, Harry gritted his teeth.

The only sound that filled the chamber was Wormtail's pitiful sobs as the two of them stayed like that. Harry's wand was shaking as he stared down it hatefully.

Why was he hesitating? Why didn't he do it?

'You don't want to kill me…' it said as it dropped to its knees. 'You chose not to before!' It started to creep towards Harry as it clasped it hands together in front of its face. 'Please … p-please spare me … pity me! Please…' It wailed.

A surge of repulsion and pity began to rise in Harry. He took a step back so Pettigrew could not touch him as he groped for Harry in his effort to appeal to him. Harry swallowed hard.

The ice in his veins was slowly melting at the realization of what he had been about to do. He lowered his wand hesitantly, lost in a furious internal battle. Pettigrew seemed to take solace in Harry's actions, almost immediately noticing his lack of conviction and his pity.

'That's right…' he whimpered hopefully. 'You don't want to kill me … you cant-'

WHAM!

Suddenly Harry was lying on his back sprawled across the floor, his wand had been flung from his hand and was rolling towards the wall. A heavy weight was on his chest and a putrid smell filled his senses.

'You're mine now!' Greyback whispered hoarsely on top of him, sniggering evilly and baring his yellow pointed teeth at Harry.
'How did you get out?' Pettigrew sounded alarmed.
'Dear Alecto opened the cage.' He sounded pained to talk and his face seemed to be undulating,

stopping Harry from struggling as he watched, too terrified to move. Greyback's mouth and nose were distorting as he half laughed, half growled in pain. His eyes rolled back in his head, but then came back down to Harry again glowing bloodshot and beastly. His face was becoming more elongated, and Harry felt jagged claws stabbing into his flesh where Greyback's hands were.

Panic struck through Harry as he realized he was about to have a fully transformed werewolf on top of him. He began to struggle again, thrashing around madly and finally starting to edge free as he inched backwards, Greyback's claws tearing through his clothes and raking down his skin as he went.

With his legs still pinned under the beast, Harry twisted on his stomach and desperately tried to pull himself free. Then all of a sudden the weight was lifted and he scrambled awkwardly to his feet, stumbling forward in exhaustion as he went.

He collided with the wall and slumped his cheek against it with his eyes closed, panting, the effort of freeing himself from Greyback robbing him of the little energy he had left. Slowly he became aware of the hairs on the back of is neck prickling uncomfortably and another panting breath other than his own.

He opened his eyes and using the wall for support he turned, dreading what he knew was coming. His eyes followed the trail of his own smeared blood along the floor as a threatening low, animalistic growl sounded. The breath left him as he met the werewolf's hungry gaze.

It slunk towards him, barring its teeth, its tongue lapping at the drool that leaked out of the side of its mouth.
Any moment it would attack, any moment Harry's life would change forever - if he lived.

The creature was within reach, its manky breath wafting over Harry's face, eyeing him viciously when without warning, it lurched forward. Harry closed his eyes as if shutting them would somehow shut out what was about to happen. There was a high, painful squeal and Harry waited for the excruciating feel of its teeth to register, before realizing it wasn't him that had yelled.

Opening his eyes wide, the werewolf was only inches from his face, but it seemed frozen as its mouth gaped open. It dropped back slowly and as it did Harry could see something strange poking through its chest. A pitiful dog-like whine escaped its mouth as the thing that was in its chest retracted. The werewolf collapsed to the ground, gargling as if drowning in its own blood then it breathed no more.

Harry look up in astonishment at Pettigrew, who was standing with his blood covered sliver hand held out in front of him, looking down at Greyback.

He shuddered and looked at Harry before turning speedily and scurrying to the exit. A figure appeared in the doorway, and a wand was raised on Pettigrew.

'NO!' Harry yelled. Tonks hesitated as she took in the sight before her, keeping her wand on Pettigrew as he turned nervously to her.
'Let him go.' Harry said as he wrenched himself off the wall behind him. Pettigrew glanced back at Harry, and then down to Greyback almost as if he couldn't believe it himself, before looking at Tonks again.
'Tonks.' Harry said as he stepped forward. 'Let him go.' She moved inside the doorway, allowing Pettigrew to pass. He skulked passed her, her wand still trained on him.

Once he was clearly gone Tonks moved quickly to an unsteady Harry, throwing his arm over her shoulder.

'Did it bite you?' She asked as they headed for the door. He didn't hear her at first, still lost in his turbulent feelings. The hatred that had flared in him for so long had been temporarily doused, but he still struggled with believing what had just happened.

'Harry! Hey!' Her concern roused him and he looked at her questioningly. 'Did it bite you?' Harry shook his head.
'No. No, it didn't get the chance.' Harry stopped. 'My wand.' He said, looking to the other side of the

room. Tonks pointed her wand at it and it flew at them and Harry grabbed it with his free hand.

'Harry!' Ron came rushing through the door and skidded to a halt on the marble flooring. Harry jolted at the site of him. He was filthy, coated in dirt from his stay in the pit and looking extremely tired.
'You look how I feel.' Harry said with a wry smile. Ron was running his eyes up and down Harry, taking in all the blood and bruising. He swore.
'Hermione said you were in bad shape, but…' he paused as he followed the trail of blood, his eyes falling on the werewolf. He swore again. He looked up suddenly urgent 'It didn't bi-'
'No.' Harry interrupted 'It didn't.' A look of relief came over Ron's face, and then it seemed to cloud over as he watched Tonks ease Harry down onto one of the three black marble stumps that lined the room.

'I'm back Ron.' Harry said, reading Ron's expression. 'It's worn off.'
'It has, has it?' He replied soberly.
'Yes.' Harry said as Tonks peeled open several layers of his ripped and ragged clothing, frowning at the bruising and lacerations on his wrists and arms.
'Then why haven't you asked if Hermione's alright?'

Harry stared at Ron who was still eyeing him distantly.
'I-I … w-w…' He trailed off. Tonks lifted his t-shirt to see where all the blood was coming from. Harry looked down at the deep gashes from where Greyback's claws had imbedded themselves in his skin and torn down his back and side. It was her turn to swear as her eyes pooled with tears. Ron paled visibly beneath the dirt smeared all over his face. Harry looked away ashamed. Ron was right, he hadn't bothered to ask after Hermione, not only that, but he had run after Pettigrew in his quest for revenge, and not even stopped to see if they were freed safely.

'This is beyond my skills in healing.' Tonks said as she summoned some bandages that coiled around Harry's chest and waist. 'We have to get you out of here.' She said lowering his clothing. Just then, Hermione appeared in the doorway. She looked pale and drawn, and her hair was damp with sweat as she moved to stand beside Ron.

'You're alright?' she asked Harry quietly.

'I'm fine.' He said avoiding her gaze; suddenly aware he didn't deserve her concern. He opened his mouth to say what he knew he should have days ago, though he couldn't seem to get the words out.
'Me too.' Hermione said pityingly, seeming to understand more than he did. She stepped away from them and looked around the room, her eyes falling on the body first. Her voice squeaked as she asked 'Did it-'
'No.' Ron answered.

Tonks was helping Harry back on with his jacket and easing him off the marble pillar when Hermione's voice made them all turn to look at her.

'Harry, this is it!' she was saying as she traced her hand along the markings on the floor. Harry frowned and for the first time, looked about the room. He took in the platform in the centre and the golden runes that were splayed around it on the floor and the three pillars. He let go of Tonks and limped towards Hermione.

'It's here?' He asked. She looked up at him nodding.
'I think so.'
Ron came up behind him. 'What does it all mean?' he asked.

'I don't think we should be hanging around here any longer than we have to.' Tonks said, eyeing them with frowned curiosity.
'There's something we have to do before we go.' Harry turned to her with a determined look. 'I'll explain later. We wont be long.'
'What?' she asked cautiously.
'Not right now, we don't have time!' Harry said warningly. 'Please, just give us a minute.'

'Alright,' she hesitated as she frowned at him. 'I'll go back and see how Moody's getting on with his

two new friends, make sure no one else is coming.' She moved off reluctantly. When she was gone, Hermione continued.
'It's a rune triangle.' She said as she shook her head.
'What … like the one we did at Halloween?' Ron asked sceptically.
'Well … yes … and no.' she said as she wove her way around the symbols. 'It's the same sort of magic, though this … is a magical key, I suppose you might call it.'

'How do we open it?' Harry asked.
'Opening it isn't the problem,' she looked up at them warily 'It tells you how, and that is the problem.'
'What d'ya mean?'
'Well, Voldemort would have constructed this, right?' she reasoned slowly. 'He's not likely to forget how to get to the cup himself, is he? So why write a set of instructions on how to do it?' They both stared at her blankly for a moment, and then Harry caught on.

'It's booby trapped.' He said as he heaved a sigh.
'It's like a game to him.' She nodded again.
'So how do we open it without setting it off?' Ron asked
'You can't,' she said 'it will go off as soon as its opened this way, no matter what.'
'Voldemort's sick curiosity again, just like in the cave. His idea of "testing the worth" of whoever gets this far.' Harry said grimly.
'Yes.' Hermione was growing ever more anxious as she watched Harry. 'Harry, I don't think we should attempt this now. We should come back after I've-'

'you know that's not an option. It's now or never.' Harry cut in abruptly. 'Tell me what I have to do.'
'Well, for some reason it's already been partially opened,' her fists were clenching as her hands hung by her sides. 'Someone has already done most of the work to bring the pillars up.' She motioned to the marble columns.
'Pettigrew!' Harry said. 'That's what he was doing in here, he must have been trying to remove it for him.' Harry was already regretting his decision to let Pettigrew go. 'So what's left to do?' Hermione was frowning as if not sure she wanted to continue.

'Hermione.' Harry prompted. 'What do I have to do?' She glanced at the three marble pillars.
'You need to place a few drops of your own blood on each of the columns,'
Blood again, Harry thought. 'That wont be too hard.' He said wearily.

She stepped nearer the to the platform 'Then you have to stand on the triangle, and that's all it says.' But she paled as she pointed to the ceiling directly above it 'Though I have a feeling that will come down, whatever it is.' Harry looked at the triangle shape inserted into the ceiling that looked like it was made of black glass.

'What will happen then?' Ron swallowed nervously as he eyed it.
'I don't know.' She said, her eye's full of fear and concern as she looked back at Harry.

He walked over to the first pillar and yanked his jacket and jumper off, leaving only his torn and blood stained t-shirt on. Hermione gasped as he pulled the bandages off, exposing the ripped skin. Immediately blood dripped from the wounds and Harry put his wand tip to the red drops and caught some on the end of it. He let it drip onto the pillar and then moved off to do the same with the next one.

'Harry, I don't think you should be doing this now.' Hermione's quivering voice said.
'We've already had this conversation.' He said flatly, as the blood dripped off his wand tip.
He approached the last pillar without looking at her.

'But I didn't know how badly you were hurt.' Her voice was growing stronger with conviction as she spoke. 'This is going to test you beyond anything you can imagine Harry, and look at you! You shouldn't even be walking around, let alone trying to withstand who knows what!' He ignored her as he moved to go to the platform. She planted herself in front of him with a furious look on her face.
'You're not doing it! I wont let you!' She said through her teeth, her wand in hand.

Harry glared back at her for a moment, but he was too tired for an argument. He softened his look and slumped his shoulders convincingly.

'You're right. I'm not in any condition to do this.' He nodded slightly and saw the look of surprised relief on her face.
'W-We'll come back, as soon as you're healed.' She said. 'Ron, grab his clothes.' Harry allowed himself to be turned and walked to the door but ushered her in front of him as Ron walked slowly towards them holding Harry's clothes in one hand, bringing up the rear.

Ron stopped at the door, his face grim, eyeing Harry knowingly. Before Hermione knew what was happening Harry turned back and darted towards the platform. She threw herself after him, but Ron dropped the clothing and caught hold of her round the waist, restraining her.

'*NO! Harry…*' she sobbed as Harry reached the platform.

Within seconds he was encased in the dark glass as it dropped over him from the ceiling. His feet left the ground and his hair swirled around his head as he was immersed in liquid. Dark clouds swelled and grew around him, the blood leaving his wounds and blending with the liquid he was trapped in.

The blood on the pillars began to bubble as Harry's hands began to pound frantically against the glass-like tomb.

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Harry's vision was blurred by the icy dark liquid that suspended him, which was so cold it felt like a thousand little knives stabbing at his skin. He could just make out Ron and Hermione's figures moving beyond the glass. A sudden flash of light shot towards him, causing the watery substance around him to ripple and sending a shockwave through him, but the barrier did not break.

Harry stopped clawing at the glass to pull his own wand free of his jean pocket. *Reducto!* He thought. A beam of light cut through the water towards the glass, which was clear behind the blackish fluid, but died out before it reached its target. He shot off two more in quick succession, aware his time was running out, but neither of them made it more than a couple of inches through the liquid, which seemed to smother the beams of light rapidly.

In angry panic, Harry pressed his wand tip to the glass and fired again at point blank range. Bolts of jagged light stretched out in a web across the glass, the freezing liquid reverberating with the force of its power making Harry clutch at his ears as the pressure built up within the tomb, but the web of light died out and the glass remained.

His movements were slowing now, becoming increasingly clumsy as the cold penetrated his body. He was beginning to feel very tired as the air in his lungs ran out. His wounds were no longer stinging. His whole body felt numb.

He had slowed to doing nothing as he stared out at the two frantic figures beyond the tomb beneath heavily hung eyelids, frozen to the bone. Harry's lungs seemed to be the only part of him that could feel as they threatened to burst. So this is it? He thought, floating still in the icy black water. His heartbeat slowed dramatically and his eyes closed. He's won… Then his heartbeat stopped altogether.

Everything was quiet. And warm. And peaceful.

A smoky white mist gently wisped around him in the darkness, caressing him, growing slowly as it flowed and ebbed, seeming to gradually become thicker and take on form. Milky figures at his back were guiding him gently as he drifted towards a small warm light that glowed in the distance. All of the pain he had been in was gone, and he felt safe and at peace.

As he neared the light, he realized it had a form. He was almost on top of it before he saw it was a small golden chalice. The Cup! Harry reached out his arms as he floated before it, grabbing the two slim, cool metal handles and pulling it to him. Almost immediately he became aware he was still drifting. He looked up directly ahead of him to see a beautiful red glow that looked faintly familiar.

He could feel himself being sucked gently to it and found he was keen to reach it, when something made him stop.

'Sweetheart,' a hauntingly sweet feminine voice made him turn, his movements slow as if in water. His mother, Lily, was beckoning him to her with her misty white hand, his father, James, drifting at her side. Harry's heart lifted as he started using his arms to swim his way to them, but the pull of the red light was growing stronger, dragging him backwards.

'Fight it Harry.' His fathers deep, comforting voice urged *'You can do it.'*

Harry looked over his shoulder at the light which only a moment ago had seemed so enticing and watched as it grew in size, gaping open like an enormous sinister mouth, sucking everything to it. He put all his effort into swimming his way through the thick surroundings away from it and towards his parents, still grasping the cup firmly in his hand, until finally he started moving away from the red glow.

'That's it Harry, keep coming.' His father encouraged Harry to kick even harder and pull himself along faster, but try as he might, they seemed to keep drifting away from him.

'You're almost there, darling.' His mother gave him a broad smile that warmed Harry through. He was getting nearer to them, and keen to be with them, he sped up as fast as he could.

Glancing over his shoulder the red mouth was gaining on him. He looked back at his mother and father, and using every ounce of strength in him to reach them, he swam towards them, concentrating all his effort on being with them, desperate not to let them go, until finally stopping before them.

'You are ready for the task given to you, son' his father said *'Have faith in yourself, as we do.'*
'Remember Harry, we're always with you.' His mother said. They sounded like they was saying goodbye.
NO! Harry tried to speak but he couldn't make a sound. A heavy sadness came over him as their misty bodies flew apart to reveal a small white glowing orb. He reached his free hand out despairingly and touched it with his finger. It sunk into the light, which began enveloping him, creeping up his hand and arm gradually, until it encased his whole body.

Coughing and spluttering, pain once again searing through his freezing cold body, Harry opened his eyes to see Hermione crouched over him. He had the strangest feeling she had just been kissing him.

She was soaking wet, as were Ron and Mad-eye behind her, but Harry could still see the tears pouring down her face. As Harry pushed himself up into a sitting position she scooped him into her arms and hugged him so tightly he thought he might pass out again.

'Don't you ever do that to us again!' she sobbed as she rocked him in her arms.
'Hermione let him go. You're going to suffocate him, then you'll have to do that pash of a lifetime thing again.' Ron said seriously. Harry felt two hands grab him under the elbows and lift him to his feet.

'It's called the "kiss of life" Ron.' Her voice was still wobbling dangerously. Harry saw the marble floor was covered in the inky water that had encased him mixed with pools of his own blood. He was shaking uncontrollably, his teeth chattering uncontrollably as Moody threw some clothing over his back.

'What's that?' he asked gruffly, pointing at Harry's stomach. Harry looked down at the golden cup clasped tightly in his hand. He didn't want to speak, he didn't want to have to explain right now, and he was feeling like he might not be able to stand much longer.

'Let's get out of here. He looks like he's not going to last long.' Hermione said.
'M-m-my wand' Harry stammered croakily as he shook.
'I've got it' Ron said 'here.' He slid it into Harry's back pocket. Moody growled.
'Now what have I told you lot about storing your wands there?' He said, helping Harry limp out the doorway and up the tunnel. 'Don't come running to me with only one buttock when it goes off

accidentally!' Harry tried to stay with them, but blackness was creeping into his vision. His head spun and little lights sparked before his eyes. Then his body slumped and everything went black.

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When Harry opened his eyes, he found he was at Julies again, lying in her bed as she snoozed on a thin mattress by the fireplace. The grey morning light crept through the open curtains as the sun surfaced, so Harry edged himself up and pulled on his jeans.

His body was still sore, the bruising around his wrists and ankles were all shades of deep purple and black, but the wounds down his back and sides did not gape as they had done. In fact, they were sealed neatly together, leaving almost no marks.

Harry walked to the kitchen and put some tea on, his back to the rest of the room. He felt extraordinarily hungry, so he hunted the cupboards for something to eat, pulling out some bread and throwing together a cheese sandwich. He took two mugs out and filled them both, and then walking over to Julie and crouching down next to her, he reached out and tapped her on the shoulder.

To Harry's surprise she stirred almost immediately.
'Here.' He passed her the tea as she sat up looking at him from heavy eyelids. Her hair was ruffled and she was still fully clothed. 'How long have I been here?' he asked.
'They brought you in the early hours of yesterday morning.' She said and took a sip of her tea. Harry nodded and unconsciously reached out and pushed her hair back from her face.

'Thank you Julie.' He said, and then realizing the intimacy of the situation, he pulled his hand back awkwardly. 'You really do have a gift for healing.' He smiled, feeling incredibly grateful yet also slightly embarrassed.
'Don't mention it.' She flashed a quick smile at him that appeared to Harry to be strained.

'Is everything okay?' he asked. This wasn't the first time he'd picked up that all wasn't as well with Julie as she liked to make out.
'Yes' she brightened suddenly. 'It's you and your friends we were all so worried about. When you disappeared like that. We've been looking for the three of you for a week.' Harry sighed and stood up, going back to the kitchen and putting his cup and sandwich on the table before sitting down, Julie joining him.

'I've got to leave as soon as possible,' he said almost to himself 'get back to Hogwarts.' He bit into his sandwich. He knew Ron and Hermione would have taken the cup there.
'Your friends were here yesterday afternoon.' She said, trying to catch his eye. 'That girl, Ginny was with them.' Harry stopped chewing and looked up. 'I don't know why she bothered to come, to be honest.' Julie said 'She didn't look at all concerned about your state of health. Seemed to spend most of her time trying to nosy around my flat.'

Harry frowned but didn't say anything, just resumed eating. When her comment appeared not to get the reaction she expected, Julie pushed further 'You know, if you two are in love, she has a funny way of showing it.'

Harry pushed his chair back and left the table, slipping a clean t-shirt over his head and throwing on his jacket. 'I'll see you round.' He mumbled and headed for the stairs. Julie stepped in front of him, handing him a fresh bottle of purple tonic.
'Take this, and remember, seven drops with water or juice. The state you're in, you'll need to keep taking it until the bottles empty.'
Harry took the bottle, stashing it in his pocket, and then started down the stairs, making it as far as the door before she called out to him again.

He paused with his hand on the doorknob.
'Harry' she said again, more quietly this time.

He finally looked around at her as she reached the bottom of the stairs. 'You know you can come

here anytime if you need to … I-I-If you want to.' Harry could see in the bright waiting room the dark rings under her eyes as they glazed with tears. She held something out for Harry, placing it lingeringly in his hand when he turned his palm up. It was an ornate golden key, the same one he had seen her use to unlock the door he was standing before.

'N-no' he said uncomfortably as he tried to hand it back to her. She stepped back and waved his hand away.
'Keep it. You might find you need it.' She was frowning as a tear spilled down her face. Harry turned and opened the door, going through it and closing it behind him, pausing outside it momentarily to shove the key in the same pocket as his tonic before angrily taking a few steps and then disapparating to arrive outside the Hogwarts gates.

What is she playing at? He thought, his temper bubbling just below the surface. What does she want from me? He locked the gates and started walking to the entrance when he veered off and headed to Hagrids. There was no smoke rising from the chimney, even in this cold weather, so Harry didn't hold much hope of finding Hagrid at home, but he knocked briefly and tried the handle automatically, expecting it to be locked, but it opened easily.

He walked into the gloomy room, all the curtains were closed allowing only minimal light. Harry saw something stir out of the corner of his eye, and was surprised to see Socks sitting on Hagrids made bed. He smiled and went to sit down next to her. She was peering at him through her large green eyes, her tail flicking in annoyance by her paws.

'What have you got to be so angry about?' he said as he pulled her to him, entwining his fingers in her fur. 'You've found yourself a nice place to sleep and still have your freedom to run around chasing mice at your leisure. Sounds like a pretty good life to me.' He held her out in front of him, laughing softly as he looked on the grumpiest cat he'd ever seen. 'Anyone would think I was interrupting something. You don't have a Tom cat hidden in here do you?' Harry made a mock search of the room with his eyes and Socks swiped at his face with the paw of a bear for his trouble.

'Whoa… Touchy little thing aren't you? Ah, now I get it,' Harry said quietly 'your mistress has told you to treat me like the git I am, hasn't she?' He was wearing a wry smile, hiding the real pain at the thoughts of Ginny's feelings towards him at the moment.

She had come with Ron and Hermione to see how he was, but according to Julie she didn't look interested in his condition at all, seemingly far more interested in Julie. I guess its natural, he thought. She's probably too mad at him still to want to show anyone she cares. That must be it, he thought. He cuddled Socks to his chest, and despite her apparent grumpiness she began purring loudly.

'You still love me at least' He held her up again 'So what d'ya think, will she ever forgive me?' The cat wriggled free and dropped onto his knees. Socks quickly sunk her claws in, and as Harry jumped up at the prickly pain, she scooted over to the door and disappeared round it. 'Well I guess that answers that question.' Harry left the hut, closing the door behind him, and headed for the entrance.

There was a lot of clatter coming from the Great Hall and Harry figured it was breakfast, and having left the majority of his sandwich back at Julies, he entered the hall and stood at the end of what he thought was the Gryffindor table, ready to sit down, but there was something strange about it.

There were some Gryffindors sitting at it, piling their plates or eating their breakfasts, but there were also Hufflepuffs Ernie and Justin sitting opposite Dean and Seamus, and to their right was Luna, which was not so surprising as she had taken it on herself to sit with Ginny at the Gryffindor table anyway this year, but also Anthony Goldstein and Terry Boot, all fellow Ravenclaws sitting chatting comfortably with Lavender and Ginny.

Ginny … his eyes lingered on her. She was spooning food onto her plate, looking wind swept and beautiful, as if she'd just gotten off her broom after a rigorous game of Quidditch. Harry tore his eyes away finally to see Susan and Hannah laughing at something the Creevey brothers had said. The only one missing who should have been a part of this was Neville. Harry suddenly didn't feel like eating anymore and he turned to leave.

‘Oh no you don’t!’ Hermione and Ron had just entered behind him. They still looked worse for wear after their ordeal, but Hermione was eyeing him determinedly ‘You’re eating, nothing is going to spoil this.’ She nodded at the table.

‘What’s going on?’

‘The DA mate, they’re growing, booming in fact.’ Ron said as he bounced on his toes. ‘Seems when we all went missing for so long people were signing up like mad. Ginny was able to give out the extra coins to keep up, and well, with such a mishmash of houses, they decided it would be better to eat together so they could keep up with the latest news and maybe help figure out what happened to us.’

Harry frowned, feeling utterly lost. ‘But how? Why?’ he asked.

‘Neville.’ Hermione said affectionately. Harry turned to look at her. ‘He did a lot of campaigning for the recruitment of the DA, seems he had a lot more friends than he ever knew. They did it for him in the end.’

Hermione directed them to three empty places at the end of the table, a little away from everyone else. Harry received a lot of smiles and nods, even a wave or two from the rest of the table when they noticed he was there. Things had changed from being the invisible boy.

‘They know Harry.’ Hermione said across the table to him.
‘Know?’ Harry’s stomach dropped.
‘They know Voldemort had us for the past week.’
‘What?’ Harry was stunned. ‘Who told them?’
'McGonagall did yesterday after we got back.’ Ron answered ‘Not in front of us of course, Hermione and me were up in the Hospital while Madame Pomphrey shoved the most disgusting potions you’ve ever tasted down our throats.’ He screwed his face up in remembrance.
‘Why did McGonagall do that?’ Harry still couldn’t fathom it.
‘Well it’s the truth,’ Hermione said ‘and I guess she feels people deserve to know what’s going on. And I agree with her to be perfectly honest.’

Harry thought about it for a minute. He had been so used to keeping everything they did a secret that it was going to take some getting used to if this sort of thing was going to happen often. To take his mind off it he filled his plate and started eating, his appetite returning with the first piece of bacon. During his meal he set about asking how they got him free of the glass tomb.

Apparently they realized pretty quickly that their normal spells weren’t going to work, and after seeing Harry try and fail, they panicked as they watched him give up and stop trying. ‘I was numb with the cold. I couldn’t have moved if I wanted to.’ He said impatiently.

It turned out that Ron bolted off to get help while Hermione stayed back and watched Harry die. Tears were swelling in her eyes as she recounted how horrible it was to watch and yet not be able to do anything. She said he must have been lifeless for at least 5 minutes before Moody figured out a way of removing the glass altogether.

It vanished and the water burst out all over them as Harry dropped to the floor. Moody said Harry was gone and nothing could be done but Hermione wouldn't give up. Her muggle first aid training had taught her how to do CPR and since Harry had been immersed in freezing cold water, his brain had a good chance of still being in tact even after almost six minutes without oxygen.

‘Something Voldemort would never have considered.’ Said Hermione nastily. ‘When he made that trap, he made it for great wizards, which in his mind means pure-bloods, he knew whoever went in after the cup would have to die to reach it, and that was where he thought it would end, in your death. He never would have imagined muggles could be so useful.’

‘Once again he underestimated something he despises and doesn’t understand. Muggleborns!’ Ron said cheerily, putting an arm around Hermione’s back proudly. She smiled sheepishly and leaned into him.

‘That’s right.’ Hermione said ‘Wizards think once someone is dead then there is no bringing them

back.' Harry listened and thought about how Voldemort was being slowly defeated by the things he constantly underestimated. Then he told Ron and Hermione about seeing his mum and dad, how they had helped him, telling them he never would have gotten back with the cup in the first place without them.

'Another loophole he does not understand.' Hermione said as she pointed her fork at Harry. 'Once you cross over, the people who are there and love you can help you.' Harry shook his head.

'Where's the cup?' he asked suddenly.
'Safe' Ron said.
'We'll tell you later.' Hermione motioned to the people nearest them that had started to eaves drop. When they were noticed they turned guiltily back to their food.

'P-Professor McGonagall w-would like to see you b-before lunch.' A small voice came from behind Harry. He looked over his shoulder and little Peter was standing behind him looking extremely nervous. Harry smiled at Peter and ruffled his hair affectionately.
'Thanks, Pete. How are your patronuses coming on?' he asked, genuinely interested.
Pete shrugged, 'Okay, I guess.' but he sounded very down. Harry smiled his best smile.

'How about I do some one on one with you?'
Peter's eyes brightened immediately as he nodded.
'Okay, let me know when you've got some free time and we'll work something out.' Harry said. Peter seemed speechless and just nodded before moving away and almost walking straight into someone coming up the isle.
'Think you've got a bit of a groupie there, mate.' Ron teased.
'He's a good kid who deserves a break.'

After they finished breakfast Harry went up to crawl into bed, still feeling the strain of the week's events. He took out Julie's tonic and chided himself. She had told him seven drops in water and last time he had only been using five; that was why it didn't seem to be doing the job as well. This time he measured out seven drops and after returning the lid and placing the bottle, along with Julies front door key in his bedside cabinet draw, he downed the liquid and laid back on his bed, pulling the curtains around to shut out the dark, and closed his eyes. He barely had time to think about what he had to say to the Professor at their meeting before dropping into a deep sleep.

When he woke a couple of hours later it was with a start. Something had come back to him in his dreams and it disturbed him greatly. He had remembered dreaming about floating between the two lights weeks ago when he got back to Hogwarts after Halloween. Only then it had been Ginny's voice that had drawn him back. Would he have been headed for that same sinister red light that sucked you in if she hadn't woken him? The realization sent his head spinning.

When he made his way up to the Headmistresses office, he pondered what she had to say to him. So often he had walked in there and come out completely confounded, having entirely not expected what she, or indeed, who ever else was in the office with her, would have to say. Something told him this time would be no different, especially after recent events. Once outside her doors, he knocked. They flung inwards at the Professors command. 'Enter.'

'You wanted to see me?' Harry walked slowly towards her, mildly surprised there was not a lynch mob laying in wait for him.
'Yes. Sit down, Potter.' Harry slouched in the chair before her desk and waited as the doors thudded closed behind him. She was yet to look at him as she busied herself with paperwork, and then upon standing, she moved around the desk and kept walking until she stood before Dumbledore's portrait. Harry did not look at the painting, too angry about what happened last time he was in here to face the old man. Turning, McGonagall clasped her hands in front of her and peered at Harry shrewdly.

'Where is the cup, Harry?' The Professor's words were the last thing he expected.
'What?' he asked, baffled.
'The Horcrux, Harry,' said a familiar, gentle old voice 'where is it and how do you plan on destroying it?' Harry looked up at the painting of Dumbledore and met his old mentors eyes, acutely aware that every single past Head of the school was now eyeing him with great interest.

22. Friend or Foe?

Though Dumbledore's face was kindly, Harry still found his anger was brewing uncontrollably inside him. This man had chosen to ignore him when Harry needed him most, and now that there was something he wanted from Harry, he was demanding an answer.

Harry did not get up from his chair; instead he turned his gaze to the edge of the desk in front of him. 'I don't know where it is.' He said sullenly. His answer was met with silence. After an uncomfortable amount of time, Professor McGonagall spoke.

'You did obtain the cup, did you not?'
'Yes.'
'Then it seems to me, you would know of its whereabouts.'
'You would think so, wouldn't you?' Harry said darkly 'But maybe you hadn't heard, I was unconscious when they took me to Julies, so I have no idea what Ron and Hermione did with it.'

The room erupted.

'Insolence!' One of the paintings remarked huffily. 'No respect!' Said another. 'Typically teenage.' Came the sarcastic drawl of Phinneus Nigellus from the far wall.

'Harry, I understand how you feel,' Dumbledore said, quieting the comments. 'But there-'
'How I feel?' Harry cut in. He lifted himself from the chair and walked slowly towards the painting, glaring at the old man. 'You understand? That's what you've got to say to me after months of waiting? You understand how I feel?' Harry's fury was surging through him, he could feel it gathering momentum, threatening to burst.

'You know what its like to face the darkest wizard of all time, having almost no power of your own, with the fate of everyone you love riding on your shoulders? You know what its like to see the people you get close to, one by one die, just because they are close to you? No… Don't tell me you understand. Don't tell me you know what I'm *feeling*.' His eyes were beginning to swell with angry tears.

'Do you know what I had to do to get that cup? Do you? I died … Can you believe it?' Harry ignored Professor McGonagall's intake of breath as she brought her hand to her mouth. He shook his head in bafflement, staring at the floor searchingly as if somehow he might find the explanation he was looking for if he looked at it long enough. 'I had to die to get it. I mean… Who would think to set a trap like that? …' For the first time, the events of the past week started to sink in. Harry's legs began to feel like jelly. 'What sort of person…'

'The worst kind of person, Harry.' Dumbledores eyes watered as he looked down on him. 'And you are right, I do not know what its like to be you. But I do know you. Well enough to believe you will find a way to deal with your pain and get on with the task at hand.' He said 'You are not alone, Harry.'

'YOU LEFT ME!' Harry roared at the two dimensional image. 'I AM ALONE!'

'I had to, Harry.' A tear crept down Dumbledore's cheek as he spoke grimly. 'One day you will come to understand. For now, you must trust in what you know is right.' Dumbledore straightened in his chair and his voice strengthened as he continued. 'The time for hiding is over. Voldemort knows now what you are doing, and he has already set in motion plans to ensure you do not succeed.'

Harry felt like a pallet of bricks had been dropped on him. 'What?'

'He has been aware for sometime that three of the Horcruxes are gone, and of course, he will have discovered you managed to retrieve the cup by now. It must be destroyed as soon as possible, and your search for the unknown Horcrux should begin.'

'How do I destroy it?' Harry asked, forgetting his anger in his need to find an answer.
'Knowing how to destroy it is not so much a problem as living through it. You have already been on

the receiving end of the lockets curse.'
'So what do I do?'
'The same thing you have always done. Your best.' Dumbledore leaned back in his chair wearily.

McGonagall walked to her desk and leaned on her two hands, peering at Harry. 'I would suggest you start looking closer to home for help, Potter.'
'Home?' Harry said.
She nodded and raised her eyebrows 'Hogwarts is the best home some of us have ever known.'

Harry walked to the door, and then turned uncertainly. 'Professor, how did the Order find us? How did they know where we were?' She answered without looking at him; busily sorting paper piles on her desk. 'Let's just say, persistence paid off.'

~*~*~*~

Harry went down to the Great Hall to catch the last of lunch after he left the Heads office, picking up a pumpkin juice and taking it with him after he had hurried down chips and lasagne. When he finally caught up with Ron, he was sitting in the common room, sulking. It seemed Zach had been chasing Hermione down ever since she returned, and she could no longer hold him off with excuses and so agreed to meet him.

'What are you so upset about?' Harry said confused. 'She'll call it all off now we have the cup.'
Ron sneered. 'You haven't heard then?'
'Heard what?' He asked, taking a seat opposite him, sipping his juice.
'His Lordship was hounding McGonagall the whole time we were gone, spent every waking hour hanging around, demanding she "produce" Hermione. He was told there were people out looking for us, but he had it in his head she'd eloped with you.'

Harry sprayed pumpkin juice out of his nose. 'What?'
'You heard. So now she's outside trying to convince him that the three of us spent the past week in a dungeon under the church being held by Voldemort.' Ron shook his head. 'I'm telling you Harry, he's going to be trouble when she finally does pluck up the nerve to tell him.'

'Well, maybe we should go down there.' Harry said 'Check and see if she's alright.'
'What, and get our heads chewed off? No thanks. She thinks she can handle him, let her try.'
Harry narrowed his eyes. 'Your dieing to go down there and see what's happening.'
'No I'm not.' Ron said unconvincingly. 'And anyway, I was down there and she told me to push off.'
Harry looked at him knowingly 'You were teasing her mercilessly, weren't you?'
'That's not the point, is it?'

Just as Ron was speaking, Hermione clambered through the portrait hole looking rather dishevelled, and spotting them, she headed straight for the stairwell to the girls dormitories. Ron stood up suddenly, calling after her as he walked speedily towards her, but she ignored him and disappeared behind the pillar. In a fit of fury, Ron shot up the stairs, but even as Harry tried to yell out a warning, there was a loud clunking sound and Ron came sliding down feet first on his stomach. Red faced and fuming, he picked himself up as several Slytherin sixth years laughed, and stared up the stairwell as it clunked back into place.

'Next time she goes, we'll follow her, just to make sure.' Harry said, appearing at Ron's shoulder. He grunted and let Harry guide him back to the chairs.
'Where's the cup?' Harry asked as he leaned forward so they weren't overheard.

'We buried it in the secret passageway that's blocked with rubble.'
Harry nodded. It seemed like as good a place as any since it was not only secret, but also completely useless. 'We have to figure out how to destroy it before we bother retrieving it.' He said.

Ron and Harry spent the rest of the day in the restricted section of the library looking up curse-breaking spells. They compiled a list of the most likely types that were used against the darkest magic, jumping frequently at the sudden and impatient shooshing noises of Madam Pince who hovered and pounced every time Ron's hunger pangs gurgled loudly. Finally Harry folded the piece

of parchment and stuffed it in his pocket before motioning to a relieved looking Ron to head down to the Great Hall.

Saturday nights in the Great Hall were usually a light affair as Students and teachers alike revelled in being in the midst of a weekend off. When Harry and Ron entered, they were beckoned eagerly by Seamus and Colin, who were already tucking into their food, but Harry saw Ginny sitting opposite them one seat from the end of the table and was about to suggest Ron take the seat next to her when Ron sped away from him, the smell of the food being too much for him to resist, and planted himself next to Seamus, the last spot on that side of the bench. He then started piling his plate high with food, oblivious to the position he had just landed Harry in.

So Harry took up the last spot on the end of the bench, Ginny sitting on his right, and grabbed the first thing that was in front of him, spooning the mushy peas onto his plate. He was so engrossed in trying to ignore Ginny's presence that it wasn't until the fifth spoonful that he remembered he hated mushy peas. After collecting a few foodstuffs he did like, he ate in silence, listening to the others as they talked about things that seemed altogether too normal to Harry.

He could feel Ginny's eyes boring into him challengingly as he finished his last potato, his plate still laden with five serving spoons full of thick gooey peas. He looked at the green swamp, knowing full well that Ginny knew he hated it, but defiantly stuck his fork in, watching it ooze off the sides as he brought it to his mouth. It took all his effort to swallow, but he continued to shovel in forkful after forkful, slowing down dramatically the more he ate, until he was halfway through, and that blissful moment finally arrived. The plate vanished and dessert appeared next. Unfortunately, by this time he felt quite as green as the peas he had been eating, so he left the table and headed back to the Common Room, cursing Ron under his breath.

Hermione was sat with a blanket wrapped around her staring into the fire of the otherwise empty Common Room when he emerged through the portrait hole. 'Why didn't you come down to dinner?' He asked, suspecting he already knew the answer. She looked at him briefly before turning back to the fire. 'I wasn't hungry.'

Harry frowned as he approached her, not sure if he had seen what he thought he had. She wiped the edges of the blanket to her cheeks, confirming his suspicions. He rounded her chair and crouched down before her, his stomach sickening even more than it was already.

'Hermione, did he hurt you?' At Harry's words she looked back at the fireplace.

'That depends on who you are talking about. If you mean Zach,' she met Harry's determined gaze 'No, of course not. He's always been such a gentleman, even if he is a little … over demonstrative. Ron on the other hand' Tears welled in her eyes again. 'Why does he have to be the way he is?'

Harry breathed a sigh of relief as he took Hermione's hands in his. 'You know he only says those things because he's mad with jealousy.' Hermione appeared unconvinced as she looked down at her lap. 'And because he's a stupendous git.' He added, still annoyed about the mushy peas. Hermione smiled in spite of herself. 'When you were passed out in the cage, he was frantic, wouldn't shut up for hours trying to get a word out of you.' Harry let her hands go.

'He even told me he might never forgive me for not caring when you were in a bad way.' Unable to meet her in the eye, he said 'and then you go and bring me back from the dead. I owe you debt Hermione… one that I hope I'm never called on to repay.' Hermione opened her mouth, but whatever she had been about to say, she was cut off by the sound of a bunch of rowdy Hufflepuffs as they entered the room.

Harry took out the list he and Ron had made in the library and handed it to her before slumping into the other armchair by the fire. She scanned the list quickly and Harry knew by the look on her face that there wasn't one spell on there that would work. She leaned forward when she saw the frustration on Harry's face. 'Harry, we are going to need help on this one, and I have a fair idea who to ask.'

~*~*~*~

The next morning as Harry knocked on the office door in the dungeons, it struck him how he had known what Hermione was going to say the night before. His own thoughts had strayed to Professor Slughorn after he had left McGonagall's office. He was one of the few people who seemed to have a good working knowledge of Horcruxes, though he had always seemed loathed to admit it. Maybe that was the real reason Voldemort wanted to recruit him.

The door opened, rousing Harry from his thoughts.

The Professor was still in his night attire, the same expensive looking green velvet dressing-gown and matching nightcap as when Harry had disturbed him last time this early on a weekend morning.

'Oh' he said, sounding like he would rather have had an enormous angry troll standing at his door than Harry.
'I need to speak to you, Professor.' Harry said 'Can I come in?'

Slughorn peered over his shoulder as if he was being interrupted. 'Well actually, I am rather busy. Perhaps you should come back tomorrow, hmm?' He replied as he closed the door, frowning when it wouldn't shut completely and banging it against Harry's carefully placed foot a couple of times before looking down and realizing what the problem was.

'This cant wait, Professor.' Harry said, leaving his foot where it was. Slughorn sighed and pulled the door open, stepping aside and waving his arm, motioning Harry to enter. 'Very well, if you will not be put off.'

As Harry suspected, the room was empty of people, but just as crowded with Slughorns comfort-collectables, and still overly warm as he remembered it. He waited for Slughorn to close the door before perching himself awkwardly on a tasselled footstool. 'Professor, what do you know about destroying a Horcrux?' Harry saw Slughorn shudder visibly as he stopped abruptly on his way to what was obviously, going by the worn out dent in the cushy upholstery, his favourite chair.

'Not exactly the type of conversation one is used to first thing in the morning.' He replied. Harry could tell by his reaction he was not completely surprised by his question. 'I imagine you have a very good reason for almost putting me in an early grave.'
'Yes sir, I do.'
Slughorn changed direction and sidled over to the table crammed with assorted drinks instead. Harry watched as he poured himself a drink of what looked like firewhiskey with a rather shaky hand.

'I'm hunting down the pieces of Voldemorts soul. But I need to find out what to do with one when I find it.' At the mention of pieces of Voldemorts soul, Slughorn had downed his whiskey in one gulp, only to turn back to the table and pour himself another.
'And why would I have any knowledge about such things?' he said, his back to Harry with his glass full.

'I was with Dumbledore when he went through your memory in the pensieve, sir.' Harry said. Throwing his head back, Slughorn tipped the whiskey down his throat. 'I know it was you who told Voldemort how to create a Horcrux.' The Professor banged the glass down heavily on the table

'I didn't know…' he said quietly. 'I had no idea Riddle was capable of such … heinous acts.' He was talking to himself, but then seemed to remember Harry was there and turned to look at him. 'I would never have told him how to do it if I thought for one minute that he would use that information to start creating his own.' His double chin was wobbling as his mouth quivered. 'I wasn't to know. He was so well liked by everyone. Top of his grade, charming … he had so many friends.'

'Friends who are now all Death Eaters.' Harry said. Slughorn pulled back slightly at Harry's words. 'Yes.' He said slowly, seemingly lost in thought. 'I have been avoiding them for more years than I care to remember.' Harry was getting impatient at Slughorns guilty tangents.

'Professor, how do I destroy a Horcrux?'

Slughorn eyed Harry cautiously. Seeing Harry's determination, he closed them briefly, sighing

heavily, and then waddled a short distance before sinking into the chair. 'There is no "one way" to destroy a Horcrux. He could have sealed each of them differently into their vessels, and most probably would have.' He had been staring at the red and green carpet, but now he met Harry's gaze. 'I would have to see it, then maybe I could work out how its been sealed. *Maybe.*' He stressed. 'Where is it?'

Slughorn had guessed far more than Harry was comfortable sharing, but faced with the prospect of trying to figure it out alone, Harry knew he had no choice. 'I'll show you.' He stood up, not entirely sure he was doing the right thing.

'I'd better get dressed.' Said the Professor, heaving himself out of the chair. Twenty minutes later they were standing by the secret entrance.

Harry waited until he was sure the passageway was clear before opening the disused doorway. With his wand lit, Slughorn followed Harry in a short distance until they reached the rubble. Harry knew better than to try summoning the Horcrux. Hermione had told Harry she had found a way of protecting it against such charms, just in case. So he started pulling some of the stones aside. It wasn't long before he was wishing he'd brought Ron or Hermione along. They had hidden it well and Harry was beginning to think he would have to call it off when he noticed a slight distortion of the rocks.

It was almost a shimmer, but not quite. Harry frowned in concentration as he turned his attention on it, running his hand over the rocks slowly. A slight tingling sensation crept into the tips of his fingers. With renewed effort, he pulled away two huge rocks, exposing a glint of gold. Yanking the cup free he turned to Professor Slughorn.

'Let me have a look at it.' He said, holding out his hand expectantly. Harry hesitated as he handed it over. He watched as Slughorn turned it, eyeing it from every direction. 'Yes,' he said slowly, nervously. His eyes were wide in the small light, giving him a slightly sinister look. Then looking up at Harry he handed it back to him. 'Put it back.'

'But aren't you going to tell me how-'
'Its not as easy as that m'boy.' He said, raising his eyebrows. 'I'll need to think about it … do some research.'
'Oh,' said Harry. He placed the cup back in the small hole and flicked his wand to cover it again.

Slughorn told Harry he would have some answers for him by the next morning as they parted. Harry nodded, noticing the slight glistening of sweat on Slughorns brow. Harry walked away from the secret passage, making straight for his room, where he pulled out the Marauders map and checked Slughorns whereabouts. Something about the way he eyed the Horcrux made Harry nervous. But he felt slightly relieved to see the small dot with Slughorns name over it moving about in his quarters. Harry's relief was short lived however as he began folding the map and briefly, out of the corner of his eye, he thought he caught sight of another dot moving along a corridor on the seventh floor. And then just as suddenly, it was gone. Malfoy!

Ron waltzed into the room. 'How'd it go?' he asked, and then seeing Harry was frowning at the map he peered over his shoulder. 'Whacha lookin' at?'

'Here!' Harry said, shoving the map at Ron. 'Follow me to the seventh floor! And keep an eye out for Malfoy, I'm going to try to head him off.' And with that, Harry bolted out of the room at breakneck speed, Ron in tail, battling to keep up and watch the map at the same time.

Malfoy couldn't have gone into the room of requirement because the dot was heading in the wrong direction. So how had he just disappeared? Harry thought as he emerged from several short cuts on the fourth floor, figuring he had a better chance of catching Malfoy in the corridors. He forced himself to slow down, drawing his wand from his robes and concentrating hard on the space around him, not sure what he was looking for. He had lost Ron in his haste so he was going to have to rely on his wits if he was going to find Draco.

Harry reached the main stairs that climbed to the fifth level, already feeling that his chance had gone, sure that Malfoy had slipped passed him, when he a familiar feeling overcame him. *Protego!* Harry's training with Sir took over as a white beam of light shot towards him from out of nowhere.

It rebounded off Harry, heading back in the direction it had come.

'Protego!' Draco's alarm was evident in his voice. He had not expected a reaction. Harry had caught him off guard. Zooming in on the direction it had come from, Harry aimed his wand. Expelliarmus! His spell hit the staircase, causing the stone to erupt in a dusty cloud. Two students, who had been watching the exchange from the top of the stairs, ran off up the fifth floor corridor out of sight.

'Where are you?' Harry demanded angrily, his wand darting around looking for a target.

23. The Unknown Passage

Harry scanned the area intently, looking for something that would lead him to Draco's whereabouts. Then someone skidded into view at the top of the stairs.
'Is he here?' Ron asked urgently looking down at Harry. 'The kids who just ran past me-'

'*Ron, look out!*' But before he could react to Harry's warning, Ron was hit hard in the shoulder by a stun almost at point blank range that sent him careering backwards into the fifth floor corridor. Draco was fleeing back the way he had come. Harry dropped his wand hand and leapt up the stairs in pursuit.

'MOVE!' He yelled. A small group of three or four students were making their way cautiously towards Ron's still form sprawled near the top of the stairs. They flattened themselves against the wall terrified as Harry raced through them. Then something caught Harry's eye. The corner of a tapestry half way along the passageway depicting two centaurs gazing at a purple flame on a grassy knoll, a mesh of stars stirring above them, gently flapped back into place.

He pelted towards it, flinging the ancient wall-hanging aside and squeezing himself into a narrow opening that was sliding closed. A wave of steamy heat swamped him as the wall shut behind him with an echoed thud, extinguishing the dim ribbon of light that had filtered through, leaving Harry enveloped in darkness.

Harry knew he had made a mistake the second he took a step forward. Instead of hitting a hard surface, his foot plunged into nothingness, and feeling totally disorientated in the utter blackness, Harry teetered for a moment and then lost his balance. He dropped quickly, and then jarringly collided with something, yet he continued to fall, being propelled with gathering momentum along a smooth round, slimy surface. It twisted and turned, grazing Harry's elbows as he went. Then without warning, he left the slippery surface and was airborne briefly before thudding face first onto hard stone.

His head still reeling from dizziness, and his heartbeat racing more than ever, he scrambled to his feet and lit his wand, trying to find something in the stiflingly hot, damp blackness to focus on.

The minute the light splayed along the glistening stone walls, an ear piercing shrill rang out. The pitch was so unbearable that Harry doubled up, hands clenched over his ears, and eyelids pressed tightly together trying to shut out the noise. It was not the sound of the merpeople's song that screamed aboveground; it was a thousand times worse. It seemed not only to attack his eardrums, but pierce his very skin as well, prickling at it with cactus-like spines of painful sound.

Unable to think, Harry curled up against the wall behind him, squirming in an effort to escape the burning sensation that felt like a fine mist of acid on his skin. But as Harry forced his eyes partially open in the foggy wand light, hands still pressed firmly against his ears, expecting to see his clothes morbidly dissolved and melted to his body, astonishingly his jeans appeared whole, untouched. The painful sound pummelling him relentlessly made tiny specks of light dance sickeningly before his eyes.

Then a flash of white-hot heat shot through his chest. His grip on his wand loosened, sending it clattering to the ground. The light dissolved and Harry knew no more.

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‘Potter ...’ Harry felt a sharp jar in his shoulder. ‘*Potter!*’ Struggling to open his eyes, his head throbbing painfully, Harry’s gradual recognition of the cold voice of Draco that intruded on him sent his pulse racing, rousing him fully. But as he urgently tried to lift himself, he found he couldn’t move his arms or legs. Wrenching at the binds around his wrists and ankles furiously, he stopped dead as the sole of a shoe pushed against the side of his face with spiteful force, shoving his cheek into the warm wet surface he was lying on.

A cold, contemptuous laugh broke the silence. ‘Well, well ... we meet again.’ Harry could not see him, but Lucius Malfoy’s voice was unmistakable. A wave of fear gripped Harry as his fingers flexed uselessly in search of his wand.

‘All but the most dim-witted of NEWT students would have extinguished their wand at the sound of a Screaming Wraith. It appears Severus is right. Harry Potter is not troubled with the petty art of learning. Far too mundane for the “Chosen One”?’

‘You shouldn’t have followed me here.’ Draco said sourly as he leant down, planting his pale face at an odd angle in front of Harry’s, his black Death Eater robes draped loosely around him. Lucius increased the pressure of his foot on Harry’s head warningly, as he tried to jerk free.

‘You’re leaving us no choice but to do something about you.’ Lucius drawled.

‘Get-off-me!’ The words came out muffled through distorted lips as Harry seethed in anger. Lucius dug his foot further into Harry’s cheekbone. ‘I’m-warning-you...’

‘What?’ Lucius drawled sarcastically ‘what is it exactly you plan to do? Since you do not have a wand, nor even a free fist or leg, your limited magical skills, as well as your primitive mudblood tendencies are of no use here. Perhaps you plan to talk incessantly until you manage to bore us to death with your usual drivel?

‘Then again, maybe you have something even more delightfully woeful to share with us?’ Harry felt a pang in the pit of his stomach as he watched a malicious smile creep across Draco’s lips. Lucius continued, ‘Though I should warn you, if you’re planning on reciting the grim details of your deplorable personal life with Miss Weasley, I may be inclined to lose my patience.’

Draco sniggered as the pang in Harry’s stomach swelled into full-blown nausea.

His anger exploded suddenly, and with an all-mighty lunge, Harry wrenched free of Lucius’s foot and brought his bound legs crashing into the back of Draco’s knees. Draco let out a painful groan as he crumpled to the ground.

Harry shuffled into a wall behind him, coming to a rest, sitting upright with his bound arms tucked behind him. ‘If you go near her’ he said, his voice sounding strange ‘it’ll be the last thing you ever do!’

For the first time, Harry could see Lucius as he rounded on him, wearing the same pitch-black robes Draco wore. With his long pale hair and the angle of the strange coloured light that barely shone from Draco’s wand casting long shadows across his sleek face, he looked even more sinister than usual.

‘You are hardly in a position to threaten anyone,’ He said darkly, bringing his wand only inches from Harry’s face. It was obvious he was on the verge of cursing Harry into oblivion, but the anger that flooded through Harry over-rode any fear he should be feeling.

‘I mean it.’ With a piercing, deadly gaze, Harry held Lucius’s pale eyes as he spoke slowly and deliberately. ‘If you, your son ... or anyone else touches her ... ’

Draco had picked himself up off the floor and now rounded on Harry, furiously. ‘You wont live long enough to worry about the Weaslette, Potter! One day soon-’
‘One day soon,’ Lucius cut in coolly, ‘you will face the Dark Lord, and you’re life will be a living nightmare.’

'Right,' Harry said sarcastically. 'As apposed to the dream come true that it is now?' He was shifting his body slowly, trying to ease it into a position where he could get to his feet. 'You may not know, not being one of Riddle's closest cronies anymore, (Draco looked outraged) but I spent the last week facing him, and yet … here I am!'

Lucius raised an eyebrow, looking down at Harry malevolently. 'You *escaped* him?' A faint smile edged Lucius's thin lips. Harry had expected the revelation to anger him, possibly even incite fear, but Lucius looked amused. 'Even you cannot possibly be that ludicrously dull. Tell me,' Lucius leaned in uncomfortably close to Harry's face, 'did you ever bother to ask who it was that released you from your bonds? … No?' He shook his head slowly and drawled 'Oh dear, oh dear! Still, I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. You cant even find something that is right under your no-'

'Father!' Draco said sharply. He sounded nervous as he watched Lucius with a mixture of fear and warning. Lucius eased himself upright.

'*Lumo Sepia!*' He snapped. His wand instantly glowed in the same eerie light that Draco's gave off. 'You are fortunate the Dark Lord wants you alive,' Lucius bitterness was evident as he sneered down at Harry. 'Though, you will not think so when he comes for you.'

Harry narrowed his eyes at Lucius's smooth grin. Anger pulsated through him as he finally wriggled up the wall into a standing position. 'Next time we meet, I'll wipe that smile off your face!'

Lucius glared at Harry, his knuckles whitening over the grip of his wand as it shook slightly, and through gritted teeth he said 'Oh, I do *so* look forward to you trying. In the meantime,' Lucius waved the tip of his wand and the ropes slid from Harry 'let's see how you deal with your present state of affairs.'

Lucius's malicious smile disappeared along with the rest of him as the glow from both his and Draco's wands retracted and Harry was plunged into darkness once more.

There was a brief sound of cloaks fluttering in the darkness as Harry imagined Lucius and Draco making their escape … then nothing.

'Great!' Harry said under his breath. 'Now what?' He stood in black silence, swamped in sticky heat, and concentrated.
Accio wand!

Nothing. A drip echoed somewhere near as Harry squeezed his eyes tightly shut and said aloud *'Accio Wand!'*

Still nothing.

The drip seemed to grow louder in the stifling silence, and then Harry felt something brush past his leg. He stepped back in alarm.

A waft of humid air swept around him, ruffling his hair slightly, triggering a growing unease in the pit of his stomach. Almost unsure if his eyes were open or closed anymore, Harry reached his arms behind him and felt for the wall, planting his hands firmly on the warm slimy surface in an effort to get his bearings.

The waft gently grew into a steady breeze and Harry's heartbeat quickened with the looming certainty that he was not alone. As dreaded confirmation, a fuzzy blue-green glow appeared in the distance. At first, he thought he had imagined it, but as it spread out along the glistening rounded surfaces, it pushed the air ahead of it with a quickening speed, blowing Harry's jacket out around him.

Harry looked down suddenly in the blurry light. Something had curled itself around his leg.
'Socks?' Ginny's cat was staring up at him, her tail flicking wildly as her hair ruffled in the wind. She pressed her head into his shin then sniffed the ground.

There, almost undetectable, lying on the damp stone at Harry's feet was his wand. He bent down

and scooped it up, looking in wonder at Socks as she turned in the direction of the blue-green light, which lit up the surroundings. Following her gaze, he was horrified to see that a huge shadow was visible in the midst of the eerie glow, drifting straight for him with ever increasing speed. The wind rushed at him as Socks scooted across to a small fissure in the stone wall, and disappeared.

Harry glanced back at the encroaching shadow, raising his wand, his mind racing. His hair and clothes blustered about him as he looked around him desperately for a way out. Then Socks reappeared through the wall. She growled at Harry, lifting her paw up and clawing at the air, and then darted back through it. Harry knew she was trying to get him to follow her, yet there was no way he could fit through the narrow gap, but he bolted towards it in an effort to put some distance between him and the shadowy light that was hurtling towards him.

Then quite suddenly, the light died, the wind dropped, and all was silent again.

Harry listened to the sound of his rapid breathing in the blackness as he turned back towards the now non-existant light. This cannot be good, he thought. A tingling sensation crept up his spine and he knew whatever had been within the light was almost upon him. He had to do something, fast! *'Lumo Sepia!'* His wand ignited in the same eerie light that the Malfoy's had given out.

Harry froze at the sight before him.

In the dark light, two monstrous forms loomed barely feet away. They were almost human, but too reptilian in their features to be considered so. One had an elongated snout and hard armoured skin like a crocodile, and the other had spiky scales that fanned out along its back and neck like a prehistoric lizard.

Their bodies were undulating as if fluid-like, glowing fluorescent in the wand light, and both eyed Harry venomously, baring their dripping, silvery teeth.

A viscous hissing sound brought Harry out of his stupor. Socks was standing at his feet, her hackles raised and her tiny pointed teeth bared. She let out a low rumble of warning and advanced on the rippling creatures in what Harry thought was a totally reckless move on her part. They opened their mouths and the same horrible screeching sound he had heard before accosted Harry, making him curl into himself as he tried to shut out the noise and pain, but Socks spat and growled savagely, seemingly unhurt by their wailing.

To Harry's amazement, they started to retreat as she slunk towards them, but then she turned suddenly, pouncing on Harry and pushing on his chest with surprising force, sending him reeling backwards towards the wall.

In shock at her surprise attack, Harry watched as she darted up a small stairwell that had appeared out of nowhere where before all he could see was the tiny fissure. Realizing she had shown him the way out, a way maybe he could see only by the Sepia light, he took off after her, his skin burning and his hands still clenched over his ears, the wraiths in pursuit, following Socks as she leapt up the stairs turning every now and then to let him catch up.

The stairs ended where a tunnel began, and Harry ran on through it, glancing over his shoulder, but the painful sound of the creatures at his back seemed to fade as the air became dryer and cooler, until he could no longer feel his skin burning.

The curved stone walls of the tunnel ended abruptly, leaving only dirt and wood in their wake as it slanted off at an odd angle. Harry didn't dare try switching to a brighter light, even though it was hard going as he tripped and stumbled over what looked like tree roots in the dirt floor. Sock's tail flipped out of sight on occasion, but then Harry would see her again standing in the middle of the tunnel, her eyes glittering in the strange light, waiting for him.

Some way along, the tunnel came to an abrupt end. Socks watched Harry as he came to a stop, flicking her tail impatiently as she prowled round and around on the spot. Harry looked down at her expectantly.

'So, how do we get out?'
She looked up at the tunnel roof above them, and following her gaze, Harry noticed the wood that

was splayed scarce and disorganized in the rest of the roof, seemed to have a much more solid form directly above them. In the inky light Harry could make out what looked like a trap door, only it appeared to have no way of opening it.

Not sure if the wraiths were likely to still be following them, Harry wasted no time in blasting it with a Reducto curse that sent splinters of shrapnel in all directions.

'C'mon then.' Socks immediately jumped into Harry's outstretched arms, and he hoisted her above him. She leapt clear of him and landed with a light thud on the wood above. Pocketing his wand, Harry jumped up and grasped the jagged edges of wood, pulling himself up with difficulty until he was sitting on the edge of the hole.

Looking around him, he could see a huge old wood and iron bed bent up in the middle and lying on its side, the mattress torn and oozing fluffy green feathers. There was an oversized wooden table and chairs, an assortment of traps and hanging cured food, pots and pans and other gear dangling from the roof, and finally a large stone fireplace on the far wall.

Hagrids?

Harry lifted himself to his feet and looked back at the ruin of floor where Hagrids bed used to be. Hagrid had not long had his hut rebuilt after last years fire; Harry didn't relish the thought of telling him he had made a crater in the middle of the floor and destroyed his bed into the bargain. He took out his wand and tried to repair the damage; the bed heaved slightly and groaned as the iron moved reluctantly, but then it merely collapsed in on itself even further. Deciding it was best left to someone more skilled, Harry grabbed Socks and headed to the door, walking out into the cold mid-morning light.

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'Harry! You're filthy! What happened?'

Harry looked down at his clothes as he buried his fingers in the fur of Sock's neck. He was indeed, filthy. His shoes, which were once white, were coated in black slimy mud, along with the whole back and left hand side of him.

'Is Ron okay?' he asked as he met Hermione's scowl.
Her face dropped. 'Why wouldn't he be?'
'Oh' said Harry.
'Harry, what is going on! Where is Ron, and why wouldn't he be okay?' Hermione was standing on the worn out carpet in the Gryffindor Common Room tapping her foot with her hands on her hips, and a very fiery look in her eyes.

'Hello.'

Harry and Hermione turned to see Ginny strolling over to them. She had a rather blank look on her face as she inspected Harry's state. 'I don't suppose that mud is Peruvian Bugboo-'

But Socks wriggled free of Harry's grip and leapt at Ginny, seemingly greatly pleased to see her mistress. She knocked the books out of Ginny's hands, sending them tumbling to the floor. Harry crouched down with Ginny and helped her gather them up again, leaning in so no one else could hear.

'Ginny, we need to talk.'

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Harry stood up with an armful of books as Ginny smiled and said pleasantly 'I've always liked a good conversation.' Surprising Harry with her receptiveness.

‘Not here though!’ Harry said. ‘I have to go and check on Ron first, but then we *must* talk.’

‘Harry!’

He turned to see Ron coming through the porthole rubbing his shoulder soothingly. ‘What happened to you?’ he asked grinning as he took in Harry’s slimy clothing.

‘I’ll tell you at lunch. You alright?’
‘Yeah. McGonagall wants to see you though. She wasn’t looking too happy either when she brought me round. Did you catch up with him?’

‘Who?’ Hermione said impatiently. She was trying to coax Socks to her, but Socks kept darting out of her reach.
‘We’ll meet at lunch; I’ll fill you in then. Ginny, come on.’ He placed her books on a small table and grabbed her hand, pulling her to the door.

‘Harry …’ Hermione called out hesitantly. Both he and Ginny turned and looked at her expectantly.
‘Oh, er …' she looked from Harry to Ginny uncertainly 'n-nothing.’ She said in frustration, waving at a hand at them dismissively and resuming her pursuit of Socks.

Harry led Ginny into the first empty classroom they came to, closing the door behind him before turning to her gravely.

‘He knows Ginny. Voldemort knows.’ He said quietly, frowning as Ginny flinched slightly.
‘Oh,’ Ginny said, then added vaguely ‘knows what?’
‘About us, of course!’ he said sharply.
‘Oh!’ she said as comprehension dawned ‘that’s not good is it? How did he find out?’ she asked interestedly.

‘Malfoy, who else?’ Harry said in impatiently, annoyed he didn't seem to be having the impact he thought was warranted. ‘Anyway, it doesn’t matter how he knows; the point is you are now a target! This is exactly what I didn’t want to happen!’ He started pacing the floor nervously. ‘He’ll try to get to you, I know he will! That’s what he does!’ His insides were swirling with painful guilt as he stopped abruptly, taking hold of Ginny’s arms.

‘Until the Christmas break, you are not to leave the inside of the castle! Do you understand? And never walk the corridors alone! Always make sure someone is with you!’ he let go of her and started pacing the floor again. ‘I’ll put the DA onto it.’ He said to himself as his mind raced. ‘I’ll make sure there is always at least two of them with you wherever you go.’

‘Oh, I don’t think she’ll like that very much.’ Ginny said blandly.
‘Who?’ Harry snapped.
‘Oh … er … maybe you should talk about this later? I'm in a bit of a hurry actually.’

‘What are you talking about?’ Harry stared at her in angry bewilderment, beginning to lose his temper that she appeared not to be taking his worst fears seriously. She watched him dreamily as he grabbed her too tightly by the arms and said in almost a yell ‘Ginny, this is important. He knows! He’ll come after you! He'll use it to get to me if he can. You have to stay hidden, you have to stay safe!’ He was shaking her as the painful lump in his chest made his eyes water.

‘I cannot let anything happen to you! Do you understand? I wont let you get hurt! I wont let him take you too! I wont lose you as well! Do you understand me?’ He could feel himself losing control as his eyes dropped to her mouth. The pain within him branched out, surging through his whole body as a salty tear threatened to leak behind his glasses. In a fit of desperation, he thrust his lips to hers, looking for a way to shut out the pain. But he pulled away again prematurely and frowned as he searched her face. She looked stunned, confirming what he had felt in her lips. The anguish of it tore through him.

‘Oh … Oh I’m sorry Ginny. I had no right.’ He let go of her and backed away. ‘I really am sorry … really I am…’ he could feel himself crumbling as he dropped his gaze to the floor. ‘More sorry than you can know.’ He walked passed her without looking at her and opened the door, tilting his head in

her direction. 'Go straight back to the Common Room. And tell Ron he's to stick to you like glue!'

The guilt that swamped him had Harry so torn up that when he finally reached the Gargoyle; he stood in front of it unable to utter the password. Ginny was now in serious danger, possibly more than anyone else, even himself, and it was all because he couldn't control himself. He should have stayed away from her after he left her at Dumbledore's funeral!

Dumbledore … someone who was already no more because of Voldemort. Harry tortured himself with the knowledge that he had endangered Ginny recklessly.

'Stupid!' Harry chided himself angrily through clenched teeth. If Voldemort took her, he would not kill her straight away. He would surely use her as bait. What would he do to her in that time? 'Stupid … stupid idiot!' He said, breathing hard in an effort to reign in his emotions.

'I doubt that's the password.'

Lupin smiled faintly as he stopped before the Gargoyle, placing his hand on Harry's shoulder. He must have seen the excess water in Harry's eyes because his smile faded as he studied Harry intently. 'What is it? What's happened?'

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Harry sat in the Head's office and spilled everything he knew about Draco Malfoy's whereabouts when he was in the castle. McGonagall and Lupin listened as Harry told them about the secret passage that did not appear on his map, and about Lucius and Draco's presence in the underground drains. McGonagall rested on her elbow with her fingers to her mouth and a pained expression on her face as Harry recited as accurately as he could what Lucius had said, leaving out the part about Ginny, fearing he wouldn't be able to keep his composure if they dwelled on it.

He told them about the Screaming Wraiths, and the tunnel that led to Hagrid's, acutely aware that the paintings were not bothering to hide their interest. The occasional gasp or short disbelieving comment about Death Eaters roaming the castle at their leisure escaped their lips, and when he had finished, Lupin was the first to speak.

'Harry, why didn't you tell us about Draco when you first saw him?' He looked weary as he leant against McGonagall's desk with his hands in his pockets.
'Because I wanted to find out what he was up to.' Harry replied, his eyes on a green, ball-shaped paperweight that sat atop some parchment on the desk.

'Don't you think we might have had a better chance of determining his intentions together?' asked Lupin.
Harry sighed heavily. 'I couldn't tell you because I'm almost certain it had something to do with the task Dumbledore left me.'
'The Horcruxes?'
Harry looked at Lupin in surprise. 'You know?'

'Yes, though I have not known for long. I am not privy to all of the information. Professor McGonagall and Aberforth are the only ones who know almost as much about this as you do. And it must stay that way. Voldemort could still get information from anyone else if he should happen upon us.'

'We must seal the secret passageway, immediately!' McGonagall said briskly. 'And Hagrid's hut will need to be investigated. I can see how they have utilized the drains, but how on earth they have been getting into the grounds escapes me!'

'What about the fireplace?' Harry said.

'It's a definite possibility. They must have built the tunnel between Hagrid's and the drains. It was just dirt and wood, you say?' Harry nodded at Lupin. 'Then it makes sense that they were able to get in and out of the grounds through the fireplace, and were using the tunnel to enter the castle.'

He added gravely.

‘I never heard of such a thing!’ one of the most pompous looking of the portraits said huffily. ‘I thought Hogwarts was supposed to have superior security.’ As the old ex-headmaster pounded his fist on his armchair for emphasis, a few portraits murmured in agreement.

‘It always did when Albus was here.’ Professor McGonagall looked pale, the news of the infiltration obviously weighing heavily on her. ‘I am certain that if he were still running things the castle would have been safe, as it is-’

‘As it is…’

Harry and the others looked at Dumbledore’s portrait at the sound of his voice. He was peering over his half-moon spectacles at Professor McGonagall. ‘Their secret has been successfully discovered before they had time to do any real damage.’

‘But do we know that, Albus?’ McGonagall stood up and approached him questioningly. ‘We’re not even sure what they were doing here in the first place.’

‘I think it is safe to assume that if they had managed to complete their mission, we would know.’ He glanced at Harry and gave him the slightest wink before turning his attention on Lupin. ‘I trust you know what to do?’ Lupin nodded. ‘By the way, now would be the ideal time to tell Harry why you are here, Remus.’

‘Yes, of course. Harry, you will be joining Molly and Arthur Weasley at the burrow for Christmas again. Members of the Order will be here on Saturday to escort youself, Ron and Ginny onto the Knight Bus, staying with you to ensure your safety. Molly has also informed me that you are most welcome to bring someone along, if you wish.

‘Well, I should be going.’ Lupin moved to the door and opened it, and then turning he said to McGonagall ‘I shall have the passage entrance and Hagrid’s Hut guarded until something more permanent can be worked out. Harry,’ he said with a nod of his head ‘I shall see you at Christmas.’ Then he turned and left, closing the door behind him.

‘What did he mean,’ Harry asked nobody in particular ‘I could bring someone along?’

‘I am certain you can think of someone who deserves a Weasley family Christmas, Harry.’ McGonagall said as she took his elbow and led him to the door. Harry thought he saw a faint twinkle in her eye. ‘In the meantime, how is it working out with Professor Slughorn?’

Harry frowned, uncertain of how she knew he had approached him, but looking over her shoulder at Dumbledore, he wondered no more. Dumbledore nodded slightly.

‘He said he’d have some information for me tomorrow morning.’
‘Very well. I must get on.’ The Professor opened the door and edged him out of her office. ‘It seems we now have a traitor in our midst, on top of everything else.’

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‘*A traitor?*’ Ron breathed. ‘Why does she say that?’ He was sitting next to Hermione at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall scooping cauliflower and cheese onto his plate. The ceiling above them was heavy with grey cloud as the magic rain tumbled down above them.

‘Isn’t it obvious Ron?’ Hermione poked her zucchini absentmindedly. ‘McGonagall would have left the rebuilding of Hagrid’s hut to people she thought she could trust. Whoever made that tunnel and bewitched the fireplace so it could be used, must have worked on it.’

‘I’m betting they wont try to use it again.’ Harry said looking at his plate of food with disinterest.
‘Well good! Means we don’t have to worry about Malfoy sneaking around the place.’ Ron stabbed at his Yorkshire pudding and stuffed it into his mouth. ‘Chunior or shenior!’

‘Hermione, have you done Screaming Wraiths in your defence classes?’ Lucius’s comment about him not bothering to learn had been playing on Harry’s mind.

‘Well … not really,’ she eyed him knowingly. ‘I mean, they’re in the text books, but we haven’t really covered it in class.’
‘What do you know about them?’
‘They’re ghosts aren’t they?’ Ron frowned.

‘Wraiths are visible spirits Ron; ghosts are different. A wraith isn’t just an echo of a past life; it has substance as well as form. It can affect its surroundings, touch things, move them.’ She looked at Harry pointedly ‘What did they look like?’

As Harry described them, Hermione’s expression darkened. ‘They’re his Harry. They’re Voldemort’s.’
‘What d’you mean?’
‘Wraiths become whatever was in there hearts when they lived. Going by your description, and the fact that they didn’t seem to bother Lucius or Draco, I’d say they were put there by Lord Voldemort-’
‘To guard the passage’ Ron finished.

‘Maybe.’ Hermione sounded unconvinced. ‘They might be there to guard something else too.’
‘Like what?’
‘I don’t know.’ she said thoughtfully.
‘Tell me about Lumo Sepia.’ Harry asked, wanting to know everything he could.

‘It means "Dark Light" or more commonly "Black Light."' She said, finally putting her fork down. ‘Screaming Wraiths are sensitive to normal light. As soon as they are exposed to it they, well … scream.’
‘It wasn’t like any scream I’ve ever heard before.’ Harry said.
‘Their screams alone aren’t deadly, though people have been known to be driven mad when exposed to them for too long.’
‘What? So they can’t hurt you as long as you don’t use light on them?’ Ron said dubiously.

‘Of course they can. They used screaming as a weapon on Harry, even in the black light, and they do things, remember? And they apparently have teeth.’ She said flashed an uncomfortable look at Harry.
‘How come they were afraid of Socks?’ he asked, glad to finally see his untouched plate vanish.
‘It not just Socks, cats are their natural enemy.’

‘Hey, do you think the cups still safe where it is?’ Ron whispered.
‘They don’t know where it is, if they did, they would have taken it by now. If they're even after it.’ Hermione said, looking up as Ginny appeared over Ron’s shoulder.

‘Harry, I need to speak with you.’ She looked slightly paler than usual and Harry could tell there was something wrong. He left the Great Hall, following her out into the courtyard. It was very cold and raining heavily still, and neither of them were wearing coats, so they took what shelter they could under a giant willow.

‘I want to talk to you about what happened earlier.’ Her green eyes fixed on him as he brushed a hand through his hair in an effort to shake some of the droplets of rain off. ‘There were some things I should have said, but didn’t.’

‘No Ginny.’ Harry shook his head slightly. ‘You don’t need to do this. It’s okay, I understand.’ His heart pounded in his chest painfully.
‘I don’t think you do.’ She said, a small crease forming between her eyebrows. ‘I will not live in fear and hiding Harry, and I’m certainly not going to be surrounded by the DA everywhere I go.’

Harry stared at her for a moment. He had thought she was going to talk about what happened when he kissed her. He had thought she was going to explain why she had not kissed him back, why her lips had lacked the fiery passion they always held. He had hoped she might open up to him, even yell and scream at him for his betrayal, or maybe tell him she hadn’t meant to be so cold, finally finding it in her heart to forgive him. But she had not even noticed.

The pain and hurt that was flooding every part of him began to change, anger once again rearing its head as he spoke. 'I know things are different between us now, Ginny. *I* know it and *you* know it, but Voldemort doesn't. I'm not changing my mind, you need protecting no matter how *inconvenient* it is for you.' He turned away from her and stalked back towards the door. Suddenly, he was yanked around by an abrupt pull on his arm.

'*Harry Potter*, I've got something to say and you had better listen!' They were both standing in the pouring rain; any shelter now well out of reach. Ginny's hair, which was only lightly dusted with raindrops moments ago, was quickly getting soaked flat to her head as droplets of rain tumbled off the ends of her soft fringe and crept down her face.

'I will not be dictated to! I don't care who you think you are!' Her voice sounded strange as she poked him in the chest. 'I will not be followed around or told where I can and cannot go! Have you got that straight? You are not the only one around here who is entitled to do as you darn well please!'

Ginny's cheeks were flushed, and if it wasn't for the rain, Harry was certain he would have been able to see tears spilling from her swollen eyes.

'Do you really think I would be stupid enough to flaunt who I am now that Voldemort knows about me? Is that what you think? Well it's about time someone pushed you off that bloody throne you've been sitting on *Mr.-Chosen-One* and brought you back down to earth where the rest of us live! You think you're the only one that knows anything that's going on! You think you're the only one who can do anything about it! Well I don't want to be the one to burst your bubble, but there are-'

But Ginny never got a chance to tell him what there was. Harry swept her into his arms and bent down to taste the fire that once again flared after it had lain dormant at their last meeting. She pushed her fists into his shoulders, trying to pull away, but Harry would not release her. Seconds later, he did not need to. Her lips were ignited and she kissed him heatedly, putting her arms around the back of his neck and pulling him to her. Harry was lost for one blissful moment where there was nothing except Ginny.

Slowly becoming aware that they was standing out in the freezing cold and pouring rain, Harry slowed his kiss until Ginny's lips left his reluctantly.

She allowed Harry to take her by the hand, and following him at a run, they headed back inside. They walked without speaking until they reached the Common Room, and then Ginny made her way to the dormitory stairs, leaving Harry to ponder how he had ever thought her lips cold.

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The next morning on his way to breakfast, Harry came across Hunter at the foot of the marble staircase. He was lingering with a small group of students and appeared to be demonstrating the effects of a very nasty curse to the sniggering delight of his audience.

'You've never seen someone perform such a pitiful improvement charm on themselves until you've seen Taphet's effort!' Hunter gloated. 'Imagine trying to make yourself taller and ending up with too much skin! Honestly! It was hanging off him in great wrinkly folds! He looked like my aunt Begonia's dog! And I thought *that* was the ugliest thing I'd ever seen!' The small crowd guffawed as a very red-faced young boy with curly brown hair tried to get passed them unnoticed.

'Hey Taphet!' Hunter yelled after Peter. 'Taphet! I could hook you up with my Aunt's dog if you're looking for a mate!'

'Hunter!' Harry slapped his hand down heavily on Hunter's shoulder. Obviously taken by surprise, Hunter glanced up at him in dire disbelief. 'You must have thoroughly enjoyed cleaning out the Greenhouses last time Hermione set you to it.' Hunter grimaced as the other students stared, unsure of what they should do.

'You know, I could think of far better ways of spending my last week of lunchtimes before the holidays, but each to his own I guess. And don't worry; there'll be no shortage of dragon dung to scrape off the floors, that's always guaranteed! Oh, and its mating season for the Mandrakes if I'm not mistaken. I'm certain you will find it very entertaining picking up after the wild parties they are sure to have thrown over the weekend.' Harry smiled pleasantly as he looked down at Hunters increasing scowl. 'Report to Greenhouse three at the beginning of lunch. I will let Professor Sprout know she can expect you.' Harry started walking away but turned again calling after him 'Oh, and I'd stay out of reach of the Venomous Tentaculars too … very nasty.'

The group dispersed and Harry entered the Great Hall, making his way over to Peter who was sitting alone at the far end of the Hufflepuff table.

'Hello! Listen, I've been thinking,' Harry sat himself down on the edge of the seat and lazily grabbed a piece of toast from one of the racks 'I promised you some one on one time, but I don't think I'm going to be able to do it before schools out,' Peter, who had smiled nervously at Harry when he sat down, tried to hide his obvious disappointment.

'It doesn't matter. I'm rubbish at magic anyway. I'd probably just be wasting your time.' The boy said sincerely.
'Oh,' Harry said brightly, 'then it is just as well I was going to ask you if you would come and stay with some friends and me over Christmas then, isn't it? Sounds like you could use the practice!'
'But … under age wizards aren't allowed to do magic outside of Hogwarts.' Peter said, with a hint of excitement.
'That will *not* be a problem where we're going.' Harry said casually as he bit down on his toast 'So, what do you say? Wanna come?'

When Harry got back to the Gryffindor table, he was feeling very pleased with himself. Peter had accepted the offer of Christmas at the Weasleys, and assured Harry he would be ready to go with them on Saturday. And the thought of Hunter elbow deep in droppings instead of enjoying his lunch this afternoon brought an immensely satisfying grin to his face.

Harry was just about to start loading his plate, his appetite fully returned, when Hermione swooped in on him, the look on her face nothing short of horrified.

'Harry! The cup … its gone!'

24. The Order's Secret and the Lion's cub

As he ran up the stairs and through the corridors, Hermione at his heels, Harry thought desperately that she had just missed it somehow. He, himself had found the cup difficult to find when he had been showing it to Slughorn, and since he was the last person to have it, it was perfectly plausible that she wouldn't be able to find it. Harry had sensed its whereabouts last time, and would again; he just needed to get there. Yet even as he told himself this, dread flooded him.

Ron was standing outside the passageway when they arrived with a pained expression on his face. Without a word, Harry drew his wand, lit it, and sped into the open entrance, jogging the short distance to the rubble. Rocks were spread on the floor of the passageway where Ron and Hermione had scattered them in their desperate search, and as Harry made his way through them, Hermione came up behind him, panting.

'Its not here, Harry! We looked … its gone!'

'Bring your light over here!' he ordered as he extinguished his and slid the wand into his jean pocket. She edged her way over the debris as Harry began running his hands gently over the stone.
'What are doing?'
'Sh! I'm trying to see if I can feel it.'
Hermione watched him silently as he traced the outline of the rocks. At one stage he thought he could feel something creeping into the tips of his fingers, but after he heaved a few stones aside, the sensation was gone. It wasn't long before the dread that sat like a knot in his stomach, twisted into anger and frustration, and with a heated growl he turned.

'Slughorn!'

He pushed past Hermione and made his way quickly back into the corridor, his anger at Slughorns betrayal seething within him.
'Where are you going?' Ron asked as Harry emerged and stalked off.
'I'm going to kill him!' Harry said viciously over his shoulder.
'Harry!' Hermione was stepping quickly behind him in an effort to keep up with his angry strides. 'Do you really think he would steel the cup?' she questioned.
'Yeah,' said Ron, as he too caught up after having sealed the passage. 'Its more likely the Malfoy's took off with it, isn't it?'

'You didn't see the look on Slughorn's face when I showed it to him!' Harry said through clenched teeth. 'I knew he was up to something. He's the reason I was checking the map in the first place yesterday! I can't believe I was stupid enough to show him where it was!'

When he reached the door to Slughorn's office, he pounded his fist on it and turned the handle immediately, not waiting for an answer, but the door wouldn't open. Harry drew his wand and pointed it at the lock.

'Harry! It's a teacher's private quarters! You can't just unlock it-' But Hermione's warning was interrupted by a frustrated growl as Harry pushed on the door after having tried to unlock it magically, and it still wouldn't budge.

Harry took a couple of steps back and pointed his wand at the door.
'What are doing?' she squeaked.
Hermione gasped and Ron swore as the door suddenly exploded, sending shrapnel flying into the air and showering the three of them with splinters of wood.
'Geez Harry!' Ron gawped in a half laugh as Harry strode the few steps into the Potions Masters office, inspecting the room before him.

Nothing was out of place; the room was exactly as it was when Harry had been there the morning before, except of course, for the pieces of Slughorn's door which now littered the area in front of the trio, and ... a pair of shiny black shoes on the floor, which pointed to the ceiling as they jutted out from behind the comfortable chintz sofa that backed onto the Professor's sleeping quarters. Harry walked hesitantly towards them, stopping when he rounded the couch.

Slughorn was lying on his back, eyes wide open and his mouth gaping as if quite literally frozen in fear. Harry's anger ebbed as he crouched down over the still form. Reaching out, he gently peeled the chubby fingers from the golden cup clasped to the Professor's rounded stomach.

'Go and get McGonagall,' he said gravely as Hermione clapped her hands to her mouth. 'Tell her he's still alive, but needs a hospital.' Hermione retreated immediately. Harry lifted the cup and turned it over in his hands. A large crack ran from the lip to the base.

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Days later they were still trying to piece together what had happened, but whatever his motives one thing was clear; Slughorn had destroyed the Horcrux. McGonagall had shipped him off to St Mungos and Harry made a point of asking everyday for news, but there was no change in his condition.

'I'm glad it wasn't you, Harry.' Hermione had said on more than one occasion, and maybe because Harry wasn't angry with Slughorn anymore, he didn't share her view. It was his fault that Slughorn had the cup, and guilt prickled at him that he had somehow managed to get out of destroying it unscathed.
'He deserved what he got, if you ask me,' said Ron 'He shouldn't have told Riddle how to make a Horcrux in the first place!'
'Tom would've found out some other way.' Harry commented.

With only four days until the Christmas break, Harry called a meeting of the D.A. He decided the

Room of Requirement was still the best place, so the trio sent word out, and before the afternoon was out, everyone who was enlisted had been informed. After dinner, Harry headed up to the seventh floor with Ron and Hermione in tow. He rounded the corridor with the expectation that maybe a dozen people would be waiting for them, and was somewhat taken-a-back by what lay in wait.

There were the old D.A. members milling around beneath the tapestry of the dancing trolls, which included Dean, Seamus, Lavender, Colin and Dennis Creevey, Ernie, Justin, Hannah and Anthony Goldstein, Michael, Susan, Terry Boot, Luna and Ginny, yet there was also two Ravenclaw seventh years, Neil Sanders and Lucinda Kellynack, standing with a girl Harry had met briefly last year and whose name he couldn't remember but her parents owned a string of apothecaries, a small gaggle of sixth and seventh year Hufflepuff girls who were giggling and whispering while shooting looks at Harry, and lastly, Blaise Zabini, who was eyeing Harry challengingly as he stood with two other sixth year Slytherins Harry had only ever had dealings with when dishing out punishments.

'What are they doing here?' Ron asked under his breath.
'They asked about the D.A., so I gave them the details of the meeting.' Hermione said matter-of-factly.
'Zabini' Harry said in cautious greeting as he stopped outside the already materialized door. Zabini merely motioned his head in return. Everyone cleared the way for Harry to open the door, and then filed in after him. He waited until they were all seated on one of the many cushions spread throughout the room, and the door was secured behind them, before speaking.

'Hogwarts is not safe.' He started gravely 'Death Eaters have been roaming around beneath us the whole time we've been here.' Gasps rang out, and eyes boggled out of their gaping faces, but no one spoke; they sat with their wide-eyes glued to Harry as he continued. 'It's time for us to mobilize. We need to pool our resources and help McGonagall keep an eye on the castle. It'll be our job to be on the look out for anything … or anyone that shouldn't be here. Hermione,' he said, turning to her, 'can you make out a roster for people to check the passageways between classes?'

'I'll need everyone's timetables when we get back to the Common Room.' She said tentatively. 'I can have something worked out by morning.'
'Good, and it'll need to include the grounds as well.' he turned back to the rest of the room. 'Myself, Ron and Hermione will continue to do the night shifts; the rest of you can cover the days.' Harry look out at the anxious faces before him. 'We'll have to start conducting regular meetings, so I'm suggesting we start with another one on the first school night when we get back from Holidays, same time and place. Between now and the break, if you see or hear anything suspicious, report it to one of the three of us immediately.'

'Does this have something to do with that night you saw Malfoy?' Seamus asked.
'Yes, it does.'

For the rest of the meeting, Harry was bombarded with questions about Draco and his father's activities. He wasn't able to tell them much as he had no idea himself what they were doing, which only seemed to unnerve everyone all the more, and as Harry described the screaming wraiths that lurked beneath them, there was much head-turning and whispered murmuring.

More to make them feel like they could do something to help protect themselves than actually thinking it was necessary, Harry advised them to learn the Lumo Sepia charm and to find out everything they could about the wraiths in the unlikely event they should find themselves face to face with one. Before he dismissed the meeting, Harry asked Dean, Seamus, Ernie and Justin to stay behind. They hung back as the rest slowly trickled out the door, all except Zabini who approached Harry once most of the crowd had gone.

'What would Death Eaters be doing at Hogwarts?' He had asked it without any trace of scepticism, and was watching Harry intently.
'We don't know.' Harry replied shortly, not at all sure he should be comfortable having Zabini in on their dealings. Zabini looked away thoughtfully and muttered something under his breath that he knew they had been up to something before turning back to Harry and added 'Whatever our differences, I don't like what's happening anymore than you. I've got plans of my own when I leave Hogwarts, and things going the way they are, is … less than ideal for me. I'm not promising anything, but I'll put some feelers out and see what I can reel in.' He turned, and Harry watched his

back as he left the room.

'What did he want?' Ron asked as Hermione and the others gathered round.
'I don't know, but he might prove useful.' Harry said grimly. 'Anyway, I called on you, because I can trust you not to say anything,' he looked around at their expectant faces, 'especially to Ginny. She's in trouble, more trouble than she knows, and its up to us to keep an eye on her. I want someone on her every waking hour until schools out. Hermione, you'll get her timetable with all the others tonight. I want you to work out the rosters so that not only are the passages and corridors covered, but Ginny as well.' Hermione gave him a worried look.

'I don't mean to sound difficult,' Dean interjected, 'but she isn't going like that one bit!'
'That's why it has to be done carefully. She doesn't have to know she's being followed if we plan it right.'
'Why does she need following?' Ernie piped up with a bemused look on his face. 'She doesn't come across as the "damsel in distress" type to me.'

Harry breathed out heavily; he hadn't wanted to have to explain. 'Voldemort has been told Ginny and I were together.'
'But that's history isn't it? I mean, you broke up, right?' asked Justin. Harry stared at the floor.
'Yeah, but he doesn't know that. He'll try and get to her if he can.' He hated saying it out loud; the guilt twisted in him painfully.

'I'll work it out,' Hermione said, watching him. 'I'm sure between the seven of us we can keep her covered.'
'Don't worry,' Dean said solemnly, 'if its that important, we wont let her out of our sight.'

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The last few days of school went quickly as the weather cooled and the snow began to fall once more, and by the time Saturday morning rolled around, Harry was beginning to feel nervous about leaving Hogwarts. He knew McGonagall was working with The Order and the Ministry to ensure the castles safety, but once he and the others left for The Burrow, The Order would be concentrating on keeping the place where "Harry Potter" was spending Christmas safe. McGonagall had told him the Ministry would be placing live-in Ministry Guards over the holidays, and that she and several of the staff would be remaining, she also informed him that Hagrid was returning in a few days, all of which helped stay some of his fears.

Tonks, Sturgis and Hestia were standing in the snow waiting for them just inside the gates, all of them rugged up to the eye balls and beating their hands against the cold as Harry and the other's strolled out into the grey day. After a rather intimidated and shy Peter was introduced, they shuffled through the gates as other students passed them accompanied by nervous looking parents. They waved a hasty goodbye to Hermione, who was apparating out; not at all happy her parents had insisted she go home for the holidays. She was holding out that they would let her go a week early, allowing her join Harry and Ron at The Burrow eventually.

Tonks took charge of Peter's luggage, morphing her features to do a convincing impression of Professor Flitwick giving nervous instructions on the levitating charm on Peter's trunk whilst pretending to duck for cover and finally toppling off the stack of books he was always mounted on. The young boy took to her immediately.

'Why aren't we apparating?' Ron said as he helped Tonks to her feet as she resumed her usual appearance.
'We are!' she said. 'The Knight Bus is going to be full. It seems most people feel it's the fastest and safest way to travel under the circumstances, and its not a good idea for us to endanger the other passengers.' She shot Harry an apologetic look.

'I-I-I can't a-apparate…' came a small voice near Harry's elbow.
'I'll take you,' Tonks said brightly, 'someone else can bring your trunk.' Peter flushed as she instructed him to grab her arm tightly, and a few suffocating seconds later, they were all at The Burrow.

Harry had a shock as Mrs. Weasley rushed out the front door, waving her arms madly and singing greetings at the top of her voice. She looked much thinner than she had done even at the beginning of school term, and there were dark shadows under her tear stained eyes. She grabbed each of them in turn, pulling them to her and squeezing so tightly her fingers went white.

Harry felt slightly nauseas as he watched her almost lift Ginny off the ground. He didn't relish her reaction when he told her about the danger her daughter was now in because of him, and the guilt weighed heavily on his chest. It wasn't a conversation he wanted to rush into, but he knew both Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had a right to know.

'Oh!' she said as she wiped at her damp cheeks, 'You're finally here!' sounding almost as if she couldn't believe it. Then she launched into another round of hugs before stopping in front of Peter. 'And you must be Harry's young guest!' Harry had sent one of school owls with a note earlier in the week to let Mrs. Weasley know Peter was coming, certain that even though he had told Ron, he wouldn't have passed on the information. She put her arm over Peter's shoulder and drew him to her. 'Well, you just treat this as your home while you're here! C'mon, lets get inside in the warmth.'

They all bustled up the cleared path through the snow and once inside, they separated off to unpack. Harry took his trunk up to Fred and George's old room, while Peter was set up in the Den. After meeting downstairs again for a deliciously warming lunch of Mrs. Weasley's homemade vegetable soup and fresh crusty bread, they retired to the lounge in front of the fire while Mrs. Weasley quizzed them on the happenings at Hogwarts.

It was obvious as Ron told her about the tunnel under the grounds that she hadn't heard about it, and she tried quite unsuccessfully to hide her growing fear and anger by laughing loudly at the most unfunny things they said. After a long while, she rose and headed for the kitchen.
'Arthur Weasley, you wait until you get home!' Harry overheard as she disappeared through the doorway. The clashing of pots and pans being slammed on benches in angry abuse could be heard as Ron leaned in sheepishly.
'I wouldn't have told her if I thought she didn't know. Dad should have warned me!'

Peter had been shifting uncomfortably in his chair the whole time they had been discussing Hogwarts, and Harry noticed his face was somewhat paler than usual.
'Well it's not a problem anymore.' He said, motioning slightly to Peter. 'The tunnel has been discovered, so Hogwarts is safe again.'
'Of course,' Ron chimed in, picking up on Harry's hint and glancing sideways at Peter. 'Professor McGonagall's on top of it.'

Ginny sat silently by the fire, the golden light of the flames flickering on her hair. Although Harry couldn't see her face, he could tell by the way her shoulders sat that she was tense. Maybe with the thoughts of how close Voldemort's Death Eaters had come, it had finally hit home how much danger she was in. Maybe now she would drop her tough exterior and accept the protection afforded her.

Maybe she would not to return to Hogwarts at all.

Harry stood up and left the room, heading for the back door. It was late afternoon and already the sun had retreated, leaving a billowy grey blanket of snow under the starless sky. He wandered across the backyard, crunching crusted snow underfoot, picturing Ginny's face, as it must have been in front of the fire. He looked around, but could not see any Order members, yet he knew they were there; hidden in shadow, or disguised by magic. The sound of boots in the snow coming up behind him made him turn.

'I suppose you feel like you're never alone.' Ginny said as she watched her feet's progress in the icy mounds. She pulled up along side his shoulder without looking at him. 'I brought you a coat,' she held out a thick jacket. 'You'll catch your …' She had been going to say death. '… It's freezing out here.' She wrapped her arms about her as Harry donned the warm fleece.

In the pale light, he caught a glimpse of something, and without thinking, he reached up to her neck and trailed the chain in his hand until it fell on the pendant that nestled between her collarbones. It was the pendant he had given her when he had left to find the locket, except instead of a badly tarnished and blackened wheel, it glittered silver in the sparse light. Now that it was

clean, markings could be seen on the five spokes.

'I cleaned it.' She said quietly. Harry nodded before letting it fall back to her bare skin. 'I've worn it since that day you gave it to me … never taken it off.'

They stood alone, awkward silence reining, Ginny scuffing her boots lightly in the snow, and Harry watching her. He knew she was there for a reason, something other than delivering a coat. He waited. Then finally she looked up.

'Don't tell mum and dad about us … don't tell them Voldemort knows.' she said it nervously, unable to meet his steady gaze, as if knowing his thoughts. Harry continued to silently watch her. 'They'll stop me from going back.' Her eyes had been roaming the ground, but now she turned them on him. 'I want to go back, Harry. I need to go back.' If telltale fear hadn't shown in her eyes, it would have been easy to think her angry the way her brow furrowed under her fiery fringe. She searched Harry's face for a reaction, but received none.

'If-If it makes any difference, I'll do as you asked. I'll stay within the castle walls, I wont go out … not even into the grounds unless it's safe.' Her speech was coming faster than normal as she reached up and lightly grabbed the front of his coat. 'You can put the D.A. on me … I wont complain about them following me everywhere … I'll even make it my responsibility that they're always with me!' There was a look of hopelessness behind her watery eyes as she pleaded 'Harry, please … don't tell them what's going on … don't make me have to stay! I have to go back with you when you go!'

She brought her mouth to his in a desperate kiss, her sudden determination taking Harry by surprise. The painful feelings that had been burning in him; a melting pot of guilt and anguish, were doused by the touch of her lips, and he kissed her back with all of the passion that she aroused in him. And for a moment, it seemed like everything was going to be okay.

She had finally shown him that she wanted him too; needed him as he did her. She had thrust herself on him when he had remained stiff with resolve … and yet … she had made no mention of forgiveness. She had not actually said that she wanted him, only that she wanted to return to Hogwarts. With a terrible unwillingness to let his thoughts interrupt, the realization slowly sank in. She wanted something from him. Harry grabbed her arms and pulled her away.

Breathing heavily, he asked 'What do you want from me, Ginny?' She stared at him with glistening cheeks in the grey light.
'I want you to tell me that you wont say anything to mum and dad … Promise me!'
He stepped back, unconsciously increasing distance between them and swallowing the lumpy pain in his throat.
'I can't do that.' He said grimly. She had kissed him to get around him. To manipulate him. Harry removed the coat and dropped it at her feet before turning and walking the harsh path back to the unwelcome warmth.

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When Christmas day arrived, Harry rose late, as had become his habit since he found it painful to be in Ginny's company. He had not yet told Mr. and Mrs. Weasley about their history together, or the threat that now hung over her, but everyday he reminded himself he would most probably tell them tomorrow.

He was not feeling at all in the Christmas spirit when he entered the kitchen to find Mrs. Weasley basting the biggest turkey he had ever laid eyes on. She had pots galore boiling away on the stovetop and knives chopping carrots and green beans on the benches noisily. Harry sat down wondering where everyone else was, at least until she started huffing over getting the impossibly large turkey back in the oven, (which Harry was certain had already been magically enlarged for the occasion) and finally sensing why no one else was in sight and not wanting to be on the receiving end of her frustration either, Harry decided to skip breakfast and rose from the table quickly before she noticed him, and headed for the lounge.

As he suspected, the rest of the household, including Mr. Weasley, Bill and Fleur were spread around the furniture in front of the fire, and upon his entrance, they looked up anxiously, but seeing it was Harry, not Mrs. Weasley, relief flooded their faces and they went back to either staring off into space, or chatting to the person next to them. Ginny was busily putting up Christmas decorations, gradually turning the room into a spangled forest of tinsel, but Fred and George were yet to show, and Charlie, Harry had been told, was not making the trip across.

As the morning drew on to afternoon, other people began arriving, and it wasn't long before Harry understood why Mrs. Weasley had needed such an enormous bird. Not only had Lupin and Tonks shown up, but several other Order members as well. Apparently they were taking it in shifts; while some would be inside enjoying a Christmas dinner, others were outside on guard until it was their turn. When Fred and George made their entrance, they greeted Harry heartily before offering to help Mrs. Weasley with the food. She shooed them out heatedly after they managed to turn a second pot of asparagus on its head "accidentally".

'Alright, Potter?' Moody growled as he made his way to Harry and Ron.
'Yeah, you?'
'Can't complain, no one to listen to me anyway! I heard about the tunnel at Hogwarts, wasn't able to be there myself, but Lupin tells me its under control now.' His magical eye was scanning the room, and appeared to be lingering in the direction of the kitchen. 'Don't suppose you've got any idea what they were doing there?'
'No'
'Strange things are happening all over now.' Moody said gruffly. 'Some say they're just random occurrences, purely coincidence. Bollocks, I say. They're all little pieces of a bigger picture if you ask me, we just got to find a way of stickin 'em together.'

'Mad eye!' interrupted Hestia indulgently. She had obviously been listening, 'you can't possibly still think that poor boys missing body has anything to with *his* plans.'
'I do, and if it isn't then why can't the Ministry find him, eh? Oh … excuse me, Molly's needin my help.' Harry had been about to ask what body, but Moody melded into the crowd just as Lupin emerged. He handed Harry and Ron and eggnog each.

'He's right about the strange happenings, though.' Hestia continued, 'If the whole Quintaped thing at Halloween wasn't bad enough, all sorts of stories have come out of it since that just don't make any sense.'

'Oh, that reminds me,' Ron said to Lupin, 'I never got a chance to thank you for saving Hermione and me. Wouldn't be standing here today if it wasn't for you!' he lifted his eggnog in a toasting gesture. 'You know, with all the life debts I'm chalking up, I'm beginning to think I would be better off dead.'
'What are talking about?' Lupin took a sip of his eggnog.
'Halloween!' Ron said 'When the Death Eaters had Hermione and me cornered. If you hadn't come along when you did I wouldn't like to think-'

'I didn't.' Lupin said with a frown. 'We found the two of you fast asleep after the Death Eaters retreated. I thought you knew.'
'Well who hit Amycus and Avery then?' Harry asked, his heartbeat unconsciously increasing. Lupin shook his head slowly.
'There were no passed out Death Eaters near you when we got there,' he addressed Ron, 'just the two of you slumped in a doorway.'

'Are you sure no one from The Order did it?' Harry asked slowly.
'Absolutely certain! Everyone was accounted for. Maybe you just thought you saw a couple of Death Eaters, wouldn't be surprising, the state you were in.' he said to Ron.
'What? Its not possible to both hallucinate the same thing … is it?' Ron scoffed.

'What about this missing body then?' Harry pushed, an uncomfortable pounding now growing in his chest.
'Who told you about that?' Lupin asked gravely. Hestia gave him an apologetic look before slinking into the crowd. 'This is not really the time to be discussing such matters, its Christmas Day, Harry.'

'What body?' Harry said in a way that indicated he was not going to let the subject drop. Something

about Lupin's reaction told him Lupin was keeping it from him for a reason. Lupin sighed deeply and turned his eyes to the floor for a moment, before settling on Harry again.

'Two days after he was killed, Neville's body disappeared.'

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Harry felt like the wind had been knocked out of him. Lupin hastily took Harry's drink from his tightening grip, shoving their cups into nearby idle hands and edging Harry backwards into a chair.

'Are you all right?'
'Wh-what do you … h-how could h-he…' The words wouldn't come.
'Harry.'
But he could barely hear Lupin; he had managed to bury Neville's death deep within him, smothering it quickly whenever it threatened to surface, but now the tiny lump that he had suppressed for so long was expanding rapidly, filling him with the wretched feelings he had numbed. Harry dropped his head forward as his eyes closed tightly trying to contain the pain and rage that spread through him.

'Harry?' Lupins tentative voice coaxed, 'I'm sorry. You weren't supposed to find out, not this way.'
Harry did not lift his head as he spoke, his voice thick with anger. 'How did it happen?'
Lupin crouched on the edge of the chair next to him. 'He was taken to the family crypt the evening after he died and sealed within a tomb.' Lupin sighed heavily as he shifted uncomfortably. 'His grandmother discovered what was left of the broken stone the following morning.'

Harry was sickened to his core. 'Why would they take him? Hadn't he paid enough?' He said in ghastly bewilderment. 'What could they possibly gain?'
It was then Harry realized the whole room was silently watching them. Ron's face was bloodless as he stared dumbfounded at Harry while the twins were glaring at Mr. Weasley.
'I can't answer that.' Lupin said, running a weary hand through his hair. 'I wish I could.'

Harry couldn't bear to sit there any longer; he pushed himself to his feet and made his way through the parting crowd. He had no idea where he was going, but found himself outside a few seconds later … walking, making dents in the downtrodden snow, his eyes stinging as the salty water chilled in the biting cold. He slowed when he reached the garden shed, his hands thrust deeply into his pockets, turning this way and that, not knowing what to do with himself.

Why hadn't Lupin told him? Maybe it would have been easier … maybe he would have been able to do something … Maybe he wouldn't have felt like his insides were slowly decaying.

Who would do that to Neville? What could they possibly gain from desecrating him? Why couldn't Neville rest in peace … *he should be at peace!* As his rage became unbearable, Harry's fist flew at the wall of the shed; the weathered wood caved and shattered as his hand disappeared beyond his wrist.

A small whimper came from inside followed by a low shooshing sound.

Harry drew his wand and put his hand to the rusty latch, yanking the stubborn door open. Sitting on a wooden crate beneath the small window were two shadowy figures, one smaller than the other. Harry squinted as he tried to adjust his eyes to the dim light.

'Are you going to stand there pointing that thing at us, or are you coming in?'

Harry lowered his wand at the sound of the cool female voice. He moved away from the door slowly, allowing the light to penetrate the darkness where Ginny sat. She had her arm around Peter's shoulders, frowning intently at Harry as the curly haired boy wiped quickly at damp cheeks.

'You know, most people just knock.' She said with a hint of impatience. Harry was keenly aware he had interrupted an awkward moment, and though he instinctively wanted to ask what was going on; why Peter was so upset, the boy's obvious embarrassment stayed his tongue; instead he sat down

on a rickety chair opposite.

'Sorry...' Peter said in a small voice. Harry leaned forward on his elbows.
'Don't be. There are things *worth* crying over Peter.' The small boy nodded and stood up, wiping his hands down his jeans.
'I-I think I'll go back inside now.' He said to Ginny as she got to her feet. She smiled warmly and nodded her head, and Peter walked out of the door, disappearing behind the wall. Ginny waited until the sound of crunching snow faded before speaking.

'He knew Neville.' She said gravely. 'He overheard Lupin telling you.'

Harry ran his fingers through his hair. 'I didn't know.' He slouched back on the chair, eyeing the blood that was slowly beginning to ooze from his scratched and battered knuckles. 'Its not right,' he said as dark red trails ran down his hand. 'Why does it have to be the innocent people who suffer? Neville ... even Pete's been through more than any kid his age should have to go through.'

'I can think of another eleven year old who'd been through as much, if not more.'
Harry continued to stare at the ruby streaks. 'It's different,' he said 'Peter is so ... young.'

'So were you.'

The sudden softness of her voice sent an unbidden surge of yearning through Harry. He was beginning to feel wearied by the emotions that were tearing through him; too much anger and pain pulsated beneath his dormant exterior as he watched the blood creep down between his fingers and drip to the floor. He was tired of this war. Tired of fighting. Yet as he sat there, he knew he could not turn his back on it. Exhausted by sorrow he watched the tiny peppered spots on the floor as they merged. He needed to purge himself of the poisonous hurt.

Bleed it out.

'Thanks for not saying anything to mum and dad. I don't think they'd have let me go back if they knew.' Then almost as an after thought, Ginny added 'You're not going to tell them ... are you?'
'No, I'm not going to tell them,' Harry said grimly, 'but you are.'

Ginny did not answer at first, and he could tell by the sound of her breathing she was restraining herself with obvious difficulty. Harry still did not look up; instead he watched the small pool of blood at his feet slowly expand.
'I can't.' Her voice trembled slightly.

Harry stared at the sticky reddish-black liquid darkly 'It must be important if you're willing to continue to deceive and manipulate to go back.' He finally dragged himself away from the bloods morbid progress, grabbing Ginny's wrist sharply as her determined hand headed for his face. Without releasing it, he drew himself to his feet.

'How dare you!' she said heatedly.
'How?' Harry said roughly, his own anger ignited. 'Because only days ago you tried it on me, and it nearly worked! You almost had me thinking...' He stopped himself as his heart beat painfully in his chest.

'What?' Ginny said, the anger gone from her voice. 'Thinking what?' Harry let go of her wrist and dropped his gaze, his breathing shaking with uncertainty. He suddenly felt as though he was standing in quicksand. Right now he was in it up to his neck, and he was almost certain whatever move he made, he would sink completely. 'Harry ... what were you thinking?'

'I thought ...' he hesitated.
'What?'
'I thought that you might have ... forgiven me.'

A horrible silence filled the room as he waited for her to say something, and as it stretched on, Harry began to sense the awful truth.

'No, Harry.' She shook her head slightly. 'I haven't quite managed to forgive you, though I have

tried.' Harry closed his eyes briefly.
'At least we don't have to pretend anymore.' Ginny said flatly.
Harry could feel his heart being squeezed dry. 'We haven't needed to pretend for a long time now.' He said grimly.
'You're wrong. I *have* been pretending, but I don't want to anymore.' Her eyes betrayed her steady voice, pooling with water as she stared at him.

'Harry, don't you know the effect you have on me?' Ginny took a step closer to him. 'When you walk into the room, every nerve in my body sparks, and every time you leave, you take those tiny pieces of beautiful light with you. When you're hurting … its like … like I can't breathe until you smile again. Your touch is all I ever needed, yet you turn me away time and time again.' She was visibly shaking yet there was no anger in her voice. 'And I thought I knew why … I thought I understood you … and then…' her eyes dropped to the floor 'then you made love to Julie.'

'It wasn't love.' Harry said quickly, 'I-I don't know what it was … or-or why I did it…' he felt the quicksand swamping him, suffocating him. He had to make things right. 'I-I never wanted to hurt you. If I could take it back, I would.'

'She's had more of you than you were ever willing to give me…'
'No … no, that's not true,' Harry took hold of her arms, desperate to make her understand. She pushed his hands off and stepped back, her head dropping as she brought the back of her hand to her mouth.

'I hate thinking about it, but I can't stop myself! I see you with her … the two of you together' she sank down onto the edge of the crate, staring at nothing in front of her 'I think about how it must have felt to you … touching her … her hands on you …' her brow furrowed, 'and I start to feel like I'm drowning with it.'

Harry could feel a hot droplet of guilt and anguish creeping down his cheek as he watched her. He wanted to go to her, take her in his arms and hold her until she was healed, but his guilt held him back. 'I don't know how I can make things right … tell me how…'

Ginny looked up at him through sorrowful eyes, her voice much calmer now as she spoke. 'I don't know if it can be made right.'
'You can't forgive me.' he breathed in realization.
She pushed herself to her feet and approached him. 'No, Harry … I can't forgive you,' she touched her hand to his cheek 'but I'll *never* stop loving you.'

She raised her head and brushed her mouth against his. At her words, the quicksand rapidly retreated; she had told him she loved him.

Harry closed his eyes to her kiss, gently caressing her soft lips as he breathed in her scent, immersing himself in the sweet sensation of her touch. The need in him grew as he increased the pressure of his lips on hers. He wanted to drink her in, fill himself with her. She had said she loved him…

When she slowly pulled away from him, her lips were full and reddened from his want. 'Maybe its something I'll learn to live with, I don't know.' She fixed Harry with her green eyes. 'What I do know is I don't want to go on pretending. I don't want another day without you.'

He bent his head and kissed her again, not wanting to let her end it. Her mouth was so tender and warm as she offered it to him, and he delicately played his lips across hers, lost in the passion that burned within. It was the kiss that he had craved when he slept alone at night; when his deepest desires would surface, and he lingered his lips as if in hope it would never fade. Harry traced his hands along the contours of her body longingly as she slid her arms inside his jacket and un-tucked his shirt to lay her hands against his bare skin. The feel of it sent ripples of pleasure through him, and he gave himself over to the love he had for her, burying his guilt, knowing he would never hurt her again.

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Ginny had found the strength to tell Mr. and Mrs. Weasley about Harry and the threat she now lived under with Harry's encouragement, knowing it was the right thing to do, and Harry had insisted they do it together now they were no longer hiding their feelings for each other. The afternoon after the awful disquiet of Christmas Day, Harry and Ginny approached Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. Ron had taken Peter out into the back garden to practice hexes, giving them the space they needed, and no one else was expected to turn up, so they asked Ginny's parents into the lounge room, both of them feeling very nervous.

As Ginny explained how she and Harry had realized their feelings for each other last year, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had exchanged glances, and when she began stumbling towards their break up at the end of the year, Harry took her hand, squeezing it as he brushed his thumb over her skin in an effort to comfort her, and took over. The look on their faces as he told them about his connection to Voldemort, and how that put Ginny's life in danger, almost made him wish he hadn't been so determined to tell them. When Harry finished, the Weasleys sat in silence, side by side on the couch, staring at Ginny.

'So,' Mr. Weasley said hesitantly, 'there was a prophecy?'
'Yes.' Harry renewed his hold on Ginny's hand.
'And that's why he's after you?'
'Partly.' Harry had not told them the prophecy word for word, but he could see Mr. Weasley's mind ticking over, putting everything together. A very alarmed looking Mrs. Weasley clasped her husband's hand in hers tightly, her knuckles turning white.

'And Ginny,' he said slowly 'he knows you have feelings for her?'
'Yes.' Harry watched as Mr. Weasley lifted his head slightly, swallowing his raw emotions, and turning his gaze on his daughter. Ginny had hardly moved, hardly even breathed as she listened. Harry could feel her fingernails digging into the flesh on his hand. Mr. Weasley dropped his eyes to the floor.

'Under any other circumstances, I'd be glad that my daughter chose someone such as yourself. You are a fine young man, and I know I could trust you to treat her well,' A gaping black hole was stirring in Harry. He had expected this, and even worse, he agreed with it. 'But I think the best thing for both of you right now is to do what ever it takes to stay safe. We'll keep a closer eye on the house until you go back to school Harry, and then we'll leave men here to watch Ginny and Molly after that. I'll try and be here as often as I can…' but he trailed off as his eyes fell on Ginny again.

'No, no…' her words were barely audible as she shook her head lightly, 'No … I'm going back … I'm not staying…' Harry let go of her hand, placing it on her shoulder.
'Your dad's right, Gin.'
'No Harry! Why isn't anyone listening to me? I'm going back to Hogwarts, its no more dangerous than staying here!' Mrs. Weasley rose and came towards her. 'Mum, please… if I go back, with all of the increased security, I'll be fine! It makes sense that I'd be better off there!'

'You're mother will want you here with her, Ginny.' Mr. Weasley said 'Surely you can understand that?'
'I-I do, I know why you want me to stay,' She was looking from one to the other 'Please, just trust me on this; I know what I'm talking about. Hogwarts is the safest place for me … *Mum?*' she pleaded '*Please…*' Mrs. Weasley, who had not spoken at all yet, turned her intent expression on Arthur.

'Well, I can see only one-way out of this.' She said. 'I'll go with them when they return. I'm sure Minerva will be able to find some empty quarters for me to stay in. I'll be at Hogwarts as an Order member after all, not just a mother.' There was a sudden interruption as someone cleared their throat.

Harry and the other three turned in the direction of the kitchen. Standing in the doorway was probably the last person Harry had expected would turn up.

'Hello mother.' Percy said gravely. Mrs. Weasley let out a strangled gasp, clutching at her chest, but she did not rush to embrace him. Mr. Weasley also stood his ground.

‘I didn’t mean to interrupt; Sturgis told me to … the front door was open.’ he gestured awkwardly.
‘What can we do for you?’ Even as Mr. Weasley said it, Harry could tell he was extremely uncomfortable with having to be so formal. It seemed necessary though. The last time Percy had appeared at their door, he had come not for his family, but to give the Minister his opportunity to get to Harry.

‘I want to see Harry, actually.’ He said stiffly, ‘Though, he’s not the sole reason I am here.’ He still had that pompous air about him, but Harry also thought he looked rather weary.
‘I doubt whether Harry has anything much to say that would be of any use to you, or the Ministry.’ Mr. Weasley said.

‘Well, yes … of course Harry’s an adult now.’ Said Percy, glancing in Harry’s direction. ‘Therefore I would imagine that decision is up to him.’ Mrs. Weasley placed herself in front of her husband, facing him.
‘He’s right Arthur. Come with me and I’ll put the kettle on, you too Ginny.’ She grabbed her hand and led her passed Percy. She looked back at Harry questioningly as Mr. Weasley turned to him.
‘I’ll stay if you want.’
‘Its fine.’ Harry said. Mr. Weasley only gave Percy the briefest of glances as he made his way to the kitchen.

‘Well,’ said Percy briskly ‘that went as expected.’
‘What are you doing here Percy? Still Scrimgeour's right-hand man?’

Percy tilted his head. ‘It might surprise you to learn that I was reassigned.’
‘Not really, people like you always seem to do well at the Ministry.’ Harry stated unkindly. Percy’s eyes narrowed for a fraction of a second before he moved into the room.

‘I said reassigned, not promoted, though I see you still harbour a certain amount of resentment towards us, even though the Minister has respected your wishes and not interfered.’
Harry kept his tone flat. ‘From what I understand, he didn’t have much of a choice after his henchman almost killed me.’

‘Yes, yes well that was a most regrettable situation.’
‘Regrettable? See, now I wouldn’t have put it like that. Catastrophic seems rather more fitting.’

Percy tensed as he gestured to a nearby chair. ‘Why don’t we sit down?’
‘No, I don’t think so. Why don’t you just get to the reason you’re here?’

‘Very well,’ Percy said huffily, and then he leaned in and said slowly and succinctly. ‘I came here to inform you that you can now consider the Ministry as a “safe house” if you should need it.’ Percy raised his eyebrows and nodded, looking very pleased with himself. Harry stared at Percy in silence for a moment.

‘What?’ He finally said, unable to stop an incredulous smile from hitting his lips.

‘It is common knowledge that Lord Voldemort is pursuing you,’ Percy said pointedly. Harry frowned slightly at Percy’s use of the name, but he continued conspiratorially ‘and should you ever need it, the Ministry is the place to go.’ Percy gave Harry a half-wink as if intimating some other meaning only the two of them could share in, and Harry let out a small laugh, much to Percy’s obvious annoyance.

‘Right. So let me just get this straight.’ Harry said pleasantly. ‘You came all the way out here to your parents home, whom you no longer even talk to, to tell me - the person the Minister himself almost had killed a few months ago, that I should go running to the very place I was left to die, in the event Voldemort pops round. Is that about right?’

‘Well’ said Percy defensively, ‘When you put it like that it sounds almost comical, but-’
‘Comical?’ Harry scoffed ‘It’s completely ludicrous. Why would I return there for safety after everything your Minister has done to *help* me in the past?’

‘Look, I know you’ve had your difficulties with the Ministry, but not everything is always about you!’

Percy said heatedly, his cool persona evaporating. 'I've been working on this too, if you must know, and something you should remember is the Ministry has the money and the resources to do things you can not.'

Harry sighed, 'Voldemort wont be defeated with red tape and paper shuffling by a bunch of bureaucrats.' Harry said, all traces of amusement gone from his voice. 'He's the most powerful dark wizard that ever lived, or haven't you heard?'

Percy's chest was heaving angrily as he spoke. 'I had hoped you would have grown up enough to understand. I see I was wrong. You are still as stubborn as you always were!' He pulled something from out of his robes and thrust it into Harry's hands. '*Listen* to the people who are trying to talk to you, Harry. And remember, not everything is about *you*.' Then he turned and stalked out of the room.

As the front door slammed shut, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley hurried into the room, Ginny, Ron and Peter trailing after them.
'What happened?' Mr. Weasley asked. Harry turned his gaze to the small, yet heavy clay container in his hand. As he lifted it so he could inspect it, he saw a small hinge running along a crack, he turned the pot, and spying a small brass latch, he opened it.

A tiny seedling was nestled in the rich, dark soil filling the container.

25. The Power Of One

Everyone had examined the seedling Percy had passed Harry with a certain amount of trepidation, even Order members who were continually coming and going looked it over, but no one could identify it so it was placed out in the shed, a good distance from where it could do any harm.

Ginny took to watering it everyday and positioning it into the scarce sunlight as it moved about throughout the day in the dim surroundings, hoping that it would grow enough for them to understand what it was. Harry accompanied her more often than not, as much to get some time alone together as to make sure it was no threat to her.

Hermione arrived at the Burrow a week before they were to return to Hogwarts, and Ginny immediately led her out to take a look at the seedling which had sprouted an extra tiny leaf or two whilst she had been nurturing it. But Hermione was at a loss to explain its foliage as much as anyone else, pointing out that it would need to be somewhat bigger before they could positively identify it.

When Harry and Ron finally and reluctantly took her up to Harry's room and filled her in about the disappearance of Neville's body, she had turned a sickly pale colour and didn't speak for some time. Ron moved to sit beside her on Harry's bed, putting an arm around her in an effort to comfort her but she seemed closed to him, as if lost in thought. Maybe the news was too much for her to swallow, although Harry learned from Ginny that she was still receiving owls from Zach everyday, even though he was no longer under the effects of the potion. He suspected her mood had something to with that as well the news about Neville.

One thing that did seem to cheer Hermione was seeing Harry and Ginny together again. She learned quickly however, to knock before she entered either Ginny's or Harry's room after one particularly awkward moment where she walked in on them to find them locked together in a passionate embrace as they laid across Ginny's bed.

Being faced with two flushed, yet rather amused looks staring back at her, Hermione turned scarlet and retreated rapidly, closing the door with an apologetic grin.

Whether it was the fact that Harry and Ginny seemed to be spending a lot of their spare time together, leaving Ron and Hermione to themselves, or if Ron was feeling somewhat threatened over Hermione's situation with Zach, they too seemed to be spending a lot of time together.

For months Harry had seen their subtle, and not so subtle beginnings of a relationship forming, and now it seemed that left to themselves, they hardly ever argued anymore. Harry caught them on occasion wistfully watching one another when they thought the other wasn't looking, Harry bringing his hand to his mouth in an attempt to hide his inability to resist smirking. He and Ginny were also often exchanging amused looks as Ron became more attentive to Hermione, uncharacteristically thinking to hand her serving dishes of food at meal times and frequently offering to pour her tea or juice.

The obvious change in Ron's manners did not go unnoticed by Mr. and Mrs. Weasley either. At first, Mrs. Weasley had fretted over Ron's considerate attitude and had even gone so far as to place her hand to his forehead, possibly to see if he was fevered and delirious, but it didn't take her long to figure out what was going on and as the days passed, she took to flashing secretive smiles to her husband at Ron's not so successful attempts at the oh-so casual gestures.

Harry could tell Hermione was trying to contain her pleasure at the way things were developing, and for once he felt completely happy for them, no longer burdened with how it would effect their friendship. He himself was feeling happier than he could remember in a long time, now that things were out in the open for him and Ginny, and she was Ron's little sister! If Ron and Hermione did finally want to recognize their feelings for each other, who was he to stand in their way?

Perhaps remembering what it was like to be young and in love, Ron's parents often retired to bed much earlier than usual, leaving the four of them sitting by the fire at night as Peter trailed off after them, worn out from his Defence sessions he was having daily with Harry. Once or twice Harry had actually injured him slightly, even though he was only using simple jinxes and hexes against him. Harry had consciously tried to restrain his skills after the first time he bruised the boy, but it was almost as if his powers were increasing unwittingly.

But sitting by the fire after dinner was Harry's favourite time of day. He would lounge on the couch and freely encase Ginny in his arms as she leaned into him, resting her head on his shoulder while Ron and Hermione would take the two-seater divan. Every night was the same. They would sit, one at either end of the sofa, and then casually start shifting their bodies until they touched, eventually resting against one another.

The four of them talked about everything and nothing, immersing themselves in the tranquillity of their company, letting go of everything that plagued them during the day for those few hours at night, knowing, yet not wanting to acknowledge it would come to an end all too soon.

Harry's health had improved in leaps and bounds during his stay at The Burrow.

Mrs. Weasley's home cooking and the peace he rediscovered in Ginny once again had helped to ease his mind, and he continued to take the tonic Julie had given him each night before he slipped into bed. Socks often joined him later in the night, yet was always gone by morning. On occasion he would see her lurking out in the yard during the day when he was training with Peter, or Ron and Hermione, disappearing through the hedges, most probably on the hunt for mice or other cat treats.

Harry spent much of his time outside practicing new spells; some that Aberforth had taught him, and other's that Hermione had dug up.

At first he tried to teach Ron and Hermione a spell called the "Circumcaesura Abrogare", which was similar to the shield charm, except the duration of the spell lasted longer and protected the caster not only against curses and hexes, but also against other substances that might be in the atmosphere. It was extremely advanced magic, and very powerful when cast, taking a lot of concentration, and could prove very useful, though it had one major drawback; once it was in action, the caster would not be able to cast spells out through the protective bubble either; unfortunately working as a shield both ways.

Ron and Hermione found it impossible to cast it on their first session after trying for almost an hour, so they moved onto something else which Hermione had plucked from her *Inconceivable Magic: Spells Beyond The Ridiculous* book she had picked up at Flourish and Blot's at the beginning of the year. Needless to say, it was also extremely difficult magic. The spell was called the "Accendere Abaqua" charm and it created fire on water.

Hermione melted a pool of snow for them to practice on, managing spectacularly to master it on just her third try; though she had always been particularly adept at creating fire with magic. Harry had eight goes at casting it before he produced a whiff of smoke that fizzled pathetically on the water and faded into nothing, but not one to give up, on his eleventh attempt a purple flame erupted on the reflective pool, looking almost as impressive as Hermione's had. Ron, on the other hand, even after over a dozen goes at it, couldn't seem to make anything happen at all. In fact, the melted pool of snow was starting to freeze over again by the time he eventually gave up in disgust.

So they moved onto some of the advanced hexes and curses in Hermione's book, deciding to practice on gnomes because they were not game to try them out on each other. Most of them had extremely unpleasant effects that would prove difficult, if not impossible to reverse without the skills of a talented wizard or healer. They worked out a plan. While two of them would flush out a gnome, the other would cast the spell.

Right about now they should have been feeling rather sorry for the poor little gnomes being used in such a way, but fortunately for the gnomes, and not the trio, they didn't have a lot to worry about in the end. They cast spell after spell on the unsuspecting, potatos with legs, with very little to show for it.

One unlucky gnome limped off carrying its newly detached leg after one of Ron's efforts, and another had to drag it's head along the ground awkwardly as it made its escape since it weighed rather a lot having swelled to five times its normal size. Hermione watched it retreat, lowering her wand guiltily as Harry stepped up for the next go.

Ron snatched up an unsuspecting, and stupidly nosy gnome by its leg as it came out of its hole to see what all the fuss was about and waited for the nod from Harry before dropping it to the ground. As it got to its feet angrily, brushing itself off and turning to stalk back to the bushes, Harry fired at it. Instantly the gnome was squelched flat.

Harry stepped back stunned as Hermione let out a whimper and Ron screwed his face up, 'Yeccch!'

'That-that wasn't suppose to happen!' Harry said, still eyeing the squishy mess. 'It was supposed to just pin it to the ground! Not flatten it.'
'The poor thing,' Hermione said with a mixture of repulsion and pity.
'But, I didn't mean it,' Harry said guiltily. 'It was supposed to drop to the ground and be pinned there, like under a heavy weight.'
'Well, it looks like an invisible anvil dropped on it.' Ron said with a raised eyebrow.

'But it's not supposed to kill it!' Harry said persistently as he walked up to it.
'Maybe it's because the gnome is so small?' Hermione said, still staring at it bleakly.
'No!' Harry said in frustration. 'The spell isn't meant to be that powerful! … I didn't want to kill it…' he trailed off.
'Well … I think that's enough for today.' Hermione said tentatively to Harry. 'We'll try it again tomorrow.'

'Yeah, I'm hungry anyway.' Ron said briskly.

Hermione and Harry looked at him in disbelief.
'How could you be hungry after that?' Hermione motioned to the sickly gooey blob where the gnome had once stood.
'Well I'm not going to eat that am I?' he said as if it were self-explanatory.

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The next afternoon Harry decided to do some training with Peter instead of working on new spells. He enjoyed his time with Pete and hoped it would take his mind off the unfortunate gnome incident from the day before.

The boy was a keen student and practiced very hard to perfect the spells Harry tried to teach him. He led Peter to the backyard and decided to work on his shield charm, starting with something he

knew the boy could throw off, thinking he could gradually increase the strength of his jinxes as they went. Peter readied himself and Harry fired off a mild hex, expecting it to bounce right off him, but the spell broke through. The boy's wand hand jerked suddenly and Peter let out a sudden yelp of pain as he dropped to his knees, clutching at his arm.

Harry rushed to him and pulled back the heavy sleave of his jacket and was mortified to see that the boy's wand hand, right up to the elbow was blistered and raw. He quickly led Peter back towards the house as Mrs. Weasley came rushing out looking alarmed.

As Mrs. Weasley flustered about, wrapping an arm over Peter's shoulder protectively, Harry explained numbly that he had only cast a stinging hex while Peter's shield was up. Once inside, Mrs. Weasley busied herself, digging out one of her healing books and whipping up an ointment, coating Peter's wounds with it and then bandaging the area before shuffling the boy into the kitchen instructing him to help himself to some freshly made hot chocolate.

When Peter was out of earshot, she turned back to Harry.
'You threw a stinging hex at him?' she asked cautiously.

Harry knew Mrs. Weasley had been very taken with Peter over the time he had been there, and Peter too, seemed to reciprocate the feelings; spending much of his time helping her in the kitchen and generally hanging around her as she fussed over him.
'Yes,' Harry said quietly.
'And he was ready for it? His shield was up?'
'Of course it was!' Harry said defensively. 'I wouldn't have cast it otherwise.'

Mrs. Weasley eyed him for a moment and the side of her mouth curled slightly. 'Well dear, it wasn't your fault then, was it?' She said finally. 'Maybe his shield charm isn't very strong.'

Harry shook his head as he dropped his eyes to the floor. 'No … no, that's not it.' He met her gaze uneasily. 'I've been working on Protego with him since the Defence classes at Hogwarts and he withstood the same hex then.'

His eyes searched the floor at his feet again. 'It's not him' he paused as the squashed gnome came back into his mind 'its me.'

Harry turned and left as Ron's mum bit her lip, not knowing what to say. As he walked through the door and down the stone steps to the front yard, Hermione called to him, coming from the side of the house pulling her heavy quilted jacket about her against the frosty chill, Ginny in tow.

'I placed a quick-growing charm on the seedling in the shed.' She said as she approached. 'I imagine we will have a fair idea as to what the plant is not long after we get back to Hogwarts.'

'Good' Harry said distractedly 'good.'

'What?' Ginny said flatly as she brought herself alongside Hermione, immediately picking up on his mood. Harry looked at the both of them hesitantly.

'I was thinking I might go back to Sirius's.' Ginny eyed him suspiciously as Hermione frowned. 'We've only got a few days until we head back to school and there's a few things I need to … take care of.'

'What things?' Ginny said bluntly. Harry looked around the yard as he scuffed his foot in the powdery snow.
'I've been ignoring a lot of stuff over the holidays because … because I wanted a rest from it all. I wanted to just … let it all go for a while and be with my friends.' The people I care about, was what he had wanted to say. He steadied himself as he finally addressed them face-to-face. 'But I need time alone for a while.'

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When Harry entered number twelve Grimmauld Place, he floated his trunk up the stairs and set Hedwig's cage on the dresser, opening the latch so she could stretch her wings. He sat on the edge of the bed, slumping his shoulders and closing his eyes, rubbing at them under his glasses.

What was happening to him?

He already knew from his battle in Hogsmeade that his stunning curse was gaining in strength, having seen the trouble fully grown and powerful wizards had had keeping their feet when deflecting it. When it *had* contacted its intended target, they had been flung through the air with surprising force. He had killed a grumpy little gnome that didn't deserve to be squashed flat, and now he had hurt Peter, a kid who he liked immensely, with no explanation as to how it had happened. Was he becoming dangerous in his ruthless attempts at increasing his skills?

What if he had cast something worse at Peter? The thought sickened him. How am I going to continue training with Ron and Hermione? He thought. What if I hurt them as well? He knew Mrs. Weasley had told them what had happened with Peter because when he had emerged with his gear ready to leave, Ginny had pulled him aside with concern in her eyes.

'Talk to Sir about what's happening.' She had said. 'He knows your powers better than anyone. I'm sure he'll be able to explain it. You didn't mean it, Harry. Pete knows that.' Then she had leaned in and touched his lips gently with hers. 'We'll see you in few days.' Harry had nodded gravely and glanced over at Ron and Hermione, both of who had grim expressions on their faces as they made stunted comments that they would see him back at school, before Harry had finally turned to Pete.

'I'm sorry about your arm.'
'I wish I was that powerful.' Peter had said with a wry smile, and then his expression changed. 'You're still going to teach aren't you? At school I mean.'
'Sure, but I think we'll lay off the one-on-one sessions for a bit.' Harry had laid his hand on the boys shoulder. 'I'll see you back at Hogwarts.' He had then thanked Mrs. Weasley for having him (which she waved off dismissively) and left.

But now that Harry was sitting alone in the harsh dankness of the Black house, he began to wonder whether he really should be taking the Defence classes anymore. To teach them, he had to demonstrate spells for the students to see what they were aiming for. What if something went wrong in class? He had been thinking about starting on the disarming spell when he got back. What if he cast Expelliarmus and ended up sending Ron or Hermione, or one of the young students flying backwards with such force they were knocked out, or worse?

His thoughts were interrupted by a gentle knock. Lupin's head appeared around the door enquiringly as Harry stayed where he sat.

'The guard that came back with you will stay here, the rest will continue to watch The Burrow.' He said as he strolled into the room. 'Why did you come back here before Hogwarts re-opens?' he said, taking in Harry's demeanour. 'There's only a few days left, I would have thought you would have preferred to be with the Weasley's, especially with a certain pretty young redhead there.' He smirked knowingly.

Ginny. Harry thought. Maybe because of his recent contented days with her, it had been hardest to leave her most of all. 'I'm having some … problems with my magic.' Harry said at last.
'Problems?' Lupin raised his eyebrows. 'From what Aberforth tells me you've been doing astonishingly well, I think you're being a little hard on yourself. You have to remember you're only seventeen…'

'That's not what I mean.' Harry said, staring in front of him. 'I've learned a lot, and my powers are increasing, but that is the problem.' He looked at Lupin's frown. 'Things are happening that aren't supposed to.' He told Lupin about the gnome and Peter's injuries. 'I don't seem to be able to control it anymore. It's like I've been so obsessed with increasing my skills that they're getting beyond me.'

'Well, I can't say that I've ever heard of this sort of thing happening before.' Lupin said as he sat on the bed beside Harry. 'Normally you can increase your skill through knowledge by learning more powerful spells, but I never thought it was possible to increase the power of mastered incantations. They are what they are. Either you can cast them, or you can't, with the exception of a few of the

more advanced castings like Patronuses.' He gave Harry a curious look 'Are you sure Peter was capable of repelling a stinging hex?'

'Yes.' Harry said gravely as he cast his eyes to the floor. 'I wanted to train to help people, instead' Harry paused, reluctant to say it 'it feels like I'm becoming a danger to them.'

Neither of them spoke for a moment as Harry continued to eye the worn out rug on the floor.

'Well, if you're right, and you are developing your powers beyond the normal working level,' Lupin finally said 'then you need to find out what's causing it, and discover a way of controlling it.' Lupin stood up and peered down at Harry. 'I'm heading off tonight and will not be back before you return to Hogwarts.' Harry nodded. 'I suggest you speak with Aberforth when you meet with him next.'

'That's what Ginny said.'
'Smart girl, that one.' Lupin smiled as Harry met his gaze. 'Always thought so. Her OWL's were one of the highest levels Hogwarts has ever seen.'
'Were they?' Harry said in surprise. He had never even thought to enquire after her grades with so much going on.

'Absolutely, and considering the circumstances with which the fifth years had to sit them after last years … events, her achievement was nothing short of astounding, far above the next closest to her, even though all the grades were scaled up in the end. Except Ginny's. A perfect score has never yet been attained across the board, and had McGonagall scaled Ginny's, she would have been the first. Professor McGonagall was all set to award her with Hogwarts highest achievement award.'

'She never said…' Harry said blankly.
'She asked the Head Mistress not to scale her results when she was called into her office earlier in the year and informed of the schools intentions. McGonagall wasn't keen on it, feeling she deserved the recognition, but Ginny was very determined.' Lupin smiled facetiously. 'I'm certain given your relationship with her you have been on the receiving end of her stubbornness. Eventually McGonagall relented. Anyway, I'm off.' Lupin said briskly. 'Try and stay out of trouble, and don't worry too much, I'm sure there will be a rational explanation for your recent magical prowess.' Lupin smiled reassuringly at Harry before leaving, closing the door behind him. Harry continued to stare into space.

So Ginny is way more talented than she's letting on, he thought. But why, why wouldn't she want the rest of them to know? Surely Mr. and Mrs. Weasley must know her results. Harry did not move for the longest time as he sat there thinking about it. The room darkened as the sun retreated, finally bringing Harry out of his revere. He lit the candelabra in the room and picked up the thick candle from his bedside, igniting it before heading down to the kitchen to rustle up something for dinner.

Over the next couple of days, The Order members who kept guard did not intrude on Harry, only popping in a couple of times a day to check on him. Harry had grown so used to this routine that he no longer resented it, knowing they were doing their job and even feeling grateful that he still had their support.

Hermione contacted him more than once through their message log, but Harry didn't had a lot to say, merely asking after them all, and finding himself relieved to hear that Peter's arm was now free of bandages and seemed to be healing well under Mrs. Weasley's motherly care.

The night before he was to return to Hogwarts, Harry decide to repack his trunk so it would be easier to navigate when back at school, and as he did so, he came across several items he had forgotten he had even had.

The sneakascope that Ron had given him years back was still wrapped in the same horrid pair of his uncles old socks. The presence of Scabbers no longer a problem, it whizzed no more, lying silently where it sat. So it had worked after all, Harry thought wryly as he tucked it back into the bottom of his trunk alongside the items he had procured from Fred and George's Joke shop at the beginning of last year. Once he had monotonously and rather haphazardly folded his clothing back into place, and stowed his Firebolt on top, he lifted his parent's dented black chest to stow it safely away. Without knowing why, instead of putting it back in his trunk, he sat it on the bed and settled beside

it, pointing his wand at it and opening the lock.

He hadn't explored the contents since opening it for the first time many months ago, and was just lifting the yellowed parchment note from his dad to read it again when he noticed the inside panel of the arched lid had come loose. It must have happened that awful day when Ginny had discovered him with Julie and he dropped the chest. He pushed the panel back with his fingers in an effort to replace it, but it sprung back, dangling open wider than before as something silvery slid into view above the panel.

Harry slid his fingers in and eased the object out, and in uncertain disbelief, he brought it closer to his face.

It was mirror. Not just any mirror. As he turned it over in his hand, he realized it was an exact copy of the small oval mirror Sirius had once given him. His heartbeat quickened as his mind raced. He placed the mirror carefully on the bed and grabbed his father's letter, opening with shaky hands.

As he read through it slowly, he studied every word carefully.

...rest Lily,

...e home as soon as...
...merick to deliver this t...
...received news of his pla...
...will be all hands on d...
...w is my little guy do...
...bout you both, day and...
...in with Sooty to make su...
...member to use the m...

He stopped.

Parts of his father's words were missing, parts that when he had first read them had meant little to him. But now, glancing down at the silvery object that lay beside him, he began to piece it together. He looked back at the letter and read on...

... will come as soon as...
...ss you my darling Lily...
...unior a hug from his da...
...y love, James

He went back to the few lines that had his heartbeat racing and read it again.

...member to use the m...
... will come as soon as...

"member to use the m...?" Had it once said, "Remember to use the mirror"? The word that was missing from the beginning of the next sentence ... could it be ... was it even possible his father was referring to Sirius? Harry swallowed hard as he picked up the mirror and held it up alongside the parchment. He looked back and forth, from the mirror to the letter.

...member to use the m...
... will come as soon as...

Over and over he looked at the wording, and the more he read it, the more he believed in his train of thought. Then the reality hit him. His stomach dropped painfully.

Even if this did mean that his mother had had a mirror just like the one Sirius had given him, Sirius was gone – dead. The mirror would be useless. He slowly, reluctantly replaced the parchment in the chest, carefully adding the mirror on top, and then closed the lid, securing the latch.

After he had finished packing, he extinguished the candelabra, leaving only the one dull candle light on his bedside table to illuminate the room, and lay back on the top of his bed, his hands behind his

head as he stared up at the flaky paintwork on the ceiling. Hedwig scratched about on top of the wardrobe, before fluttering soundlessly down to the windowsill by the bed. Harry lifted himself up and reached across to open the window for her. She trilled gently and swooped out into the cold night air, obviously looking forward to her nights hunt. Harry reclined again, leaving the window open so she could come back at her leisure.

Harry tried to empty his mind, but the thoughts that plagued him would not abate.

Ever since he had arrived he had been curious as to why Ginny had been so secretive about her abilities, and his worry over his own unexplainable increase in magical powers, along with the fact that he had not been able to let go of the hauntingly eerie fact that Neville's body had been stolen had already cost him dearly in the sleep department. And now … now he had the added discomfort of his discovery of the mirror.

The icy air that dropped through the open window stretched its tentacles out, creeping through the room. Harry yanked off his shoes and pulled the blankets back, burying himself under the covers still fully clothed. All of these questions, he thought. So many things that concerned him when he knew he was supposed to be focused on only one thing: discovering what the next Horcrux was and destroying it.

He turned over impatiently, willing the seductive plume of sleep to encase him; determined to lye there until he fell asleep. Harry closed his eyes and tried to push everything from his mind.

How long he hovered in the state of almost sleep, he didn't know, but something jolted him suddenly to full consciousness. He felt it before he could even open his eyes. Clumsily he threw himself off the bed, the blankets twisting around him as he went. He hit the floor in the small gap between his bed and the window with a thud, grabbing urgently for his wand, which still resided in the pocket of his jeans. Fighting the restricting sheets, an arrogant, lingering voice uttered as he wrestled desperately.

'Well, that is possibly one of the most amusing things I've seen since our last meeting.'

Harry wriggled in the narrow prison as he struggled to pull his wand out and get free of the blankets, Snape's drawl mocking his efforts.

'Did you do that on purpose, or is it a frequent event?'

~*~*~*~

Harry finally managed to yank his wand free and kick the bedding off his feet. His heart was racing as he scrambled to his feet, straightening his glasses, which were badly askew from not only falling asleep with them on, but also from his face abruptly meeting with the floor.

Snape was standing just inside the doorway, adorned in fathomlessly black Death Eater robes, glaring at Harry. There was no trace of the half-hearted attempts of mockery that Harry expected to see in his expression, in fact, he looked pale and pasty and incredibly grim - even more so than usual.

"*You left us to die!*" Harry blurted.

It was out of his mouth before he could even think about what he wanted to say. He had been stewing for months over the after-effects of the spell he, Ron and Hermione had conjured on Halloween to counter the Quintapeds, and now, faced with Snape's sudden presence, his anger swarmed inside him dangerously and radiating out through every single pore on his body.

Snape did not flinch. He understood exactly what Harry was referring to. He remained rigid as he spoke.

"There was no other way to stop the onslaught."

“You could have warned us!” Harry jerked his wand as he spoke. “Instead, you left us completely vulnerable!” His chest was heaving as his knuckles whitened over his wand. “But I guess that’s exactly what you wanted, wasn’t it?”

Not taking his eyes off Snape, who had his wand aimed uncharacteristically casually in his direction, Harry edged out from behind the bed, scuffing the blankets under foot in an effort not to trip over them.

“And what meandering path of wisdom brought you to that *logical* conclusion?” Snape drawled as he followed Harry’s movements with his wand.

“You set us up.” Harry’s skin was tingling and burning with violent fury. He rounded the bed and stopped in front of it. “You neglected to tell me that we’d be useless to defend ourselves in the aftermath. You used us to do your dirty for you, knowing you were landing Bellatrix in hot water for her failure, and then hoping we’d be wiped out by her wrath-”

“As always, your powers for deduction are nothing short of – astonishing.” Snape’s sarcasm glowered as he raised an eyebrow. “Explain to me why I would want to destroy both Bellatrix LeStrange *and* the great Harry Potter? Surely even you had trouble piecing that together and making it stick?”

“You’ve always hated me.” Harry said with no trace of bitterness. His voice was dark and controlled. “It’s not that hard to imagine you wanting me dead – especially after you killed Dumbledore.” Snape winced slightly. “And you at least *pretended* to tolerate him.”

A change had come over Snape at the mention of Dumbledore. His shoulders, usually stiff and ready, slumped forward marginally, and his skin seemed to drain of the shadow of natural colour it barely contained, leaving him pallid and ghostly looking. Harry might have thought he looked almost remorseful – if he didn’t know better.

“Dumbledore knew what could happen – what *would* happen.” Snape said, not meeting Harry’s eyes.

“*What?*” Harry’s anger was rapidly morphing into pure fury. “You evil…” The name Harry tagged Snape with at this point was so shockingly corse that Snape’s eyes immediately snapped back to him. “He trusted you! He believed in you when no one else would have given you the time of day! And how did you repay him? You killed him in cold blood when he was sick enough to probably be dying already!”

Snape’s jaw set as he spoke scathingly. “It would pay you not to be so presumptuous. My-”

“I know more than you think!” Harry unconsciously advanced, stopping after his first step as he realized his closeness to his hated ex-professor, and making Snape renew his grip on his wand. “You managed to slime your way into Dumbledore’s confidence by turning on Voldemort. But I was there! I was there that night on the tower. I saw you kill Dumbledore - minutes after he asked me to find you so you could *help* him!” Harry held back the maddening, bitter tears that stung his eyes, infuriated at the thoughts of breaking down in front of Snape.

“You even had a hand in Sirius’s death because you let your pathetic pride interfere with our Occlumency sessions, letting me see exactly what Voldemort wanted me to see. And somehow, you conveniently didn't act fast enough the night he died, either. Strange how it took so long for the Order to arrive.”

“I did what I could.” Snape injected calmly. “If you had done as you were-”

“You started *all* of this!" Harry cut him off, advancing again as his hatred pulsed uncontrollably, his voice growing higher as he spoke. "*You* went running to your *master* after hearing part of the Prophecy. *You’re* the one who’s responsible for Voldemort’s unrelenting vendetta against me! *You’re* the one who is responsible for my parents deaths!”

Harry seethed dangerously as he stopped only feet away from Snape. They were standing face to face, wands aligned and running parallel, yet pointed in opposite directions. Snape looked like he

was going to be sick there and then. Harry glared at him, overwhelmed by the need to *do* something to Snape. Guilt. So close now, Harry could see it in Snape's face. But it was indefinable guilt. It was impossible to think that Snape felt the deep and painful regret of his wrongdoing that seemed to be etched across his features.

"Dumbledore told you." Snape's words weren't so much a question, more a grim statement, uttered in a strangled voice.

"No – he didn't. Though he should have. He would *never* have betrayed you like that." The sourness of Harry's words registered on Snape's face. "He insisted that you were to be trusted. He said he had an 'iron-clad' reason for believing in you – and you killed him."

Snape's eyes were shadowed as he spoke.

"I never liked your father,"

Harry gaped at Snape. His mind raced in an effort to come up with the most horrible of the new curses he had practiced over the Christmas break.

"But your mother ... loved him." Snape screwed up his face in distaste; the word 'loved' rolling off his tongue like a brick. "And I would never have wished her any harm."

Harry was pulled out of his mental checklist. "What?"

"Your mother, Lily" Snape turned his gaze from Harry "was my potions partner in my NEWT years at Hogwarts." Snape lowered his wand a fraction as his gaze settled on Harry's bewildered one. "She was – a good person. Too good for likes of James Potter. But she saw something in him he must have kept exceedingly well hidden from most. I was forced to believe that he must have had *some* redeeming qualities because I knew her. She was no fool."

Harry stared dumbfounded. This was too much to take in! He knew his mother was gifted at potions from what Slughorn had said, but he never thought of her having a connection to Severus Snape; especially given he had seen the memory in the pensieve. She had made an effort to intervene when his father had had Snape humiliatingly dangling upside-down with his underwear on display to the whole school, but his scathing refusal of her help, and her subsequent reluctant giggle when his father had jumped to her defence had made him believe there was no love lost between his mother and Snape. It had never occurred to him that they would have been thrown together and actually developed some kind of – *friendship?*

"You … my mother?"

Snape was eyeing Harry under half-closed lids. His expression unreadable.

"She was an extraordinary woman." Snape said, a flicker of – was it – fondness? Crossing his face. "We would have remained friends if it wasn't for her – devotion – to James."

Harry stalled for a moment, trying desperately to absorb this unwanted information. If this was true, if Snape was really 'friends' with his mother, then that complicated everything Harry thought to be true. They had worked together as partners – mixing, measuring, stiring, talking, and maybe even laughing? A repugnant and irrational – decidedly irrational - fear came out of the blue and was slowly uncoiling in the pit of Harry's stomach.

"You…" Harry was beginning to feel sick at the thought that was pressing in on him. "You … and my mother…" He said slowly.

Snape raised an eyebrow.

Harry felt like he almost couldn't breathe. "You weren't…" His train of thought that ran along the lines of somewhere Harry thought he would never have to go must have shown, because Snape cut in abruptly.

"Don't be ridiculous, Potter! Your mother and I were only ever potions partners."

Harry was suddenly awash with relief. Snape appeared irritated, disgusted, and … faintly amused.

“But in those two years I grew to respect her, though it pains me to admit to *you*. Believe me.”

Snape’s tone ruffled Harry’s ire again as he swallowed the bile that had been creeping up at the thoughts of his mother and Snape being … lovers. “How could you have told Voldemort-”

“I didn’t know!” Snape snapped. “Since you know so much, you should be aware I only heard part of the Prophecy. I had no idea your mother was pregnant at the time. We hadn’t spoken since we graduated.” Did Snape actually look regretful? “We both walked very separate paths after that…” He sounded extremely weary as he trailed off.

“So you’re washing your hands clean then?” Harry said grievously. “Blood doesn’t come off that easily, Snape!” Snape sucked in a deep breath. “You would have known he was going after my family, wouldn’t you? And you let them die anyway.”

“I did try to stop it from happening. When I found out-”

“I DON’T WANT TO HEAR IT!” Harry roared. Snape stood his ground and kept his wand low. “Nothing you can say will change everything that’s happened!”

“Of course it won’t!” Snape said icily. “But its inevitable we play out this charming little scenario before its too late!”

“Too late for what?” Harry shouted.

“For you to realize who your allies are!” Snape said steadily.

Harry stared a Snape for a moment.

“Oh,” Harry said slowly. “I get it. You’re going to try to do to me what you did to Dumbledore. You’re going to try and tell me you’re really on my side, aren’t you?” He sneered at the thought.

Snape narrowed his eyes. “Need I waste my breath?”

Harry scoffed. “How stupid do you really think I am? – On second thoughts - don’t answer that! I already know. Otherwise you wouldn’t be here.”

Snape’s shoulders dropped as he breathed out heavily. “I’m not doing this under the delusion that we can ever trust in one another. That would be fool-hardy to say the least, given our history.” Snape eyed Harry’s wand. “I would appreciate it if you would lower that somewhat, however. It might go off accidentally – given your disposition.”

“Its not accidentally you should be worried about.” Harry said. Nothing Snape could say would change the fact that he had been the one to tell Voldemort about the Prophecy. There was no absolution for his betrayal of Dumbledore. Yet Harry found himself relaxing his arm anyway. His mother had seen something Snape, something that Harry couldn’t, maybe just like Snape with James.

“Thank you.” Snape said.

“Don’t thank me yet.”

“You have too much confidence in your abilities, Potter.”

“Are you going to tell me why you are here, or not?” Harry said, his anger and hatred holding under a very fine leash.

“Yes. But as I don’t have time to give you all the answers you seek,” Snape said as he relaxed his own grip on his wand further “you will have to go back to what you once knew.” At Harry’s frown, Snape continued. “You always had faith in Dumbledore. Dumbledore had faith in me. You will need

to utilize that to get to the next Horcrux."

Harry froze. He stared at Snape dumbly.

"Surprised?" Snape asked.

"Not really." Harry rushed, recovering as quickly as he could. "Voldemort knows I'm after them. He probably told you as you're one of his 'most trusted servants' – in fact he probably sent you here-"

"Do not assume to second guess what Voldemort is thinking, or doing!" Snape cut in angrily. "He trusts no one! He sends out clueless individuals under the guise that they are redeeming themselves, knowing that they will do whatever it takes to keep their family safe." Harry frowned again. Snape rolled his eyes. "I am, of course, speaking of Mr. Malfoy."

"Lucius is not what I'd call 'clueless'. He's-"

"I'm not talking about Lucius, you twit! I'm talking about his son!"

"Draco?"

"Yes."

"So," Harry's mind raced. "He's looking for a Horcrux? At Hogwarts?"

"Yes, and no." Snape said grimly. "He's had no idea why he's been looking for the object assigned, he's only trying to prevent his father from being murdered – as his mother was."

A dull ache surged from the pit of Harry's stomach. Draco Malfoy was far from his favourite person in the world, but he couldn't help empathizing with him when it came to losing his mum and dad – however horrible they were.

He thought Draco Malfoy had looked somewhat thinner the last time he'd seen him. Even in the strange black light of the Lumo Sepia charm, his pale grey eyes had look haunted, and his cheeks hollow. It was obvious he was still struggling. Lucius too, had looked thin. Maybe from his stay in Azkaban. Even though it was no longer guarded by dementors, it still couldn't have been pleasant. Not that Lucius Malfoy deserved pleasant. He had gloated over Harry's incompetence and almost let something slip, but Draco had stepped in. It was automatic – the way he had reined in his father. Protective even.

"What do you mean, yes *and* no?" Harry asked, trying to focus on the Horcruxes.

"I mean, that what Draco Malfoy has been sent to find may – or may not – be a Horcrux." Snape was holding Harry's gaze meaningfully. "The true dilemma he faces is finding it. The Dark Lord is growing impatient. He is ready to … remove Draco and send in others."

Harry knew immediately what Snape meant by 'remove'. "Others?"

"Others who would not think twice about killing anyone that discovered them. Including children."

Harry swallowed.

"I think you will agree that that particular situation would be best avoided." Something flashed across Snape's expression, but it was gone before Harry could get a handle on it.

"Why did he send Draco in the first place?" Harry asked suspiciously. "Its not like he did a magnificent job the last time, is it?" Harry bit down on the venomous remark that sat on his tongue about Snape's involvement.

Snape seemed to pick up on his restraint. "You are aware Draco is not a killer. That does not mean he cannot be of use to the Dark Lord – for a time. But his time is rapidly running out. He needs your help."

Harry spluttered a disbelieving cough.

“You’re joking!” He couldn’t stop the incredulous smile from hitting his lips. “You’re asking me to help Draco Malfoy find a Horcrux so he can return it to Voldemort?”

“No.” Snape said coolly, chosing his words carefully. “I’m telling you that if you do not help Mr. Malfoy find what he is looking for, then both he, and his father, are dead." Snape tilted his head as he played his card. "Though who would have to watch whom die, I cannot say.”

Harry was beginning to feel nauseas. He could honestly say that he couldn’t care less if Voldemort decided to send Lucius off in a halo of green light. But Draco – he didn’t deserve that. Nor did he deserve to have his father’s death on his conscience.

“I can’t.” Harry said with difficulty. The first time he and Draco met in Hagrid's hut, Harry had seen that Draco had his mother’s death weighing on him - bending him to the point of breaking. Harry suspected that his father’s death would shatter him completely. “I can’t do that. I can’t hand over a Horcrux to Voldemort.” Harry’s voice cracked as he spoke.

Snape’s expression didn’t move, as if he had expected Harry's answer. Harry met his gaze, battling with himself over his feelings of guilt.

Snape’s eyes grew hard.

A strange muzzy feeling encroached on Harry, something like an invisible hand reaching into his mind, easing in, and then pushing in – intent on seeking and probing.

Harry felt a shift in his thoughts; an image was struggling to appear. It was like a page in a scrapbook, sticky with sloppy glue, being plied open.

No!

He knew this feeling, but he had never been able to recognize it so quickly and prevent the barrage of mental slides – memories in pieces - surfacing at the urge of another. Harry pulled on an empty, dark space in his mind as he resisted Snapes intrusion, a black hole of nothingness, and swiftly settled there.

“*Get out of my head!*” Harry yelled. A second later, the push was gone.

Snape was standing before Harry, eyeing him curiously.

“Don’t do that!” Harry said, angered by Snape’s attempted invasion.

“You closed your mind.” Snape said frowning. “Very efficiently too. Strange considering where you were a few months ago.”

“A lot of things have changed.” Harry said defiantly, remembering his surges in power. He tried to keep his tone level, unwilling for Snape to realize that Harry was as surprised by his ability to shut out Snape as Snape was.

Snape seemed to be thinking to himself, and then he nodded his head briefly.

“Unexpected. This is something I hadn’t dare count on," he glanced back to Harry "knowing your previous endeavours.” He added insultingly. He still couldn’t resist a poke at Harry, even through this unlikely truce. Snape was weighing something up in his mind, and then he straightened and drew breath. “You *will* help Draco, and you *will* allow him to take the item to Voldemort because it is *not* a Horcrux.”

“What? ... But you just said-”

“Don’t argue with me - I’m running out of time and patience for this bantering!” Snape’s voice returned to his usual tone in the classroom. “Draco will need your help in getting into the Headmaster’s office. He will also require access to the pensieve.”

“Er… ” Harry stared blankly, utterly bereft of any power to reason out what Snape was saying.

Snape sighed exaggeratedly. “I see your verbal skills haven’t improved.” Then very slowly, as if talking to the temporarily deaf, he continued. “Get Draco into the Head Office. There you will find the information you both require to go further.”

“Hang on” Harry said, remembering something. “Malfoy has already been in the Head Office. Over the summer break.”

Snape narrowed his glare. “How do you know that?”

“Why didn’t he get the information he needed then?” Harry asked, ignoring Snape.

Snape narrowed his eyes suspiciously, but he did not pursue the matter - perhaps because he was, indeed, running out of time.

“Because neither of you were ready before now. The information would have brought about not only his demise, but other's as well. Not to mention most likely yours.”

Harry raised an eyebrow in cynical disbelief. “Concerned for my welfare?”

“When it is tied to Draco Malfoy's – yes.”

“How did he get-”

“I will be missed." Snape cut in impatiently. "The password to access the cabinet is…” Snape paused and wrinkled his nose. “Lollygobble.” He looked like something particularly nasty had wafted under his nose. “You will need to disband the silencing charm surrounding the cabinet before you use the password. Draco will know how.”

“I know how to cancel a simple silencing charm!” Harry was stupidly irritated at Snape’s continued inference that he was a useless wizard.

“Being child’s play, I would hope so.” Snape drawled. “But this is no ordinary silencing charm.”

“Why does Draco even need my help?”

“For one – he does not have the password – not to the Heads office, or the cabinet. In fact, he isn’t aware he needs one to gain access to the pensieve. Also, he will need you specifically to locate the item – if I am correct.”

“How do I know he wont try to attack me when my back is turned?” Harry's old rivalry surfaced. He felt quietly confident at a duel with Malfoy, but if he let his guard down enough to do this, he doubted Draco would allow him the opportunity of fighting back, if he decided to turn on Harry.

Snape sighed. “Has he pursued you even once in the whole time he’s been in and out of Hogwarts?”

Harry thought about it, and then frowned.

“Well … no.”

“Am I right in saying then, that the two times you came in contact with him was when *you* were pursuing *him?*”

“I. Well. I…”

“Precisely.” Snape sneered slightly. “You would do well to keep that in mind, Potter. Draco Malfoy is walking a thin line, and under much duress. He could still fall either way. But remember – he has posed no threat to anyone at Hogwarts this year. I must leave.” He paused just as he was about to turn and considered Harry. “I hope we can forego any of the unnecessary parting rituals we have become accustomed to of late.”

Harry stared at Snape, registering a great weariness lurking in him. He nodded once.

Snape looked mildly surprised, then turned to leave.

“I do have a question for you though. Well, a couple actually.”

Snape sighed impatiently and turned to face him.

“Firstly – How am I going to help Malfoy if I don’t even know where he is?”

“*He* will find *you*.”

“Oh.” This was somewhat unsettling. The thoughts that Draco could track him down so easily hadn’t really occurred to him before. He had always been concerned with the safety of the other students at the school. Harry barged on before he could re-think himself.

“Why did you kill Dumbledore?”

Snape stiffened. His eyes shuttered and he appeared completely closed.

“The answer to that will present itself when you are not seeking it.”

Harry hated these cryptic answers. Absolutely hated them - having had more than his fair share of them over the years. Snape was almost beginning to sound like Dumbledore.

“How can I believe anything you’ve said?” There was no malice in his question, just a great deal of his own weariness.

Snape answered bleakly.

“When the time is right, inform Miss. Granger and Mr. Weasley that, under the circumstances, I do not consider they owe me a life debt.”

And with that, Snape was gone.

26. Uncovering Draco Malfoy - Part 1

The cloak of night reluctantly receded.

Shadows stretched and thinned under dawn’s bloody glow as it encroached on the ancient, crumbling stonework that perched on the rocky drop-off. The wild grass that tufted through the salt-burned snow at the foot of weary walls was blonde and brittle and dead. The trees that rimmed the Dark Forest gripped the edge of the rugged and relentlessly weathered cliffs, leaning heavily over the exposed expanse burdened not by too much snow, but by the presence of what lay hidden within their depths.

Beneath the rubble of what was left of the old castle, in the bowls of a long forgotten fortress, two figures waited. One sat hidden by an emerald swathed winged backed chair edged with blackened steel serpents that appeared frozen in mid-writhe. The other stood tall and dark and rigid just inside the damp stone archway that led into the dreary chamber.

“You have seen the boy?”

A voice like ice and daggers rose from the chair.

“Yes, my Lord.” Snape bowed his head even though he could not be seen.

“And.” Said more as a warning than a question.

“He will do as expected.”

“And the other?”

“She will be ours in a matter of days.”

The waves that bombarded and crashed against the jagged cliff face somewhere behind the walls of the underground chamber hummed their fury through the room.

“The dragon whelp will be brought to me before the full moon.” The order was laced with displeasure. “Lucius will have the opportunity to make amends for his … mistakes.” The last word hissed out evilly.

“Yes, my Lord.”

Snape stayed in his half-bow, waiting. Finally, like shards of glass, the voice shattered the silence.

“Do you think I am being too harsh on him?” the voice asked silkily.

“Young Malfoy is of no consequence, my Lord.”

A malevolent chuckle followed. “You betray your feelings, Severus. I was referring to Lucius.”

The silence that followed unsettled the very air between the two. A scaly white hand that had rested lightly on the snakehead arm of the chair motioned casually.

“Come. Stand before me, Severus. Let me see you.”

Snape instantly glided across the room, his black robes swirling behind him. In one swift easy movement, head bowed, he lowered himself on one knee, lacing his hands across the other raised knee, and subjugated himself at the foot of Lord Voldemort.

Long white fingers ending in unnatural, talon-like nails came to rest under Snape’s chin.

“You are such a contradiction.” Voldemort mused almost fondly. “So eagerly you betray *trusted* companions to their deaths, yet you are willing to suffer the incompetence of an imp.”

The fingers gently forced Snape to raise his gaze to meet the two red, reptilian eyes that studied him.

“Could it be that you *love* Draco, Severus?”

Snape said unflinchingly. “I would tear the last breath from him if you wished it, my Lord.”

With the removal of the hand, Snape lowered his head once more.

~*~*~*~*~

“Where’s Hermione?”

It was a question Harry had heard more times in the last week than anyone needed to hear in a lifetime.

“I don’t know.” Harry sighed. “I’ve been with you all evening. Why are you asking me?”

Ron scratched something out on the parchment he had sprawled in his lap and screwed his nose up in frustration.

“I need her.” He said matter-of-factly. “How am I supposed to know why the Dicta charms require swishes and not flicks? I can’t finish this ludicrously long essay if she’s not around.” He looked up at Harry with a slight worry crease between his eyebrows. “Where does she keep disappearing off to, anyway? Ever since we got back I’ve hardly seen her.”

“We’re talking about Hermione, Ron” Harry said, sounding exasperated. “Its NEWT year.”

“Yeah. But that doesn’t explain why she’s not here studying with us, does it?” He turned back to his parchment and scribbled something down and added sulkily. “She always studies with us.”

Harry rolled up his transfiguration homework with a frown, giving up completely on being able to concentrate. At the beginning of the week, Ron and Hermione (mostly Hermione - Ron having been reluctantly recruited) had cornered Harry and admonished that he needed to start catching up on his schoolwork since the year was already half over. (After all, if Harry wanted any kind of shot at being an auror he ought to buckle down every free moment he had.) Harry had tried to put the effort in, but even though potions classes had been suspended until the replacement professor arrived on Monday, giving them all more free time, and every night this week he had his nose buried in a book with a concentrated look on his face, instead of absorbing and understanding and writing about the information in front of him, his mind hadn’t taken in a word of it. He found he had too many things going on inside his head. Things that were pressing and couldn't wait.

Not the least of which was that the three of them seemed to have hit a brick wall in uncovering the identity of the unknown Horcrux.

Harry was almost certain Hermione was using *some* of the time she spent hidden away researching what the item could be. Yet so far, she had not, as was her usual want, come bounding up to Harry and Ron loaded with the latest brilliant epiphany that would set them all on the right track again. He had tried to pin her down to discussing it with him on several occasions, but Hermione had taken to making fumbling excuses, shooting Harry pained or nervous glances as she invariably made her exit. Not like Hermione at all. She should have been huddled in whispered conversation with Harry and Ron at every opportune moment. But she wasn’t. In fact, Harry was beginning to get the distinct impression that Hermione had been avoiding him.

Harry stuffed his books and papers in his already overfilled bag that leant against the foot of his chair.

“I’m going for some air.”

Ron looked up, the crushed end of his quill tip hovering near his mouth. “If you see Hermione, tell her it’s getting late, will you?” Harry nodded. “Do you want me to do the rounds for you?”

Harry smiled reassuringly and stood up. “Its fine. I’ll do it on the way back.”

“You going to the lake?”

“Yeah.” Harry threw his bag over his shoulder and climbed the dormitory stairs to drop off his books, retrieve some warmer clothing and don his invisibility cloak. Ron didn’t quiz Harry as to why he was headed to the lake again, or offer to come along. For which Harry was glad. His best friend seemed quite happy to give him the room he needed. Something Hermione never really quite got the hang of – until recently that is.

When Harry emerged back in the common room, thanks to his trusty cloak, no eyes were on him as he crossed the room unseen and crawled through the portrait hole to make his way along the deserted halls.

The time spent away from Hogwarts at Christmas, had brought into sharp belief just how often the other students spent covertly eyeing Harry. He found himself keenly aware of the hands that shaded whispering mouths, the swing of heads that turned quickly away when his eyes roamed a room, and worst of all, the expectant, doey eyes of the younger students who not so much as looked *at* him, but *to* him. For what, Harry knew all to well, and he found it disconcerting, to say the least.

Harry stopped momentarily as he walked across the grounds and cast a cautious warming charm on himself. He had spoken to Sir at their first meeting when he had returned to Hogwarts and explained the problems he'd been having with his magic. Sir had looked troubled to begin with, and remained silent for some time before offering the explanation that Harry's magic was 'spiking', and that it was most likely to do with the new, more powerful spells he'd been practising.

After the first session, (and several incidents of near misses with unexpected effects) Sir cautioned Harry, telling him that he needed to rein in his emotions. The problems appeared to surface mostly when Harry was overly emotive, and then again nearer the end of the lesson, when he was worn out. It was up to Harry, Sir said, to keep control of his feelings, and by so doing, control the spikes.

When Harry reached the small jetty overhanging the lake, he removed his father's cloak and perched himself on the edge of the pier, dangling his legs above the waters edge. This was the fourth night in a row (bar the night before last when it had poured torrential rain on the castle) that he had sat in this spot. It was a nice spot to sit. Something about the lazy ripples of the black water was incredibly calming, giving Harry a chance to churn his thoughts uninterrupted.

It also gave Malfoy the perfect opportunity to approach Harry. Which still hadn't happened.

Harry was growing increasingly restless. He glanced over his shoulder, and then looked back out over the spangled surface of the lake.

It had been almost a week since the return of school, and he was beginning to wonder if Malfoy was ever going to make himself known. Harry was tired of waiting for something to happen. The anticipation was wearing on him. It was almost tempting to just give up on this uncomfortable quest of Snape's and forget completely about any trouble Malfoy may have landed himself him. To be honest, Harry wasn't entirely sure if Malfoy didn't deserve all he might get. He had always been excessively vicious to Harry and his friends. Ever since day one. Really, what did Harry care if Malfoy's nasty disposition and narrow-minded prejudices were about to ricochet back onto him? You reap what you sow. Right?

There was the slight problem however, that according to Snape, Harry was going to need Malfoy to get to the next Horcrux.

Harry breathed out loudly and shifted in his spot.

He hadn't quite managed to come to terms with Snape's revelation about his friendship with his mother. In a way, maybe it wasn't as shocking as perhaps he would have expected months ago. It was more the fact that Harry didn't *want* to believe it.

From what Lupin had told him about Lily, she was the kind of person who would befriend the un-befriendable. Until recently, Harry had never been in doubt that underneath Snape's cold, oily and decidedly ugly exterior, he harboured just as much icy disgust, greasy bitterness, and unattractive hatred as he reflected outwardly.

But then, he had gone and given Harry the means to prevent Bellatrix from destroying Hogsmeade - and he had saved Ron and Hermione. That had to count for something. So now Harry was finding himself reluctantly believing that there might actually be more to Snape than the loathsome Death Eater.

Yet Harry couldn't quite trust him. Maybe it came down to all the years of their mutual loathing. Something like that couldn't be erased in a matter of weeks or months even, let alone days. In the end, his instincts kept him wary.

Harry picked up one of the small pebbles that littered the jetty and tossed it into the lake impatiently.

Why hadn't Malfoy accosted him yet? There was still one more Horcrux before Harry could leave Hogwarts in search of Nagini and Riddle. The unknown Horcrux. The Horcrux that Voldemort is apparently trying to re-acquire from Hogwarts, and yet Snape says isn't a Horcrux at all. How could Voldemort not know what all of his Horcruxes were? Snape was either wrong, or he was lying just

so Harry would hand it over to Malfoy. Either way, it still meant the item must be a Horcrux. There was no logical reason why Voldemort would send Malfoy in on a wild goose chase, and therefore, there was no way Harry was going to hand his prize over to Draco Malfoy once it was in his possession.

But he needed the Slytherin to acquire it since Malfoy knew the way passed the pensieves silencing ward and Harry did not. Though, thinking about it, if he spoke to McGonagall, maybe she might be able to disarm it. After all, she was the Headmistress now, and she was also about as close to Dumbledore as anyone could have been. Its not like he had to keep it a secret from her anymore. She knows about the Horcruxes now.

...Yes.

Yes. It was less risky and all together a much more comforting thought to work with McGonagall than Malfoy. So he would speak to McGonagall and she was sure to help. That way he could by-pass his long time schoolyard enemy completely.

But then...

He would essentially be leaving the other boy to his fate. In fact, Harry was as good as holding the wand that would send the killing curse that would take the breath from Draco Malfoy.

Harry let out a frustrated sigh.

He sat there for some time, pondering his many thoughts by the lake, hoping - yet dreading - Malfoy would show. Eventually, Harry picked himself up, throwing the cloak over his head, and made his way back to the castle.

He couldn't keep waiting for Malfoy to appear. He had to get into that pensieve as soon as possible. He would have to approach McGonagall in the morning. Tomorrow was Saturday, that would give them both plenty of time to work on getting into the pensieve.

Harry eased open the heavy front doors and slipped quietly into the entrance hall. It was late. Much later than he had realised, and he still had to do his Head Boy rounds. Deciding to start in the dungeons and work his way up, he headed over to the stairs and trudged down them, thinking they wouldn't take long to do as most of the area was deserted now the Slytherins no longer resided there and Slughorn was still catatonic in St Mungos.

He strolled along the familiar corridors, occasionally checking doors whilst keeping an eye out for anything out of place. He did not bother to remove his invisibility cloak as it shielded him against the penetrating dampness that clung to the dungeons, *and* prevented the usual exchanging of unpleasantries with Filch if he should happen by the old caretaker or his eerie cat. He passed by portraits and tapestries, and blank wall, descending more stairs in the underground passageways, working his way along steadily through torchlight and shadow, and then stopped suddenly.

He cocked his head and listened. Nothing.

Harry looked up ahead of him, and then turned to search the area behind him, but could see nothing but the empty corridor in both directions.

Then faint scuffing sounds drifted down the stairs behind him. Harry watched from where he stood, but no one appeared at the bottom.

Harry drew his wand and pushed his back against the wall. He was still not able to see anyone, but the person was most definitely in the corridor with him now. It wasn't an Order member patrolling the castle; Harry had stumbled on them often enough in his Head Boy travels to know they did not use invisibility cloaks inside.

Suddenly, the scuff of a shoe on stone sounded impossibly close.

Harry held his breath.

A voice whispered near his ear, and then Harry was falling backwards.

The sound of stone scraping against stone covered Harry's '*oof*' as he hit the floor. He lay there for a stunned second, watching the wall close in front of him, and then frantically pulled his feet up to make sure they weren't poking out of the cloak, which mercifully, had clung to him as he fell.

A quick glance around, and he instantly recognised his surroundings. The Slytherin common room. It had been years since he had been there with Ron, but it was immediately recognisable. The House colours of green and silver overwhelmed the area, broken only rarely by the stray, dark colouring of expensive hardwoods, or the golden glow of a lit torch.

His eyes were drawn to a door that suddenly opened seemingly of its own accord and then closed again.

Harry got to his feet carefully, wand still grasped in hand, adjusting his cloak as he went. No one was supposed to have access to old common rooms. It was one of the first things McGonagall had explained to Harry when she went over his duties. They were locked, she said, closed off so that the students wouldn't be tempted to try returning to them. It also lessoned the area needing to be patrolled.

Yet here Harry was, standing in the obviously inhabited dormitory, eyeing the door that someone had just passed through.

He wanted to open it. But if he just burst through it, whoever it was might be right on the other side, or worse, still in the room with him, then he'd give himself away, and that could lead to all sorts of problems, especially as his magic was unpredictable at the moment. Whoever it was definitely shouldn't be here. Actually, Harry had a fairly good idea who the ownerless footsteps belonged to, but what they were doing had his curiosity piqued.

He really wanted to open the door and follow, and had made up his mind to risk it when the door opened again and Draco Malfoy walked into the room.

Harry fought the instinct to whip off his cloak and confront Malfoy then and there, choosing to stay hidden instead. Maybe it was because Malfoy had such an intense look on his face as he was walking to the fireplace, like he was on important business.

Harry watched quietly as the boy pushed the coffee table away from the front of the fireplace and began pulling cushions off the chairs and couches, throwing them onto the floor at his feet. Well. No. That wasn't quite accurate. He was placing them – rather meticulously – in a solid circle on the threadbare rug.

When he was contented with the layout of the cushions, Malfoy yanked a white pillowslip out of his cloak pocket and laid it on the table behind him. He slid his cloak off and folded it neatly over a green leather armchair and then grabbed the bottom of his fleecy jumper and pulled it off over his head, mussing up his silver blonde hair so it uncharacteristically stuck out in all directions. He folded the jumper just as carefully as he had the cloak, and then raked his fingers through his hair, smoothing it down before moving onto the cuff of his shirt.

Harry could tell by Malfoy's actions that all of this was a well-practised routine, and it made him wonder just how long the Slytherin had been residing in the common room undetected.

Harry was just thinking to himself that if Malfoy was going to sleep in the buff then he would have to reveal himself, and soon, when Malfoy did something wholly unexpected. Instead of moving onto the right cuff to remove his shirt altogether, he rolled up the sleave of his left arm.

Harry sucked in a breath.

The Dark Mark stood out stark and aggressive against the pale skin beneath it.

The Slytherin reached behind him and picked up the pillowcase. He slowly began twisting it tightly, round and round, until it was a solid roll of fabric between his hands. Harry wondered what this bizarre ritual was leading up to, but Malfoy was facing away, towards the fireplace leaving Harry

unable to make out the Slytherins expression.

So he moved closer.

As he neared, Harry's eyes were drawn to the Mark, the skin surrounding which was yellowed and purpled indicating both new and old bruising. As his gaze wandered up, he took in the tension in the blonde's arms and the stiff stance of his shoulders. Malfoy's jaw was moving as he ground his teeth together, and Harry was taken aback at the unguarded, haunted look of the Slytherins darkly encircled eyes. The boy's breathing was coming in quick, expectant pants as he wiped the light beading of sweat off his brow with a slight tremble in his hand.

Harry swallowed.

Raw fear was radiating from the Slytherin.

Malfoy dropped to his knees on the cushions. He drew several long, deep breaths before placing the white cloth between his teeth and wrapping it around the back of his head, tying it off with a sharp tug. He then brought his right palm up over the Dark Mark and bowed his head.

And there he stayed, not moving except for the steady rise and fall of his shoulders as he breathed slowly in and out through his nose.

Harry glanced at the fireplace, but it showed no signs of life, so he watched Malfoy, both bewildered and fascinated.

The only sound in the room aside from Malfoy's sharp breaths was coming from a Grandfather clock steadily tick-tocking somewhere behind Harry. Suddenly Harry was startled out of his voyeurism by its melodic chime signalling the midnight hour. Reflex made his head swivel round to look at it.

A split second later, another sound pierced the room.

Harry swung his head back to Malfoy.

He was still kneeling in the same position, but the guttural moan now emanating from the boy's mouth, muffled by both the pillowcase and the teeth that bit down on it, was one of the worst sounds Harry had ever heard. The boy's eyes were squeezed tightly shut, his body rigid with pain, and his knuckles white over the Mark as his fingers dug into the bruised flesh.

Harry stood stunned.

Malfoy's groaning was rapidly growing into a fully-fledged desperate roar behind the twisted cloth. The sound broke fleetingly only when the boy tried to draw in a ragged breath, and then it started up again.

Harry's heartbeat was racing in his chest, his fist clenching around his wand as he looked about him despairingly for something to do. But what could he do? It wasn't like there was someone casting the Cruciatus curse that he could try and stop. It seemed likely the curse was emanating from Malfoy's Mark. How was he supposed to stop that?

Suddenly, Malfoy keeled over and curled in on himself. But it was far from over.

The strangled cries didn't stop, and Harry was just beginning to realise why Malfoy had covered the floor with cushions. The boy began writhing and squirming, his body thrusting against the cushions, scattering them until he was knocking his head and limbs against the unforgiving stone floor.

Harry threw off his cloak and rushed forward.

He lunged at the other boy, using his body weight to subdue him, and then grabbing at Malfoy's arms, he pinned them against the blonde's sides.

Harry rolled his weight off, keeping his arms wrapped tightly around the writhing boys torso, and pushed Malfoy into a sitting position. Slipping behind the Slytherin he positioned the boy's body

between his legs and pulled him back until Harry was leaning his back against the foot of the couch for purchase. He had no choice but to clutch Malfoy's back firmly to his chest, using his own arms to restrict the Slytherins movement as much as possible.

Malfoy's struggling seemed to abate somewhat at the contact, and when Harry was reasonably sure the boy couldn't do too much damage he laid his head back on the couch and wondered how long this was going to last. The groaning had not lessened in intensity, but the hoarseness of Malfoy's throat meant that it wasn't as loud, though it didn't look like letting up either.

Harry's glasses were uncomfortably skewed on his face, but he didn't dare try to free an arm to fix them, so he resigned himself to waiting it out until he could release the other boy. It was obvious that this was a regular occurrence, and the thought shook Harry. He vaguely wondered if all Death Eaters endured the same.

Harry renewed his grip as Malfoy almost managed to wrench an arm free. He looked down at what was visible of the suffering boys features. A deep line was etched between his brows and sweat was dripping down the side of his face. Harry wondered if Malfoy was aware that someone was with him or if the pain was too intense to register anything else. It was a blessing that the blonde's head didn't thrash about on Harry's shoulder, yet the Slytherins body was so taught against Harry that he wondered if this wasn't some form of Cruciatus - inflicted through the Mark instead of a wand.

It seemed like hours, but it was only about three minutes from start to finish before Malfoy's hoarse groans died off and his tense and pain racked body finally fell limp. Harry lifted his head off the couch and looked down, tentatively loosening his hold on the other boy and finally lifting an arm to straighten his glasses. He wondered briefly if Malfoy had passed out, but then the blonde head, which had lagged forward, slowly lifted and sagged back against Harry's shoulder, rolling limply outwards.

The part of the Slytherins face that Harry could see was white and clammy looking and his breaths came in shallow pants. An impatient, broken grunt sounded, and Harry moved quickly to undo the gag. But before he could dislodge himself from the Slytherin, Malfoy turned to inspect the person he was leaning against.

Bloodshot, heavy lidded grey eyes met concerned, searching, bespectacled green ones.

Malfoy groaned and closed his eyes again, croaking in a whiney voice something that sounded like "Oh no. Why did it have to be *you*?" before the exhausted Slytherin finally succumbed to enforced sleep.

Harry breathed a deep sigh and rubbed at his eyes under his glasses before pushing the frames back up his nose and letting his own head fall back against the couch.

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Harry woke feeling groggy and wondering at the pain in his neck when the memory of what had happened the previous night and where he currently was drifted rudely back to him. His eyes flew open at the realisation he had carelessly fallen asleep on a couch while he'd been waiting for Malfoy to come to. He wrenched his head out of the uncomfortable position it had been lolling in only to find himself staring down the tip of a wand.

Harry blinked twice. Malfoy's pale figure came into focus.

The Slytherin was abundantly emitting cold fury as he stood before Harry's sprawled form.

"Malfoy." Harry groaned. He closed his eyes and rubbed the indents on the bridge of his nose left there by his glasses and settled back into the couch. The sickly looking boy did not respond. He kept his piercing gaze on Harry, and his wand rigidly aimed.

Lifting his arm, Harry tried to work the crick out of his neck as he eyed the Slytherin, wondering how long he'd been standing there battling with himself over whether to hex Harry limb from limb or not.

"That's not really very polite. Considering." Harry remarked, nodding at the wand. But Malfoy continued his threatening pose, making Harry feel more and more uneasy. Harry began to edge his hand around the side of the couch in search of his wand.

Malfoy followed his movements. "Looking for this?" With a triumphant glint in his sunken eyes he slid Harry's wand from his robe and dangled it between his fingers.

Harry swallowed.

"Yes. As a matter of fact." He replied with more calm than he felt. He reached out his hand slowly. "Care to return it?"

"No." Malfoy said bluntly. He pulled it away from Harry and slid it back into his robes. "I don't think so."

Harry's anger bubbled beneath the surface at the predictable answer. His jaw tightened as he decided enough was enough.

"Look Malfoy, I'm not in the mood for this. Just give me my wand." He moved to stand up, and the other boy backed up slightly. "I'm not going to attack you. I just want my wand back. You owe me that courtesy."

"I don't owe you a thing! And I didn't ask for your *interference*." Malfoy spat.

"Christ, Malfoy!" Harry exasperated. "You could be just a little bit more grateful. I stopped your bony butt from getting seriously hurt last night and I wake up with your wand in my face! I helped you and the least you can do is–"

"I didn't *need* any help!" The Slytherin growled. His knuckles whitened over his wand. "And believe me, *you* would be the Very. Last. Person. I would ask."

Malfoy sneered aggressively. "You and your sycophantic sidekicks are sickening enough from a distance without you barging into my personal space. I bet the three of you have the Slytherins vomiting en mass with your group-hugs in that hovel of a common room. Its pathetic the way you run around playing at being heroes and getting people killed. Not anyone important, of course." He ground out. "*Not anyone that actually matters.*

"That hapless prat Longbottom, for instance." Malfoy hissed, impervious to the blood and thunder glare that Harry was sending his way. "He hung off you like a leach, but he was. Never. Quite. Good enough to join your little 'Golden Gryffindors' threesome, was he? And yet he was good enough to die for you like the willing little Mudblood-loving fodder he was." The Slytherin's face was flushed and spiteful. "Purebloods have always paid a higher price than *Mudbloods*."

Harry's fists were balled so tightly his fingernails were digging into his palms.

"The saviour of the wizarding world?" Malfoy mocked as he looked Harry up and down. "Pleeease! You're a walking magnet to misery, and anyone near you gets hurt. If you really want to help your fellow wizard then go throw yourself off the nearest–"

Malfoy was cut off by Harry's fist as it crunched into the Slytherin's cheek. The boy reeled sideways in shock, stumbling a few feet away from Harry. Harry pulled back his fist ready to punch Malfoy again if he tried to retaliate but stayed his arm when the other boy turned in a slow controlled movement to face his aggressor. Blood wept from the corner of his mouth.

Malfoy scowled as he slowly wiped at the sticky fluid. He looked down at the red smear on the back of his hand and snorted.

“I repeat. I. Did. Not. Need. Your. Help. Nor will I *ever!*” He wiped his hand on his robes, his eyes glittering with malice.

And it hit Harry suddenly why Malfoy hadn’t approached him. The Slytherin *hated* him. Not just the hate that people carelessly bandy around daily. This was a deep seeded, festering hatred. Malfoy loathed him so much that he was willing to suffer torture and the threat of death rather than ask for help from the Gryffindor. The realisation was disturbing. Harry already had one deadly arch-nemisis in Voldemort. Sure, Malfoy was no Dark Lord, but he was vicious and passionate and could potentially prove a dangerous enemy – if he survived his current pickle.

Harry let out a weary breath and raked a hand through messy hair. If Malfoy wouldn’t come to him, then he would go to Malfoy.

“Well I need yours.”

Malfoy hesitated. “… What?”

Harry looked off to the side, finding this more difficult than he would have imagined. Not that he’d ever imagined needing to go to Draco Malfoy for help. Not for anything. It would have been a complete waist of time under any normal circumstances. Malfoy would automatically reject him, then sneer and mock him for days afterwards – perhaps even weeks. It was unthinkable.

But these were not normal circumstances.

“You’re not going to make this easy for me, are you?” Harry said under his breath. He turned his gaze back to the other boy. “I need to get into the pensieve in the Headmistresses office, but I can’t get passed the protective spell.”

Malfoy’s eyes widened, but they quickly narrowed again. “Why are you interested in the old nags memory bowl?” He asked suspiciously.

“Dumbledore left something in it that I would like to see.”

“What?”

“I don’t know,” Harry could tell the other boy was fishing to find out what he might know, but his impatience reflected in his voice. “I just know that its there, and that I need to see it.”

“Why *me*?”

“What?”

“Why do you need *me*?” He asked, and then added scathingly. “The mudblood finally found a limit to her dazzling talents?”

“Her name is Hermione.” Harry said darkly.

“Ahh.” Malfoy soothed knowingly. “The task is beneath the untouchable trio. Wouldn’t want to sully yourselves with any dark magic, would you?” He scoffed and shook his head slightly. “Not good enough for *you*, but good enough for *me*. Right?”

“Malfoy! Cut the crap!” Harry bit out, unable to hold in his anger any longer. “I *know* that you need access to that pensieve as much as I do. I know that what happened to you last night has been going on for some time. I know that He’s hurting you through the Mark and I think I know why…” Harry’s voice trailed off.

Malfoy masked the flash of vulnerability that crossed his face almost immediately. White fury took its place as he renewed the aim of his wand, and Harry wondered if he’d finally pushed the Slytherin too far.

“What *the hell* were you doing here last night? How did you get in?”

There was panic behind the ire in Malfoy's voice, and the dark rings under his eyes made them appear sunken and afraid against his pale skin. His jaw where Harry's fist had landed was quickly growing red and swollen and angry looking. Harry hesitated. He was almost certain now that Malfoy was unaware Snape had recruited him.

Harry decided on as much truth as possible. "I came in with you. I was checking the area when I heard footsteps." Harry blushed and rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly with his hand. "I … er … fell through the door when you opened it."

Malfoy continued to eye Harry suspiciously. "How did you know I wanted to get into the pensieve?"

"Its not that hard to figure out." Harry's voice was subdued. "Makes sense in a... sick sort of way."

"What do you mean?" The Slytherin asked cautiously.

Harry sighed. "Our history is pretty much conducive to something like this, don't you think?"

Malfoy's steely glare eased slightly. Harry could guess the thoughts that were going through the other boy's head because they were going through his own at that moment.

Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy had always rucked heads on everything. Whether it was in classrooms, in the halls, on the Quidditch pitch, or in the war against Voldemort, they had always been on opposite sides. Always competing against one another. What had started as nasty childish bantering had quickly turned bitter and full of malice as they grew, becoming what it was today. It was tiring, to say the least, having to watch your enemy all of the time. Harry should know. He had spent a good part of last year obsessed with Malfoy. It might have been the same this year but for the tiny issue of recovering and destroying Voldemorts soul. Piece by piece.

In the end, for one reason or another, Potter and Malfoy were continually pitted against each another. And there was no reason to believe that would ever change.

"McGonagall's out of the castle all night tomorrow."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "What?"

Malfoy rolled his eyes and lowered his wand slightly. "I heard the old battle-axe in the staff room. She's going to some … gathering or other at the Ministry." He held Harry's wand out in resentful offering. "We can do it then."

Harry took his wand slowly, only slightly relieved at Malfoy's sudden amiable stance, knowing that as quickly as the change had befallen the other boy, it would reverse again when it no longer serviced his needs. It was a shallow reprieve. Tentative and empty.

Harry flicked his wand, summoning his invisibility cloak from the floor behind the couch. "What time should I–"

"Be here at a quarter to ten." Malfoy grumbled. His gaze shifted uncomfortably to the side. "Neophyte."

"Pardon me?" Harry asked, surprised at the uncalled for name-calling.

Malfoy huffed impatiently. "Its the password, ignoramus."

"O-oh." Harry stuttered, barely able to take in the fleeting reprieve from being insulted only to be insulted in earnest. He nodded his head once, threw his cloak over his arm, and then headed out the door.

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26. Uncovering Draco Malfoy - Part 2

"Harry!"

As he exited the stairs from the dungeons, he looked up to see Ginny bounding down the marble stairs in the Entrance Hall. Luna was drifting along behind her dreamily. His face broke into a wide grin at the sight of his girlfriend. She returned his smile before launching herself at him.

There was something about the way Ginny hugged that warmed Harry instantly, and he buried his nose in her neck to savour the embrace. Cuddling, Harry had decided, was one of the things in life that no one should have to live without. Kissing of course was also on the list. As were many other things that Harry looked forward to doing with Ginny. But that would be after she had graduated. Harry wanted to give her plenty of time. He wanted to make sure she was comfortable and he wanted everything to be just right. Perfect for Ginny.

"Where were you all night?" She pulled back to meet his gaze. "Hermione's been chewing people out all morning! I think she's worried about you."

"I'd better skip breakfast and go on up." Harry glanced guiltily up the stairs. "I'll see you later?"

"Mmm. I'm meeting mum early." Ginny said. "She wants to have meals with the family on the weekends, so she'll be at our table when you come down for lunch." She flashed a smile and planted a chaste kiss on Harry's lips. "So where were you anyway?"

"I fell asleep." He replied a little sheepishly.

"Oh, I hope you didn't spend the night out by the lake." Luna said, widening her eyes at him. "It's the Gurglepod fondling season, you know."

"Um… No." Harry shook his head with a smile. "I fell asleep in the dungeons."

A small frown creased Ginny's brow. "That wouldn't have been much better. It's freezing down there at night now."

Harry shrugged. "It was alright. Anyway, I'd better catch up with Ron and Hermione. I'll see you at lunch?"

"Okay." She kissed again, this time lingering her goodbye, and then turned with Luna to enter the Great Hall. A few feet away, Ernie gave Harry a knowing wink and strolled off after them.

The second Harry set foot in the common room he was accosted by Colin Creevey. The sixth year slapped him sharply on the back and yelled too loudly by his ear, announcing Harry's return to everyone in the room whether they cared or not.

Harry blushed despite himself.

Pansy glanced at him with a small crease between her brows as she passed, and Blaise gave him a hesitant nod before joining her, both of them exiting the portrait hole presumably on their way to breakfast.

Harry turned to watch them depart.

It had surprised Harry when Pansy Parkinson had turned up to the first DA meeting of the term last Monday night with Blaise, and to be truthful, he hadn't been happy about her presence to begin with.

The first thing she had done was to complain bitterly about the name of the group.

She had formally proposed (and then passed her own motion) that it needed changing. Then she

unabashedly offered up “Quasi Requiters” as being a much more proactive (not to mention classier) name. The glares she had received for her trouble (the most deadly being that from Hermione) had failed to intimidate her into silence, indeed, she had continued to offer increasingly obscure 'alernatives' for the groups name. After much creasing of foreheads from the other members in the room, and snarky comments from Pansy about the “uninspired and sapless” name, Seamus had stood up, aimed his wand, and hit her with a silencing charm before Hermione (who had been steadily turning redder and was now visibly shaking) broke out of Ron’s increasingly nervous hold and performed the unforgivable of her choosing on the pug-faced girl.

The name was not altered and Pansy had sulked. But as the meeting had worn on and the delegation of duties had been handed out, she had raised her arms and started waving them about irritatingly so that Harry had no other option but to remove the charm. First she pointedly scowled in Seamus’s general direction and then she protested loudly (once again) because she hadn’t been assigned any patrols.

On the Thursday, Pansy had taken her first shift partnered with Michael Corner. Michael hadn’t been a very happy lad when they had returned to the common room, but he begrudgingly informed Harry that she had done an *annoyingly* thorough job of checking the halls.

So Pansy Parkinson, She-Slytherin and ex-girlfriend of Draco Malfoy, was now a member of the DA.

Things were definitely getting weird.

“Where have you been?”

Hermione must be in bossy mode, thought Harry as her voice cut through the room. She and Ron were standing in a small group of DA students crowded around a piece of parchment.

“I fell asleep.” Harry said shortly. “What’s this?” He asked.

“It’s the new roster for ‘Ginny-Minding’.” Dean said wryly. “Luna and Ernie are with her until after breakfast. Then it’s just me since Mrs. Weasley’s here.”

“I’m really grateful to you all for doing this.” Harry looked at the people around him. Seamus and Dean waved their hands to dismiss Harry’s thanks and Justin gave him a quick nod of assent.

“Er … can I speak to you two for a minute?” Harry caught his two best friends eyes. “Um … up in the room?” They nodded and Hermione gave the parchment to Dean.

“Its each persons job to make sure the next one on the list knows. Okay?” She said. Dean nodded and Harry left for his dorm room, Ron and Hermione trailing behind.

“What’s up then?” Ron finally asked as he closed the door behind them. “Is this something to do with where you were last night?” He moved to his bed and plonked himself down on the edge of it next to Hermione, picking up her hand and encasing it between his palms. Harry leaned against his bedpost.

“Yeah. There’s something I have to tell you.” He began tentatively. “I guess I haven’t really been fair on you both to keep it a secret. I think you have the right to know. It concerns you after all. But er … don’t get mad alright? I feel bad enough for keeping it from you in the first place.”

As expected, Ron’s eyebrows lifted marginally, but Harry was surprised to see the colour completely drain from Hermione’s face.

Mildly alarmed, Harry pulled himself off the bedpost. “Are you okay, Hermione?”

Her eyes glazed over and her fingers gripped Ron’s hand so tightly, he yelped.

Ron leaned forward inspecting her face. “Hermione? What?” He placed an arm around her shoulders.

She swallowed, avoiding their gazes. “N-nothing. I-I. I’m just worried about you, Harry. That’s all.”

She sniffed deeply and lifted her free hand, pressing the back of it to her nose in an effort to quell the tears that were rapidly pooling in her eyes. She glanced quickly at Ron. “Y-you know what he’s like.” She babbled on hastily. “Always getting into trouble. E-especially when one of us isn’t around to keep an eye on him.”

Harry studied her fidgeting, and when she continued to avoid his gaze he moved to stand in front of her. “Hermione. What’s really the matter?”

She looked at him almost pleadingly and the tears finally overflowed and spilled down her cheeks. “I jus-just worry about you. You’ve been through *so* much…” she hiccoughed and stared at the hands wringing madly in her lap. “Its just not fair that it’s al-always you Harry.” Her voice was sounding broken and more desperate as she went on. “It-Its just… its not-not fair that it always has to be you…”

“Heyyy.” Ron pulled her into a hug as she trailed off choking down sobs. He tucked her head under his chin and awkwardly patted her back. “Shh. It’s alright.” Her shoulders shook as she now cried freely into Ron’s chest, clinging to him as he comforted her.

Harry watched on, frozen. Stunned at Hermione’s outburst, which had contained rather hurtful truths.

It was like an unspoken agreement between the three of them. They didn’t discuss issues that were pointless and upsetting. They didn’t dwell on things that they couldn’t do anything about. But suddenly Hermione was sobbing her heart out over Harry’s life.

And it unsettled him greatly.

Hermione was cracking the walls of their carefully constructed damn. Chiselling at the stone that held all of the bad feelings at bay. A small leak like this could undo everything. Unleash all of the pain so carefully vaulted away and bring it cascading into the open. Harry could not deal with all of that right now. There was still more to do. He couldn’t afford to be smashed against his nightmares as the damn burst. That would leave him broken and useless. He couldn’t stop now.

“… Mate.”

Harry blinked and looked at Ron.

Ron was watching Harry, full of concern. “She’s just been working too hard.” He said soothingly. “Don’t take it to heart.”

Hermione raised her head, sniffing and wiping at the dampness on her face. “I-I’m sorry.” She said wetly. “Ron’s right.” Gathering herself and pulling at the last of the moisture on her cheeks she stood up and gave Harry a firm squeeze. “I’m so sorry Harry. I didn’t mean what I said. Everything’s fine. Really.”

Harry raised his arms with uncertainty to hug her back, still feeling like he had been hit by half a dozen bludgers at once. Hermione continued to squeeze Harry for all he was worth. Then finally she pulled back.

“So.” She said briskly, sliding in beside Ron again, still sniffling but looking all business. “What were you going to tell us?”

“Yeah,” Ron said. “What really happened last night?”

Harry took a deep breath, trying to put the last few minutes out of his mind. “Right. Well. Like I said … I don’t want you to get angry, so I’m warning you up front you’re not going to like it. Okay?”

The two of them nodded, having no other option *but* to agree. So Harry started his story.

He told them everything about Snape. About his role on Halloween and his request that it stay between them, and then he related to them everything Snape had divulged when he last dropped in on Harry. He then went on to tell them about Draco Malfoy and the previous night. By the time

Harry had finished, he had successfully fielded most of their questions. Ron's initial angry shock that Harry had been interacting with Snape proved quite disruptive until Hermione's impatience to hear the rest of the story won out. Hermione's annoyance at the risk Harry had taken fizzled too at the mention of Malfoy's mission.

Of course, they immediately informed Harry that they were accompanying him to his meeting with Malfoy on Sunday night, but Harry stopped them in their tracks. Whatever Malfoy was using to avoid detection (Hermione, suggesting it may be an invisibility cloak that was also unplottable) would prove more than adequate to escape them and Harry knew there was no way the Slytherin would go along with it if Ron and Hermione were there. Eventually it was agreed upon that Harry would go alone – if only to view the pensieve. Any further searching for the item they would do together.

Afterwards, they wandered down to the Great Hall for lunch and sat at the Gryffindor table as Mrs. Weasley, flanked by a blushing Pete on one side and Ginny on the other, regaled the other students with stories of some of her surprisingly mischievous years at Hogwarts. She was flushed with colour and had a sparkle to her eyes, and had everyone guffawing and gasping so often that even Professor Sprout, who hadn't been her usual self since Halloween, joined in.

The pudding plates had vanished long before the crowd finally broke up and Mrs. Weasley retired to her quarters with Ginny and Dean to have afternoon tea. Ron and Hermione settled on one of the common room couches by the fire with their books in hand, and Harry retreated to his bed, deciding it would be a good opportunity to catch up on some missed sleep.

As he shifted around looking for the most comfortable position for his overly full stomach Harry wondered if Malfoy had had any lunch.

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When Harry appeared in the Great Hall for dinner he was not particularly hungry, so it was a bit of a non-event. It was past seven thirty when Harry sat down at a study table in the library with Ginny to research his transfiguration homework. His full body transformations were successful almost every time now, only small details like colour or texture ever differed slightly from what he was aiming for.

Ginny flicked through her Herbology text as Harry got up and went to the shelves. He fingered along the spines and pulled out a small, soft leather book and returned to his seat. He by-passed the index and went straight to page 111.

"Why are you reading that?"

Harry looked up from the page he had previously left off. Ginny had set her book down and had her head tilted, reading the title 'Boor to Beast'. Harry shrugged.

"Just interested." He answered. "I think I would like being an animagus. It would be handy if… " Harry trailed off. He thought it would have been a great advantage if he were an auror. But he had stopped kidding himself that that was ever going to happen.

"If what?" She pressed, leaning forward.

"I don't know. I just like the idea of being able to transform into a creature, you know?"

"It'd be handy for when you're an auror too."

Harry looked back at the book. "It would still be good. Even if I can't be an auror."

"You will be a formidable auror, Harry." Ginny took the book from his grip and closed it. "You told

me once that McGonagall said she was going to help you become one - if it was the last thing she ever did.” Her lips curved into an amused grin.

Harry leaned back in his chair. He sighed as he lifted his hands behind his head. “I just can’t see it happening, Gin. I’m already two subjects short and the ones I *am* taking I’m so far behind in that I’d be lucky to avoid Trolls in any of them. I know she meant it at the time, but the NEWTS are only months away now.”

“Harry.” Ginny said. “We are talking McGonagall.” As if that explained everything. “She knows that you’re busy with other things. I’d bet my last knut that she has something sorted for you.”

Harry smiled and leaned across the table so he was only inches from Ginny’s face. “You’re right. We are talking McGonagall, aren’t we?” He closed the gap between them and kissed her lightly; letting his lips linger far longer than necessary. “You are a smart young lady, Ginny Weasley. Oh. That reminds me,” He said, pulling back to rest against his chair again and crossing his arms over his chest. “How come you didn’t tell me you did so well in your OWLS?”

Ginny’s eyebrows shot up. She sat back as well, colour flushing up her cheeks. “How do you know about that?”

“Lupin told me.” He frowned at her. Why was she so embarrassed?

“Oh.” She said flatly. “Listen Harry. What I am about to tell you is something that I’m not at all proud of, and I have every intention of telling McGonagall too at the end of the year, but until then, I need you to keep it quiet.”

Harry nodded, his frown deepening.

“Well.” Ginny kept her eyes on the table. “Keeping in mind how difficult it was to sit exams last year. Well … after Dumbledore’s death, and … everything you had to go through … and then our break-up,” She took a deep breath and let it out again as if bracing for something. “How do I say this? Oh hell. FredandGeorgegavemeWizWonderMallows…” She darted her eyes up to Harry’s. “And… I used them.”

“They gave you what?” Harry uncrossed his arms and sat forward.

“They offered me a bunch of Weasley Wiz-Wonder-Mallows, more than enough to eat one before each OWL paper I sat, and so I did … take them, I mean. But I haven't used any since!”

Ginny’s blush renewed itself with gusto under Harry’s intense stare.

“They were only trying to help,” She rushed on. “And the magic was only supposed to be mild. Oh Harry, I was such a mess at the funeral after we broke up. Everything just came crushing down on me in one hit and you weren’t there and Fred and George found me blubbering under the Quidditch stands and I was scared and they only wanted to help.”

Ginny watched as Harry sighed, shook his head slowly and stood. Her eyes glistened with panic and moisture. She twisted her fingers together as Harry walked around the table and grabbed the chair beside her. He sat down and pulled her hands towards him, leaning in so her forehead rested on his shoulder.

“I should have known your brothers had something to do with it.” He said dryly, smoothing her hair gently with one hand.

Ginny lifted her head reluctantly. “They meant well, Harry.”

“So what are these Wiz-Wonder-Mallows then?” He asked quietly.

“They’re marshmallows.” She said. “Er … obviously.” She added at Harry’s wry look. “Their magic is not supposed to help you cheat … as such, which is why they couldn’t be picked up by the examiners, they’re only supposed to help you shut out everything that isn’t relative to what you're doing so you can pull on everything you have learned about whatever it is you’re concentrating on.

That way you're at your peak of whatever you are capable of. But… it seems that they were quite a bit more successful than expected."

"What are you going to say to McGonagall? Do you want me to go with you?"

"The truth. Fred and George insisted on coming with me too. They wanted to take the full blame but I'm the one who used them so… that wouldn't be right. Still, if I get expelled, Fred and George said they'd set me up in the old Zonko's when it's ready to open. Once the trouble dies down." She smiled, but didn't look too happy all the same. "They said it would be my place."

Harry brushed his thumb lightly on her cheek. "I don't think McGonagall would expel *anyone* for doing something out of character at the end of last year. Still, running a joke shop could be fun. You could have extra long lunches with me when I can get to Hogsmeade to visit."

Ginny beamed and raked her hand through Harry's silky black mop. "You are wonderful. You know that? Are you horribly disappointed in me?"

Harry gazed into her vivid green depths. "No." He said simply.

Their lips connected again, and Harry thought her kisses tasted like peaches and cherry blossom. They went back to studying for a couple of hours, before eventually leaving for the common room. Ginny retreated to bed and Harry glanced around at the students who were lounging around the room, finding an odd mix of Hufflepuff, Gryffindors and Slytherins, before climbing the stairs to his own room.

The social dynamics in the common room had actually settled into a less violent routine by the end of last term, and surprisingly had somehow morphed over the holidays so that it was positively *benign* at times now. Harry would never have believed it possible at the beginning of his seventh year and as he headed upstairs to offload his bag he passed by the locked doors and wondered if it was time to open them again. Strangely, no one had even requested they be opened since Halloween.

Harry decided it wouldn't be wise to fix something that wasn't broken.

He realised he was hungry as he dumped his bag on the floor by the bed. He plonked himself down and started to remove his jacket, but then changed his mind and opened the bedside draw, grabbing the purple potion of Julie's out. He held it up to the light, saw it was still almost a quarter full, and shoved the crystal bottle into his jacket pocket before heading back down the stairs. He walked over to Ron and Hermione whom he'd spotted on his way in curled up together in an oversized armchair. Ron was fast asleep with his head tilted back and his mouth hanging open. Hermione, of course, had her nose in a book.

"I'm going to the kitchens to get something to eat." Harry half-whispered once he was near them. Hermione looked up at him. "Do you want me to bring anything back?"

She smiled and shook her head. "No thanks." She rolled her eyes in Ron's direction. "I'll be doing the lockup soon anyway. Ron volunteered to keep me company so you don't have to worry about rounds tonight."

"Oh." Harry was beginning to see this thing between his two best friends might actually have fringe benefits. "Tell him I said thanks, will you?" Hermione nodded and Harry left for the kitchens.

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Harry was surrounded by eager elves as he stood in the kitchen. He smiled nervously and requested a tray of left overs enough for two to take with him. His jacket pockets were being stuffed with sweets and cakes by those elves not fetching sandwiches and legs of chicken while he waited.

Dobby came out of the cluster of elves and threw himself awkwardly at Harry's leg and clung there adoringly.

"Harry Potter has come to see Dobby!" The elf squeaked as tears brimmed his enormous pale green eyes.

"Er ..." Harry said, his eyes flicking over the elf's attire.

Dobby had something that looked like a mangy dead cat on his head, a glittering silver boobtube on his torso, and a purple and yellow tartan kilt complete with sporran. His hands and feet were wrapped thickly in dirty rags and old tea towels.

"Dobby, are you okay?"

"Dobby is pleased to see you, Sir!" Dobby said wondrously as if it were obvious. Harry very gently pried the little elf off his leg and squatted as the other elves began shuffling away.

"It's good to see you too." Harry frowned. "Where's Kreacher?"

Dobby dithered, his expression turning guilty and then said barely audibly. "Kreacher is serving his false Master, Sir."

"Who is...?" Harry hesitated. "Do you mean *Malfoy*? Is Kreacher with Draco?"

The elf bowed his head. "Yes Sir." He said quietly. "Dobby knows young Master Malfoy is Harry Potter's enemy but the young Master..."

"What?"

"The young Master is fevered, Sir. He is fading. Dobby could not let him fade, Sir. The young Master was once my Family." The little elf's words tumbled over one another in his haste as he stared at his covered hands. " Dobby would never forgive himself–"

"Dobby," Harry soothed as he placed hand on the elf's skinny shoulder. "Its okay. Just tell me what's going on."

Dobby looked pleadingly at Harry. "Dobby has seen when Master Malfoy screams and burns. The young Master does not bare well the darkness in him. Dobby feels he needs to help. Dobby is letting Kreacher sneak food. But young Master Malfoy does not eat. The food comes back." Dobby's distress leaked down his wrinkled cheeks. "Says it's poisoned. Doesn't trust Kreacher or Dobby. Even the young Miss cannot help him. Dobby does not know what to do. If the–"

"Whoa... Back up." Harry interrupted. "What 'young Miss'?"

Dobby's eyes went wide in horror. "Dobby is not supposed to be speaking of that!" He breathed. The elf promptly picked up the nearest thing he could get his hands on, (a rather large old silver tea pot) and moved to bang it against his forehead in earnest, but Harry reached out speedily and grabbed it from his grip.

"Who else knows he's here, Dobby?"

The little elf hobbled on his feet, shifting his weight nervously but didn't speak or look Harry in the eye.

"Dobby."

"She said she would cut Dobby's ears off and put them in Harry Potters stew if I told." He squeaked.

"No she won't. Who ever she is. I promise you Dobby. Tell me who."

The elf winced. "Miss Parkinson, Sir."

Harry narrowed his eyes. “Pansy?”

“Yes Sir.” Dobby squeaked urgently, and continued on hurriedly. “Dobby wanted to tell Harry Potter. Dobby punishes hiself but cannot say anything. Master Malfoy has not hurt anyone else, Sir. Only hiself. And Miss Parkinson made Dobby swear and she is a Mistress of Hogwarts…”

“Don’t worry about it.” Harry said distractedly, before concentrating on the elf again. “Dobby. You are not to punish yourself anymore. Do you hear me? No matter what happens. Do you understand? No more feeling guilty, okay?”

“Yes Sir.” Dobby replied sadly.

“All right. Leave it to me.” Harry said slowly and rose to stand again. “You should go and see Madame Pomphrey about those.” He added, nodding at Dobby’s injuries.

“Oh no, Sir.” Dobby said in surprise. “Dobby is having much worse under his old Master.”

Just then three elves came bustling up balancing a tray loaded with enough food for half a dozen people. Harry took off the leg of ham and one or two other things, handing them back to one of the elves with an apologetic grin, and grimaced at Dobby.

“I really think you should go to Madame Pomphrey. Maybe I should order you to go?”

“Dobby is having *un-indaba* soon.”

“What’s that?”

“To help, Sir. Dobby is having his *third* un-indaba.” The elf fumbled with his sporren looking inordinately pleased with himself.

“Oh. Right. Er… Good.” Harry said, not having a clue as to what un-indaba was but imagining it was most likely some sort of herb or potion with healing properties.

He left the kitchens carrying the tray of leftovers and headed for the dungeons.

Harry whispered the password to the stone wall, which opened into the Slytherin common room. He looked around for the reason he had come as he walked stiffly into the room, the stone wall closing behind him.

The room looked exactly as it had when he’d entered it the last time. But there was no sign of Malfoy. Harry walked over to the coffee table setting the tray down before heading towards the door he had seen the other boy emerge from. It was slightly ajar, so Harry eased it open a little more, cringing at the slight creak it made, and slipped through it. He walked lightly, not wanting to alert Malfoy to the fact that he was here until he could see the Slytherin face to face, knowing the blonde would likely don his invisibility cloak or whatever. Harry didn’t want to entertain the thought of coming all this way just to get snubbed.

There were doors lining the snugly curved, barely lit passageway, and Harry gently tried the handle of each one as he went, but none opened. The corridor then curved in the opposite direction as he continued, but still no sign of Malfoy. It was impossible to see very far ahead in the ‘S’ shaped passageway and abruptly Harry came upon the end. The door facing him was the same as all the ones he’d passed with one exception. This door was open. A narrow plume of light splayed out from the narrow gap into the corridor.

Harry took a deep breath and pushed the door gently inwards, taking a tentative step into the room.

Then he stilled.

In his peripheral vision, he registered the blur of Malfoy standing just behind the door so he swung his head round to meet the other boy. Harry saw the flicker of relief that flashed across the pointy face.

Malfoy had his arm stretched out rigidly in front of him, his wand hovering inches from Harry's nose.

"Do you *want* to die?" Malfoy's angry voice ground out.

Harry relaxed slightly. "Stop big-noting yourself and put that wand down, Malfoy. I didn't come here to start anything." That wasn't entirely true, but Malfoy didn't need to know that.

"Why *are* you here? I said tomorrow night, moron." The Slytherin sneered.

Harry was gazing at the tip of the boy's wand, partially hypnotized as it wavered in front of his face, drifting slowly to and fro. Harry dragged his eyes away to peer at the Slytherin properly.

The first thing he noticed was that the boy's normally pale cheeks were flushed with colour. Also, his usually taught mouth was open a small way, his lips red, wet and slack, and he had a glazed look in his eyes. His blonde hair was tussled and his clothes wrinkled like he'd just got out of bed and he was swaying gently where he stood. It occurred to Harry that the boy might really have a fever, and that the house elf hadn't just been referring to the same thing Harry had seen.

But then Harry saw the bottle clutched in Malfoy's other hand that hung by his leg. Its label indicated that it was a bottle of Ogden's Finest.

And it was three-quarters empty.

"You're drunk." Harry said flatly.

"I. Do not. Get. Drunk. *Potter!*" The Slytherin snorted in disgust. "Its for medicinal purposes." He slurred the last words.

"Right. Fine. Whatever." Harry sighed. "I've brought some food. Looks like you could do with something to eat."

"I'm not hungry. And even if I was I wouldn't take food from *you!*" Malfoy sneered.

"Well I am. So you can either join me, or watch me eat." Harry didn't wait for a response, just took out his wand and summoned the tray of food. A loud echoing clatter rang out soon after from the other end of the passage and Harry winced and waited for the probably now empty tray to reach him. It soared into view still loaded with food. Harry grabbed it and looked at it in surprise.

"I spelled the acoustics."

Harry looked at the other boy who had finally lowered his wand.

Malfoy raised a snarky eyebrow. "*You* sounded like a herd of hippogriffs." He turned away from Harry, swaggering as he walked.

The room was almost triangular and the two longer walls were lined with beds arranged in unusal ways to best fit the impractical shape. One of the smaller walls had a large iron fireplace in the middle of it with a small but comfortable carpeted area with large flat rectangular green and silver cushions surrounding it.

Malfoy set himself down on one of the cushions and leaned back against a nearby bedpost, drawing his knees up loosely and resting his wrists atop them. He lifted the bottle to his mouth and tilting his head back, tipped some of the amber liquid down his throat.

Harry followed the Slytherin and set the tray down on the floor between them, lowering himself onto a cushion and leaning against the opposite bedpost, acutely aware of the other boy's half-lidded gaze on him.

He felt thoroughly self-conscious being scrutinized and couldn't bring himself to eat, so he stretched over the tray and swiped the bottle from Malfoy's grasp. The Slytherin only watched as Harry settled back, tilted the bottle and then swallowed a much larger gulp of Firewhiskey than he'd

intended.

Harry then coughed and spluttered and wiped his mouth with the back of a hand. When he looked up through watery eyes the Slytherin was smirking at him.

“Let me guess. First time?”

“No!” Harry rasped, annoyed at suddenly feeling a little bit pathetic. He took another swig to prove a point and then handed the bottle back to Malfoy. “Where did you get it anyway?”

“Unlike most students in this Palace of Pueriles, I conquered puberty long ago.” The Slytherin took another swig.

Harry watched as the other boy brought the bottle to rest. “You stole it. Didn’t you?”

Cold eyes settled on Harry. “It must be debilitating to be so righteous all of the time.” Malfoy sneered. “I bet when you’re wandering obliviously around with your head held higher than everyone else’s, you’re thinking about the next undeserving soul you will save.”

Harry closed his eyes briefly, tilting his head back to rest on the bedpost. “I can’t save anyone.” He said resignedly. “As you have so thoughtfully pointed out." He lifted his head forward and raked a hand through his black mop. "I try... But it either doesn’t work out ... or I make things worse.”

“Then why are you here?” The other boy asked tonelessly.

The question surprised Harry. He hesitated before answering. “Well, firstly. I thought you might be hungry.” The Slytherin gave a doubtful scoff. “And secondly. I thought you might want some company.” Harry avoided the other boy's gaze. “Later.”

Malfoy’s expression went stony. “I told you.” He said darkly. “I don’t need your help.”

“Yeah, well … you could still have something to eat.” Harry said wearily. “You look like death warmed up.”

Malfoy raised an eyebrow. “Charming.”

Harry picked tentatively at the food as the Slytherin took another swig. After the first couple of mouthfuls he began to appreciate just how long it had been since he’d eaten.

“Do you miss flying?” Harry asked around a mouthful of cheese and pumpkin bread.

Malfoy looked up from watching Harry’s hands at work and rolled his eyes. “What do you think?”

“I do.” Harry went on, ignoring the blonde and picking up a carrot stick. “Not the Quidditch though. ...Strange that.” He frowned. “I guess its because I can’t really think about it right now. But flying. Just soaring through the air … I miss that.”

Harry raised his eyebrows as a thought occurred to him. “I suppose I could take the Firebolt out tomorrow. Head down to the Quidditch pitch after lunch for an hour or so…” He trailed off at the bitter look on Malfoy’s face. “Sorry.” He said quietly.

“Don’t let *me* drag you down, Potter.” The Slytherin said bitterly. “Merlin forbid if the ‘Chunderous One’ doesn’t get to fluff about on his broomstick tomorrow afternoon.”

“Do you sit around just thinking up insulting names for me?” Harry asked impatiently.

“Yes.” Malfoy said proudly. “Got loads more. Want to hear them?” He asked, not waiting to hear the answer. “Let’s see.” He looked at the ceiling thoughtfully. “There’s the ‘Churlish One’, ‘The Bogey which Loitered’, ‘Chipmunk’s Bum’. That’s one Goyle came up with. Then there's the '*Chivalrous* One'." His voice dripping with sarcasm. " 'The Bragger that Lacked–”

“Malfoy!”

“Oh, and my personal favourite, ‘The Buttocks What Loosened’." The Slytherin smirked. " That one is self explanatory *and* particularly useful. Then there’s ‘The Blunderer–”

“*ENOUGH!*”

Malfoy chuckled softly through his smirk.

~*~*~*~*~

“Potter. What are you doing?”

“Making a sandwich.”

“Out of herrings and musk sticks?”

“Why not?”

“…”

“Try some.”

“Do you want me to vomit up what little I *have* eaten?”

~*~*~*~*~

“No… Look… Juss… Give it here. You don’t do it like that un-unless you want the lining of your throat dissholved.”

“Malfoy. Where did that second bottle come from?”

“Now watch….……………….…ssee? No after… … no aft… …no problem.”

“All right. I think you’ve had enough. Let me try.”

“I’ll have you know, Potter. *I* will still be standing–”

“Sitting.”

“What? Oh. I will still be 'sitting'… when you are l…lying in a p-hool of your own vomit.”

“Thanks for sharing that image.”

~*~*~*~*~

“…The ‘Cheesey One’, 'The Blemish That Lurked', the ‘Chunderous One’, ‘The Botcher–”

“You ssaid that one already.”

“…What?”

“ ‘Chunderous One’. Tha… that was the firss one you called me.”

“Don't interrupt.”

“…”

“ ‘The By-gone That Lingered’, the ‘Childish One’, 'The Boy Who Blunders'………

~*~*~*~*~

“Draco?”

“What?”

“I feel ssick.”

“Well you should have stopped three quarters of an hour ago. When I did.”

“You had a … a head sstart.”

“Of roughly three and a half years by the look of it. I thought you said you’d had Firewhiskey before?”

“I hah-ave. For medicing…medish… When I was ssick.”

“Well, once you stop drinking you sober up pretty fast.”

“Oh good. …Uuuuuur.”

“Do not throw up in my sleeping quarters! If you’re going to live up to your pet name then do it in the bathroom.”

“I think… bathroom…”

“…”

“Oopssy Daisy!”

“Oh… For Merlin’s sake, Potter. Pull yourself together.”

"…”

“Here. Give me your hand.”

~*~*~*~*~

“So what happens now?” Harry asked, leaning against the bedpost. Both of them were back in their original positions after returning from the bathroom. (An experience Harry would prefer to forget.)

Malfoy sighed. “What do you mean?”

“Tomorrow night. What happens when we find what we’re both looking for?”

Malfoy leaned his elbows on his knees and placed his head in his hands. His fingers scrunched through his hair. “Exactly what was always going to happen.”

Harry breathed in deeply and then let it out long and slow. “I don’t want to fight you Malfoy.”

“It’ll happen anyway.”

The Slytherin glanced at the squat old clock on the mantelpiece. “Its time for you to leave.”

Harry looked at the hands that pointed to a quarter to twelve and shook his head and regretted it instantly as it swam dangerously. “I’m staying.”

Malfoy stood up and looked down at Harry stonily. “No. You’re not.”

Harry closed his eyes briefly and then picked himself up off the floor. “Here.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a fistful of sweets, spilling some onto the floor.

Malfoy scowled and was about to say something when Harry finally removed the small crystal bottle of purple-black liquid. Harry held it out for Malfoy to take.

Malfoy eyed it cautiously.

“It’s a healing potion. A health Tonic.” Harry explained.

Malfoy shook his head. “No.”

Harry shoved it into the Slytherin whose hands came around it automatically. “Take it. Seven drops with water. I’ve been taking it for ages and it works brilliantly.”

“It doesn’t look like any healing potion I know.” Malfoy sneered at it. “Did you just throw it together out of scraps?”

“No, it was made by a healer in Hogsmeade. She’s really gifted, Malfoy. Just… just trust me and use it.”

The other boy pulled out the stopper and sniffed at it. He screwed his face up and then sniffed again. He returned the stopper and held it out to Harry with a blank look on his face.

“What?”

“I’m not taking that.” The Slytherin said.

“Why not?”

“Its contains danomdipartite. Amongst other things.”

“So?”

“You don’t ingest danomdipartite if you like breathing.” Malfoy said tonelessly.

Harry frowned and took the bottle. "...But..."

“Tomorrow. A quarter to ten. Don’t be late.”

Harry replaced the bottle in his pocket. “Sure.”

As he headed back to the Gryffindor tower, Harry tried to think of a way that would make tomorrow *not* as inevitable as Malfoy had said. But he couldn't come up with a single way of avoiding the confrontation that would follow, if not as soon as they had seen the memory, then as soon as they found the Horcrux.

And it made Harry's already queasy stomach churn.

He didn't want to fight Malfoy. Not like this.

The arguments and skirmishes they'd had in the past were going to be nothing compared to their final battle. This time the stakes were much higher.

They were competing for the same short-term objective. *Needing* one another to achieve it, yet as always, on opposing sides.

In the end, one of them would lose everything.

And one would claim the prize.

But at what price?

Harry decided that maybe this was a game neither of them could win.

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27. Hermione's Parting

The Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff dining tables in the Great Hall were slowly shrinking. The Gryffindor table however, seemed to be growing longer by the day. It now extended to almost half the length it was when the school had its full intake, nearly doubling in size since the beginning of the school year. Mealtimes had become a meeting place – a time to discuss anything that related to student welfare and safety along with outside happenings that threatened their world as a whole. It seemed the Gryffindor table was 'the' place to be if you wanted to know the latest happenings.

The students that belonged to the ever-increasing DA gathered at the back end of the table, while those left (mostly the younger Gryffindor students and their friends) took up the front half. Amongst the mix of Gryffindor, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff, was the odd Slytherin as well as most of the new unassigned first years who ever since the discovery of the tunnel beneath Hogwarts had developed the strategy of schooling together and hovering on the fringes of the largest crowds.

Sunday morning breakfasts were casual affairs, with students wafting in at their leisure, taking advantage of the extra hours service, and drifting off again to make the most of the free day before another week started.

Today the torches were all lit, spilling their yellowy light into the shadowed corners of the Hall as a storm raged outside. Almost black clouds brimming with violet, billowed in the magical ceiling, while outside they loomed over the castle and its surrounds, smothering sunlight and blanketing the Hall's windows so that it could have been dusk if not for the toasts and cereals lining the tables. The thunder that rolled across the ancient stonework shook the panes and hummed through the tables, making cutlery tinkle and liquids shimmy.

Harry sat staring at two runny poached eggs that trembled jelly-like on his plate.

"You look positively green." Hermione scolded over the lingering rumble.

Harry'd already explained up in the common room to a concerned Hermione before coming down *why* he was not really feeling like breakfast. At his tale of drinking half a bottle of firewhiskey with a sottish Slytherin, she had dropped the worried frown, snorted unkindly and shuffled him out the

portrait hole ahead of her. Harry had thought this a bit harsh, as he'd stumbled down the stairways and corridors dreaming longingly of crawling back into bed. When she had slid the plate containing two poached eggs in front of him just after he had sat down, Harry suspected that Hermione's sadistic streak new no bounds in the punishment of the previously pinko'ed, since it appeared she was actually *trying* to make him vomit.

"You could've come and got me last night." Ron said sulkily. Reaching over he lifted a platter of grilled tomatoes to his plate, taking three halves off and then setting it back down again. "Best mates, Harry. We're supposed to do that sort of thing together. Can't believe you'd go down into the dungeons alone to get stonkered with *Malfoy*. It should've been me."

"Honestly." Hermione tisked disapprovingly at Ron.

Harry pushed his plate away and looked up miserably. "I didn't go down there to drink. It just sort of… happened."

Hermione turned her nose up slightly. "If you're careless enough to get yourself into this state then you deserve to suffer if you ask me."

Harry frowned at her in annoyance as she swirled honey over her steaming porridge. He was ready to admit that it *was* his own fault that his brain felt like it had turned into lead overnight, but he suspected her total lack of sympathy was for Ron's benefit more than his own. Maybe he would have to re-think the whole 'fringe benefits' thing.

"That's not very sympathetic." Ron said sullenly, tipping bacon onto his plate enough for three people.

"I give sympathy where it's deserved." Hermione said snootily. "I suppose *you* think it was funny."

"If I'd been there it would've been." Ron replied grimly. Looking at Harry he continued. "Malfoy could've been *planning* to get you drunk, Harry. Maybe he's hexed you and you can't remember it. Maybe it's got a delayed effect and sometime later on today your nose will fall off." Ron's eyes grew large as a thought occurred to him. He shoved the bacon dish onto the table distractedly, knocking over the salt and peppershakers. "Maybe he slipped you a potion in your drink and that's why you look so green. Maybe you'll go blue next because you can't breathe–"

"We drank from the same bottle Ron." Harry said calmly.

"Oh." Ron relaxed and stuffed a chunk of tomato in his mouth.

"Harry…"

Harry cocked his head at Hermione's warning tone wearily, expecting further disapproving comments, but when his gaze met hers she was glaring at him, her spoon frozen in mid-scoop. She glanced meaningfully in the direction of the front of the Hall so Harry followed her gaze. His eyebrows shot up in pleasant surprise.

Easing into a chair at the teacher's table, in between Hagrid (who was also just settling himself and when did *he* get back?) and Professor Flitwick, was Julie.

Harry's eyebrows lowered again almost immediately when he remembered Malfoy's reaction to the potion. His brow furrowed together as he reached into his jacket pocket and drew out the potion he hadn't bothered removing last night.

"Hermione? What's danomdipartite?" He asked cautiously. He hadn't told either of his friends what Malfoy had said about the potion because he didn't really know if he could take the Slytherin's word for it. After all, Julie had performed amazing healing on Harry's wounds after his run-in with Greyback. Why heal someone you're only interested in poisoning?

Hermione, who had been shooting furtive glances at Ron, just waiting for him to notice Julie, creased her brow thoughtfully for a moment before answering. "I don't know. Can't say as I've ever heard of it. Why?"

Harry leaned forward and held out the dark purple potion for Hermione to take. She frowned, set her spoon down and took the bottle from him.

"That's the tonic I've been taking that Julie gave me." Harry said. "I offered it to Malfoy last night because he looks so ill, but he gave it back to me. He said it contained danomdipartite and that he wouldn't take it because he liked breathing too much."

Hermione's eyes grew wide and Ron's fork clattered against his plate loudly where it had dropped.

"Whu?" Ron muffled out through egg and toast.

Harry shrugged in an effort to look like he wasn't that bothered. "He could be wrong. I can't imagine Julie trying to poison me slowly when she's had ample opportunity to do away with me at her place. And anyway," He continued casually. "If *you've* never heard of that stuff Hermione, then Malfoy's probably got it wrong. Maybe he was just trying to scare me?"

Hermione gave Harry a withered look. "Contrary to popular belief, I do not know *everything*. And as far as potions go, Malfoy's had enough help over the years as Snape's pet to know what he's talking about. Probably." She added. "Just because I haven't heard of it doesn't make it *not* real. It could be a substance only used in dark magic. There must be loads of ingredients used in all sorts of potions that aren't in the books we have here. I mean, look at Horcruxes. I couldn't find that in the libr–" She stopped suddenly and narrowed her eyes at the dark liquid. "...brary." She finished quietly, turning the crystal bottle around in her hand thoughtfully.

"What?" Harry asked.

"Mmm?"

"C'mon Hermione." Ron said, slightly irritated. "You always do this! You can't just leave us hanging when you've got something."

"Oh, its nothing really." She said distractedly, still eyeing the bottle. "I recently acquired some reading material that *might* help."

"Where from?" Ron asked interestedly. "I thought you said you didn't get out much over the holidays?"

"What?" Hermione finally dragged her gaze from the potion. "Oh... No. Well I didn't. Sir gave me some extra reading material." She frowned again and leaned across to Harry. "I'll see if I can find anything but in the meantime, I can give this to Meredith from the DA if you like? She helps Ginny with her Potions homework. Her parents apparently design a number of the potions they sell in their apothecaries, *and* she works in the labs with them over the holidays so she must be fairly knowledgeable." She slipped the bottle into her jacket pocket. "I really think it's worth checking it out. The meaning of the name alone makes me–"

"What the bloody hell is *she* doing here?"

Harry swung his head to follow Ron's threatening gaze and realized with a sinking feeling what his best friend was glaring at. Hermione sighed wearily as Harry brought his gaze back to meet Ron's. This was why Hermione was so anxious about Julie's presence. Ron may have forgiven Harry once they had escaped Voldemort, not surprising after what they had been through together, but he had no reason at all to make friendly with Julie.

"I have no idea." Harry replied dully.

"Maybe you can ask her." Hermione said casually, lifting a spoonful of porridge to her mouth. "She's on her way over right now."

"What?" Ron's head spun back to the direction of the teacher's table and sure enough, Julie was coasting up the aisle between the tables, heading straight for Harry. Ron narrowed his eyes and Harry slunk further down in his seat. All he needed now was for Ginny to come along to complete

this increasingly gloomy morning. A low gurgle of thunder tumbled overhead ominously as Julie stopped beside Harry, flashing all three of them a bright smile.

“Harry. How are you?” She took in his greenish pallor, knitting her eyebrows together as Harry fumbled with words.

“Er… um, good. I'm Well. Um… How are you?”

“You don’t look well.” Julie raised an eyebrow dubiously. She glanced at his plate of untouched eggs. “Not eating again, I see?” She rested her hand on his shoulder, gently squeezing it. “How long have you been feeling ill again?”

“Er… its nothing. Really.” Harry cringed inwardly. “Its just this morning and… I’m feeling better than I did when I woke up.”

“Hello.”

Oh no.

Harry closed his eyes briefly at the sound of Ginny’s voice.

This day, it seemed, could only get worse.

He turned reluctantly to face his girlfriend who was standing behind him.

Julie removed her hand.

Ron and Hermione watched on in awed anticipation.

“Ginny.” He reached out his hand to her in a gesture he had performed many times and was mildly surprised when she smiled dreamily down at it and chuckled, placing her own hand in his tentatively, yet enthusiastically. He squeezed it gently in a reassuring way but it seemed he needn’t have worried. She sat herself down demurely next to Harry, grinning at their joined hands.

Mrs. Weasley, who had entered the Hall with McGonagall, patted the Headmistress’ arm in farewell and headed for Julie.

“Well now.” She said, smiling kindly at Julie. “Minerva tells me you will be taking Potions for the rest of the year Julie?”

“*What?*” Harry choked out.

Hermione made a strangled noise in her throat and Ron dropped his fork again.

“Yes. That’s right.” Julie said pleasantly. “And I’ll be teaching Healing charms in the Great Hall when time allows.”

“A good thing too. Minerva knows what she’s doing. Best to have even children trained these days.” Mrs. Weasley then gave Ron and Ginny a pointed stare. “Both of you pay close attention to what Miss Pathet has to say. There’s few better when it comes to healing charms.” She motioned loosely with her hand. “These two are mine. You let me know if they give you any trouble. Ginny’s my youngest, and that there’s–”

“We’ve met.” Ron cut in icily, glaring at Julie.

“Yes, we have.” Julie agreed with a smile. Mrs Weasley looked surprised at Ron’s obvious dislike. “Well, don’t let me keep you. Have a nice breakfast Molly. Harry?” Harry rubbed Ginny’s hand with his thumb before releasing it and reluctantly meeting Julie’s gaze. “I would like you to stop by the potions classroom later. I’ll be working in there most of the day. Anytime that’s convenient for you will be fine.”

“What for?” Harry asked before he could stop himself.

She had turned to leave and hesitated at his words. “Oh. Our business is of a somewhat … personal nature.”

Harry’s stomach fell through the floor. It was almost as if he could feel the soil piling up around him as Julie dug his hole. He nodded nervously, ready to agree to anything so that Julie would stop talking and leave. He watched as she finally walked away, and then hazarded a look at Ginny.

His fiery girlfriend was busy arranging her scrambled eggs on her plate in the form of a face, with two huge grilled tomato-halves as eyes, a small chipolata sausage for a nose, and a crispy curved bacon strip as its smiling mouth. When it was all in place she cocked her head to admire her handy work.

“Um … Ginny?” Harry asked hesitantly. She didn’t look up immediately, just took out her wand and pointed it at the plate. Harry, Ron and Hermione all flinched expecting the food to blow up or incinerate or worse. Instead the breakfast face started chuckling. She smiled dreamily back at it and then she seemed to pick up on Harry watching her and raised her eyebrows expectantly in his direction.

“What are you doing?”

“I felt like happy food this morning.” She smiled easily as if it was the most natural thing in the world to say. “Storms can be so dreary, don’t you think?”

Her breakfast chuckled again and Harry couldn’t stop the broad grin that crossed his face or the small laugh that escaped his lips as relief surged through him. He completely forgot that Mrs Weasley was there and leant sideways and plucked a soft lingering kiss from her lips. Ginny stayed with her lips puckered and her eyes closed for a long moment, even after Harry pulled back, as if savouring it for all it was worth. When she opened her eyes and looked straight into Harry’s enquiring gaze she giggled shyly and then picked up her cutlery and stabbed one of the tomato eyes on her plate. She popped it into her mouth and chewed it with a large dopey grin on her face.

Harry smiled and chuckled softly to himself and grabbed a piece of toast from the rack, suitably relieved that Ginny seemed completely uncaring at the turn of events and feeling rather smug about Ginny’s reaction to his kiss.

Hermione had watched all of this with narrowed eyes.

~*~*~*~*~

“Pansy! Can I walk with you?”

Pansy was on the third floor near the transfiguration classrooms, mid-way through her rounds when Harry had finally spotted her after leaving the Great Hall. She eyed him suspiciously as he caught up with her, but didn’t say anything, only continued along the passageway, her eyes darting this way and that, occasionally lifting the corner of a tapestry or poking a suit of armour with her wand to check that it sounded hollow. Harry walked beside her, watching her and thinking that she was *indeed* very thorough in her duties.

She stopped suddenly and turned her attention on Harry, her lips pouted and an eyebrow raised challengingly.

“It was that stupid elf, wasn’t it?” She crossed her arms defiantly. Harry raised both eyebrows, caught off guard by her question. “It told you even after I gave it orders not to!”

“I *made* Dobby tell me.” Harry said finally. “And if you seek any sort of retribution on him you’ll have me to deal with. Is that clear?” He asked warningly.

She sniffed, tilting her head and looking down her stubby little nose at him. “I have no intentions of punishing him. He’ll take care of that all by himself. Lucius Malfoy had him *exceedingly* well trained.”

“It’s a wonder Dobby feels any sympathy for people like you.” Harry frowned. “After the way your lot treated him he should have been happy to leave Malfoy to his fate.”

“It just goes to show then, doesn’t it?” Pansy said lightly. “Perhaps you don’t know as much as you think you do.”

“What is there to know? Oh. Don’t tell me.” Harry said sarcastically. “Draco deserves Dobby’s sympathy because he was always so *kind* to the house elf, right?”

“Hardly.” She replied. “Draco learned from the best after all. No. He was never kind. That creature and others like it are not worth the effort of kindness. Most of them wouldn’t appreciate it anyway. So why waste your time?”

“That’s just wrong on so many levels. You’re lucky Hermione isn’t around to hear you say that.”

“Like I care what that muggle thinks.”

“She’s a witch, just like you.”

Pansy balled her fists up. “She’s nothing like me – or any of the other pure-blooded witches in this school. She’s never *had* to choose sides. She doesn’t have to worry when she returns home that her own family might be the enemy. She won’t be looking over her shoulder and wondering if her parents are looking at her like that because they suspect she’s not willing to take the Mark when she graduates. She won’t be lying awake at night waiting for the bedroom door to swing open with her father or brother or worse standing there in a Death Eater mask because someone has fingered you as a risk.” She was bordering on hysterical as her eyes glistened with moisture.

Harry couldn’t think of anything to say. Stung by her words he just stared at her as she continued.

“You ‘precious ones’ think everything is black and white – good and evil – and nothing in-between. Well Slytherins know better. You think we don’t notice that people sneer at us just because we wear Silver and Green?” Pansy said bitterly. “Is it any wonder that we don’t play nicely with the other children? We're *forced* to make choices on our own because *nobody* but Professor Snape *ever* looked out for us!”

“But M-Malfoy took the mark willingly.” Harry stumbled awkwardly. “He was proud of it … Pleased even … I heard him on the train…”

“You heard him bragging to his peers, *Potter!* Just maybe that ridiculous little elf knows Draco a little better than you! Ask yourself why a crazy little elf like that would care about what happens to him. And while you’re at it, ask yourself why Draco took the Mark so young, why don’t you? But maybe you don't want to know that much about him. Maybe its easier to keep him labelled with the tag you were so quick to slap on him in the beginning." She huffed and jutted an accusing finger at him. "I would have thought you’d have learned something about him last night.”

She saw the surprise on Harry’s face and dropped her shoulders exasberatedly.

“Oh of course I know about it. He didn't tell me what went on but he said you didn't fight." She let out a weary breath and lowered her gaze. " I thought maybe that would’ve helped you to see. Helped you to realize.”

Harry worked his jaw, feeling decidedly uncomfortable. Being put in your place by Pansy Parkinson was not an experience he ever thought he'd suffer. Not knowing how to respond he decided to go on the offensive.

“How long have you known he’s here?”

Pansy rolled her eyes. “Not long. But long enough.”

“And yet you didn’t bother to inform the DA–”

“I couldn’t care less about your little vigilante group, to be honest.”

Harry faltered. “Huh?”

“I’m only there so I know what’s going on – that’s all.”

“But… you’re here… checking the passageways.”

“Because my darling Draco needs me to.” Pansy said smoothly. “You didn’t really think I was doing it for you?”

“I thought … for the DA. For all of the students.” Harry said, mildly disgusted.

“No.” She said simply. “Only for Draco. He needs me to keep an eye on things while he’s… indisposed.”

“You know, you’re not helping your case for Slytherins here. You do realize how bloody selfish that sounds! Why the hell would I trust people like you when you’ve got that sort of attitude?”

“You know, Draco’s been close to killing you more times than you can imagine.”

Harry’s breath hitched at the careless ease with which Pansy spoke.

“But he’s never actually *done it*, has he? Not once in the whole time he’s been here has he even attacked you. He could have. Loads of times. When you were down by the lake all by your lonesome and he was standing right behind you and there was no one to see. *Even then*, he didn’t *do* anything.

“My Draco is not the enemy underfoot you should be focusing on.” She added snootily, not meeting his eye.

Harry’s nose crinkled in question. “What d'you mean?”

Pansy sighed dramatically. “I’m not going to stick my neck out for you, Potter.”

“You’re in the DA Pansy.” Harry pointed out. “It's not like you can hide that for long. Not now we have so many members.”

“I’m not trying to hide it.” She said indignantly, placing her hands on her hips. “I’m in the perfect position to spy right where I am.”

Harry scoffed. “For who?”

“For either side. It's perfect.” She shrugged. “It was Draco’s idea, after all.”

“What?” Harry blurted.

“Oh don’t get your wand in a knot!” She said dramatically. “I’m not *actually* spying on you, it just looks that way. It'd be pretty thick to tell you about it otherwise, don't you think? No. This way I can be alerted to any unexpected visitors to Hogwarts and keep an eye on Bl....” Her straying eyes flashed with fear and she stopped herself sharply.

“Who? Who are you keeping–”

“Blaise!” Pansy interrupted Harry loudly, peering over his shoulder. Harry turned to see Blaise strolling up behind him.

“Pansy.” Blaise said smoothly, coming to a stop. “What are you doing here still? You’re going to be late for our study session if you don’t get a move on.” His eyes darted between the two of them in suspicion, narrowing ever so slightly.

“Oh do drag me away from this boorish Gryffindor, Blaise.” Pansy sighed exaggeratedly, all traces of uncertainty gone. “Its not enough that I’m doing my share, *he* has to come up and start criticizing *how* I do it!”

“I did not–”

“Come on, darling.” Pansy cut Harry's indignant denial off, grabbing Blaise’s arm and tugging him along with her. “I get no appreciation, Blaise. No love.” She pulled Blaise up the corridor leaving Harry staring after them in bewilderment.

~*~*~*~*~

Ron accosted Harry just outside the common room as he was on his way back. Ron was carrying his winter cloak over one arm and was out of breath and mildly panicky.

“Harry. We have to go. Now.” He said, grabbing Harry’s arm.

“What’s happened?” Harry asked quickly as he allowed Ron to lead him speedily down the stairs.

“Hermione’s gone to meet him. To call it all off.” He panted. “You promised we’d follow her. I don’t trust him Harry.”

Realizing Ron was talking about Hermione and Zach he said. “Oh." And then added. "Don’t you think you’re over reacting a bit?” Just then he was shoved unceremoniously into the second floor shortcut to the main stairs by a pushy Ron. “I mean Hermione’s handled him pretty well so far.”

“Ginny said he wouldn’t let Hermione do it by owl. Kept insisting she meet him. Why?" He asked forcefully. " Why would he want to meet with her if he was going to take this well?”

They came out at the top of the marble staircase on the first floor. Harry stumbled forward as Ron nudged him out of the hidden recess. A clap of thunder crashed overhead, echoing loudly through the high ceilinged Hall.

“Well, it is a bit impersonal … isn’t it?” Harry offered calmly. “Owl, I mean. Its not exactly a 'sensitive' way to break-up, is it?”

“Harry. If it was no big deal why didn’t she tell us she was going?” Ron threw Harry’s coat at him and started down the stairs to the Entrance Hall talking over his shoulder. "She's too bloody proud. That's her trouble!"

Harry pulled his coat awkwardy over his shoulders as he followed.

The sky outside was deep shades of grey and purple, and hard heavy rain lashed at Harry as he closed the huge entrance door behind him. The rain did not seem to slow Ron down in the slightest however. He was racing across the grounds to the gate as if pursued by a dragon. He was already muttering the password and flicking his wand at the chains that bound the gate by the time Harry joined him.

“Where are we going?” Harry asked as they slipped through and relocked the entrance.

“The Three Broomsticks. Ginny said … that's where she's meeting him.” Ron answered breathlessly and then he disappeared with a pop. Harry sighed and followed.

He arrived outside the pub just in time to see Ron disappear inside it. Harry opened the door and entered the familiar cosy warmth already uncomfortably wet from his brief time in the rain.

Before he knew what was happening he was enveloped by a blast of hot wind that gushed and blustered all around him, taking his breath away. It stopped after only few seconds and Harry looked about him in confusion. A wrinkly old wizard dressed in shabby khaki robes sat in a padded chintz armchair near the door holding his wand in hand, pointing it at Harry. A crooked, toothless smile slanted his face as he looked at Harry's cloak.

Harry looked down and patted himself and realized he was bone dry.

The old wizard wheezed a cackle at his surprise. Harry began searching his pockets, hoping that he had some money stashed somewhere, but the wizard shook his head and poked his thumb in the direction of Madame Rosmerta.

"Taken care of, lad." He rasped. Harry nodded and thanked him and began his search for Hermione and Zach.

He spotted Ron unsuccessfully trying to 'covertly' work his way around the room. The boy knocked someone's drink all down it's owner and trod on more than one foot in his 'stealthy' efforts of trying not to bring attention to himself. Harry turned away to hide his smirk.

The pub was almost full as it was near lunchtime, and Sunday lunches were always a big draw because of Happy Hour. When Harry and Ron finally stopped, neither had seen any sign of Hermione *or* Zach.

"I'll ask Rosmerta." Ron said with a worried frown. Harry nodded and Ron went up to the bar, leant over it and spoke to the innkeeper. She smiled broadly at him when she saw Ron and then nodded her head and pointed to an empty two-seater corner table. Then she shook her head and motioned to the door. Ron turned quickly and made his way back to Harry.

"They've left." He said, looking paler than usual. "They walked off without apparating."

Harry frowned. "Where would they go in this weather?"

"You tell me." Ron replied, the worry etched on his face. Harry gripped his arm gently.

"We'll find her. Don't worry. C'mon." Harry led Ron back to the door. "Hang on." He pulled up short and turned to face Ron. Digging under his cloak, he slipped his wand out of the pocket of his jeans and waved it over Ron. "Impervious Charm." Harry explained, and then turned the wand on himself. He waved it and then slipped it back under his cloak. "Let's go."

Once back out on the street they decided it would be better to split up and cover more ground faster. Harry headed out towards the Shrieking Shack with the aim of circling round to meet Ron back outside the pub in twenty minutes. As he trudged along in the rain, which fell all around him and not on him thanks to the charm, he began to worry in earnest.

Why would Hermione leave the comfort of The Three Broomsticks and come out in this? She was far too sensible a girl to do something like that lightly, so what had brought her out here?

A sudden gust of wind whipped his coat up, and Harry shivered. Partly from the cold blast, but mostly because Ron's foreboding intuition about Hermione's break-up with Zach was now creeping through Harry's veins like ice.

Harry quickened his pace, scanning the cobbled streets carefully. Lightening forked across the sky as he neared the edge of town and a clap of thunder broke loudly above him. Harry's worry was turning to dread as the minutes ticked by with no sign of Hermione. It was possible that she had already returned to Hogwarts, but something told Harry that she hadn't. That she was out here somewhere and in need of him and Ron. Out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of a flash of light somewhere in the distance to his right. It was low on the horizon, rising above the housetops instead of illuminating the sky.

Harry broke into a run.

He circled the last house at the end of the street before the forest took over and bolted down the path that took him past trees on one side and streets on the other.

Another flash of light rose from the trees ahead.

Harry clumsily dug for his wand under his cloak, but it was impossible to get to it under the heavy garment unless he slowed down or stopped. Another flash – this one green – and Harry abandoned his try for the wand and broke into a sprint.

As he neared he could make out three figures draped in black standing around another slumped body on the ground. Harry tried to pull up before he ran straight into them and gave himself away but skidded on the muddy sopping grass and slid along the ground on his hip before finally coming to a halt in a bush.

He scrambled to pull his wand out and get up at the same time but he slipped again, nosediving into the mud. He swore loudly in frustration and ripped at his cloak. It fell away as he stumbled to his feet, his hand swiftly grabbing his wand from his jeans. The impervious charm had dissipated on contact with the ground when he had fallen and the rain pelted into his lenses obscuring his vision. The figures ahead were a blur, but he could make out one of them lifting the limp body off the ground. Harry pushed forward and fired a stun that hit his target, flinging the Death Eater backwards and sending the body in his arms flying.

Another figure with light coloured hair was screaming at Harry and pointing frantically. Then spells were being flung at Harry from an impossible number of directions as he tried to turn. Unable to do anything else, he launched himself onto the ground, ducking the ribbons of light that laced above him. Some hit surrounding trees and exploded, sending splintering wood showering down on Harry. But he didn't have time to worry about the sudden stabbing pain in his shoulder. He clawed his way off the ground again and scrambled towards the body that had been thrown clear by his stun, when suddenly something brought him crashing to his knees. Collapsing under an enormous weight Harry was pushed forward and pinned flat to the ground. All the air left his lungs under the crushing force and specks of light darted into his eyesight as he slowly and painfully lifted his head.

Voices muffled by the storm exchanged unknown words around Harry's prone form. He realized he was only meters from the Death Eater he had knocked out with his stun as several pairs of black boots crossed his field of vision, slapping in the muddy, rain soaked grass. The Death Eater was beginning to slowly and stiffly pick himself up off the ground, and only a short distance from him was the limp body he had been holding. This close Harry could see the sodden and muddied long brown hair and Weasley jumper poking through the torn cloak.

"Hermione."

It came out as barely a whisper and Harry's heart clenched and ached and suddenly everything felt wrong.

He gritted his teeth, putting everything he had into moving. To getting up and going to her anyway he could. He tried to push up, but even though his arms were right there on the ground either side of his head his brain couldn't seem to find them to use them and as he strained, blackness swamped the edges of his vision threateningly. He ignored the warning and summoned every nerve and muscle he could to get on his feet, but his arms still didn't move and with dawning understanding, Harry realized couldn't even feel his legs.

The blonde who had been screaming at Harry was lying on his back in the mud a few feet away with his arms folded over his face and weeping whole-heartedly. Then his arms dropped away as he rolled onto his side and hugged himself, curling his knees up tightly into his chest.

Zacharias anguished eyes closed tightly as he continued to sob.

Harry's neck burned with the strain of keeping his head up but he had to watch. He had to.

The Death Eater in front of him had finally found his feet and was walking the few paces to Hermione's still form. He bent down to gather her up and as he slid his arms under her body his now unmasked face came into Harry's limited field of view.

Harry roared in frustration and fury, but with next to no air in his lungs all that came out was an inaudible groan, smothered by the pounding, relentless rain. Harry watched, unable to do anything as Snape lifted Hermione and then turned to face the other Death Eaters. He said something Harry couldn't pick up and then Harry felt a pull, and sharp seering pain forked through his right shoulder. He tried to respond but all that came out was a broken grunt.

He was rapidly losing his battle to stay conscious. His eyes dropped closed as his head sagged.

The voices were talking again but were interrupted by a loud yell that came from somewhere in the distance.

Snape barked out an order and Harry heard several loud cracks and he knew beyond a doubt, without having to look, that Hermione was gone.

Zach's wailing sobs droned on relentlessly and then Harry heard Ron's voice calling to him.

Harry clinged to consciousness.

He had failed Ron. He had failed Hermione. He'd let them take her and he wanted to tell Ron how sorry he was. How desperately and sickeningly sorry he was.

The pain seemed to be growing in intensity as he tried to draw breath.

His head finally dropped cheek first back into the mud, the strength to hold it up no longer in him. Ron yelled his name frantically again, sounding almost on top of him, and then ... a hand touched his face hesitantly.

Harry dragged his eyes open and met Ron's pale, strained and scared face looking down at him.

"I'm so sorry." Harry breathed.

Then he sank into darkness.

~*~*~*~*~

28. Revelations

Harry didn't feel like moving and he wasn't really sure if he was awake, asleep or dead. He seemed to be lying on a cushioned surface on his stomach and his cheek was pushed into what could have been a pillow. Jumbled up nightmare images flashed through his head as grim murmurs slowly drifted into his hearing.

"...Poppy. Are you saying that the sap was trying to liquefy his muscles?"

"Nasty stuff Minerva, and hard to recognise according to Professor Sprout. The Eucapatholyptus looks exactly like a harmless Blood-wood. I dread to think what would have happened if she hadn't been up here when he was brought in."

"How did Pomona know what it was?"

"One of the two fellows that helped Mr. Weasley bring him back'd already removed quite a vicious curse that had Potter pinned to the ground, but nothing he cast helped Potter's paralysis. When I asked about the wound in his shoulder the Professor noticed the splinters in his clothing. He was hardly breathing by then."

Harry tried to open his eyes as the murmuring voices echoed over him lingeringly, but nothing happened. Not even a fluttering of eyelids.

“The shard entered his shoulder… just there. See? It was pulled out rather roughly going by the tear, though nobody seems to know by whom. If it’d stayed in there any longer he would have been beyond my aide. He will need complete bed rest, of course. For the next few days at least.”

“You are aware of how difficult that will be under the circumstances?”

“Mm, yes. Unfortunately I am quite well acquainted with Mr. Potter’s… determination.”

Groggily, Harry tried to move, to roll over in an effort to ease the ache in his limbs, but it wasn’t just his eyes that didn’t work. Not even a finger lifted off the bed.

“How long will the antidote take to work through his system?”

“He’ll be a bit wobbly on his feet for a time, but he’s breathing normally already. He should be able to make it to the bathroom and back but not much further than that for a few days, I’m afraid.”

“What about Smith?”

“Heavily sedated until we can get two coherent words out of him.” Harry felt the mattress lift slightly on one side as a sheet was drawn up and tucked in. “The Ministry’s hounds will be back tomorrow to question him fully. Its hard to believe a young man like that would lead poor Miss Granger into…”

“Yes. Well we do not have all the facts yet, Poppy. I imagine there is more to this than what Mr. Weasley has so far informed.”

As thoughts of Hermione bombarded him, Harry tried to push out some of the sickening pressure building in him. It would likely come out as an awful groan and Harry wouldn’t have cared. Any sound would have been a release, helping him to escape this waking prison he found himself in. But nothing, not even a whisper passed his lips. His whole insides were swirling with anger, frustration, and sorrow slowly rotting inside him.

“I would have worried about Smith’s safety tonight except for the fact I gave young Ronald something to calm him before I sent him off as well. I’ve never seen a student look so murderous–”

“Thank you, Poppy. I believe Mr. Weasley was … very close … to Miss Granger. She was … an exceptional … young woman.”

McGonagall’s voice sounded strangled and Harry started to lose grip on whatever it was that had woken him.

“I must be going, Poppy. I do not like to leave but some things will not wait. … I will notify the Grangers … before I leave for the Ministry. You will be able to handle things here until I return?”

Harry registered McGonagalls anguished tone at contacting Hermione’s parents and guilt forked through him like lightening. It was his fault she was gone. He had been so busy worrying about Ginny being a target that he had neglected to watch out for his other two highest priorities. Ron and Hermione. His Hermione. And now she was gone. Sweet kind compassionate lovingly loyal impossibly bossy and always right Hermione.

Best friend for ever Hermione.

How could he have let this happen…

“He’s out of danger Minerva. Don’t worry, neither of them will be going anywhere this evening.”

Harry no longer wanted to hold on. To think about how she had slipped so violently away from him. Because of him. He let go and felt himself fall. Footsteps faded into nothing.

~*~*~*~*~

… Potter …

Harry was dreaming of rain. So much rain, that he could no longer see the ground, just a dark ocean and grey storm clouds. The murky water pooled around his thighs as large blobs continued to fall. The droplets dented the surface causing rippling ringlets to expand and collide in a never-ending cycle. Harry wondered if he too was made of water.

The tips of his fingers swirled lazy patterns through the spitting swelling, volumous surface, as he stood not moving, just watching the water rise. He thought about how peaceful it would be to just stand there and let the water keep coming. To let it swathe him. Envelop him.

He watched as it bloomed higher and higher. Maybe when it covered him completely it would finally shut out the awful sobbing that persistently echoed around him.

"…*Potter*…"

Harry ignored the intruder to this grey, wet and empty place where he didn't have to think about anything except the rain.

Warm wet salty rain.

He lifted his face to the weeping haze and closed his eyes, concentrating on the feeling of the water seeping up his body. It was up to his elbows and he let it keep coming. Willed it to come.

As the rain sprinkled onto his face he slowly became aware that he was leaking. He looked down and saw salty water seeping through his shirt and running in rivulets down his chest. At the same moment … he realized the incessant sobbing had stopped.

"Potter!"

Harry opened his eyes. The second he did he wished he had let the water take him. He was lying on his back in the comfort and safety of the dimly lit hospital wing at Hogwarts and it was wrong. It was so wrong. Like everything since… since…

He closed his eyes again and sucked in a breath.

"Don't you *dare* go back to sleep!"

Harry knew that voice and the acidic tone with which it spoke.

"Sod off Malfoy." He croaked as he rested an arm over his eyes.

"Oh. No. You. Don't!"

The blanket that was covering Harry's only half pyjama clad form was yanked off the bed and the cool night air settled on him like a cold hand across his chest. Stiffly Harry rolled onto his side and curled his knees up.

He had no idea how the Slytherin had got into the hospital ward, and didn't care to know, but he did know *why* the other boy was there, and Harry found he no longer cared about that either. He closed his eyes to the outside, unconcerned if he never opened them again.

"Potter. Get up!" Malfoy whispered hoarsely as he walked around the bed until he was standing in front of Harry.

Harry ignored the Slytherin but Hermione's accusing, lifeless form seemed burned into the back of his eyelids and with a sinking feeling, he decided he couldn't look at it anymore. He opened his eyes slowly, scowling at his own cowardice, and stared blankly at nothing in front of him.

An impatient huff came from Malfoy. "Its already past ten. We have to get moving."

Harry didn't move.

Nothing he did made anything better. Maybe if he stayed here and didn't move at all then his friends would be safe. Maybe if he stayed here long enough he wouldn't have any friends to worry about keeping safe.

Maybe *then* no one else would have to die.

One of the hospital wings metal chairs was scraped noisily into view. Malfoy then threw an invisibility cloak over one of its arms and dropped into it. He lifted a knee to rest his foot up on the edge of Harry's bed before sprawling back and raking a hand through his hair in a nervous gesture. He was quiet for a moment before letting out a deep sigh. Harry's gaze was drawn to him long enough to take in the Slytherin green pullover and black pants the boy was clad in and the weary, uncertain look on his face. Harry looked away to stare at nothing again.

"I hope this isn't going to take long." Malfoy deadpanned. "I have plans at midnight."

Harry almost closed his eyes again at Malfoy's attempt at humour. But the fact that the Slytherin tried to make light of the pain the boy suffered nightly only tugged at the pit of his stomach. Only the thoughts of seeing *her* again kept them open. He was so tired of the pain – of his own, and of everyone else's.

"Look." Malfoy sighed again and looked up at the ceiling uncomfortably. "Neither of us is any good at this Potter. So why don't we skip the part where I act convincingly like I care, bypass the whole woeful outpouring of Gryffindor sentimentality that, Merlin forbid, we both know I don't have a hope of tolerating without taking the mickey, and *you* just come right out and tell me exactly what it'll take to get you off that bed and out of the dump of self pity you are currently wallowing in. Because – quite frankly – it's boring and it's selfish and I don't have the bloody time for it."

Harry should have felt mild shock and would normally be affronted at Malfoy's words, and yet he remained unmoved. It was going to take a lot more than Malfoy's lack of tact to pierce his numbness.

It must have become clear to Draco that Harry had no intention of continuing on with their plans tonight, because the Slytherin's casual façade shattered suddenly. He kicked out his foot; jarring the bed Harry was lying on and sending his chair skidding backwards. Harry was jolted out of his revere while Malfoy leapt to his feet and lunged forward, grabbing Harry's arm and yanking the wary-eyed Gryffindor up to bring their faces within inches of each other.

"You pick tonight of all nights to give up!" Draco hissed through his teeth. He searched Harry's face impatiently and then tightened his grip. "I know what you need Potter. Revenge."

Before Harry could gather his wits he was thrust backward onto the bed again. Malfoy turned and stalked away. Harry lifted himself onto his elbows with difficulty, still incredibly stiff and sore from the poisonous sap and watched as the Slytherin stopped beside a bed some way down and opposite. The angry blonde drew his wand and pointed it at the unconscious sandy haired Hufflepuff that lay oblivious in the sheets.

"*No!*" Harry croaked out, not at all certain what Malfoy had in store for Smith. He thought he ought to keep the seething Slytherin from doing something that Harry would surely regret.

Malfoy looked over his shoulder disgustedly at Harry. "He has to pay for what he did. It's the only way you'll be free of that pointless and emasculating guilt that you're infested with." The Slytherin reached forward and grabbed a fist full of Sandy hair, yanking the other boy's head up so he was in a sitting position. He snarled at Harry. "And if you won't do it, I will. I need you on your feet

tonight, Potter. I cannot afford you to be weakened by self loathing and pity."

Then suddenly a yellow flash darted from Malfoy's wand and Smith gasped in a breath of air, clutching at his chest, his eyes remaining eerily closed.

Harry swung himself onto the side of his bed, ignoring the sharp pains coming from his stiff limbs. "What did you do?" He demanded.

Smith sagged again, the weight of his torso only being held up by Malfoy's grip on his hair.

"A little pick me up. Guaranteed to break through most common sedatives." Draco eyed Smith with interest. "It's a tad painful, bit of a shock to the system, but nothing a pure-blooded traitor like Smith here couldn't handle." Malfoy pulled Smiths head up higher and grinned malevolently as it hung forward. "Dear oh me, some people just can't get up in the mornings."

Before Harry verbally protested, he was wincing at the effects of another yellow flash Malfoy sent Smiths way. Smith's eyes flew wide open and he drew in a rattled breath that sounded like it could be his last, his arms still clutched at his chest. Harry suspected the only thing keeping Smith from falling backwards onto the bed was Malfoy's unyielding grasp of his hair.

"Malfoy! Let him go." Harry ground out, finally managing to work his way off the edge of the bed onto his feet.

"You don't need to worry about being found out. I put a silencing charm on the doors when Poopy Pomphrey left. Oh Come on Potter. You know what he did as well as I do. I was here when they were trying to mend you. He's a traitor. A blood traitor but also a double-crosser who betrayed his own side – hell, his own girlfriend – at the first sign of trouble." Malfoy yanked Smiths head back so the boys face was tilted towards him. Smith was panting and dazed from his rude awakening, and growing more frightened by the second.

Malfoy's lip curled dangerously in distaste as he moved in closer to the scared boy.

"Do you know what my side does to traitors?" The Slytherins voice hissed dark and threatening. Not waiting for an answer he continued on slowly, relishing the other boys fear. "They peel the skin from you body, layer by layer, magically so you don't pass out from the pain and horror, and then they just walk away and leave you." Malfoy moved his head round so he was speaking with soft venom into Smiths ear. Zach was shaking so badly the metal bars on the bed were rattling. "Do you know why? Why they don't torture you further? Because skin is the bodies largest organ, and when it's simply taken away, all of your other organs begin to shut down from shock."

A change was slowly coming over the Slytherin as he spoke. The malicious bravado was gradually being overcast with repulsion. "They say you can feel your outer flesh shrivelling as it dries out. But not the face. A lipless mouth tends to drool rather a lot, and the salt in the tears that leak from raw, sagging eyes, burns like acid as it drips. It's slow and agonizing… And the worst suffering you can imagine before you die…" Malfoy's expression was laced with pain and bitterness as he trailed off.

Smith let out a whimper and squeezed his eyes tightly shut. Clear wet drops fell down his flushed and anguished cheeks.

"Malfoy. That's enough. Let him go." Harry said croakily under his breath, sickened by what he had just heard.

Malfoy glanced round at Harry and then back at the pitiful Smith and then he finally let the boy go, his sneer plastered back in its usual place. Harry rested his full weight on his feet and stood for a moment to get his balance. He took a tentative step to the bedside cabinet and grabbed his glasses before pushing them up his nose and picking up his wand, feeling somewhat more secure in Malfoy's presence now it was in his hand. Then he turned slowly and began lifting himself back onto the bed.

"What the hell are you doing? Why are you getting back into bed?"

Harry sighed and without meeting the incredulous stare he was sure to be getting from Malfoy, he

rearranged the bed covers and settled back against the propped up pillows.

“Potter!” Malfoy spat. “Did I not make myself clear? Shake off this quagmire you’re stuck in and hex Smith until he’s the slobbering blob he deserves to be and you feel better. Then we can go.”

Smith made a keening noise.

“I’m not going anywhere Malfoy.” Harry pushed his hands up under his glasses and rubbed at his eyes. “Don’t you get it? Hermione’s… They’re all dead or dying, and I don’t want … to *know* about it anymore. I don’t want to… to be the cause … anymore.”

Zach started mumbling incoherently in the background, rocking back and forth on the bed, clutching at himself as Malfoy advanced on Harry.

“You are a part of this whether you want to be or not. You always have been and always will! And you’re not the only one so stop being so weak and pathetic.” The Slytherins face twisted angrily. “You should count yourself lucky! Not all of us have a Secret Society and Ministry officials covering our backs. I haven’t exactly been served a dish full of dancing Veelas either. But did I give up when…” Malfoy stopped and struggled to get the words out. “When my mother died.”

Harry recognized that Malfoy wasn’t associating his mother’s death with the truth. Murder by Voldemort. Maybe that’s how he managed to still serve his Dark Lord.

“Of course not!” The Slytherin continued. “And you. You’re The Chosen One.” He mocked with his lip curled. “Oh… but of course. How terribly insensitive of me. It must be insufferable to have a world full of hero worshippers fawning all over you and jumping to your every need. Over protective mobs racing you off to the hospital wing whenever you do no more than stub your big toe. It must be the *absolute pits* to have a world of people at your fingertips ready to help you – fight for you – take you in and…” He mouthed without sound for a moment in search of more words and then said even louder. “The difference between you and me is that they mistakenly see you as the saviour of the wizarding world, while its people like me that are really trying to preserve it!”

Zach gave another whimper at Malfoy’s raised voice and continued to murmur something over and over again that neither of them could understand. (Not that they were listening. They had both sunk into eyeing each other off challengingly like they had habitually ended up doing since they were eleven years old.)

“One day they’ll understand.” The Slytherin narrowed his eyes, his passion clearly visible. “One day they’ll see what it means to allow fools like Dumbledore to make the rules. Muggles will *never* accept wizards. They fear our magic, they fear our spoken word, and they even fear that we live longer than them. Its jealousy – nothing nobler – and muggles destroy everything they fear and envy. If we don’t do something now there’ll be no more wizards left to–”

“PUT A CORK IN IT MALFOY! ARE YOU SERIOUSLY SAYING THAT THAT CRAZED PSYCO TOM RIDDLE – THE ONE THAT PUTS YOU THROUGH HELL NIGHT AFTER NIGHT – IS YOUR ANSWER?” Harry’s outburst had surprised even himself, but he was so sick of hearing Malfoy’s oblivious hypocrisy.

“He’s the only one powerful enough to do anything about it.” The Slytherin said quietly, avoiding Harry’s glare. “I trust Fathers judgment.”

“This would be the same Lucius Malfoy that placed a dangerous book into eleven year old Ginny Weasley’s hands – a pureblood remember – so that the entire ‘impure’ student body could be systematically wiped out? Only she told Riddle about me, didn’t she? And in his infinite wisdom he was no longer content to just lie and manipulate Ginny and kill hundreds of kids – sorry – *mudbloods*. He abandoned ‘the noble cause’ for consuming her soul, leaving her for dead so he could have another go at me, a near-powerless twelve year old, all because he learned I had somehow almost killed him when I was one.” Harry watched as Draco’s expression faltered into an uncertain frown. “Funny how he can ignore his ‘noble calling’ without a second thought when he thinks his own existence is under threat.”

Harry had Malfoy hooked. The Slytherin was listening in spite of himself. Harry continued, taking full advantage of the moment.

“I don’t imagine he looks too kindly on his Death Eaters valuing their own lives as much. It’s probably in some Death Eater handbook somewhere that you have to sacrifice yourself ‘honourably’ for your fellow pure-blooded comrades future glory. Still, I suppose it makes sense that Voldemort wouldn’t have to hold to that – having a muggle father and all.” Harry heard the hiss from Malfoy but continued on as if he hadn’t. “Of course Voldemort would *like* everyone to believe he’s warring for pureblood supremacy, but that’s hardly likely since he’s a halfblood, don’t you think? But your father must know all about it. He wouldn’t be gullible enough to commit his whole family into the service of the darkest wizard of all time without being certain of Voldemorts agenda. Your *father* is surely smart enough to know the real reason Voldemort needs his Death Eaters.”

Harry’s gaze drifted over Malfoy’s decidedly pale face. The Slytherin was frowning in quiet fury and confusion, reflecting his inner turmoil as he stewed over what he had just been told. It was almost enough to make Harry wish it wasn’t too late to care whether or not he’d made a difference. “Anyway.” Harry said resignedly, pulling the blanket back around him. “You’ll forgive me if I don’t want to hear any more of your Death Eater ‘Youth Training’. I don’t care about any of it anymore.”

This seemed to bring Draco out of his thoughts. He narrowed his eyes and sneered. “Of course you care… or you wouldn’t be behaving like such a coward!”

“*What?*”

“You finally lose someone close to you and you-you can’t stomach it anymore!”

“F-Finally? …” Harry blustered in disbelief but he was not prepared to get into the long list of people he’d lost so he went on the attack. “Hermione’s dead you sodding insensitive prat! DEAD! She died because I couldn’t save her!” Oh no no no no no… Harry could feel the salty sting prickling at his eyes and he did *not* want to do this in front of Malfoy. He whipped his glasses off and lifted his palms up to his eyes. He was not ready to open these floodgates. Maybe he would never be ready. Maybe if he started crying for Hermione, he’d never stop. Just drown in the tears like in his dream.

“It’s always the same story with you, isn’t it Potter? *Oh what?*” Malfoy bit out impatiently over his shoulder as Zach’s mantra became more urgent. “What are you on about Smith?”

“She’s not d-dead.”

The Slytherin turned to face the distressed Hufflepuff. “The mudblood?”

Harry dropped his hands away from his face where they had been pressing in violently in an effort to hold back his grief and stared at Zach.

“Sh-she’s not dead.” He stumbled out. “Just … knocked out.”

Harry slipped off the bed and began walking stiffly towards Zach, barely even registering the pain caused by his movement. “But… but there was a green light. The killing curse … I saw it.”

“Snape.” Zach sobbed as Malfoy approached, watching on in interest. “One of them went to fire the k-killing curse… *at me* …and he shot the wand out of their hand… just in time. It barely missed me.”

“Snape did that?” Malfoy demanded, frowning intently as the other boy nodded. “How do you know it was him?”

“I didn’t – not for certain – until his mask came off when Harry hit him with a stun.”

Malfoy didn’t let up, now seeming as interested in what happened as Harry, who was temporarily struck dumb, afraid to speak in case Hermione’s reprieve was broken.

“So Snape didn’t kill Granger but he took her with him?”

Zach nodded at Malfoy and wiped the back of his pyjama sleeve across his wet face, sucking in air to catch his breath. “He stunned her. Knocked her out. He wouldn’t tell me why he wanted her, just-just that I had to do as I was told or they’d come for my family next.”

“How did you get her out of The Three Broomsticks?” Harry asked grimly in a sudden need to know the details. He finally allowed a tentative relief to wash through him.

The Hufflepuff had the decency to look ashamed. “Snape appeared at my house a week ago. He said they knew about our relationship and that I was to insist on meeting with her to break it off. Then he gave me something to put in her drink – a Confundus powder I think – and told me to lead her to the forest out by Shady Lane.”

Malfoy was now level with Harry and both of them were frowning intently at Smith, and going by the panicked glint in Zach’s eye as he flicked his glance between the two young men, they must have looked a formidable pair standing side by side united against a common enemy; Zach…

“Er… ak!” Zach shrivelled back under their heavy gazes into the headboard with his knees hugged protectively to him and began twisting his hands and mumbling under his breath that they couldn’t harm him for trying to protect his family… no way, Of course not… They wouldn’t…

“Well.” The Slytherin said with bright impatience. “Now there’s no excuse, Potter.” He lifted his wand and flicked it carelessly at Zach. The boy’s eyes rolled back in his head and it flopped back with a hard thump onto the headboard, passed out cold. “Can we go now?”

“What did you do that for?” Harry asked angrily, eyeing the unconscious Hufflepuff.

“You don’t want him to know what we’re up to do you?” Malfoy said, dismissing Harry’s concern with a wave of his hand. “Besides, if he was awake he’d be calling Madame Pomphrey in here demanding room service and then we’d have to deal with her too.”

“You know, you wave that thing at people way too casually for my liking. Have you ever tried talking to people, reasoning with them?” Harry asked, eyeing the Slytherins wand warily as he headed in search of his clothes.

Malfoy looked surprised as he raised an eyebrow. “Reason with them Potter? Why on earth would I bother? We’re finally going then?”

Harry nodded and delicately picked up his jeans, wincing at the sharp pain in his neck and arm and leg and … well pretty much everywhere. “I have to make a stop on the way though.”

“What? No! There isn’t time.” The Slytherin protested.

“I’m not leaving Ron believing Hermione’s dead. So save your breath. We see him first – then we’ll go to McGonagall’s office.” Harry held up a hand as Malfoy opened his mouth scowling. “And turn around so I can get changed.”

The Slytherin’s expression suddenly changed and gone were any traces of anger and impatience. He lowered himself onto the edge on Harry’s bed looking in the opposite direction and plucked at the corners of the pillow lightly. “You could give me the passwords we’ll need up there then I could get started while you’re busy petting a morose and leaky weasel.” (He shuddered)

Harry sent the back of the blonde’s head a warning look and started awkwardly dressing. “We’re going together – or not at all.” He warned the Slytherin grimly. There was no way he was going to let Malfoy loose in the Head’s office to pick his way through Dumbledore’s pensive and precious memories. Who knows what he’s left in there?

“Just a thought.” The Slytherin answered casually, yet there was a vague undertone of defensiveness. Harry frowned to himself. Surely Malfoy didn’t think that the last two days changed everything between them? Certainly they had seen another side to one another, but ultimately, neither of them was about to change who they are – Malfoy least of all. Harry only had to see him with Zach a moment ago to know that.

~*~*~*~*~

It was slow and painful going for Harry trying to get up to the Gryffindor tower. Malfoy seemed twitchy and agitated at the amount of time that was passing, knowing he was going to have to get back to the Slytherin common room before midnight. Although the fact that they were both squeezed under Malfoy's invisibility cloak, unavoidably rubbing shoulders and thighs in an effort to stay hidden could have been said to antagonize the blonde further, it wasn't doing much for Harry's comfort either.

Malfoy stopped grumbling and kept his mouth shut while Harry poked his head out at the Fat Lady. Tapping his wand on her frame a couple of times to wake her up, he gave her the password and speedily grabbed the frame as it swung open before the tired pink-clad woman dropped off again and it closed leaving them still on the wrong side of the door. Once inside and surrounded by the deep reds of the furnishings and the golden glow from the lamps and the fireplace, Harry breathed a sigh of relief and took a quick look around. Seamus and Dean were sprawled on the large couch before the fire and Pansy was huddled in a secretive chat with Crabbe and Goyle in what had unofficially become the Slytherin corner of the common room.

Harry slipped off the cloak carefully; expecting Malfoy to stay covered and made his way over to Seamus and Dean. They both wore the same punctured expression that went with their deflated bodies. They looked up as Harry eased himself up to lean on the couch. The walk had left him feeling very wobbly indeed and he was glad to have something to rest against.

"You shouldn't be here." Said Seamus in concern. "You look bloody awful."

Dean wriggled forward into an upright position so he could see Harry better. "Seam's right. You look like the walking dead. You should be resting back in hospital. There's nothing you can do up here, mate."

"Listen." Seamus began, a sombre tone to his voice. "We really don't know what to say…"

"Yeah." Dean's voice cracked and his eyes looked excessively watery. "I still can't believe it, you know?"

"Ron." Was all Harry managed to croakily get out before Seamus jerked his thumb up the stairs.

"He's in the room, with Ginny."

"He's taken it pretty bad." Dean added cautiously. "He needed company, but not the sort me or Seamus can give, so we're dossing down here for the night. Ginny's taken your bed."

Harry nodded at Dean and let go of the couch, swaying and shaking as he turned and made his way to the stairs.

"Harry."

He tossed a look over his shoulder at Dean.

"You really ought to go back to Madame Pomphrey's mate. There's nout you can do and you don't even look like you'll make it up the stairs."

"Of course he will." Came a clipped voice. They all turned to see Malfoy who had discarded the cloak and had been huddled with Pansy and co. He was straightening from the table and heading over to Harry with raised eyebrows. "I can levitate you if you like?"

Not on your life!

"Er… um… no, really. I'm fine. Really." Harry couldn't imagine anything worse than being at Malfoy's mercy at the end of his wand. If anything clarified what sort of relationship the two boys had in the

last few days, it was Harry's unwillingness to trust Malfoy as far as he could safely toss a fully-grown blast-ended Skrewt.

Malfoy smirked as he joined Harry at the foot of the stairs. "You Gryffindors are supposed to be all trusting and noble, aren't you?"

"Trusting and noble, we are." Harry said as he started the agonizing ascent. "Blithering idiots, we're not."

"Doesn't say much for our new found friendship, now does it?" Malfoy cocked an eyebrow and placed a hand under Harry's arm to help propel him along a little faster.

"Speaks volumes really." Harry replied without meeting the blonde's eye as he limped and winced his way along. "It might surprise you to learn, considering you see me as some dopey senseless underachiever smothered by a hero complex with no idea how I even get up in the morning let alone blunder my way through escaping your Dark Lord time and time again, that I actually have enough Slytherin in me to recognize an extraordinarily risky offer made by you Malfoy – The Slytherin Personified."

Malfoy snorted and genuinely smiled in amusement as he shook his head. "You have about as much Slytherin in you're whole body as I do in my little finger. Less, in fact."

"Tell that to the sorting hat, since I had to fight with it to stay out of Slytherin." Harry stopped at Malfoy's barefaced incredulous start. "You should speak with Pansy about being to quick to label people."

Malfoy growled. "Where do you think she got it from in the first place? That dosey cow doesn't have a single thought of her own. The perfect girlfriend really." He added in realization.

"Is there anyone you know that you have a kind word to say about?" Harry asked grumpily.

Malfoy smirked as he searched Harry's face. Then he grabbed him by the elbow and pushed him forward again. "Come on." They didn't stop again until they reached Harry's dorm room.

"You stay out here."

"I've no desire to see the Weasel blubbing over his mudblood." The Slytherin's lip curled in distaste but it lacked its usual venom. "But get on with it. We've wasted too much time already!"

Harry turned his eyes to the ceiling and took a deep breathe before knocking lightly on the door. He waited a moment but no sound could be heard from within and when he shot a look at Malfoy, the other boy was flicking his head, urging him to go in. Harry sighed and opened the door, stepping into the dimly lit room and closing the door quietly behind him.

Ron was not in bed asleep as he'd imagined, but sitting up at one of the windows, silhouetted by the almost full moon. He didn't turn to face Harry as he crossed the room, though a slight shift in his arms hugging tightly to his knees let Harry know the red head knew he was there.

"Ron…" Harry said quietly and moved until he was as in-front of his best friend as he could get. He gratefully took purchase of the sills opposite edge, perching himself there and trying to calm down his shakes. He leaned forward to try and draw Ron's eyes from the emptiness beyond the window. "She's not dead."

At first Ron didn't react. Maybe he had already closed off to whatever it was that Harry might have been going to say. Harry could understand him not wanting to hear any more damning admissions or explanations, or worse, apologies that only drove Hermione's death home even further. So Harry watched and waited, and when Ron finally turned his head very slowly away from the window and met Harry's gaze, Harry leaned in even further to make sure it got through this time and spoke in a low voice. "She's not dead, Ron. They didn't kill her. Hermione's alive. Snape took her alive."

Ron sat as still as rock for a moment, and then his breathing suddenly became heavy as he continued to stare at Harry. A small sob came from off to the side where Harry's own bed was. He

turned to see Ginny sitting up and watching them silently with silvery streaks glistening down her cheeks. She climbed out of bed and wordlessly walked to Harry, leaning into his chest and letting him embrace her in his arms that trembled as he tried to tighten his grip around her.

“Are-are you…” Harry looked up at Ron’s attempted question. “H-how do you know?”

“Smith.” Harry said. “Malfoy woke him up and he told us what happened. The Avada curse was meant for him. They wanted Hermione alive.”

“Snape took Hermione alive.” Ron’s voice suddenly changed. He seemed unable to allow himself any real relief over the news and now his face curled in bitter anger. “*Snape.*” He said the name like he was spitting poison. Harry could guess the next lot of questions out of his best friends mouth. Harry was the one who’d had recent dealings with Snape and had even had to trust him with certain things, like helping Malfoy for instance, but Harry did not want to have to sit through the onslaught and accusations right now, when he was feeling just as betrayed and had no answers either.

Ron was opening his mouth to start his rant when the door opened and Malfoy strolled in. Ron’s attention was immediately diverted to the blonde and Harry was actually thankful he’d disobeyed Harry’s order to stay put.

“You’ve molly-coddled your followers enough. Let’s go.”

In his weakened state, Harry almost missed catching hold of Ron in an effort to stop him using Malfoy as a punching bag to de-stress on.

“Malfoy.” Harry said wearily as he continued to hold a shaky arm across Ron’s chest, barring his way. “I think you should leave.”

“Why?” He asked coyly. “So you can all talk about me behind my back?” He pouted ridiculously and slipped both of his hands in his pockets, slouching against Harry’s bedpost.

“What have they done with her?” Ron bellowed too close to Harry at Malfoy. Harry winced and eased away, waggling a finger in his right ear.

“How should I know Weasel? I’ve been here at Hogwarts haven’t I?” The Slytherin replied lazily.

“Bollocks!” Ron barked. “You and Snape are thick as thieves and he’s the one that’s got her. You know Malfoy! I know you do.” Suddenly Ron lunged forward and fisted the front of Malfoy’s jumper, yanking the blonde’s face closer to his. “And you’re not leaving here until you spill everything you know.” Ron threatened.

“Ron, he was just as surprised about Snape as we are. I was there when Smith told him and he even questioned Smith himself what Snape was doing there.” Harry interjected calmly.

Ron eyed Malfoy who merely flicked his tightly set jaw up in a move to indicate agreement. The Slytherin still looked calm and composed with his hands still in his pockets, but Harry could see the long line of the boys wand already in hand under the fabric and the glint of fear and adrenalin in his eyes. He needed to diffuse this situation fast.

“Snape obviously wanted Hermione alive specifically.” Harry went on quickly. “It couldn’t have been as bait to get to me because I was right there. The whole exercise would have become pointless and they could have taken me there and then but they didn’t.”

Ron’s grip was loosening slightly and Malfoy edged back where he could without seeming like he was.

“There’s got to be a reason Snape wants her. And the sooner we figure it out, the sooner we can start looking for her.”

At Harry’s words, Ron released Malfoy completely and turned his attention on Harry and Ginny. Malfoy adjusted his jumper with one hand and leaned back against the bedpost, his wand hand never leaving the pocket.

“Why *her* though Harry?” Ron asked, a pained expression on his face as he wracked his brain. “How are we ever going to figure out why Snape took her? She’s just a school kid. Merlin I wish she were here. Its time like this we need her. She’s always been the smart one.”

“Exactly.” Ginny said tonelessly. They all looked at her and she shrugged, her eyes still red and puffy, flicked between them. “Well, she is. And Snape knows it. Without her, getting in and out of the next stronghold alive will be almost impossible. I mean, you couldn't have got the last Horc–”

Three sets of eyes suddenly widened in shock, while one pair narrowed.

Ginny had only just managed to stop herself from giving away to Malfoy what Harry, Ron and Hermione had been doing for months now. She looked mortified as she clamped a hand over her mouth, but at least she had managed to stop herself in time. But that was now the least of her problems.

Ron’s mouth gaped open and Harry turned a furious glare on her after he darted a look at Malfoy. How could she know what they had been doing? She had always been aware that something was going on, but she’d never been privy to the details. Yet somehow, she had just made it known that she was fully in the loop about past happenings, and hang on a minute – how does she know they’ll need Hermione to get to the last Horcrux when they have no clue as to what it is – let alone where to find it?

Ginny began to shrink under Harry’s piercing glare. They would need to have a talk. *A talk?* They needed more than a little chat to get this all out in the open, but with Malfoy here, and Harry on a mission, now was not the time. Harry could have roared aloud in frustration. What had Ginny been up to?

“H-h-h-how…”

“Not now Ron,” Harry cut off the stunned and semi-speechless Ron, still frowning intently. He flicked his head in Malfoy’s direction and Ron closed his mouth and swallowed. It was then that Harry noticed Malfoy’s demeanour had completely changed. He was no longer slouching and eyeing them all in disinterest; he was standing rigid and intensely eyeing three Gryffindors expressions. But he said nothing.

“Er… Malfoy and I have to… go.” Harry trailed off as he began walking to the door.

“Snape would not have gone to Hogsmeade in broad daylight to abduct Granger just because she’s the smart one out of you three.”

Harry, Ron and Ginny stared at Malfoy blankly. No one had expected him to offer any sort of opinion on the matter, certainly not one that appeared to be trying to be helpful.

Malfoy sighed exaggeratedly. “Think about it. Firstly, if that’s all they wanted to do – hinder your progress in whatever it is you’re doing – then killing her would take far less planning and manpower – much easier. And why Snape? A high-ranking Death Eater, not to mention one of the most wanted men around. He killed your beloved Dumbledore who, lets face it, has more allies than The Dark Lord has enemies. It’s risky for him to show up in Hogsmeade. Very risky.”

“So what are you saying?” Harry asked cautiously.

Malfoy shrugged a shoulder. “I’d guess that Snape needed Hermione. For something important. Something worth the risk. And its not you, Potter. Like you said, you were there, they could have taken you – but they didn’t. What’s she been working on?”

The question was directed at Harry, but Ginny answered.

“No one knows. She’s been holed up in her room night after night ever since we got back to Hogwarts. She hasn’t told any of us what she was doing.”

Malfoy raised his eyebrows. “If it was me, and I’d just lost my best friend – forgetting the fact that

I'd never have a mudblood as an actual friend, let alone a best one – then I'd be looking to find out what she'd been up to before she disappeared."

Harry and Ron exchanged looks.

"I'll check her room." Ginny volunteered. "I'll try tonight, but it might have to be in the morning. Lavender was pretty upset about… well, you know."

"I'm coming with you." Ron said flatly.

"You can't." Ginny said hesitantly. "Boys can't get into–"

"I'll fly." And with that, Ron dug his broom out of his trunk and headed to the door.

"Oh, all right. But I'd better go and warn Lavender. She's likely to hex your ears off if you just go bursting in there. Especially after what's happened."

"I'll see you both later then." Harry said quietly as he opened the door and waited for Malfoy to go through before him.

As the two of them descended the spiral stairs Harry almost felt like he was going into the Gladiators ring. He knew there was going to be confrontation tonight, he'd known it for days, but as the time drew nearer to getting to the memory in the pensieve, an awful dread was gathering, hanging over him like a black thunder cloud.

As they stepped back into the common room, Pansy rushed up to Draco and whispered urgently and Draco swore loudly. A second later his eyes squeezed tightly shut and his right hand gripped his left forearm as he dropped to his knees with a gutteral moan.

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SPECIAL REHEARSAL EDITION SCRIPT

HARRY POTTER

AND THE CURSED CHILD

PARTS ONE AND TWO

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A NEW PLAY BY JACK THORNE

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To Jack Thorne
who entered my world
and did beautiful things there.
— J.K. Rowling

For Joe, Louis, Max, Sonny, and Merle . . . wizards all . . .
— John Tiffany

To Elliott Thorne, born April 7, 2016.
As we rehearsed, he gurgled.
— Jack Thorne

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HARRY POTTER AND THE CURSED CHILD

PART ONE

ACT ONE

ACT ONE, SCENE ONE

KING'S CROSS

A busy and crowded station. Full of people trying to go somewhere. Amongst the hustle and bustle, two large cages rattle on top of two laden trolleys. They're being pushed by two boys, JAMES POTTER and ALBUS POTTER, their mother, GINNY, follows after. A thirty-seven-year-old man, HARRY, has his daughter, LILY, on his shoulders.

ALBUS: Dad. He keeps saying it.

HARRY: James, give it a rest.

JAMES: I only said he might be in Slytherin. And he might so . . . *(Off his dad's glare.)* Fine.

ALBUS *(looking up at his mum)*: You'll write to me, won't you?

GINNY: Every day if you want us to.

ALBUS: No. Not every day. James says most people only get letters from home about once a month. I don't want to . . .

HARRY: We wrote to your brother three times a week last year.

ALBUS: What? James!

ALBUS looks accusingly at JAMES.

GINNY: Yes. You may not want to believe everything he tells you about Hogwarts. He likes a laugh, your brother.

JAMES *(with a grin)*: Can we go now, please?

ALBUS looks at his dad, and then his mum.

GINNY: All you have to do is walk straight at the wall between platforms nine and ten.

LILY: I'm so excited.

HARRY: Don't stop and don't be scared you'll crash into it, that's very important. Best to do it at a run if you're nervous.

ALBUS: I'm ready.

HARRY and LILY put their hands on ALBUS's trolley — GINNY joins JAMES's trolley — together, the family run hard into the barrier.

ACT ONE, SCENE TWO

PLATFORM NINE AND THREE-QUARTERS

Which is covered in thick white steam pouring from the HOGWARTS EXPRESS.

And which is also busy — but instead of people in sharp suits going about their day — it's now wizards and witches in robes mostly trying to work out how to say good-bye to their beloved progeny.

ALBUS: This is it.

LILY: Wow!

ALBUS: Platform nine and three-quarters.

LILY: Where are they? Are they here? Maybe they didn't come?

HARRY points out RON, HERMIONE, and their daughter, ROSE. LILY runs hard up to them.

Uncle Ron. Uncle Ron!!!

RON turns towards them as LILY goes barreling up to him. He picks her up into his arms.

RON: If it isn't my favorite Potter.

LILY: Have you got my trick?

RON: Are you aware of the Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes–certified nose-stealing breath?

ROSE: Mum! Dad's doing that lame thing again.

HERMIONE: You say lame, he says glorious, I say — somewhere in between.

RON: Hang on. Let me just munch this . . . air. And now it's just a simple matter of . . . Excuse me if I smell slightly of garlic . . .

He breathes on her face. LILY giggles.

LILY: You smell of porridge.

RON: Bing. Bang. Boing. Young lady, get ready to not being able to smell at all . . .

He lifts her nose off.

LILY: Where's my nose?

RON: Ta-da!

His hand is empty. It's a lame trick. Everyone enjoys its lameness.

LILY: You are silly.

ALBUS: Everyone's staring at us again.

RON: Because of me! I'm extremely famous. My nose experiments are legendary!

HERMIONE: They're certainly something.

HARRY: Parked all right, then?

RON: I did. Hermione didn't believe I could pass a Muggle driving test, did you? She thought I'd have to Confund the examiner.

HERMIONE: I thought nothing of the kind, I have complete faith in you.

ROSE: And I have complete faith he did Confund the examiner.

RON: Oi!

ALBUS: Dad . . .

ALBUS pulls on HARRY's robes. HARRY looks down.

Do you think — what if I am — what if I'm put in Slytherin . . .

HARRY: And what would be wrong with that?

ALBUS: Slytherin is the House of the snake, of Dark Magic . . . It's not a House of brave wizards.

HARRY: Albus Severus, you were named after two headmasters of Hogwarts. One of them was a Slytherin and he was probably the bravest man I ever knew.

ALBUS: But just say . . .

HARRY: If it matters to you, *you*, the Sorting Hat will take your feelings into account.

ALBUS: Really?

HARRY: It did for me.

This is something he's never said before, it resonates around his head a moment.

Hogwarts will be the making of you, Albus. I promise you, there is nothing to be frightened of there.

JAMES: Apart from the Thestrals. Watch out for the Thestrals.

ALBUS: I thought they were invisible!

HARRY: Listen to your professors, *don't* listen to James, and remember to enjoy yourself. Now, if you don't want this train to leave without you, you should leap on . . .

LILY: I'm going to chase the train out.

GINNY: Lily, come straight back.

HERMIONE: Rose. Remember to send Neville our love.

ROSE: Mum, I can't give a professor love!

ROSE exits for the train. And then ALBUS turns and hugs GINNY and HARRY one last time before following after her.

ALBUS: Okay, then. Bye.

He climbs on board. HERMIONE, GINNY, RON, and HARRY stand watching the train — as whistles blow up and down the platform.

GINNY: They're going to be okay, right?

HERMIONE: Hogwarts is a big place.

RON: Big. Wonderful. Full of food. I'd give anything to be going back.

HARRY: Strange, Al being worried he'll be sorted into Slytherin.

HERMIONE: That's nothing, Rose is worried whether she'll break the Quidditch scoring record in her first or second year. And how early she can take her O.W.L.s.

RON: I have no idea where she gets her ambition from.

GINNY: And how would you feel, Harry, if Al — if he is?

RON: You know, Gin, we always thought there was a chance you could be sorted into Slytherin.

GINNY: What?

RON: Honestly, Fred and George ran a book.

HERMIONE: Can we go? People are looking, you know.

GINNY: People always look when you three are together. And apart. People always look at you.

The four exit. GINNY stops HARRY.

Harry . . . He'll be all right, won't he?

HARRY: Of course he will.

ACT ONE, SCENE THREE

THE HOGWARTS EXPRESS

ALBUS and ROSE walk along the carriage of the train.

The TROLLEY WITCH approaches, pushing her trolley.

TROLLEY WITCH: Anything from the trolley, dears? Pumpkin Pasty? Chocolate Frog? Cauldron Cake?

ROSE *(spotting ALBUS's loving look at the Chocolate Frogs)*: Al. We need to concentrate.

ALBUS: Concentrate on what?

ROSE: On who we choose to be friends with. My mum and dad met your dad on their first Hogwarts Express, you know . . .

ALBUS: So we need to choose now who to be friends with for life? That's quite scary.

ROSE: On the contrary, it's exciting. I'm a Granger-Weasley, you're a Potter — everyone will want to be friends with us, we've got the pick of anyone we want.

ALBUS: So how do we decide — which compartment to go in . . .

ROSE: We rate them all and then we make a decision.

ALBUS opens a door — to look in on a lonely blond kid — SCORPIUS — in an otherwise empty compartment. ALBUS smiles. SCORPIUS smiles back.

ALBUS: Hi. Is this compartment . . .

SCORPIUS: It's free. It's just me.

ALBUS: Great. So we might just — come in — for a bit — if that's okay?

SCORPIUS: That's okay. Hi.

ALBUS: Albus. Al. I'm — my name is Albus . . .

SCORPIUS: Hi Scorpius. I mean, I'm Scorpius. You're Albus. I'm Scorpius. And you must be . . .

ROSE's face is growing colder by the minute.

ROSE: Rose.

SCORPIUS: Hi, Rose. Would you like some of my Fizzing Whizbees?

ROSE: I've just had breakfast, thanks.

SCORPIUS: I've also got some Shock-o-Choc, Pepper Imps, and some Jelly Slugs. Mum's idea — she says *(sings)*, "Sweets, they always help you make friends." *(He realizes that singing was a mistake.)* Stupid idea, probably.

ALBUS: I'll have some . . . Mum doesn't let me have sweets. Which one would you start with?

ROSE hits ALBUS out of sight of SCORPIUS.

SCORPIUS: Easy. I've always regarded the Pepper Imp as the king of the confectionery bag. They're peppermint sweets that make you smoke at the ears.

ALBUS: Brilliant, then that's what I'll — *(ROSE hits him again.)* Rose, will you please stop hitting me?

ROSE: I'm not hitting you.

ALBUS: You *are* hitting me, and it hurts.

SCORPIUS's face falls.

SCORPIUS: She's hitting you because of me.

ALBUS: What?

SCORPIUS: Listen, I know who you are, so it's probably only fair you know who I am.

ALBUS: What do you mean you know who I am?

SCORPIUS: You're Albus Potter. She's Rose Granger-Weasley. And I am Scorpius Malfoy. My parents are Astoria and Draco Malfoy. Our parents — they didn't get on.

ROSE: That's putting it mildly. Your mum and dad are Death Eaters!

SCORPIUS *(affronted)*: Dad was — but Mum wasn't.

ROSE looks away, and SCORPIUS knows why she does.

I know what the rumor is, and it's a lie.

ALBUS looks from an uncomfortable ROSE to a desperate SCORPIUS.

ALBUS: What — is the rumor?

SCORPIUS: The *rumor* is that my parents couldn't have children. That my father and my grandfather were so desperate for a powerful heir, to prevent the end of the Malfoy line, that they . . . that they used a Time-Turner to send my mother back . . .

ALBUS: To send her back where?

ROSE: The rumor is that he's Voldemort's son, Albus.

A horrible, uncomfortable silence.

It's probably rubbish. I mean . . . look, you've got a nose.

The tension is slightly broken. SCORPIUS laughs, pathetically grateful.

SCORPIUS: And it's just like my father's! I got his nose, his hair, and his name. Not that that's a great thing either. I mean — father-son issues, I have them. But, on the whole, I'd rather be a Malfoy than, you know, the son of the Dark Lord.

SCORPIUS and ALBUS look at each other and something passes between them.

ROSE: Yes, well, we probably should sit somewhere else. Come on, Albus.

ALBUS is thinking deeply.

ALBUS: No. *(Off ROSE's look.)* I'm okay. You go on . . .

ROSE: Albus. I won't wait.

ALBUS: And I wouldn't expect you to. But I'm staying here.

ROSE looks at him a second and then leaves the compartment.

ROSE: Fine!

SCORPIUS and ALBUS are left — looking at each other — unsure.

SCORPIUS: Thank you.

ALBUS: No. No. I didn't stay — for you — I stayed for your sweets.

SCORPIUS: She's quite fierce.

ALBUS: Yes. Sorry.

SCORPIUS: No. I like it. Do you prefer Albus or Al?

SCORPIUS grins and pops two sweets into his mouth.

ALBUS *(thinks)*: Albus.

SCORPIUS *(as smoke comes out of his ears)*: THANK YOU FOR STAYING FOR MY SWEETS, ALBUS!

ALBUS *(laughing)*: Wow.

ACT ONE, SCENE FOUR

TRANSITION SCENE

And now we enter a never-world of time change. And this scene is all *about magic. The changes are rapid as we leap between worlds. There are no individual scenes, but fragments, shards that show the constant progression of time.*

Initially we're inside Hogwarts, in the Great Hall, and everyone is dancing around ALBUS.

POLLY CHAPMAN: Albus Potter.

KARL JENKINS: A Potter. In our year.

YANN FREDERICKS: He's got his hair. He's got hair just like him.

ROSE: And he's my cousin. *(As they turn.)* Rose Granger-Weasley. Nice to meet you.

The SORTING HAT walks through the students, who spring into their Houses.

It becomes quickly apparent he's approaching ROSE, who is tense as she awaits her fate.

SORTING HAT:

I've done this job for centuries
On every student's head I've sat
Of thoughts I take inventories
For I'm the famous Sorting Hat

I've sorted high, I've sorted low,
I've done the job through thick and thin
So put me on and you will know
Which House you should be in . . .
Rose Granger-Weasley.

He puts his hat on ROSE's head.

GRYFFINDOR!

There's cheering from the Gryffindors as ROSE joins them.

ROSE: Thank Dumbledore.

SCORPIUS runs to take ROSE's place under the SORTING HAT's glare.

SORTING HAT: Scorpius Malfoy.

He puts his hat on SCORPIUS's head.

SLYTHERIN!

SCORPIUS was expecting this, he nods and half smiles. There's cheering from the Slytherins as he joins them.

POLLY CHAPMAN: Well, that makes sense.

ALBUS walks swiftly to the front of the stage.

SORTING HAT: Albus Potter.

He puts his hat on ALBUS's head — and this time he seems to take longer — almost as if he too is confused.

SLYTHERIN!

There's a silence.

A perfect, profound silence.

One that sits low, twists a bit, and has damage within it.

POLLY CHAPMAN: Slytherin?

CRAIG BOWKER JR.: Whoa! A Potter? In Slytherin.

ALBUS looks out, unsure. SCORPIUS smiles, delighted, as he shouts across to him.

SCORPIUS: You can stand next to me!

ALBUS *(thoroughly discombobulated)*: Right. Yes.

YANN FREDERICKS: I suppose his hair isn't that similar.

ROSE: Albus? But this is wrong, Albus. This is not how it's supposed to be.

And suddenly a flying lesson is happening with MADAM HOOCH.

MADAM HOOCH: Well, what are you all waiting for? Everyone stand by a broomstick. Come on, hurry up.

The kids all hurry into position beside their brooms.

Stick out your hands out over your broom, and say, "Up!"

EVERYONE: UP!

ROSE's and YANN's brooms sail into their hands.

ROSE and YANN: Yes!

MADAM HOOCH: Come on, now, I've no time for shirkers. Say "UP." "UP" like you mean it.

EVERYONE *(bar ROSE and YANN)*: UP!

Brooms sail up, including SCORPIUS's. Only ALBUS is left with his broom on the floor.

EVERYONE *(bar ROSE, YANN, and ALBUS)*: YES!

ALBUS: Up. UP. UP.

His broom doesn't move. Not even a millimeter. He stares at it with disbelieving desperation. There's giggling from the rest of the class.

POLLY CHAPMAN: Oh Merlin's beard, how humiliating! He really isn't like his father at all, is he?

KARL JENKINS: Albus Potter, the Slytherin Squib.

MADAM HOOCH: Okay. Children. Time to fly.

And suddenly HARRY appears from nowhere beside ALBUS as steam expands all over the stage.

We're back on platform nine and three-quarters and time has ticked on mercilessly. ALBUS is now a year older (as is HARRY, but less noticeably).

ALBUS: I'm just asking you, Dad, if you'll — if you'll just stand a little away from me.

HARRY *(amused)*: Second-years don't like to be seen with their dads, is that it?

An OVER-ATTENTIVE WIZARD begins to circle them.

ALBUS: No. It's just — you're *you* and — and I'm me and —

HARRY: It's just people looking, okay? People look. And they're looking at me, not you.

The OVER-ATTENTIVE WIZARD proffers something for HARRY to sign — he signs it.

ALBUS: At Harry Potter and his disappointing son.

HARRY: What does that mean?

ALBUS: At Harry Potter and his Slytherin son.

JAMES rushes past them, carrying his bag.

JAMES: Slythering Slytherin, stop with your dithering, time to get onto the train.

HARRY: Unnecessary, James.

JAMES *(long gone)*: See you at Christmas, Dad.

HARRY looks at ALBUS, concerned.

HARRY: Al —

ALBUS: My name is Albus, not Al.

HARRY: Are the other kids being unkind? Is that it? Maybe if you tried making a few more friends . . . without Hermione and Ron I wouldn't have survived Hogwarts, I wouldn't have survived at all.

ALBUS: But I don't need a Ron and Hermione. I've — I've got a friend, Scorpius, and I know you don't like him but he's all I need.

HARRY: Look, as long as you're happy, that's all that matters to me.

ALBUS: You didn't need to bring me to the station, Dad.

ALBUS picks up his case and makes hard away.

HARRY: But I *wanted* to be here . . .

But ALBUS is gone. DRACO MALFOY, his robes perfect, his blond ponytail precisely placed, emerges from within the crowds to be beside HARRY.

DRACO: I need a favor.

HARRY: Draco.

DRACO: These rumors — about my son's parentage — they don't seem to be going away. The other Hogwarts students tease Scorpius about it relentlessly — if the Ministry could release a statement reaffirming that all Time-Turners were destroyed in the Battle of the Department of Mysteries . . .

HARRY: Draco, just let it blow over — they'll soon move on.

DRACO: My son is suffering and — Astoria hasn't been well recently — so he needs all the support he can get.

HARRY: If you answer the gossip, you feed the gossip. There've been rumors Voldemort had a child for years, Scorpius is not the first to be accused. The Ministry, for your sake as well as ours,

needs to steer well clear.

DRACO frowns, annoyed, as the stage clears and ROSE and ALBUS stand ready with their cases.

ALBUS: As soon as the train leaves you don't have to talk to me.

ROSE: I know. We just need to keep the pretense up in front of the grown-ups.

SCORPIUS runs on — with big hopes and an even bigger case.

SCORPIUS *(hopeful)*: Hi, Rose.

ROSE *(definitive)*: Bye, Albus.

SCORPIUS *(still hopeful)*: She's melting.

And suddenly we're in the Great Hall and PROFESSOR McGONAGALL is standing at the front with a big smile on her face.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: And I'm pleased to announce Gryffindor's newest member of the Quidditch team — our — *(she realizes she can't be partial)* your superb new Chaser — Rose Granger-Weasley.

The hall erupts into cheers. SCORPIUS claps alongside them all.

ALBUS: Are you clapping her too? We hate Quidditch and she's playing for another House.

SCORPIUS: She's your cousin, Albus.

ALBUS: Do you think she'd clap for me?

SCORPIUS: I think she's brilliant.

The students circle ALBUS again as suddenly a Potions class begins.

POLLY CHAPMAN: Albus Potter. An irrelevance. Even portraits turn the other way when he comes up the stairs.

ALBUS hunches over a potion.

ALBUS: And now we add — is it horn of bicorn?

KARL JENKINS: Leave him and Voldemort's child to it, I say.

ALBUS: With just a little salamander blood . . .

The potion explodes loudly.

SCORPIUS: Okay. What's the counter-ingredient? What do we need to change?

ALBUS: Everything.

And with that, time moves ever onwards — ALBUS's eyes become darker, his face grows more sallow. He's still an attractive boy, but he's trying not to admit it.

And suddenly he's back on platform nine and three-quarters with his dad — who is still trying to persuade his son (and himself) that everything is okay. Both have aged another year.

HARRY: Third year. Big year. Here is your permission form for Hogsmeade.

ALBUS: I hate Hogsmeade.

HARRY: How can you hate a place you haven't actually visited yet?

ALBUS: Because I know it'll be full of Hogwarts students.

ALBUS screws up the paper.

HARRY: Just give it a go — come on — this is your chance to go nuts in Honeydukes without your mum knowing — no, Albus, don't you dare.

ALBUS *(pointing his wand)*: Incendio!

The ball of paper bursts into flame and ascends across the stage.

HARRY: Of all the stupid things!

ALBUS: The ironic thing is I didn't expect it to work. I'm terrible at that spell.

HARRY: Al—Albus, I've been exchanging owls with Professor McGonagall — she says you're isolating yourself — you're uncooperative in lessons — you're surly — you're —

ALBUS: So what would you like me to do? Magic myself popular? Conjure myself into a new House? Transfigure myself into a better student? Just cast a spell, Dad, and change me into what you want me to be, okay? It'll work better for both of us. Got to go. Train to catch. Friend to find.

ALBUS runs to SCORPIUS, who is sitting on his case — numb to the world.

(Delighted.) Scorpius . . . *(Concerned.)* Scorpius . . . Are you okay?

SCORPIUS says nothing. ALBUS tries to read his friend's eyes.

Your mum? It's got worse?

SCORPIUS: It's got the worst it can possibly get.

ALBUS sits down beside SCORPIUS.

ALBUS: I thought you'd send an owl . . .

SCORPIUS: I couldn't work out what to say.

ALBUS: And now I don't know what to say . . .

SCORPIUS: Say nothing.

ALBUS: Is there anything . . . ?

SCORPIUS: Come to the funeral.

ALBUS: Of course.

SCORPIUS: And be my good friend.

And suddenly the SORTING HAT is center stage and we're back in the Great Hall.

SORTING HAT:

Are you afraid of what you'll hear?
Afraid I'll speak the name you fear?
Not Slytherin! Not Gryffindor!
Not Hufflepuff! Not Ravenclaw!
Don't worry, child, I know my job,
You'll learn to laugh, if first you sob.
Lily Potter. GRYFFINDOR.

LILY: Yes!

ALBUS: Great.

SCORPIUS: Did you really think she'd come to us? Potters don't belong in Slytherin.

ALBUS: This one does.

As he tries to melt into the background, the other students laugh. He looks up at them all.

I didn't choose, you know that? I didn't choose to be his son.

ACT ONE, SCENE FIVE

MINISTRY OF MAGIC, HARRY'S OFFICE

HERMIONE sits with piles of paper in front of her in HARRY's messy office. She is slowly sorting through it all. HARRY enters in a rush. He is bleeding from a graze on his cheek.

HERMIONE: How did it go?

HARRY: It was true.

HERMIONE: Theodore Nott?

HARRY: In custody.

HERMIONE: And the Time-Turner itself?

HARRY reveals the Time-Turner. It shines out alluringly.

Is it genuine? Does it work? It's not just an hour-reversal turner — it goes back further?

HARRY: We don't know anything yet. I wanted to try it out there and then but wiser heads prevailed.

HERMIONE: Well, now we have it.

HARRY: And you're sure you want to keep it?

HERMIONE: I don't think we've a choice. Look at it. It's entirely different to the Time-Turner I had.

HARRY *(dry)*: Apparently wizardry has moved on since we were kids.

HERMIONE: You're bleeding.

HARRY checks his face in the mirror. He dabs at the wound with his robes.

Don't worry, it'll go with the scar.

HARRY *(with a grin)*: What you doing in my office, Hermione?

HERMIONE: I was anxious to hear about Theodore Nott and — thought I'd check whether you'd kept your promise and were on top of your paperwork.

HARRY: Ah. Turns out I'm not.

HERMIONE: No. You're not. Harry, how can you get any work done in this chaos?

HARRY waves his wand and the papers and books transform into neat piles. HARRY smiles.

HARRY: No longer chaotic.

HERMIONE: But still ignored. You know, there's some interesting stuff in here . . . There are mountain trolls riding Graphorns through Hungary, there are giants with winged tattoos on their backs walking through the Greek Seas, and the werewolves have gone entirely underground —

HARRY: Great, let's get out there. I'll get the team together.

HERMIONE: Harry, I get it. Paperwork's boring . . .

HARRY: Not for you.

HERMIONE: I'm busy enough with my own. These are people and beasts that fought alongside Voldemort in the great wizarding wars. These are allies of darkness. This — combined with what we have just unearthed at Theodore Nott's — could mean something. But if the Head of Magical Law Enforcement isn't reading his files —

HARRY: But I don't need to read it — I'm out there, hearing about it. Theodore Nott — it was me who heard the rumors about the Time-Turner and me who acted upon it. You really don't need to tell me off.

HERMIONE looks at HARRY — this is tricky.

HERMIONE: Do you fancy a toffee? Don't tell Ron.

HARRY: You're changing the subject.

HERMIONE: I truly am. Toffee?

HARRY: Can't. We're off sugar at the moment. *(Beat.)* You know, you can get addicted to that stuff?

HERMIONE: What can I say? My parents were dentists, I was bound to rebel at some point. Forty is leaving it a little late, but . . . You've just done a brilliant thing. You're certainly not being told off — I just need you to look at your paperwork every now and again, that's all. Consider this a gentle — nudge — from *the Minister for Magic*.

HARRY hears the implication in her emphasis, he nods.

How's Ginny? How's Albus?

HARRY: It seems I'm as good at fatherhood as I am at paperwork. How's Rose? How's Hugo?

HERMIONE *(with a grin)*: You know, Ron says he thinks I see more of my secretary, Ethel, *(she indicates off)* than him. Do you think there's a point where we made a choice — parent of the year or Ministry official of the year? Go on. Go home to your family, Harry, the Hogwarts Express is about to depart for another year — enjoy the time you've got left — and then come back here with a fresh head and get these files read.

HARRY: You really think this could all mean something?

HERMIONE *(with a smile)*: It could do. But if it does, we'll find a way to fight it, Harry. We always have.

She smiles once more, pops a toffee in her mouth, and leaves the office. HARRY is left alone. He packs his bag. He walks out of the office and down a corridor. The weight of the world upon his shoulders.

He walks, tired, into a telephone box. He dials 62442.

TELEPHONE BOX: Farewell, Harry Potter.

He ascends away from the Ministry of Magic.

ACT ONE, SCENE SIX

HARRY AND GINNY POTTER'S HOUSE

ALBUS can't sleep. He is sitting at the top of the stairs. He hears voices below him. We hear HARRY's voice before he's revealed. An elderly man in a wheelchair is with him, AMOS DIGGORY.

HARRY: Amos, I understand, I really do — but I'm only just home and —

AMOS: I've tried to make appointments at the Ministry. They say, "Ah, Mr. Diggory, we have an appointment for you, let's see, in two months." I wait. Very patiently.

HARRY: —and coming to my house in the middle of the night — when my kids are just getting ready for their new year at school — it's not right.

AMOS: Two months pass, I receive an owl, "Mr. Diggory, I'm awfully sorry, but Mr. Potter has been called away on urgent business, we're going to have to shift things around a little, are you available for an appointment in, let's see, in two months' time." And then it repeats again, and again . . . You're shutting me out.

HARRY: Of course I'm not. It's just, I'm afraid, as Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement I'm afraid I'm responsible —

AMOS: There's plenty you're responsible for.

HARRY: Sorry?

AMOS: My son, Cedric, you do remember Cedric, don't you?

HARRY *(remembering Cedric hurts him)*: Yes, I remember your son. His loss —

AMOS: Voldemort wanted you! Not my son! You told me yourself, the words he said were, "Kill the spare." The spare. My son, my beautiful son, was a spare.

HARRY: Mr. Diggory, as you know, I sympathize with your efforts to memorialize Cedric, but —

AMOS: A memorial? I am not interested in a memorial — not anymore. I am an old man — an old

dying man — and I am here to ask you — beg you — to help me get him back.

HARRY looks up, astonished.

HARRY: Get him back? Amos, that's not possible.

AMOS: The Ministry has a Time-Turner, does it not?

HARRY: The Time-Turners were all destroyed.

AMOS: The reason I'm here with such urgency is I've just heard rumor — strong rumor — that the Ministry seized an illegal Time-Turner from Theodore Nott and has kept it. For investigation. Let me use that Time-Turner. Let me have my son back.

There's a long, deadly pause. HARRY is finding this extremely difficult. We watch as ALBUS moves closer, listening.

HARRY: Amos, playing with time? You know we can't do that.

AMOS: How many people have died for the Boy Who Lived? I'm asking you to save one of them.

This hurts HARRY. He thinks, his face hardens.

HARRY: Whatever you've heard, the Theodore Nott story is a fiction, Amos, I'm sorry.

DELPHI: Hello.

ALBUS jumps a mile as DELPHI — a twenty-something, determined-looking woman — is revealed, looking through the stairs at him.

Oh. Sorry. Didn't mean to startle. I used to be a big stair-listener myself. Sitting there. Waiting for someone to say something the tiniest bit interesting.

ALBUS: Who are you? Because this is sort of my house and . . .

DELPHI: I'm a thief, of course. I'm about to steal everything you own. Give me your gold, your wand, and your Chocolate Frogs! *(She looks fierce and then smiles.)* Either that or I'm Delphini Diggory. *(She ascends the stairs and sticks out a hand.)* Delphi. I look after him — Amos — well, I try. *(She indicates AMOS.)* And you are?

ALBUS *(rueful grin)*: Albus.

DELPHI: Of course! Albus Potter! So Harry is your dad? That's a bit wow, isn't it?

ALBUS: Not really.

DELPHI: Ah. Have I just put my foot in it? It's what they used to say about me at school. Delphini Diggory — there isn't a hole she couldn't dig herself into.

ALBUS: They do all sorts with my name too.

Pause. She looks at him carefully.

AMOS: Delphi.

She makes to depart and then hesitates. She smiles at ALBUS.

DELPHI: We don't choose who we're related to. Amos . . . isn't just my patient, he's my uncle, it's part of the reason I took the job at Upper Flagley. But that's made it difficult. It's tough to live with people stuck in the past, isn't it?

AMOS: Delphi!

ALBUS: Upper Flagley?

DELPHI: St. Oswald's Home for Old Witches and Wizards. Come see us sometime. If you like.

AMOS: DELPHI!

She smiles and then trips as she travels down the stairs. She enters the room with AMOS and HARRY in it. ALBUS watches her.

DELPHI: Yes, Uncle?

AMOS: Meet the once-great Harry Potter, now a stone-cold Ministry man. I will leave you in peace, sir. If peace is the right word for it. Delphi, my chair . . .

DELPHI: Yes, Uncle.

AMOS is pushed out of the room. HARRY is left, looking forlorn. ALBUS watches on, thinking carefully.

ACT ONE, SCENE SEVEN

HARRY AND GINNY POTTER'S HOUSE, ALBUS'S ROOM

ALBUS is sitting on the bed as the world goes on outside his door. Still against the constant motion outside. We hear a roar from JAMES (off).

GINNY: James, please, ignore your hair, and tidy that damn room . . .

JAMES: How can I ignore it? It's pink! I'm going to have to use my Invisibility Cloak!

JAMES appears at the door, he has pink hair.

GINNY: That's *not* why your dad gave you that Cloak!

LILY: Who's seen my Potions book?

GINNY: Lily Potter, don't think you're wearing those to school tomorrow . . .

LILY appears at ALBUS's door. She's wearing fairy wings that flutter.

LILY: I love them. They're fluttery.

She exits as HARRY appears in ALBUS's doorway. He looks through.

HARRY: Hi.

There's an awkward pause between them. GINNY appears in the doorway. She sees what's happening, she stays a moment.

Just delivering a pre-Hogwarts gift — gifts — Ron's sent this . . .

ALBUS: Okay. A love potion. Okay.

HARRY: I think it's a joke about — I don't know what. Lily got farting gnomes, James got a comb that's made his hair turn a shade of pink. Ron — well, Ron's Ron, you know?

HARRY puts down ALBUS's love potion on his bed.

I also — this is from me . . .

He reveals a small blanket. GINNY looks at it, she sees HARRY is trying, and then she softly walks away.

ALBUS: An old blanket?

HARRY: I thought a lot about what to give you this year. James — well, James has been going on about the Invisibility Cloak since time itself, and Lily — I knew she'd love wings — but you. You're fourteen years old now, Albus, and I wanted to give you something which — meant something. This . . . is the last thing I had from my mum. The only thing. I was given to the Dursleys wrapped in it. I thought it had gone forever and then, when your great-aunt Petunia died, hidden amongst her possessions, surprisingly, Dudley found this and he kindly sent it on to me, and ever since then — well, anytime I've wanted luck I've found it and just tried to hold it and I wondered if you . . .

ALBUS: Wanted to hold it too? Okay. Done. Let's hope it brings me luck. I certainly need some.

He touches the blanket.

But you should keep it.

HARRY: I think — believe — Petunia wanted me to have it, that's why she kept it, and now I want you to have it from me. I didn't really know my mother — but I think she'd have wanted you to have it too. And maybe — I could come find you — and it — on Hallows' Eve. I'd like to be with it on the night they died — and that could be good for the two of us . . .

ALBUS: Listen, I've got quite a lot of packing to do, and you undoubtedly have Ministry work coming out of your ears, so . . .

HARRY: Albus, I want you to have the blanket.

ALBUS: And do what with it? Fairy wings make sense, Dad, invisibility cloaks, they also make sense — but this — really?

HARRY is slightly heartbroken. He looks at his son, desperate to reach out.

HARRY: Do you want a hand? Packing. I always loved packing. It meant I was leaving Privet Drive and going back to Hogwarts. Which was . . . well, I know you don't love it but . . .

ALBUS: For you, it's the greatest place on earth. I know. The poor orphan, bullied by his uncle and aunt Dursley . . .

HARRY: Albus, please — can we just —

ALBUS: . . . traumatized by his cousin, Dudley, saved by Hogwarts. I know it all, Dad. Blah, blah, blah.

HARRY: I'm not going to rise to your bait, Albus Potter.

ALBUS: The poor orphan who went on to save us all. So may I say — on behalf of wizarding kind — how grateful we are for your heroism. Should we bow now or will a curtsy do?

HARRY: Albus, please — you know, I've never wanted gratitude.

ALBUS: But right now I'm overflowing with it — it must be the kind gift of this moldy blanket that did it . . .

HARRY: Moldy blanket?

ALBUS: What did you think would happen? We'd hug. I'd tell you I always loved you. What? What?

HARRY *(finally losing his temper)*: You know what? I'm done with being made responsible for your unhappiness. At least you've got a dad. Because I didn't, okay?

ALBUS: And you think that was unlucky? I don't.

HARRY: You wish me dead?

ALBUS: No! I just wish you weren't my dad.

HARRY *(seeing red)*: Well, there are times I wish you weren't my son.

There's a silence. ALBUS nods. Pause. HARRY realizes what he's said.

No, I didn't mean that . . .

ALBUS: Yes. You did.

HARRY: Albus, you just know how to get under my skin . . .

ALBUS: You meant it, Dad. And, honestly, I don't blame you.

There's a horrible pause.

You should probably leave me alone now.

HARRY: Albus, please . . .

ALBUS picks up the blanket and throws it. It collides with RON's love potion, which spills all over the blanket and the bed, producing a small puff of smoke.

ALBUS: No luck or love for me, then.

ALBUS runs out of the room. HARRY goes after him.

HARRY: Albus. Albus . . . Please . . .

ACT ONE, SCENE EIGHT

DREAM, HUT-ON-THE-ROCK

There's a LARGE BOOM. Then there's a LARGE CRASH. DUDLEY DURSLEY, AUNT PETUNIA, *and* UNCLE VERNON *are cowering behind a bed.*

DUDLEY DURSLEY: Mum, I don't like this.

AUNT PETUNIA: I knew we made a mistake coming here. Vernon. Vernon. There's nowhere we can hide. Not even a lighthouse is far enough away!

There's another LARGE BOOM.

UNCLE VERNON: Hold on. Hold on. Whatever it is, it's not coming in here.

AUNT PETUNIA: We're cursed! He's cursed us! The boy has cursed us! *(Seeing* YOUNG HARRY.*)* This is all your fault. Get back in your hole.

YOUNG HARRY *flinches away as* UNCLE VERNON *holds out his rifle.*

UNCLE VERNON: Whoever's there, I should warn you — I'm armed.

There's a MASSIVE SMASH. And the door falls off its hinges. HAGRID *stands in the middle of the doorway. He looks at them all.*

HAGRID: Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey.

DUDLEY DURSLEY: Look. At. Him.

UNCLE VERNON: Stand back. Stand back. Behind me, Petunia. Behind me, Dudley. I'll soon see this scarramanger off.

HAGRID: Scarrawhat?

He picks up UNCLE VERNON*'s gun.*

Haven't seen one of these for a while.

He twists the end of the gun and ties it in a knot.

Oops-a-daisy.

And then he gets distracted. He's seen YOUNG HARRY.

Harry Potter.

YOUNG HARRY: Hello.

HAGRID: Las' time I saw yeh, yeh was only a baby. Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mum's eyes.

YOUNG HARRY: You knew my parents?

HAGRID: Where's me manners? A very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here — I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right.

From inside his coat he pulls a slightly squashed chocolate cake with "Happy Birthday Harry" written on it in green icing.

YOUNG HARRY: Who are you?

HAGRID *(laughing)*: True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. *(He looks around himself.)* What about that tea, then, eh? I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind.

YOUNG HARRY: Hogwhere?

HAGRID: Hogwarts. Yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

YOUNG HARRY: Er — no. Sorry.

HAGRID: Sorry? It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learnt it all?

YOUNG HARRY: Learnt what?

HAGRID *turns menacingly towards* UNCLE VERNON.

HAGRID: Do you mean ter tell me, that this boy — this boy! — knows nothin' abou' — about ANYTHING?

UNCLE VERNON: I forbid you to tell the boy anything more!

YOUNG HARRY: Tell me what?

HAGRID *looks at* UNCLE VERNON *and then at* YOUNG HARRY.

HAGRID: Harry — yer a wizard — yeh changed everything. Yer the most famous wizard in the whole world.

And then, right from the back of the room, whispering around everyone.

Words said with an unmistakable voice. The voice of VOLDEMORT *. . .*

Haaarry Pottttter.

ACT ONE, SCENE NINE

HARRY AND GINNY POTTER'S HOUSE, BEDROOM

HARRY wakes suddenly. Breathing deeply in the night.

He waits a moment. Calming himself. And then he feels intense pain in his forehead. In his scar. Around him, Dark Magic moves.

GINNY: Harry . . .

HARRY: It's fine. Go back to sleep.

GINNY: Lumos.

The room is filled with light from her wand. HARRY looks at her.

A nightmare?

HARRY: Yes.

GINNY: About what?

HARRY: The Dursleys — well, it started there — then it became something else.

Pause. GINNY looks at him — trying to work out where he is.

GINNY: Do you want a Sleeping Draught?

HARRY: No. I'll be fine. Go back to sleep.

GINNY: You don't seem fine.

HARRY says nothing.

(Seeing his agitation.) It can't have been easy — with Amos Diggory.

HARRY: The anger I can cope with, the fact he's right is harder. Amos lost his son because of me —

GINNY: That doesn't seem particularly fair on yourself . . .

HARRY: — and there's nothing I can say — nothing I can say to anyone — unless it's the wrong thing, of course . . .

GINNY knows what — or rather who — he's referring to.

GINNY: So that's what's upsetting you? The night before Hogwarts, it's never a good night if you don't want to go. Giving Al the blanket. It was a nice try.

HARRY: It went pretty badly wrong from there. I said some things, Ginny . . .

GINNY: I heard.

HARRY: And you're still talking to me?

GINNY: Because I know that when the time is right you'll say sorry. That you didn't mean it. That what you said concealed . . . other things. You can be honest with him, Harry . . . That's all he needs.

HARRY: I just wish he was more like James or Lily.

GINNY *(dry)*: Yeah, maybe don't be that honest.

HARRY: No, I wouldn't change a thing about him . . . but I can understand them, and . . .

GINNY: Albus is different and isn't that a good thing. And he can tell, you know, when you're putting on your Harry Potter front. He wants to see the real you.

HARRY: "The truth is a beautiful and terrible thing, and should therefore be treated with great caution."

GINNY looks at him, surprised.

Dumbledore.

GINNY: A strange thing to say to a child.

HARRY: Not when you believe that child will have to die to save the world.

HARRY gasps again — and does all he can not to touch his forehead.

GINNY: Harry. What's wrong?

HARRY: Fine. I'm fine. I hear you. I'll try to be —

GINNY: Does your scar hurt?

HARRY: No. No. I'm fine. Now, Nox that and let's get some sleep.

GINNY: Harry. How long has it been since your scar hurt?

HARRY turns to GINNY, his face says it all.

HARRY: Twenty-two years.

ACT ONE, SCENE TEN

THE HOGWARTS EXPRESS

ALBUS walks quickly along the train.

ROSE: Albus, I've been looking for you . . .

ALBUS: Me? Why?

ROSE isn't sure how to phrase what she has to say.

ROSE: Albus, it's the start of the fourth year, and so the start of a new year for us. I want to be friends again.

ALBUS: We never were friends.

ROSE: That's harsh! You were my best friend when I was six!

ALBUS: That was a long time ago.

He makes to walk away. She pulls him into an empty compartment.

ROSE: Have you heard the rumors? Big Ministry raid a few days ago. Your dad apparently was incredibly brave.

ALBUS: How do you always know about these things and I don't?

ROSE: Apparently he — the wizard they raided — Theodore Nott, I think — had all sorts of artifacts that broke all sorts of laws including — and this has got them all gooey — an illegal Time-Turner. And quite a superior one at that.

ALBUS looks at ROSE, everything falling into place.

ALBUS: A Time-Turner? Dad found a Time-Turner?

ROSE: Shh! Yes. I know. Great, right?

ALBUS: You're sure.

ROSE: Entirely.

ALBUS: Now I have to find Scorpius.

He walks down the train. ROSE *follows, still determined to say her piece.*

ROSE: Albus!

ALBUS turns decisively.

ALBUS: Who's told you that you have to talk to me?

ROSE *(sprung)*: Okay, maybe your mum owled my dad — but only because she's worried about you. And I just think —

ALBUS: Leave me alone, Rose.

SCORPIUS is sitting in his usual compartment. ALBUS enters first, ROSE still tailing him.

SCORPIUS: Albus! Oh hello, Rose, what do you smell of?

ROSE: What do I *smell* of?

SCORPIUS: No, I meant it as a nice thing, you smell like a mixture of fresh flowers and fresh — bread.

ROSE: Albus, I'm here, okay? If you need me.

SCORPIUS: I mean, nice bread, good bread, bread . . . what's wrong with bread?

ROSE walks away, shaking her head.

ROSE: What's wrong with bread!

ALBUS: I've been looking for you everywhere . . .

SCORPIUS: And now you've found me. Ta-da! I was hardly hiding. You know how I like to — get on early. Stops people staring. Shouting. Writing "son of Voldemort" on my trunk. That one never gets old. She really doesn't like me, does she?

ALBUS hugs his friend. With fierceness. They hold for a beat. SCORPIUS is surprised by this.

Okay. Hello. Um. Have we hugged before? Do we hug?

The two boys awkwardly dislocate.

ALBUS: Just a slightly weird twenty-four hours.

SCORPIUS: What's happened in them?

ALBUS: I'll explain later. We have to get off this train.

There's the sound of whistles from off. The train starts moving.

SCORPIUS: Too late. The train is moving. Hogwarts ahoy!

ALBUS: Then we have to get off a moving train.

TROLLEY WITCH: Anything from the trolley, dears?

ALBUS opens a window and makes to climb out.

SCORPIUS: A moving magical train.

TROLLEY WITCH: Pumpkin Pasty? Cauldron Cake?

SCORPIUS: Albus Severus Potter, get that strange look out of your eye.

ALBUS: First question. What do you know about the Triwizard Tournament?

SCORPIUS *(happy)*: Ooooh, a quiz! Three schools pick three champions to compete in three tasks for one Cup. What's that got to do with anything?

ALBUS: You really are an enormous geek, you know that?

SCORPIUS: Ya-huh.

ALBUS: Second question. Why has the Triwizard Tournament not been run in over twenty years?

SCORPIUS: The last competition included your dad and a boy called Cedric Diggory — they decided to win together but the Cup was a Portkey — and they were transported to Voldemort. Cedric was killed. They canceled the competition immediately after.

ALBUS: Good. Third question: Did Cedric need to be killed? Easy question, easy answer: No. The words Voldemort said were "Kill the spare." The spare. He died only because he was with my father and my father couldn't save him — we can. A mistake has been made and we're going to right it. We're going to use a Time-Turner. We're going to bring him back.

SCORPIUS: Albus, for obvious reasons, I'm not a massive fan of Time-Turners . . .

ALBUS: When Amos Diggory asked for the Time-Turner my father denied they even existed. He lied to an old man who just wanted his son back — who just loved his son. And he did it because he didn't care — because he doesn't care. Everyone talks about all the brave things Dad did. But he made some mistakes too. Some big mistakes, in fact. I want to set one of those mistakes right. I want us to save Cedric.

SCORPIUS: Okay, whatever was holding your brain together seems to have snapped.

ALBUS: I'm going to do this, Scorpius. I need to do this. And you know as well as I do, I'll entirely mess it up if you don't come with me. Come on.

He grins. And then disappears ever up. SCORPIUS hesitates for a moment. He makes a face. And then hoists himself up and disappears after ALBUS.

ACT ONE, SCENE ELEVEN

ROOF OF THE HOGWARTS EXPRESS

The wind whistles from all angles and it's a fierce wind at that.

SCORPIUS: Okay, now we're on the roof of a train, it's fast, it's scary, this has been great, I feel like I've learnt a lot about me, something about you, but —

ALBUS: As I calculate it we should be approaching the viaduct soon and then it'll be a short hike to St. Oswald's Home for Old Witches and Wizards . . .

SCORPIUS: The what? The where? Look, I am as excited as you are to be a rebel for the first time in my life — yay — train roof — fun — but now — oh.

SCORPIUS sees something he doesn't want to see.

ALBUS: The water will be an extremely useful backup if our Cushioning Charm doesn't work.

SCORPIUS: Albus. The Trolley Witch.

ALBUS: You want a snack for the journey?

SCORPIUS: No. Albus. The Trolley Witch is coming towards us.

ALBUS: No, she can't be, we're on top of the train . . .

SCORPIUS points ALBUS in the right direction, and now he can see the TROLLEY WITCH, who approaches nonchalantly, pushing her trolley.

TROLLEY WITCH: Anything from the trolley, dears? Pumpkin Pasty? Chocolate Frog? Cauldron Cake?

ALBUS: Oh.

TROLLEY WITCH: People don't know much about me. They buy my Cauldron Cakes — but they never really notice me. I don't remember the last time someone asked my name.

ALBUS: What is your name?

TROLLEY WITCH: I've forgotten. All I can tell you is that when the Hogwarts Express first came to be — Ottaline Gambol herself offered me this job . . .

SCORPIUS: That's — one hundred and ninety years. You've been doing this job for one hundred and ninety years?

TROLLEY WITCH: These hands have made over six million Pumpkin Pasties. I've got quite good at them. But what people haven't noticed about my Pumpkin Pasties is how easily they transform into something else . . .

She picks up a Pumpkin Pasty. She throws it like a grenade. It explodes.

And you won't believe what I can do with my Chocolate Frogs. Never — never — have I let anyone off this train before they reached their destination. Some have tried — Sirius Black and his cronies, Fred and George Weasley. ALL HAVE FAILED. BECAUSE THIS TRAIN — IT DOESN'T LIKE PEOPLE GETTING OFF IT . . .

The TROLLEY WITCH's hands transfigure into very sharp spikes. She smiles.

So please retake your seats for the remainder of the journey.

ALBUS: You were right, Scorpius. This train is magical.

SCORPIUS: At this precise moment in time, I take no pleasure in being right.

ALBUS: But I was also right — about the viaduct — that's water down there, time to try the Cushioning Charm.

SCORPIUS: Albus, this is a bad idea.

ALBUS: Is it? *(He has a moment's hesitation, then realizes the time for hesitation has passed.)* Too late now. Three. Two. One. Molliare!

He incants as he jumps.

SCORPIUS: Albus . . . Albus . . .

He looks down desperately after his friend. He looks at the approaching TROLLEY WITCH. Her hair wild. Her spikes particularly spiky.

Well, as fun as you clearly look, I have to go after my friend.

He pinches his nose, he jumps after ALBUS, incanting as he goes.

Molliare!

ACT ONE, SCENE TWELVE

MINISTRY OF MAGIC, GRAND MEETING ROOM

The stage is flooded with wizards and witches. They rattle and chatter like all true wizards and witches can. Amongst them, GINNY, DRACO, *and* RON. *Above them, on a stage,* HERMIONE *and* HARRY.

HERMIONE: Order. Order. Do I have to conjure silence? *(She pulls silence from the crowd using her wand.)* Good. Welcome to this Extraordinary General Meeting. I'm so pleased so many of you could make it. The wizarding world has been living in peace now for many years. It's twenty-two years since we defeated Voldemort at the Battle of Hogwarts, and I'm delighted to say there is a new generation being brought up having known only the slightest conflict. Until now. Harry.

HARRY: Voldemort's allies have been showing movement for a few months now. We've followed trolls making their way across Europe, giants starting to cross the seas, and the werewolves — well, I'm distressed to say we lost sight of them some weeks ago. We don't know where they're going or who's encouraged them to move — but we are aware they are moving — and we are concerned what it might mean. So we're asking — if anyone has seen anything? Felt anything? If you could raise a wand, we will hear everyone speak. Professor McGonagall — thank you.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: It did look like the potions stores had been interfered with when we returned from summer break, but not a huge amount of ingredients were missing, some Boomslang skin and lacewing flies, nothing on the Restricted Register. We put it down to Peeves.

HERMIONE: Thank you, Professor. We shall investigate. *(She looks around the room.)* Nobody else? Fine, and — gravest of all — and this hasn't been the case since Voldemort — Harry's scar is hurting again.

DRACO: Voldemort is dead, Voldemort is gone.

HERMIONE: Yes, Draco, Voldemort is dead, but these things all lead us to think that there is a possibility that Voldemort — or some trace of Voldemort — might be back.

This gets a reaction.

HARRY: Now this is difficult but we have to ask it to rule it out. Those of you with a Dark Mark . . . have you felt anything? Even a twinge?

DRACO: Back to being prejudiced against those with a Dark Mark, are we, Potter?

HERMIONE: No, Draco. Harry is simply trying to —

DRACO: You know what this is about? Harry just wants his face back in the newspapers again. We've had rumors of Voldemort coming back from the *Daily Prophet* once a year every year —

HARRY: None of those rumors came from me!

DRACO: Really? Doesn't your wife edit the *Daily Prophet*?

GINNY steps towards him, outraged.

GINNY: The sports pages!

HERMIONE: Draco. Harry brought this matter to the attention of the Ministry. And I — as Minister for Magic —

DRACO: A vote you only won because you are his friend.

RON is held back by GINNY as he charges at DRACO.

RON: Do you want a smack in the mouth?

DRACO: Face it — his celebrity impacts upon you all. And how better to get everyone whispering the Potter name again than with *(he does an impression of HARRY)* "my scar is hurting, my scar is hurting." And do you know what this all means — that the gossipmongers once again have an opportunity to defame my son with these ridiculous rumors about his parentage.

HARRY: Draco, no one is saying this has anything to do with Scorpius . . .

DRACO: Well, I, for one, think this meeting a sham. And I'm leaving.

He walks out. Others start to disperse after him.

HERMIONE: No. That's not the way . . . Come back. We need a strategy.

ACT ONE, SCENE THIRTEEN

ST. OSWALD'S HOME FOR OLD WITCHES AND WIZARDS

This is chaos. This is magic. This is St. Oswald's Home for Old Witches and Wizards and it is as wonderful as you might hope.

Walker frames are conjured into life, knitting wool is enchanted into chaos, and male nurses are made to dance tango.

These are people relieved of the burden of having to do magic for a reason — instead these witches and wizards do magic for fun. And what fun they have.

ALBUS and SCORPIUS enter, looking around themselves, amused, and let's face it, slightly scared.

ALBUS and SCORPIUS: Um, excuse me . . . Excuse me. EXCUSE ME!

SCORPIUS: Okay, so this place is wild.

ALBUS: We're looking for Amos Diggory.

There is suddenly total silence. Everything is instantly still. And slightly depressed.

WOOL WOMAN: And what you boys want with that miserable old sod?

DELPHI appears with a smile.

DELPHI: Albus? Albus! You came? How wonderful! Come and say hello to Amos!

ACT ONE, SCENE FOURTEEN

ST. OSWALD'S HOME FOR OLD WITCHES AND WIZARDS, AMOS'S ROOM

AMOS looks at SCORPIUS and ALBUS — irritated. DELPHI watches the three of them.

AMOS: So let me get this straight. You overhear a conversation — a conversation which was not meant for you to overhear — and you decide — without prompting, in fact, without leave — to interfere, and interfere hard, in someone else's business.

ALBUS: My father lied to you — I know he did. They do have a Time-Turner.

AMOS: Of course they do. You can move along now.

ALBUS: What? No. We're here to help.

AMOS: Help? What use could a pair of undersized teenagers be for me?

ALBUS: My father proved you don't have to be grown-up to change the wizarding world.

AMOS: So I should allow you to get involved because you're a Potter? Relying on your famous name, are you?

ALBUS: No!

AMOS: A Potter who is in Slytherin House — yes, I've read about you — and who brings a Malfoy with him to visit me — a Malfoy who may be a Voldemort? Who's to say you're not involved in Dark Magic?

ALBUS: But —

AMOS: Your information was obvious but the confirmation is useful. Your father did lie. Now leave. The pair of you. And stop wasting my time.

ALBUS *(with power and strength)*: No, you need to listen to me, you said it yourself — how much blood is on my father's hands. Let me help you change that. Let me help correct one of his mistakes. Trust me.

AMOS *(his voice raised)*: Did you not hear me, boy? I see no reason to trust you. So go. Now. Before I *make* you leave.

He raises his wand ominously. ALBUS looks at the wand — he deflates — AMOS has crushed him.

SCORPIUS: Come on, mate, if there's one thing we're good at it's knowing where we're not wanted.

ALBUS is reluctant to leave. SCORPIUS pulls him by the arm. He turns and they walk away.

DELPHI: I can think of one reason why you should trust them, Uncle.

They stop.

They're the only ones volunteering to help. They're prepared to bravely put themselves at risk to return your son to your side. In fact, I'm pretty sure they put themselves at risk even getting here . . .

AMOS: This is Cedric we're talking about . . .

DELPHI: And — didn't you say yourself, having someone inside Hogwarts might be a *massive* advantage?

DELPHI kisses the top of AMOS's head. AMOS looks at DELPHI, and then turns to look at the boys.

AMOS: Why? Why do you want to put yourself at risk? What's in it for you?

ALBUS: I know what it is to be the spare. Your son didn't deserve to be killed, Mr. Diggory. We can help you get him back.

AMOS *(finally showing emotion)*: My son — my son was the best thing that ever happened to me — and you're right, it was an injustice — a gross injustice. If you're serious . . .

ALBUS: We're deadly serious.

AMOS: This is going to be dangerous.

ALBUS: We know.

SCORPIUS: Do we?

AMOS: Delphi — perhaps if you were prepared to accompany them?

DELPHI: If that would make you happy, Uncle.

She smiles at ALBUS, he smiles back.

AMOS: You do understand even getting the Time-Turner will risk your lives.

ALBUS: We’re ready to put our lives at risk.

SCORPIUS: Are we?

AMOS *(gravely)*: I hope you have it in you.

ACT ONE, SCENE FIFTEEN

HARRY AND GINNY POTTER'S HOUSE, KITCHEN

HARRY, RON, HERMIONE, and GINNY sit, eating together.

HERMIONE: I've told Draco again and again — no one in the Ministry is saying anything about Scorpius. The rumors aren't coming from us.

GINNY: I wrote to him — after he lost Astoria — to ask if there's anything we could do. I thought maybe — as he was such a good friend to Albus — maybe Scorpius might want to stay over part of the Christmas break or . . . My owl came back with a letter containing one simple sentence: "Tell your husband to refute these allegations about my son once and for all."

HERMIONE: He's obsessed.

GINNY: He's a mess — a grieving mess.

RON: And I'm sorry for his loss but when he accuses Hermione of . . . Well . . . *(He looks across at HARRY.)* Oi droopy drawers, like I say to her all the time, it could be nothing.

HERMIONE: Her?

RON: The trolls could be going to a party, the giants to a wedding, you could be getting bad dreams because you're worried about Albus, and your scar could be hurting because you're getting old.

HARRY: Getting old? Thanks, mate.

RON: Honestly, every time I sit down now I make an "ooof" noise. An "ooof." And my feet — the trouble I'm having with my feet — I could write songs about the pain my feet give me — maybe your scar is like that.

GINNY: You talk a lot of rubbish.

RON: I consider it my speciality. That and my range of Skiving Snackboxes. And my love for all of you. Even Skinny Ginny.

GINNY: If you don't behave, Ronald Weasley, I will tell Mum.

RON: You wouldn't.

HERMIONE: If some part of Voldemort survived, in whatever form, we need to be prepared. And I'm scared.

GINNY: I'm scared too.

RON: Nothing scares me. Apart from Mum.

HERMIONE: I mean it, Harry, I will not be Cornelius Fudge on this one. I will not stick my head in the sand. And I don't care how unpopular that makes me with Draco Malfoy.

RON: You never really were one for popularity, were you?

HERMIONE shoots RON a withering look as she aims to hit him but RON jumps out of the way.

Missed.

GINNY hits RON. RON winces.

Hit. A very solid hit.

Suddenly an owl is in the room. It swoops in low and drops a letter on HARRY's plate.

HERMIONE: Bit late for an owl, isn't it?

HARRY opens the letter. Surprised.

HARRY: It's from Professor McGonagall.

GINNY: What does it say?

HARRY's face drops.

HARRY: Ginny, it's Albus — Albus and Scorpius — they never made it to school. They're missing.

ACT ONE, SCENE SIXTEEN

WHITEHALL, CELLAR

SCORPIUS is squinting at a bottle.

SCORPIUS: So we just take it?

ALBUS: Scorpius, do I really need to explain to you — übergeek and Potions expert — what Polyjuice does? Thanks to Delphi's brilliant preparation work, we are going to take this potion and be transformed, and thus disguised we will be able to enter the Ministry of Magic.

SCORPIUS: Okay, two points, one, is it painful?

DELPHI: Very — as I understand it.

SCORPIUS: Thank you. Good to know. Second point: Do either of you know what Polyjuice tastes of? Because I've heard it tastes of fish and if it does I will just vomit it back up. Fish doesn't agree with me. Never has. Never will.

DELPHI: Consider us warned. *(She knocks back the potion.)* It doesn't taste of fish. *(She begins to transform. It's agonizing.)* Actually it tastes quite pleasant, yum. It is painful but . . . *(She burps, loudly.)* Take it back. There is a — slight — *(She burps again, she turns into HERMIONE.)* Slight — overpowering — fishy residue.

ALBUS: Okay, that's — wow.

SCORPIUS: Double wow.

DELPHI/HERMIONE: This really doesn't feel how I — I even sound like her! Triple wow.

ALBUS: Right. Me next.

SCORPIUS: No. No way, José. If we're doing this, we're doing it *(he puts on a pair of familiar-looking glasses with a smile)* together.

ALBUS: Three. Two. One.

They swallow.

No, that's good. *(He's racked with pain.)* That's less good.

They both start to transform and it's agonizing.

ALBUS turns into RON, SCORPIUS into HARRY.

The two look at each other. There's a silence.

ALBUS/RON: This is going to be slightly weird, isn't it?

SCORPIUS/HARRY *(full of drama — he's really enjoying this)*: Go to your room. Go straight to your room. You've been an incredibly awful and bad son.

ALBUS/RON *(with a laugh)*: Scorpius . . .

SCORPIUS/HARRY *(tossing his cloak over his shoulder)*: It was your idea — I be him and you be Ron! I just want to have a little fun before I . . . *(And then he burps loudly.)* Okay, so that's utterly horrible.

ALBUS/RON: You know, he hides it well, but Uncle Ron's got a bit of a gut growing.

DELPHI/HERMIONE: We should go — don't you think?

They emerge onto the street. They enter a telephone box. They dial 62442.

TELEPHONE BOX: Welcome, Harry Potter. Welcome, Hermione Granger. Welcome, Ron Weasley.

They smile as the telephone box disappears into the floor.

ACT ONE, SCENE SEVENTEEN

MINISTRY OF MAGIC, MEETING ROOM

HARRY, HERMIONE, GINNY, and DRACO pace around a small room.

DRACO: Have we searched thoroughly beside the tracks . . .

HARRY: My department have searched once and are searching again.

DRACO: And the Trolley Witch is not able to tell us anything useful?

HERMIONE: The Trolley Witch is furious. She keeps talking about letting down Ottaline Gambol. She prides herself on her Hogwarts delivery record.

GINNY: Have there been any instances of magic reported by the Muggles?

HERMIONE: None so far. I have made the Muggle Prime Minister aware and he is filing what is known as a misper. Sounds like a spell. It isn't.

DRACO: So now we're relying on Muggles to find our children? Have we told them about Harry's scar too?

HERMIONE: We're merely asking the Muggles to help. And who knows how Harry's scar might be involved but it's certainly a matter we're taking seriously. Our Aurors are currently investigating anyone involved in Dark Magic and —

DRACO: This is not Death Eater–related.

HERMIONE: I'm not sure I share your confidence.

DRACO: I'm not confident, I'm right. The sort of cretins pursuing Dark Magic now . . . My son is a Malfoy, they wouldn't dare.

HARRY: Unless there's something new out there, something to —

GINNY: I agree with Draco. If this is a kidnap — taking Albus I understand, taking them both . . .

HARRY locks eyes with GINNY, it becomes clear what she wants him to say.

DRACO: And Scorpius is a follower, not a leader, despite everything I've tried to instill in him. So it's undoubtedly Albus who got him from that train and my question is, where would he take him?

GINNY: Harry, they've run away, you and I know it.

DRACO notices the couple staring at each other.

DRACO: Do you? Know it? What aren't you telling us?

There's a silence.

Whatever information you're concealing, I recommend you share it now.

HARRY: Albus and I had an argument, the day before last.

DRACO: And . . .

HARRY hesitates and then makes brave eye contact with DRACO.

HARRY: And I told him that there were times when I wished he weren't my son.

There's another silence. A profoundly powerful one. And then DRACO takes a dangerous step towards HARRY.

DRACO: If anything happens to Scorpius . . .

GINNY steps in between DRACO and HARRY.

GINNY: Don't throw around threats, Draco, please don't do that.

DRACO *(roar)*: My son is missing!

GINNY *(an equal roar)*: So is mine!

He meets her look. There's real emotion in this room.

DRACO *(lip curling, every inch his father)*: If you need gold . . . Everything the Malfoys have . . . He's my sole heir . . . He's my — only family.

HERMIONE: The Ministry has plenty in reserve, thank you, Draco.

DRACO makes to leave. He stops. He looks at HARRY.

DRACO: I don't care what you did or who you saved, you are a constant curse on my family, Harry Potter.

ACT ONE, SCENE EIGHTEEN

MINISTRY OF MAGIC, CORRIDOR

SCORPIUS/HARRY: And you're sure it's in there?

A guard walks past. SCORPIUS/HARRY *and* DELPHI/HERMIONE *try to affect performances.*

Yes, Minister, I definitely think this is a matter for the Ministry to ponder at length, yes.

GUARD *(with a nod)*: Minister.

DELPHI/HERMIONE: Let's ponder it together.

He walks on, they let out a sigh of relief.

It was my uncle's idea to use the Veritaserum — we slipped it into a visiting Ministry official's drink. He told us that the Time-Turner had been kept and even told us where — the office of the Minister for Magic herself.

She indicates a door. Suddenly they hear a noise.

HERMIONE *(from off)*: Harry . . . we should talk about it . . .

HARRY *(from off)*: There's nothing to talk about.

DELPHI/HERMIONE: Oh no.

ALBUS/RON: Hermione. And Dad.

The panic is instant and infectious.

SCORPIUS/HARRY: Okay. Hiding places. No hiding places. Anyone know any Invisibility Charms?

DELPHI/HERMIONE: Do we go . . . in her office?

ALBUS/RON: She'll be coming to her office.

DELPHI/HERMIONE: There's nowhere else.

She tries the door. She tries it again.

HERMIONE *(from off)*: If you don't talk to me or Ginny about it . . .

SCORPIUS/HARRY: Stand back. Alohomora!

He aims his wand at the door. The door swings open. He grins — delighted.

Albus. Block her. It has to be you.

HARRY *(from off)*: What is there to say?

ALBUS/RON: Me. Why?

DELPHI/HERMIONE: Well, it can't be either of us, can it? We *are* them.

HERMIONE *(from off)*: What you said was obviously wrong — but — there are more factors at play here than —

ALBUS/RON: But I can't . . . I can't . . .

There's a small kerfuffle and then ALBUS/RON ends up standing outside the door as HERMIONE and HARRY enter from off.

HARRY: Hermione, I'm grateful for your concern but there's no need —

HERMIONE: Ron?

ALBUS/RON: Surprise!!!

HERMIONE: What are you doing here?

ALBUS/RON: Does a man need an excuse to see his wife?

He kisses HERMIONE firmly.

HARRY: I should go . . .

HERMIONE: Harry. My point is . . . whatever Draco says — the things you said to Albus . . . I don't think it'll do any of us any good for you to dwell on it.

ALBUS/RON: Oh, you're talking about how Harry said sometimes he wished I — *(he corrects himself)* Albus weren't his son.

HERMIONE: Ron!

ALBUS/RON: Better out than in, that's what I say . . .

HERMIONE: He'll know . . . We all say stuff we don't mean. He knows that.

ALBUS/RON: But what if sometimes we say stuff we do mean . . . What then?

HERMIONE: Ron, now's not the time, honestly.

ALBUS/RON: Of course it isn't. Bye-bye, darling.

ALBUS/RON watches her go, hopeful she'll walk past her office and away. But of course she doesn't. He runs to block her before she enters through her door. He blocks her once, and then blocks her again, swinging his hips to do so.

HERMIONE: Why are you blocking the entrance to my office?

ALBUS/RON: I'm not. Blocking. Anything.

She again makes for the door, he blocks her again.

HERMIONE: You are. Let me into my room, Ron.

ALBUS/RON: Let's have another baby.

HERMIONE tries to dodge past him.

HERMIONE: What?

ALBUS/RON: Or if not another baby, a holiday. I want a baby or a holiday and I'm going to insist on it. Shall we talk about it later, honey?

She tries to get into the room one final time, he blocks her with a kiss. It develops into quite a struggle.

Maybe with a drink in the Leaky Cauldron? Love you.

HERMIONE *(relenting)*: If there is another stink pellet in there then Merlin won't help you. Fine. We're due to update the Muggles anyway.

She exits. HARRY exits with her.

ALBUS/RON turns towards the door. She reenters, this time, alone.

A baby — OR — a holiday? Some days you are off the scale, you know that?

ALBUS/RON: It's why you married me, isn't it? My puckish sense of fun.

She exits again. He starts to open the door but again she reenters, he slams it closed.

HERMIONE: I can taste fish. I told you to stay away from those fishfinger sandwiches.

ALBUS/RON: Right you are.

She exits. He checks she's gone and the relief floods out of him as he opens the door.

ACT ONE, SCENE NINETEEN

MINISTRY OF MAGIC, HERMIONE'S OFFICE

SCORPIUS/HARRY and DELPHI/HERMIONE are waiting on the other side of HERMIONE's office door as ALBUS/RON enters — he slumps, exhausted.

ALBUS/RON: This is all too weird.

DELPHI/HERMIONE: You were impressive. Good blocking action.

SCORPIUS/HARRY: I don't know whether to high-five you or frown at you for kissing your aunt about five hundred times!

ALBUS/RON: Ron's an affectionate guy. I was trying to distract her, Scorpius. I did distract her.

SCORPIUS/HARRY: And then there's what your dad said . . .

DELPHI/HERMIONE: Boys . . . She will be back — we don't have long.

ALBUS/RON *(to SCORPIUS/HARRY)*: You heard that?

DELPHI/HERMIONE: Where would Hermione hide a Time-Turner? *(She looks around the room, she sees the bookcases.)* Search the bookcases.

They start to search. SCORPIUS/HARRY looks at his friend, concerned.

SCORPIUS/HARRY: Why didn't you tell me?

ALBUS/RON: My dad says he wishes I weren't his son. Hardly a conversation starter, is it?

SCORPIUS/HARRY tries to work out what to say.

SCORPIUS/HARRY: I know the — Voldemort thing isn't — true — and — you know — but sometimes, I think I can see my dad thinking: How did I produce this?

ALBUS/RON: *Still* better than my dad. I'm pretty sure he spends most of his time thinking: How can I give him back?

DELPHI/HERMIONE tries to pull SCORPIUS/HARRY towards the bookshelves.

DELPHI/HERMIONE: Maybe if we could concentrate on the matter at hand.

SCORPIUS/HARRY: My point is, there's a reason we're friends, Albus — a reason we found each other, you know? And whatever this — adventure — is about . . .

Then he spots a book on the shelf that makes him frown.

Have you seen the books on these shelves? There are some serious books here. Banned books. Cursed books.

ALBUS/RON: How to distract Scorpius from difficult emotional issues. Take him to a library.

SCORPIUS/HARRY: All the books from the Restricted Section and then some. *Magick Moste Evile*. *Fifteenth-Century Fiends*. *Sonnets of a Sorcerer* — that's not even allowed in Hogwarts!

ALBUS/RON: *Shadows and Spirits*. *The Nightshade Guide to Necromancy*.

DELPHI/HERMIONE: They are quite something, aren't they . . .

ALBUS/RON: *The True History of the Opal Fire*. *The Imperius Curse and How to Abuse It*.

SCORPIUS/HARRY: And lookee here. Whoa. *My Eyes and How to See Past Them* by Sybill Trelawney. A book on Divination. Hermione Granger hates Divination. This is fascinating. This is a find . . .

He pulls the book from the shelf. And it falls open. And speaks.

BOOK: The first is the fourth, a disappointing mark.
You'll find it in parked but not in park.

SCORPIUS/HARRY: Okay. A book that talks. Bit weird.

BOOK: The second is the less fair of those that walk on two legs.
Grubby, hairy, a disease of the egg.
And the third is both a mountain to climb and a route to take.

ALBUS/RON: It's a riddle. It's giving us a riddle.

BOOK: A turn in the city, a glide through a lake.

DELPHI/HERMIONE: What have you done?

SCORPIUS/HARRY: I, uh, I opened a book. Something which has — in all my years on this planet — never been a particularly dangerous activity.

The books reach out and grab ALBUS/RON. He only just eludes their grasp.

ALBUS/RON: What is that?

DELPHI/HERMIONE: She's weaponized it. She's weaponized her library. This is where the Time-Turner will be. Solve the riddle and we'll find it.

ALBUS/RON: The first is the fourth. You'll find it in parked, not in park. Ed — de —

The books start to try to swallow DELPHI/HERMIONE.

SCORPIUS/HARRY: The second is a disease of the egg, the less fair of those who walk on two legs . . .

DELPHI/HERMIONE *(effusively)*: Men! De-men . . . tors. We need to find a book on dementors. *(The bookcase pulls her in.)* Albus!

ALBUS/RON: Delphi! What is going on?

SCORPIUS/HARRY: Concentrate, Albus. Do what she said. Find a book on dementors and be very careful.

ALBUS/RON: Here. *Dominating Dementors: A True History of Azkaban*.

The book flies open and swings dangerously at SCORPIUS/HARRY, *who has to dodge out of the way. He falls hard against a bookcase which attempts to consume him.*

BOOK: I was born in a cage
But smashed it with rage
The Gaunt inside me
Riddled me free
Of that which would stop me to be.

ALBUS/RON: Voldemort.

DELPHI *plunges through the books, back as herself.*

DELPHI: Work faster!

She's pulled back in, screaming.

ALBUS/RON: Delphi! Delphi!

He tries to grab her hand, but she's gone.

SCORPIUS/HARRY: She'd become herself again — did you notice?

ALBUS/RON: No! Because I was more worried about her being eaten by a bookcase! Find. Something. Anything on him.

He finds a book.

The Heir of Slytherin? Do you think?

He pulls the book from the shelf, it pulls back, ALBUS/RON *is consumed by the bookcase.*

SCORPIUS/HARRY: Albus? Albus!!

But ALBUS/RON is gone.

Okay. Not that. Voldemort. Voldemort. Voldemort.

He scans the shelves.

Marvolo: The Truth, this must be . . .

He pulls it open. Again it swings away, revealing a splintering light, and a deeper voice than previously heard.

BOOK: I am the creature you have not seen.
I am you. I am me. The echo unforeseen.
Sometimes in front, sometimes behind,
A constant companion, for we are entwined.

ALBUS emerges from the books. As himself again.

SCORPIUS/HARRY: Albus . . .

He tries to grab him.

ALBUS: No. Just — THIIIIIIINK.

ALBUS is violently pulled back into the bookcase.

SCORPIUS/HARRY: But I can't . . . an invisible echo, what is that? The only thing I'm good at is thinking and when I need to think — I can't.

The books pull him inside them; he's powerless. This is terrifying.

There's silence.

Then BANG — a shower of books are released from the bookcase — and SCORPIUS reemerges. Smashing the books aside.

SCORPIUS: No! You don't! Sybill Trelawney. No!!!!

He looks around, sunk but full of energy.

This is all wrong. Albus? Can you hear me? All this for a frigging Time-Turner. Think, Scorpius. Think.

Books try and grab him.

A constant companion. Sometimes behind. Sometimes in front. Hang on. I've missed it. Shadow. You're a shadow. *Shadows and Spirits*. It must be . . .

He climbs up the bookcase, which is horrifying as it rises up at him. Grabbing at him with his every step.

He pulls the book from the shelf. It comes out and the noise and chaos suddenly stop.

Is that —

Suddenly there's a smashing and ALBUS and DELPHI fall out of the shelves and down to the floor.

We beat it. We beat the library.

ALBUS: Delphi, are you . . . ?

DELPHI: Wow. Quite a ride.

ALBUS notices the book SCORPIUS is holding to his chest.

ALBUS: Is that? Scorpius? What's inside that book?

DELPHI: I think we should find out, don't you?

SCORPIUS opens the book. In the center of it — a spinning Time-Turner.

SCORPIUS: We've found the Time-Turner — I never thought we'd get this far.

ALBUS: Mate, now we've got this, the next stop is saving Cedric. Our journey has only just begun.

SCORPIUS: Only just begun and it's almost half killed us. Good. This is going to be good.

Whispers rise to a roar. And we cut to black.

ACT TWO

ACT TWO, SCENE ONE

DREAM, PRIVET DRIVE, CUPBOARD UNDER THE STAIRS

AUNT PETUNIA: Harry. Harry. These pots aren't clean. THESE POTS ARE A DISGRACE. HARRY POTTER. Wake up.

YOUNG HARRY wakes to see AUNT PETUNIA bearing down on him.

YOUNG HARRY: Aunt Petunia. What time is it?

AUNT PETUNIA: Time enough. You know, when we agreed to take you in, we hoped we could improve you — build you — make you a decent human being. So I suppose it's only ourselves we've got to blame that you've turned out . . . such a limp disappointment.

YOUNG HARRY: I try —

AUNT PETUNIA: Trying is not succeeding though, is it? There are grease smears on the glasses. There are scuff marks on the pots. Now get up and go to the kitchen and get scrubbing.

He gets out of bed. There's a wet smear down the back of his trousers.

Oh no. Oh no. What have you done? You've wet the bed, again.

She pulls back the covers.

This is very unacceptable.

YOUNG HARRY: I'm — sorry, I think I was having a nightmare.

AUNT PETUNIA: You disgusting boy. Only animals wet themselves. Animals and disgusting little boys.

YOUNG HARRY: It was about my mum and dad. I think I saw them — I think I saw them — die?

AUNT PETUNIA: And why would I have the slightest bit of interest in that?

YOUNG HARRY: There was a man shouting Adkava Ad-something Acabra — Ad — and the noise of a snake hissing. I could hear my mum scream.

AUNT PETUNIA takes a moment to reset herself.

AUNT PETUNIA: If you were really reliving their death, all you'd hear would be a screech of brakes and a horrific thud. Your parents died in a car accident. You know that. I don't think your mother had even time to scream. Lord spare you the details more than that. Now strip those sheets, get in the kitchen, and get scrubbing. I don't want to have to tell you again.

She exits with a bang.

And YOUNG HARRY is left holding the sheets.

And the stage contorts and trees rise as the dream twists into something else entirely.

Suddenly, ALBUS appears and stands looking at YOUNG HARRY.

And then, right from the back of the room, Parseltongue whispers around everyone.

He's coming. He's coming.

Words said in an unmistakable voice. The voice of VOLDEMORT . . .

Haaarry Pottttter.

ACT TWO, SCENE TWO

HARRY AND GINNY POTTER'S HOUSE, STAIRCASE

HARRY wakes in the darkness, breathing deeply. His exhaustion palpable, his fear overwhelming.

HARRY: Lumos.

GINNY enters, surprised by the light.

GINNY: Okay . . . ?

HARRY: I was sleeping.

GINNY: You were.

HARRY: You weren't. Any — news? Any owls or . . . ?

GINNY: None.

HARRY: I was dreaming — I was under the stairs and then I — I heard him — Voldemort — so clearly.

GINNY: Voldemort?

HARRY: And then I saw — Albus. In red — he was wearing Durmstrang robes.

GINNY: Durmstrang robes?

HARRY thinks.

HARRY: Ginny, I think I know where he is . . .

ACT TWO, SCENE THREE

HOGWARTS, HEADMISTRESS'S OFFICE

HARRY and GINNY stand in PROFESSOR McGONAGALL's office.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: And we don't know where in the Forbidden Forest?

HARRY: I haven't had a dream like it for years. But Albus was there. I know he was.

GINNY: We need to get searching as quickly as possible.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: I can give you Professor Longbottom — his knowledge of plants might be useful — and —

Suddenly there is a rumble in the chimney. PROFESSOR McGONAGALL looks at it, concerned. Then HERMIONE tumbles out.

HERMIONE: Is it true? Can I help?

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: Minister — this is quite unexpected . . .

GINNY: That may be my fault — I persuaded them to put out an emergency edition of the *Daily Prophet*. Asking for volunteers.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: Right. Very sensible. I expect . . . there will be quite a few.

RON bursts in. Covered in soot. Wearing a gravy-stained dinner napkin.

RON: Have I missed anything — I couldn't work out which Floo to travel to. Ended up in the kitchen somehow. *(HERMIONE glares as he pulls the napkin off himself.)* What?

Suddenly there is another rumble in the chimney and DRACO comes down hard, surrounded by cascading soot and dust.

Everyone looks at him, surprised. He stands and brushes the soot off himself.

DRACO: Sorry about your floor, Minerva.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: I dare say it's my fault for owning a chimney.

HARRY: Quite a surprise to see you, Draco. I thought you didn't believe in my dreams.

DRACO: I don't, but I do trust your luck. Harry Potter is always where the action is at. And I need my son back with me and safe.

GINNY: Then let's get to the Forbidden Forest and find them both.

ACT TWO, SCENE FOUR

EDGE OF THE FORBIDDEN FOREST

ALBUS and DELPHI face each other, holding wands.

ALBUS: Expelliarmus!

DELPHI's wand flies through the air.

DELPHI: You're getting it now. You're good at this.

She takes her wand back from him.

(In a posh voice.) "You're a positively disarming young man."

ALBUS: Expelliarmus!

Her wand flies back again.

DELPHI: And we have a winner.

The two high-five.

ALBUS: I've never been good at spells.

SCORPIUS appears at the back of the stage. He looks at his friend talking to a girl — and part of him likes it and part of him doesn't.

DELPHI: I was rubbish — and then something clicked. And it will for you too. Not that I'm a super witch or anything but — I think you're becoming quite some wizard, Albus Potter.

ALBUS: Then you should stick around, teach me more . . .

DELPHI: Of course I'm sticking around, we're friends, aren't we?

ALBUS: Yes. Yes. Definitely friends. Definitely.

DELPHI: Great. Wizzo!

SCORPIUS: What's wizzo?

SCORPIUS steps forward decisively.

ALBUS: Cracked the spell. I mean, it's pretty basic, but I was — well, I cracked it.

SCORPIUS *(over-enthusiastic, trying to join in)*: And I've found our way through to the school. Listen, are we sure this will work . . .

DELPHI: Yes!

ALBUS: It's a brilliant plan. The secret to not getting Cedric killed is to stop him winning the Triwizard Tournament. If he doesn't win, he can't be killed.

SCORPIUS: And I understand that, but . . .

ALBUS: So we just need to mess up his chances supremely badly in task one. The first task is getting a golden egg from a dragon, how did Cedric distract the dragon —

DELPHI puts her hand in the air. ALBUS grins and points at her. These two are getting on really well now.

Diggory.

DELPHI: — by transfiguring a stone into a dog.

ALBUS: — well, a little Expelliarmus and he won't be able to do that.

SCORPIUS isn't enjoying the DELPHI-ALBUS double act.

SCORPIUS: Okay, two points, first point, we're certain the dragon won't kill him?

DELPHI: It's always two points with him, isn't it? Of course it won't. This is Hogwarts. They won't let damage happen to any of the champions.

SCORPIUS: Okay, second *point* — more significant *point* — we're going back without any knowledge of whether we can travel back afterwards. Which is exciting. Maybe we should just — try going back an hour, say, first and then . . .

DELPHI: I'm sorry, Scorpius, we've no time to waste. Waiting here this close to the school is just too dangerous — I'm sure they'll be looking for you and . . .

ALBUS: She's right.

DELPHI: Now, you're going to need to wear these.

She pulls out two large paper bags. The boys pull robes from them.

ALBUS: But these are Durmstrang robes.

DELPHI: My uncle's idea. If you are in Hogwarts robes people will expect to know who you are. But there are two other schools competing at the Triwizard Tournament — and if you're in Durmstrang robes — well, you can fade into the background, can't you?

ALBUS: Good thinking! Hang on, where are your robes?

DELPHI: Albus, I'm flattered, but I don't think I can pretend to be a student, do you? I'll just keep in the background and pretend to be a — ooh, maybe I could pretend to be a dragon tamer. You're doing all the spell stuff anyway.

SCORPIUS looks at her and then at ALBUS.

SCORPIUS: You shouldn't come.

DELPHI: What?

SCORPIUS: You're right. We don't need you for the spell. And if you can't wear student robes — you're too big a risk. Sorry, Delphi, you shouldn't come.

DELPHI: But I have to — he's my cousin. Albus?

ALBUS: I think he's right. I'm sorry.

DELPHI: What?

ALBUS: We won't mess up.

DELPHI: But without me — you won't be able to work the Time-Turner.

SCORPIUS: You taught us how to use the Time-Turner.

DELPHI is really upset.

DELPHI: No. I won't let you do this . . .

ALBUS: You told your uncle to trust us. Now it's your turn. The school is close now. We should leave you here.

DELPHI looks at them both and takes a deep breath. She nods to herself and smiles.

DELPHI: Then go. But — just know this . . . Today you get an opportunity few are given — today you get to change history — to change time itself. But more than all that, today you get the chance to give an old man his son back.

She smiles. She looks at ALBUS. She leans down and gently kisses him on both cheeks.

She walks away into the woodland. ALBUS stares after her.

SCORPIUS: She didn't kiss me — did you notice? *(He looks at his friend.)* Are you okay, Albus? You look a little pale. And red. Pale and red at the same time.

ALBUS: Let's do this.

ACT TWO, SCENE FIVE

FORBIDDEN FOREST

The forest seems to grow bigger, thicker — and amongst the trees, people searching, looking for the missing wizards. But slowly people melt away until HARRY *is left alone.*

He hears something. He turns to his right.

HARRY: Albus? Scorpius? Albus?

And then he hears the sound of hooves. HARRY *is startled. He looks around for where the noise is coming from.*

Suddenly BANE *steps forward into the light. He is a magnificent centaur.*

BANE: Harry Potter.

HARRY: Good. You still recognize me, Bane.

BANE: You've grown older.

HARRY: I have.

BANE: But not wiser. For you trespass on our land.

HARRY: I have always respected the centaurs. We are not enemies. You fought bravely at the Battle of Hogwarts. And I fought beside you.

BANE: I did my part. But for my herd, and our honor. Not for you. And after the battle, the forest was deemed centaur land. And if you're on our land — without permission — then you are our enemy.

HARRY: My son is missing, Bane. I need help finding him.

BANE: And he is here? In our forest?

HARRY: Yes.

BANE: Then he is as stupid as you are.

HARRY: Can you help me, Bane?

There's a pause. BANE looks down at HARRY imperiously.

BANE: I can only tell you what I know . . . But I tell you not for your benefit but for the benefit of my herd. The centaurs do not need another war.

HARRY: Neither do we! What do you know?

BANE: I've seen your son, Harry Potter. Seen him in the movements of the stars.

HARRY: You've seen him in the stars?

BANE: I can't tell you where he is. I can't tell you how you'll find him.

HARRY: But you've seen something? You've divined something?

BANE: There is a black cloud around your son, a dangerous black cloud.

HARRY: Around Albus?

BANE: A black cloud that may endanger us all. You'll find your son again, Harry Potter. But then you could lose him forever.

He makes a sound like a horse's cry — and then makes hard away — leaving a bewildered HARRY behind. He begins to search again — now with even more fervor.

HARRY: Albus! Albus!

ACT TWO, SCENE SIX

EDGE OF THE FORBIDDEN FOREST

SCORPIUS and ALBUS round a corner to be faced with a gap in the trees . . .

A gap through which is visible . . . a glorious light . . .

SCORPIUS: And there it is . . .

ALBUS: Hogwarts. Never seen this view of it before.

SCORPIUS: Still get a tingle, don't you? When you see it?

And revealed through the trees is HOGWARTS — a splendid mass of bulbous buildings and towers.

From the moment I first heard of it, I was desperate to go. I mean, Dad didn't much like it there but even the way he described it . . . From the age of ten I'd check the *Daily Prophet* first thing every morning — certain some sort of tragedy would have befallen it — certain I wouldn't get to go.

ALBUS: And then you got there and it turned out to be terrible after all.

SCORPIUS: Not for me.

ALBUS looks at his friend, shocked.

All I ever wanted to do was go to Hogwarts and have a mate to get up to mayhem with. Just like Harry Potter. And I got his son. How crazily fortunate is that.

ALBUS: But I'm nothing like my dad.

SCORPIUS: You're better. You're my best friend, Albus. And this is mayhem to the nth degree. Which is great, thumbs-up great, it's just — I have got to say — I don't mind admitting — I am a tiny bit — just a tiny bit scared.

ALBUS looks at SCORPIUS and smiles.

ALBUS: You're my best friend too. And don't worry — I have a good feeling about this.

We hear RON's voice from off — he's clearly in close proximity.

RON: Albus? Albus.

ALBUS turns towards it, scared.

ALBUS: But we've got to go — now.

ALBUS takes the Time-Turner from SCORPIUS — he presses down upon it and the Time-Turner begins to vibrate and then explodes into a storm of movement.

And with it the stage starts to transform. The two boys look at it.

And there is a giant whoosh of light. A smash of noise.

And time stops. And then it turns over, thinks a bit, and begins spooling backwards, slow at first . . .

And then it speeds up.

ACT TWO, SCENE SEVEN

TRIWIZARD TOURNAMENT, EDGE OF THE FORBIDDEN FOREST, 1994

Suddenly everything is a riot of noise as a crowd consumes ALBUS *and* SCORPIUS*.*

And suddenly the "greatest showman on earth" (his words, not ours) is onstage, using Sonorus to amplify his voice, and . . . well . . . he's having a ball.

LUDO BAGMAN: Ladies and gentlemen — boys and girls — I give you — the greatest — the fabulous — the one — and the only TRIWIZARD TOURNAMENT.

There's a loud cheer.

If you're from Hogwarts. Give me a cheer.

There's a loud cheer.

If you're from Durmstrang — give me a cheer.

There's a loud cheer.

AND IF YOU'RE FROM BEAUXBATONS GIVE ME A CHEER.

There's a slightly limp cheer.

Slightly less enthusiastic from the French there.

SCORPIUS *(smiling)*: This has worked. That's Ludo Bagman.

LUDO BAGMAN: And there they are. Ladies and gentlemen — boys and girls — I present to you — the reason why we're all here — THE CHAMPIONS. Representing Durmstrang, what eyebrows, what a gait, what a boy, there's nothing he won't try on a broomstick, it's Viktor Krazy Krum.

SCORPIUS and ALBUS *(who are really getting into playing the Durmstrang students now)*: Go, go, Krazy Krum. Go, go, Krazy Krum.

LUDO BAGMAN: From the Beauxbatons Academy — *zut alors*, it's Fleur Delacour!

There's some polite applause.

And from Hogwarts not one but two students, he makes us all go weaky at the kneesy, he's Cedric Delicious Diggory.

The crowd go wild.

And then the other—you know him as the Boy Who Lived, I know him as the boy who keeps surprising us all . . .

ALBUS: That's my dad.

LUDO BAGMAN: Yes, it's Harry Plucky Potter.

There's cheering. Particularly from a nervous-looking girl at the edge of the crowd—this is YOUNG HERMIONE (played by the same actress as plays ROSE). It is noticeable that the cheering for HARRY is slightly less than that for CEDRIC.

And now — silence please, all. The — first — task. Retrieving a golden egg. From a nest of — ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, I give you — DRAGONS. And guiding the dragons — CHARLIE WEASLEY.

There are more cheers.

YOUNG HERMIONE: If you're going to stand so close I'd rather you didn't breathe on me quite so much.

SCORPIUS: Rose? What are you doing here?

YOUNG HERMIONE: Who's Rose? And what's happened to your accent?

ALBUS *(with a bad accent)*: Sorry. Hermione. He's got you mixed up with someone else.

YOUNG HERMIONE: How do you know my name?

LUDO BAGMAN: And with no time to lose let's bring out our first champion — facing a Swedish Short-Snout, I give you — CEDRIC DIGGORY.

A dragon roar distracts YOUNG HERMIONE, and ALBUS readies his wand.

And Cedric Diggory has entered the stage. And he seems ready. Scared, but ready. He dodges this way. He dodges that. The girls swoon as he dives for cover. They cry as one: Don't damage our Diggory, Mr. Dragon!

SCORPIUS looks concerned.

SCORPIUS: Albus, something is going wrong. The Time-Turner, it's shaking.

A ticking begins, an incessant, dangerous ticking. It's coming from the Time-Turner.

LUDO BAGMAN: And Cedric skirts left and he dives right — and he readies his wand — what has this young, brave, handsome man got up his sleevies now —

ALBUS *(extending his wand)*: Expelliarmus!

CEDRIC's wand is summoned to ALBUS's hand.

LUDO BAGMAN: — but no, what's this? Is it Dark Magic or is it something else entirely? His wand is flying away — Cedric Diggory is Disarmed —

SCORPIUS: Albus, I think the Time-Turner — something is wrong . . .

The Time-Turner's ticking gets louder still.

LUDO BAGMAN: It's all going wrong for Diggors. This could be the end of the task for him. The end of the tournament.

SCORPIUS grabs ALBUS.

There's a crescendo in the ticking, and a flash.

And time is turned back to the present, with ALBUS hollering in pain.

SCORPIUS: Albus! Did it hurt you? Albus, are you —

ALBUS: What happened?

SCORPIUS: There must be some limit — the Time-Turner must have some kind of *time* limit . . .

ALBUS: Do you think we've done it? Do you think we've changed anything?

Suddenly the stage is invaded from all sides by HARRY, RON (who now has a side parting in his hair and whose wardrobe choices have become rather more staid), GINNY, and DRACO. SCORPIUS looks at them all — and slips the Time-Turner back into his pocket. ALBUS looks at them rather more blankly — he's in a lot of pain.

RON: I told you. I told you I saw them.

SCORPIUS: I think we're about to find out.

ALBUS: Hello, Dad. Is something wrong?

HARRY looks at his son disbelievingly.

HARRY: Yes. You could say that.

ALBUS collapses onto the floor. HARRY and GINNY rush to help.

ACT TWO, SCENE EIGHT

HOGWARTS, HOSPITAL WING

ALBUS is asleep in a hospital bed. HARRY sits troubled beside him. Above them is a picture of a concerned kindly man. HARRY rubs his eyes — stands — and walks around the room. He stretches out his back.

And then he meets eyes with the painting. Which looks startled to be spotted. And HARRY looks startled back.

HARRY: Professor Dumbledore.

DUMBLEDORE: Good evening, Harry.

HARRY: I've missed you. Whenever I've dropped in on the headmistress lately, your frame's been empty.

DUMBLEDORE: Ah, well, I do like to pop into my other portraits now and then. *(He looks at ALBUS.)* Will he be all right?

HARRY: He's been out twenty-four hours, mostly in order so Madam Pomfrey could reset his arm. She said it was the strangest thing, it's like it was broken twenty years ago and allowed to set in the "most contrary" of directions. She says he'll be fine.

DUMBLEDORE: A difficult thing, I imagine, to watch your child in pain.

HARRY looks up at DUMBLEDORE, and then down at ALBUS.

HARRY: I've never asked how you felt about me naming him after you, have I?

DUMBLEDORE: Candidly, Harry, it seemed a great weight to place upon the poor boy.

HARRY: I need your help. I need your advice. Bane says Albus is in danger. How do I protect my son, Dumbledore?

DUMBLEDORE: You ask me, of all people, how to protect a boy in terrible danger? We cannot

protect the young from harm. Pain must and will come.

HARRY: So I'm supposed to stand and watch?

DUMBLEDORE: No. You're supposed to teach him how to meet life.

HARRY: How? He won't listen.

DUMBLEDORE: Perhaps he's waiting for you to see him clearly.

HARRY frowns as he tries to digest this.

(*With sensitivity.)* It is a portrait's curse and blessing to . . . hear things. At the school, at the Ministry, I hear people talking . . .

HARRY: And what is the gossip about me and my son?

DUMBLEDORE: Not gossip. Concern. That you two are struggling. That he's difficult. That he is angry with you. I have formed the impression that — perhaps — you are blinded by your love for him.

HARRY: Blinded?

DUMBLEDORE: You must see him as he is, Harry. You must look for what's wounding him.

HARRY: Haven't I seen him as he is? What's wounding my son? *(He thinks.)* Or is it who's wounding my son?

ALBUS *(mumbles in his sleep)*: Dad . . .

HARRY: This black cloud, it's someone, isn't it? Not something?

DUMBLEDORE: Ah really, what does my opinion matter anymore? I am paint and memory, Harry, paint and memory. And I never had a son.

HARRY: But I need your advice.

ALBUS: Dad?

HARRY looks at ALBUS and then back at DUMBLEDORE. But DUMBLEDORE is gone.

HARRY: No, where have you gone now?

ALBUS: We're in — the hospital wing?

HARRY turns his attention back to ALBUS.

HARRY *(discombobulated)*: Yes. And you're — you will be fine. For recuperation, Madam Pomfrey wasn't sure what to prescribe and said you should probably eat lots of — chocolate. Actually, do you mind if I have some — ? I've got something to tell you and I don't think you'll

like it.

ALBUS looks at his dad, what does he have to say? He decides not to engage.

ALBUS: Okay. I think.

HARRY takes some chocolate, he eats a big chunk. ALBUS looks at his dad, confused.

Better?

HARRY: Much.

He holds out the chocolate to his son. ALBUS takes a piece. Father and son munch together.

The arm, how does it feel?

ALBUS flexes his arm.

ALBUS: It feels great.

HARRY *(soft)*: Where did you go, Albus? I can't tell you what it did to us. Your mum was worried sick . . .

ALBUS looks up, he is a great liar.

ALBUS: We decided we didn't want to come to school. We thought we could start again — in the Muggle world. We discovered we were wrong. We were coming back to Hogwarts when you found us.

HARRY: In Durmstrang robes?

ALBUS: The robes were . . . The whole thing — Scorpius and I — we didn't think.

HARRY: And why — why did you run? Because of me? Because of what I said?

ALBUS: I don't know. Hogwarts isn't actually that pleasant a place when you don't fit in.

HARRY: And did Scorpius — encourage you to — go?

ALBUS: Scorpius? No.

HARRY looks at ALBUS, trying to see almost an aura around him, thinking deeply.

HARRY: I need you to stay away from Scorpius Malfoy.

ALBUS: What? Scorpius?

HARRY: I don't know how you became friends in the first place, but you did, and now — I need you to —

ALBUS: My best friend? My only friend?

HARRY: He's dangerous.

ALBUS: Scorpius? Dangerous? Have you met him? Dad, if you honestly think he's the son of Voldemort . . .

HARRY: I don't know what he is, I just know you need to stay away from him. Bane told me —

ALBUS: Who's Bane?

HARRY: A centaur with profound Divination skills. He said there's a black cloud around you and —

ALBUS: A black cloud?

HARRY: And I have very good reason to believe that Dark Magic is in a resurgence and I need to keep you safe from it. Safe from him. Safe from Scorpius.

ALBUS hesitates a moment, and then his face strengthens.

ALBUS: And if I won't? Stay away from him?

HARRY looks at his son, thinking quickly.

HARRY: There's a map. It used to be used for those wanting to get up to no good. Now we're going to use it to keep an eye — a permanent eye — on you. Professor McGonagall will watch your every movement. Any time you are seen together — she'll come flying — any time you attempt to leave Hogwarts — she'll fly. I expect you to go to your lessons — none of which you will now share with Scorpius, and between times, you will stay in the Gryffindor common room!

ALBUS: You can't make me go into Gryffindor! I'm Slytherin!

HARRY: Don't play games, Albus, you know what House you are. If she finds you with Scorpius, I will fix you with a spell which will allow me eyes and ears into your every movement, your every conversation. In the meantime, investigations will begin in my department as to his true heritage.

ALBUS *(starting to cry)*: But, Dad — you can't — that's just not . . .

HARRY: I thought for a long time I wasn't a good enough dad for you because you didn't like me. It's only now I realize that I don't need you to like me, I need you to obey me because I'm your dad and I do know better. I'm sorry, Albus. It has to be this way.

ACT TWO, SCENE NINE

HOGWARTS, STAIRCASE

ALBUS pursues HARRY across the stage.

ALBUS: What if I run? I'll run.

HARRY: Albus, get back in bed.

ALBUS: I'll run away again.

HARRY: No. You won't.

ALBUS: I will — and this time I'll make sure Ron can't find us.

RON: Do I hear my name?

RON enters on a staircase, his side parting now super-aggressive, his robes just a little bit too short, his clothes now spectacularly staid.

ALBUS: Uncle Ron! Thank Dumbledore. If ever we needed one of your jokes it's now . . .

RON frowns, confused.

RON: Jokes? I don't know any jokes.

ALBUS: Of course you do. You run a joke shop.

RON *(now supremely confused)*: A joke shop? Well now. Anyway I'm pleased I caught you. I was going to bring some sweets — for a, uh, sort of, a, get well soon, but, uh . . . Actually Padma — she thinks about things a lot more — deeply — than I do — and she thought it'd be nicer for you to get something useful for school. So we got you a — set of quills. Yes. Yes. Yes. Look at these bad boys. Top of the range.

ALBUS: Who's Padma?

HARRY frowns at ALBUS.

HARRY: Your aunt.

ALBUS: I have an Aunt Padma?

RON *(to HARRY)*: Taken a Confundus Charm to the head, has he? *(To ALBUS.)* My wife, Padma. You remember. Talks slightly too close to your face, smells a bit minty. *(Leans in.)* Padma, mother of Panju! *(To HARRY.)* That's why I'm here, of course. Panju. He's in trouble again. I wanted to just send a Howler but Padma insisted I come in person. I don't know why. He just laughs at me.

ALBUS: But . . . you're married to Hermione.

Beat. RON doesn't understand this at all.

RON: Hermione. No. Nooooo. Merlin's beard.

HARRY: Albus has also forgotten that he was sorted into Gryffindor. Conveniently.

RON: Yes, well, sorry, old chap, but you're a Gryffindor.

ALBUS: But how did I get sorted into Gryffindor?

RON: You persuaded the Sorting Hat, don't you remember? Panju bet you that you couldn't get into Gryffindor if your life depended on it, so you chose Gryffindor to spite him. I can't blame you, *(dry)* we'd all like to wipe the smile off his face sometimes, wouldn't we? *(Terrified.)* Please don't tell Padma I said that.

ALBUS: Who's Panju?

RON and HARRY stare at ALBUS.

RON: Bloody hell, you're really not yourself, are you? Anyway, better go, before I'm sent a Howler myself.

He stumbles on, not even an inch of the man he was.

ALBUS: But that doesn't . . . make sense.

HARRY: Albus, whatever you're feigning, it isn't working. I will not change my mind.

ALBUS: Dad, you have two choices, either you take me to —

HARRY: No, you're the one with the choice, Albus. You do this, or you get in deeper, much deeper trouble — do you understand?

SCORPIUS: Albus? You're okay. That's fantastic.

HARRY: He's completely cured. And we've got to go.

ALBUS looks up at SCORPIUS and his heart breaks. He walks on.

SCORPIUS: Are you mad at me? What's going on?

ALBUS stops and turns to SCORPIUS.

ALBUS: Did it work? Did any of it work?

SCORPIUS: No . . . But, Albus —

HARRY: Albus. Whatever gibberish you're talking, you need to stop it, now. This is your final warning.

ALBUS looks torn between his dad and his friend.

ALBUS: I can't, okay?

SCORPIUS: You can't what?

ALBUS: Just — we'll be better off without each other, okay?

SCORPIUS is left looking up after him. Heartbroken.

ACT TWO, SCENE TEN

HOGWARTS, HEADMISTRESS'S OFFICE

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL is full of unhappiness, HARRY is full of purpose, GINNY is not sure what she's supposed to be.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: I'm not sure this is what the Marauder's Map was intended for.

HARRY: If you see them together, then get to them as quickly as possible, and keep them separate.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: Harry, are you sure this is the right decision? Because far be it from me to doubt the wisdom of the centaurs, but Bane is an extremely angry centaur and . . . it's not beyond him to twist the constellations for his own ends.

HARRY: I trust Bane. Albus is to stay away from Scorpius. For his sake, and others.

GINNY: I think what Harry means is . . .

HARRY *(with finality)*: The professor knows what I mean.

GINNY looks at HARRY, surprised that he'd talk to her that way.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: Albus has been checked by the greatest witches and wizards in the country and no one can find or sense a hex or a curse.

HARRY: And Dumbledore — Dumbledore said —

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: What?

HARRY: His portrait. We spoke. He said some things which made sense —

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: Dumbledore is dead, Harry. And I've told you before, portraits don't represent even half of their subjects.

HARRY: He said love had blinded me.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: A head teacher's portrait is a memoir. It is supposed to be a support

mechanism for the decisions I have to make. But I was advised as I took this job to not mistake the painting for the person. And you would be well-advised to do the same.

HARRY: But he was right. I see it now.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: Harry, you've been put under enormous pressure, the loss of Albus, the search for him, the fears as to what your scar might mean. But trust me when I tell you, you are making a mistake.

HARRY: Albus didn't like me before. He might not like me again. But he will be safe. With the greatest respect, Minerva — you don't have children —

GINNY: Harry!

HARRY: — you don't understand.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL *(deeply hurt)*: I'd hope that a lifetime spent in the teaching profession would mean . . .

HARRY: This map will reveal to you where my son is at all times — I expect you to use it. And if I hear you don't — then I will come down on this school as hard as I can — using the full force of the Ministry — is that understood?

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL *(bewildered by this vitriol)*: Perfectly.

GINNY looks at HARRY, unsure of what he's become. He doesn't look back.

ACT TWO, SCENE ELEVEN

HOGWARTS, DEFENSE AGAINST THE DARK ARTS CLASSROOM

ALBUS enters the classroom — slightly unsure.

HERMIONE: Ah yes. Our train absconder. Finally joining us.

ALBUS: Hermione?

He looks amazed. HERMIONE is standing at the front of the lesson.

HERMIONE: Professor Granger I believe is my name, Potter.

ALBUS: What are you doing here?

HERMIONE: Teaching. For my sins. What are you doing here? Learning, I hope.

ALBUS: But you're . . . you're . . . Minister for Magic.

HERMIONE: Been having those dreams again, have you, Potter? Today we're going to look at Patronus Charms.

ALBUS *(amazed)*: You're our Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher?

There are titters.

HERMIONE: Losing patience now. Ten points from Gryffindor for stupidity.

POLLY CHAPMAN *(standing, full of affront)*: No. No. He's doing it deliberately. He hates Gryffindor and everyone knows it.

HERMIONE: Sit down, Polly Chapman, before this gets even worse. *(POLLY sighs and then sits.)* And I suggest you join her, Albus. And end this charade.

ALBUS: But you're not this mean.

HERMIONE: And that's twenty points from Gryffindor to assure Albus Potter that I am this mean.

YANN FREDERICKS: If you don't sit down right now, Albus . . .

ALBUS sits.

ALBUS: Can I just say —

HERMIONE: No, you can't. Just keep quiet, Potter, otherwise you'll lose what limited popularity you already have. Now who can tell me what a Patronus is? No? No one. You really are a most disappointing bunch.

HERMIONE smiles a thin smile. She really is quite mean.

ALBUS: No. This is stupid. Where's Rose? She'll tell you that you're being ridiculous.

HERMIONE: Who's Rose? Your invisible friend?

ALBUS: Rose Granger-Weasley! Your daughter! *(He realizes.)* Of course — because you and Ron aren't married Rose —

There's giggling.

HERMIONE: How dare you! Fifty points from Gryffindor. And I assure you if anyone interrupts me again it'll be a hundred points . . .

She stares around the room. No one moves a muscle.

Good. A Patronus is a magical charm, a projection of all your most positive feelings, and takes the shape of the animal with whom you share the deepest affinity. It is a gift of light. If you can conjure a Patronus, you can protect yourself against the world. Which, in some of our cases, seems like a necessity sooner rather than later.

ACT TWO, SCENE TWELVE

HOGWARTS, STAIRCASES

ALBUS walks up a staircase. Looking around as he does.

He doesn't see anything. He exits. The staircases move in almost a dance.

SCORPIUS enters behind him. He thinks he's seen ALBUS, he realizes he isn't there.

He slumps down to the floor as the staircase sweeps around.

MADAM HOOCH enters and walks up the staircase. At the top, she gestures for SCORPIUS to move.

He does. And slopes off — his abject loneliness clear.

ALBUS enters and walks up one staircase.

SCORPIUS enters and walks up another.

The staircases meet. The two boys look at each other.

Lost and hopeful—all at once.

And then ALBUS looks away and the moment is broken—and with it, possibly, the friendship.

And now the staircases part — the two look at each other — one full of guilt — the other full of pain — both full of unhappiness.

ACT TWO, SCENE THIRTEEN

HARRY AND GINNY POTTER'S HOUSE, KITCHEN

GINNY and HARRY watch each other warily. There is an argument due, and both of them know it.

HARRY: This is the right decision.

GINNY: You almost sound convinced.

HARRY: You told me to be honest with him, but actually I needed to be honest with myself, trust what my heart was telling me . . .

GINNY: Harry, you have one of the greatest hearts of any wizard who ever lived, and I do not believe your heart told you to do this.

They hear a knock on the door.

Saved by the door.

She exits.

After a moment, DRACO enters, consumed by anger but hiding it well.

DRACO: I can't stay long. I won't need long.

HARRY: How can I help?

DRACO: I'm not here to antagonize you. But my son is in tears and I am his father and so I am here to ask why you would keep apart two good friends.

HARRY: I'm not keeping them apart.

DRACO: You've changed school timetables, you've threatened both teachers and Albus himself. Why?

HARRY looks at DRACO carefully and then turns away.

HARRY: I have to protect my son.

DRACO: From Scorpius?

HARRY: Bane told me he sensed a darkness around my son. Near my son.

DRACO: What are you implying, Potter?

HARRY turns and looks DRACO dead in the eye.

HARRY: Are you sure . . . are you really sure he's yours, Draco?

There's a deadly silence.

DRACO: You take that back . . . right now.

But HARRY doesn't take it back.

So DRACO takes his wand out.

HARRY: You do not want to do this.

DRACO: Yes, I do.

HARRY: I don't want to hurt you, Draco.

DRACO: How interesting, because I do want to hurt you.

The two square up. And then release their wands.

DRACO and HARRY: Expelliarmus!

Their wands repel and then break apart.

DRACO: Incarcerous!

HARRY dodges a blast from DRACO's wand.

HARRY: Tarantallegra!

DRACO throws himself out of the way.

You've been practicing, Draco.

DRACO: And you've got sloppy, Potter. Densaugeo!

HARRY just manages to get out of the way.

HARRY: Rictusempra!

DRACO uses a chair to block the blast.

DRACO: Flipendo!

HARRY is sent twirling through the air. DRACO laughs.

Keep up, old man.

HARRY: We're the same age, Draco.

DRACO: I wear it better.

HARRY: Brachiabindo!

DRACO is bound tightly.

DRACO: That really the best you got? Emancipare.

DRACO releases his own binds.

Levicorpus!

HARRY has to throw himself out of the way.

Mobilicorpus! Oh, this is too much fun . . .

DRACO bounces HARRY up and down on the table. And then as HARRY rolls away, DRACO jumps onto the table — he readies his wand, but as he does, HARRY hits him with a spell . . .

HARRY: Obscuro!

DRACO releases himself from his blindfold as soon as it hits.

The two square up — HARRY throws a chair.

DRACO ducks underneath it and slows the chair with his wand.

GINNY: I only left this room three minutes ago!

She looks at the mess of the kitchen. She looks at the chairs suspended in the air. She signals them back to the floor with her wand.

(Drier than dry.) What did I miss?

ACT TWO, SCENE FOURTEEN

HOGWARTS, STAIRCASES

SCORPIUS walks unhappily down a staircase.

DELPHI scurries in from the other side.

DELPHI: So — technically — I shouldn't be here.

SCORPIUS: Delphi?

DELPHI: In fact, technically I'm endangering our entire operation . . . which is not . . . well, I'm not a natural risk-taker as you know. I've never been to Hogwarts. Pretty lax security here, isn't there? And so many portraits. And corridors. And ghosts! This half-headless, strange-looking ghost told me where I could find you, can you believe that?

SCORPIUS: You've never been to Hogwarts?

DELPHI: I was — unwell — as a child — for a few years. Other people got to go — I did not.

SCORPIUS: You were too — ill? I'm sorry, I didn't know that.

DELPHI: I don't advertise the fact — I prefer not to be seen as a tragic case, you know?

This registers with SCORPIUS. He looks up to say something but DELPHI suddenly ducks from view as a student walks past. SCORPIUS tries to look casual until the student passes.

Have they gone?

SCORPIUS: Delphi, maybe it is too dangerous for you to be here —

DELPHI: Well — someone's got to do something about this.

SCORPIUS: Delphi, none of it worked, time-turning, we failed.

DELPHI: I know. Albus owled me. The history books changed but not enough — Cedric still died. In fact, failing the first task only made him more determined to win the second.

SCORPIUS: And Ron and Hermione have gone completely skewwhiff — and I still haven't figured out why.

DELPHI: And that's why Cedric has to wait. It's all become quite confused and you're entirely right to be keeping hold of the Time-Turner, Scorpius. But what I meant was — someone's got to do something about the two of you.

SCORPIUS: Oh.

DELPHI: You're best friends. Every owl he sends I can feel your absence. He's destroyed by it.

SCORPIUS: Sounds like he's found a shoulder to cry on. How many owls has he sent you now?

DELPHI smiles softly.

Sorry. That's — I didn't mean — I just — don't understand what's going on. I've tried to see him, talk to him, but every time I do he runs off.

DELPHI: You know, I didn't have a best friend when I was your age. I wanted one. Desperately. When I was younger I even invented one but —

SCORPIUS: I had one of those too. Called Flurry. We fell out over the correct rules of Gobstones.

DELPHI: Albus needs you, Scorpius. That's a wonderful thing.

SCORPIUS: He needs me to do what?

DELPHI: That's the thing, isn't it? About friendships. You don't know what he needs. You only know he needs it. Find him, Scorpius. You two — you belong together.

ACT TWO, SCENE FIFTEEN

HARRY AND GINNY POTTER'S HOUSE, KITCHEN

HARRY and DRACO sit far apart. GINNY stands between them.

DRACO: Sorry about your kitchen, Ginny.

GINNY: Oh, it's not my kitchen. Harry does most of the cooking.

DRACO: I can't talk to him either. Scorpius. Especially since — Astoria has gone. I can't even talk about how losing her has affected him. As hard as I try, I can't reach him. You can't talk to Albus. I can't talk to Scorpius. That's what this is about. Not about my son being evil. Because as much as you might take the word of a haughty centaur, you know the power of friendship.

HARRY: Draco, whatever you may think . . .

DRACO: I always envied you them, you know — Weasley and Granger. I had —

GINNY: Crabbe and Goyle.

DRACO: Two lunks who wouldn't know one end of a broomstick from another. You — the three of you — you shone, you know? You liked each other. You had fun. I envied you those friendships more than anything else.

GINNY: I envied them too.

HARRY looks at GINNY, surprised.

HARRY: I need to protect him —

DRACO: My father thought he was protecting me. Most of the time. I think you have to make a choice — at a certain point — of the man you want to be. And I tell you that at that time you need a parent or a friend. And if you've learnt to hate your parent by then and you have no friends . . . then you're all alone. And being alone — that's so hard. I was alone. And it sent me to a truly dark place. For a long time. Tom Riddle was also a lonely child. You may not understand that, Harry, but I do — and I think Ginny does too.

GINNY: He's right.

DRACO: Tom Riddle didn't emerge from his dark place. And so Tom Riddle became Lord Voldemort. Maybe the black cloud Bane saw was Albus's loneliness. His pain. His hatred. Don't lose the boy. You'll regret it. And so will he. Because he needs you, and Scorpius, whether or not he now knows it.

HARRY looks at DRACO, he thinks.

He opens his mouth to speak. He thinks.

GINNY: Harry. Will you get the Floo powder or shall I?

HARRY looks up at his wife.

ACT TWO, SCENE SIXTEEN

HOGWARTS, LIBRARY

SCORPIUS arrives in the library. He looks left and right. And then he sees ALBUS. And ALBUS sees him.

SCORPIUS: Hi.

ALBUS: Scorpius. I can't . . .

SCORPIUS: I know. You're in Gryffindor now. You don't want to see me now. But here I am anyway. Talking to you.

ALBUS: Well, I can't talk so . . .

SCORPIUS: You have to. You think you can just ignore everything that's happened? The world has gone crazy, have you noticed?

ALBUS: I know, okay? Ron's gone strange. Hermione's a professor, it's all wrong, but . . .

SCORPIUS: And Rose doesn't exist.

ALBUS: I know. Look, I don't understand everything but you can't be here.

SCORPIUS: Because of what we did, Rose wasn't even born. Do you remember being told about the Triwizard Tournament Yule Ball? All the four Triwizard champions took a partner. Your dad took Parvati Patil, Viktor Krum took —

ALBUS: Hermione. And Ron got jealous and behaved like a prat.

SCORPIUS: Only he didn't. I found Rita Skeeter's book about them. And it's very different. Ron took Hermione to the ball.

ALBUS: What?

POLLY CHAPMAN: Sshhhh!

SCORPIUS looks at POLLY and drops his volume.

SCORPIUS: As friends. And they danced in a friendly way, and it was nice, and then he danced with Padma Patil and that was nicer, and they started dating and he changed a bit and then they got married and meanwhile Hermione became a —

ALBUS: — psychopath.

SCORPIUS: Hermione was supposed to go to that ball with Krum — do you know why she didn't? Because she had suspicions the two strange Durmstrang boys she met before the first task were somehow involved in the disappearance of Cedric's wand. She believed we — under Viktor's orders — cost Cedric the first task . . .

ALBUS: Wow.

SCORPIUS: And without Krum, Ron never got jealous and that jealousy was all-important and so Ron and Hermione stayed very good friends but never fell in love — never got married — *never had Rose*.

ALBUS: So that's why Dad's so — did he change too?

SCORPIUS: I'm pretty sure your dad is exactly the same. Head of Magical Law Enforcement. Married to Ginny. Three kids.

ALBUS: So why is he being such a —

A LIBRARIAN enters at the back of the room.

SCORPIUS: Have you heard me, Albus? This is bigger than you and your dad. Professor Croaker's law — the furthest someone can go back in time without the possibility of serious harm to the traveler or time itself is five hours. And we went back years. The smallest moment, the smallest change, it creates ripples. And we — we've created really bad ripples. Rose was never born because of what we did. Rose.

LIBRARIAN: Ssshhh!

ALBUS thinks quickly.

ALBUS: Fine, let's go back — fix it. Get Cedric and Rose back.

SCORPIUS: . . . is the wrong answer.

ALBUS: You've still got the Time-Turner, right? No one found it?

SCORPIUS takes it out of his pocket.

SCORPIUS: Yes, but . . .

ALBUS snatches it from his hand.

No. Don't . . . Albus. Don't you understand how bad things could get?

SCORPIUS grabs for the Time-Turner, ALBUS pushes him back, they wrestle inexpertly.

ALBUS: Things need fixing, Scorpius. Cedric still needs saving. Rose needs bringing back. We'll be more careful. Whatever Croaker says, trust me, trust us. We'll get it right this time.

SCORPIUS: No. We won't. Give it back, Albus! Give it back!

ALBUS: I can't. This is too important.

SCORPIUS: Yes, it's too important — for us. We're not good at this stuff. We'll get it wrong.

ALBUS: Who's saying that we'll get it wrong?

SCORPIUS: *I* say. Because that's *what we do*. We mess things up. We lose. We're losers, true and total losers. Haven't you realized that yet?

ALBUS finally gets the upper hand and pins SCORPIUS to the ground.

ALBUS: Well, I wasn't a loser before I met you.

SCORPIUS: Albus, whatever you've got to prove to your dad — this isn't the way.

ALBUS: I don't have anything to prove to my dad. I've got to save Cedric to save Rose. And maybe — without you holding me back — I can make a proper go of it.

SCORPIUS: Without me? Oh poor Albus Potter. With his chip on his shoulder. Poor Albus Potter. So sad.

ALBUS: What are you saying?

SCORPIUS *(exploding)*: Try my life! People look at you because your dad's the famous Harry Potter, savior of the wizarding world. People look at me because they think my dad is Voldemort. Voldemort.

ALBUS: Don't even —

SCORPIUS: Can you even slightly imagine what that's like? Have you even ever tried? No. Because you can't see beyond the end of your nose. Because you can't see beyond the end of your stupid thing with your dad. He will always be Harry Potter, you know that, right? And you will always be his son. And I know it's hard, and the other kids are awful, but you have to learn to be okay with that, because — there are worse things, okay?

Beat.

There was a moment I was excited, when I realized time was different, a moment when I thought maybe my mum hadn't got sick. Maybe my mum wasn't dead. But no, turns out, she was. I'm still the child of Voldemort, without a mother, giving sympathy to the boy who doesn't ever give anything back. So I'm sorry if I've ruined your life because I tell you — you wouldn't

have a chance of ruining mine — it was already ruined. You just didn't make it better. Because you're a terrible — the most terrible — friend.

ALBUS digests this. He sees what he's done to his friend.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL *(from off)*: Albus? Albus Potter. Scorpius Malfoy. Are you in there — together? Because I advise you not to be.

ALBUS looks at SCORPIUS, he pulls a Cloak from his bag.

ALBUS: Quick. We need to hide.

SCORPIUS: What?

ALBUS: Scorpius, look at me.

SCORPIUS: That's the Invisibility Cloak? Isn't it James's?

ALBUS: If she finds us, we'll be forced apart forever. Please. I didn't understand. Please.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL *(from off — trying to give them every chance)*: I am about to enter.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL comes into the room, the Marauder's Map in her hands. The boys disappear beneath the Cloak. She looks around, exasperated.

Well, where have they — I never wanted this thing and now it's playing tricks on me.

She thinks. She looks back at the map. She identifies where they should be. She looks around the room. Objects move as the boys invisibly move past them. She sees where they're heading, she makes to block them. But they skirt around her.

Unless. Unless . . . Your father's Cloak.

She looks back at the map, she looks at the boys. She smiles to herself.

Well, if I didn't see you, I didn't see you.

She exits. The two boys remove the Cloak. They sit in silence for a moment.

ALBUS: Yes, I stole this from James. He's remarkably easy to steal from; his trunk combination is the date he got his first broom. I've found the Cloak made avoiding bullies . . . easier.

SCORPIUS nods.

I'm sorry — about your mum. I know we don't talk about her enough — but I hope you know — I'm sorry — it's rubbish — what happened to her — to you.

SCORPIUS: Thanks.

ALBUS: My dad said — said that you were this dark cloud around me. My dad started to think —

and I just knew I had to stay away, and if I didn't, Dad said he would —

SCORPIUS: Your dad thinks the rumors are true — I am the son of Voldemort?

ALBUS *(nods)*: His department are currently investigating it.

SCORPIUS: Good. Let them. Sometimes — sometimes I find myself thinking — maybe they're true too.

ALBUS: No. They're not true. And I'll tell you why. Because I don't think Voldemort is capable of having a kind son — and you're kind, Scorpius. To the depths of your belly, to the tips of your fingers. I truly believe Voldemort — Voldemort couldn't have a child like you.

Beat. SCORPIUS is moved by this.

SCORPIUS: That's nice — that's a nice thing to say.

ALBUS: And it's something I should have said a long time ago. In fact, you're probably the best person I know. And you don't — you couldn't — hold me back. You make me stronger — and when Dad forced us apart — without you —

SCORPIUS: I didn't much like my life without you in it either.

ALBUS: And I know I'll always be Harry Potter's son — and I will sort that out in my head — and I know compared to you my life is pretty good, really, and that he and I are comparatively lucky and —

SCORPIUS *(interrupting)*: Albus, as apologies go this is wonderfully fulsome, but you're starting to talk more about *you* than *me* again, so probably better to quit while you're ahead.

ALBUS smiles and stretches out a hand.

ALBUS: Friends?

SCORPIUS: Always.

SCORPIUS extends his hand, ALBUS pulls SCORPIUS up into a hug.

That's the second time you've done that.

The two boys break apart and smile.

ALBUS: But I'm pleased we had this argument because it's given me a really good idea.

SCORPIUS: About what?

ALBUS: It involves the second task. And humiliation.

SCORPIUS: You're still talking about going back in time? Have we been having the same conversation?

ALBUS: You're right — we are losers. We're brilliant at losing and so we should be using our own knowledge here. Our own powers. Losers are taught to be losers. And there's only one way to teach a loser — and we know that better than anyone — humiliation. We need to humiliate him. So in the second task that's what we'll do.

SCORPIUS thinks — for a long time — and then smiles.

SCORPIUS: That's a really good strategy.

ALBUS: I know.

SCORPIUS: I mean, quite spectacular. Humiliate Cedric to save Cedric. Clever. And Rose?

ALBUS: That I'm saving as a sparkly surprise. I *can* do it without you — but I *want* you there. Because I want us to do this together. Set things right together. So . . . Will you come?

SCORPIUS: But, just a minute, isn't — wasn't — the second task took place in the lake, and you're not allowed to leave the school building.

ALBUS grins.

ALBUS: Yes. About that . . . We need to find the girls' bathroom on the first floor.

ACT TWO, SCENE SEVENTEEN

HOGWARTS, STAIRCASES

RON is walking down the staircase, consumed in his thoughts, and then he sees HERMIONE and his expression changes entirely.

RON: Professor Granger.

HERMIONE looks across, her heart leaps a bit too (though she won't admit it).

HERMIONE: Ron. What are you doing here?

RON: Panju got in a little trouble in Potions class. Was showing off, of course, and put the wrong thing with the wrong thing and now he has no eyebrows and a rather large mustache, apparently. Which doesn't suit him. I didn't want to come but Padma says that when it comes to facial growths, sons need their fathers. Have you done something with your hair?

HERMIONE: Just combed it, I suspect.

RON: Well . . . Combing it suits you.

HERMIONE looks at RON slightly strangely.

HERMIONE: Ron, will you stop looking at me like that?

RON *(summoning confidence)*: You know, Harry's boy Albus — said to me the other day that he thought you and I were — married. Ha-ha. Ha. Ha. Ridiculous, I know.

HERMIONE: Very ridiculous.

RON: He even thought we had a daughter. That'd be strange, wouldn't it?

The two lock eyes. HERMIONE is the first to break away.

HERMIONE: More than strange.

RON: Exactly. We're — friends, and that's all.

HERMIONE: Absolutely. Only — friends.

RON: Only — friends. Funny word — *friends*. Not that funny. Just a word really. Friends. Friend. Funny friend. You, my funny friend, my Hermione. Not that — not my Hermione, you understand — not MY Hermione — not MINE — you know, but . . .

HERMIONE: I know.

There's a pause. Neither of them move the smallest inch. Everything feels too important for movement. Then RON coughs.

RON: Well. Must get on. Sort Panju out. Teach him the finer arts of mustache grooming.

He walks on, he turns, he looks at HERMIONE. She looks back, he hurries on again.

Your hair really does very much suit you.

ACT TWO, SCENE EIGHTEEN

HOGWARTS, HEADMISTRESS'S OFFICE

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL is onstage on her own. She looks at the map. She frowns to herself. She taps it with her wand. She smiles to herself at a good decision made.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: Mischief managed.

There's a rattling.

The whole stage seems to vibrate.

GINNY is the first through the fireplace, and then HARRY.

GINNY: Professor, I can't say that ever gets more dignified.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: Potter. You're back. And you seem to have finally ruined my carpet.

HARRY: I need to find my son. We need to.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: Harry, I've considered this and decided I want no part of it. Whatever you threaten, I —

HARRY: Minerva, I come here in peace, not war. I should never have spoken to you that way.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: I just don't think I can interfere in friendships and I believe —

HARRY: I need to say sorry to you and sorry to Albus, will you give me that chance?

DRACO arrives behind them with a bang of soot.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: Draco?

DRACO: He needs to see his son, and I need to see mine.

HARRY: Like I say — peace — not war.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL studies his face; she sees the sincerity she needs to see. She takes the map back out of her pocket. She opens it up.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: Well, peace is certainly something I can be part of.

She taps it with her wand.

(Sighs.) I solemnly swear that I'm up to no good.

The map is lit into action.

Well, they are together.

DRACO: In the girls' bathroom on the first floor. What on earth would they be doing there?

ACT TWO, SCENE NINETEEN

HOGWARTS, GIRLS' BATHROOM

SCORPIUS and ALBUS enter a bathroom. In the center of it is a large Victorian sink.

SCORPIUS: So let me get this right — the plan is Engorgement . . .

ALBUS: Yes. Scorpius, that soap, if you may . . .

SCORPIUS fishes a soap out of the sink.

Engorgio.

He fires a bolt from his wand across the room. The soap blows up to four times its size.

SCORPIUS: Nice. Consider me engorgimpressed.

ALBUS: The second task was the lake task. They had to retrieve something which was stolen from them, which turned out to be —

SCORPIUS: — people they loved.

ALBUS: Cedric used a Bubble-Head Charm to swim through the lake. All we do is follow him in there and use Engorgement to turn him into something rather larger. We know the Time-Turner doesn't give us long, so we're going to be quick. Get to him and Engorgio his head and watch him float out of the lake — away from the task — away from the competition . . .

SCORPIUS: But — you still haven't told me how we're going to actually get to the lake . . .

And then suddenly a jet of water emerges from the sink — and after it ascends a very wet MOANING MYRTLE.

MOANING MYRTLE: Whoa. That feels good. Never used to enjoy that. But when you get to my age, you take what you can . . .

SCORPIUS: Of course — you're a genius — Moaning Myrtle . . .

MOANING MYRTLE swoops down onto SCORPIUS.

MOANING MYRTLE: What did you call me? Do I moan? Am I moaning now? AM I? AM I?

SCORPIUS: No, I didn't mean . . .

MOANING MYRTLE: What's my name?

SCORPIUS: Myrtle.

MOANING MYRTLE: Exactly — Myrtle. Myrtle Elizabeth Warren — a pretty name — my name — no need for the moaning.

SCORPIUS: Well . . .

MOANING MYRTLE *(she giggles)*: It's been a while. Boys. In my bathroom. In my girls' bathroom. Well, that's not right . . . But then again, I always did have a soft spot for the Potters. And I was moderately partial to a Malfoy too. Now how can I help you pair?

ALBUS: You were there, Myrtle — in the lake. They wrote about you. There must be a way out of these pipes.

MOANING MYRTLE: I've been everywhere. But where specifically were you thinking?

ALBUS: The second task. The lake task. In the Triwizard Tournament. Twenty-five years ago. Harry and Cedric.

MOANING MYRTLE: Such a shame the pretty one had to die. Not that your father is not pretty — but Cedric Diggory — you'd be amazed at how many girls I had to hear doing love incantations in this very bathroom . . . And the weeping after he was taken.

ALBUS: Help us, Myrtle, help us get into that same lake.

MOANING MYRTLE: You think I can help you travel in time?

ALBUS: We need you to keep a secret.

MOANING MYRTLE: I love secrets. I won't tell a soul. Cross my heart and hope to die. Or — the equivalent. For ghosts. You know.

ALBUS nods at SCORPIUS, who reveals the Time-Turner.

ALBUS: We can travel in time. You're going to help us travel the pipes. We're going to save Cedric Diggory.

MOANING MYRTLE *(grins)*: Well, that sounds like fun.

ALBUS: And we've no time to lose.

MOANING MYRTLE: This very sink. This very sink empties directly into the lake. It breaks every

bylaw but this school has always been antiquated. Dive in and you will be piped straight to it.

ALBUS pulls himself into the sink, dumping his cloak as he does. SCORPIUS copies.

ALBUS hands SCORPIUS some green foliage in a bag.

ALBUS: Some for me and some for you.

SCORPIUS: Gillyweed? We're using gillyweed? To breathe underwater?

ALBUS: Just like my dad did. Now, are you ready?

SCORPIUS: Remember, this time we can't be caught out by the clock . . .

ALBUS: Five minutes, that's all we allow for — before we get pulled back to the present.

SCORPIUS: Tell me this is all going to be okay.

ALBUS *(grinning)*: It's all going to be entirely okay. Are you ready?

ALBUS takes the gillyweed and disappears down.

SCORPIUS: No, Albus — Albus —

He looks up, he and MOANING MYRTLE are alone.

MOANING MYRTLE: I do like brave boys.

SCORPIUS *(a little bit scared, a tiny bit brave)*: Then I'm entirely ready. For whatever comes.

He takes the gillyweed and disappears down.

MOANING MYRTLE is left alone onstage.

There is a giant whoosh of light and smash of noise. And time stops. And then it turns over, thinks a bit, and begins spooling backwards . . .

The boys are gone.

HARRY appears at a run, a deep frown on his face, behind him DRACO, GINNY, and PROFESSOR McGONAGALL.

HARRY: Albus . . . Albus . . .

GINNY: He's gone.

They find the boys' cloaks on the ground.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL *(consulting the map)*: He's disappeared. No, he's traveling under Hogwarts grounds, no, he's disappeared . . .

DRACO: How is he doing this?

MOANING MYRTLE: He's using a rather pretty trinket thingy.

HARRY: Myrtle!

MOANING MYRTLE: Oops, you caught me. And I was trying so hard to hide. Hello, Harry. Hello, Draco. Have you been bad boys again?

HARRY: What trinket is he using?

MOANING MYRTLE: I think it was a secret, but I could never keep anything from you, Harry. How is it you've grown handsomer and handsomer as you've aged? And you're taller.

HARRY: My son is in danger. I need your help. What are they doing, Myrtle?

MOANING MYRTLE: He's after saving a dishy boy. A certain Cedric Diggory.

HARRY immediately realizes what's happened, and is horrified.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: But Cedric Diggory died years ago . . .

MOANING MYRTLE: He seemed quite confident he could get around that fact. He's very confident, Harry, just like you.

HARRY: He heard me talking — to Amos Diggory . . . could he have . . . the Ministry's Time-Turner. No, that's impossible.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: The Ministry has a Time-Turner? I thought they were destroyed?

MOANING MYRTLE: Isn't everyone so naughty?

DRACO: Can someone please explain what's going on?

HARRY: Albus and Scorpius are not disappearing and reappearing — they're traveling. Traveling in time.

ACT TWO, SCENE TWENTY

TRIWIZARD TOURNAMENT, LAKE, 1995

LUDO BAGMAN: Ladies and gentlemen — boys and girls — I give you — the greatest — the fabulous — the one — and the only TRIWIZARD TOURNAMENT. If you're from Hogwarts. Give me a cheer.

There's a loud cheer.

And now ALBUS and SCORPIUS are swimming through the lake. Descending through the water with graceful ease.

If you're from Durmstrang — give me a cheer.

There's a loud cheer.

AND IF YOU'RE FROM BEAUXBATONS GIVE ME A CHEER.

There's a slightly less limp cheer.

The French are getting into this.

And they're off . . . Viktor's a shark, of course he is, Fleur looks remarkable, ever plucky Harry is using gillyweed, clever Harry, very clever — and Cedric — well, Cedric, what a treat, ladies and gentlemen, Cedric is using a Bubble Charm to cruise through the lake.

CEDRIC DIGGORY approaches them through the water, a bubble over his head. ALBUS and SCORPIUS raise their wands together and fire an Engorgement Charm through the water.

He turns and looks at them, confused. And it hits him. And around him the water glows gold.

And then CEDRIC starts to grow — and grow again — and grow some more. He looks around himself — entirely panicked. And the boys watch as CEDRIC ascends helplessly through the water.

But no, what's this . . . Cedric Diggory is ascending out of the water and seemingly out of the competition. Oh, ladies and gentlemen, we don't have our winner but we certainly have our loser. Cedric Diggory is turning into a balloon, and this balloon wants to fly. Fly, ladies and gentlemen, fly. Fly out of the task and out of the tournament and — oh my, it gets wilder still, around Cedric, fireworks *explode* declaiming — "Ron loves Hermione" — and the crowd love that — oh, ladies and gentlemen, the look on Cedric's face. It's quite some picture, it's quite some sight, it's quite some tragedy. This is a humiliation, there's no other word for it.

And ALBUS *smiles widely and high-fives* SCORPIUS *in the water.*

And ALBUS *points up, and* SCORPIUS *nods, and they start to swim ever upwards. And as* CEDRIC *ascends, people start to laugh, and everything changes.*

The world becomes darker. The world becomes almost black, in fact.

And there's a flash. And a bang. And the Time-Turner ticks to a stop. And we're back in the present.

SCORPIUS *suddenly emerges, shooting up through the water. And he's triumphant.*

SCORPIUS: Woooo-hoooooo!

He looks around, surprised. Where's ALBUS*? He puts his arms into the air.*

We did it!

He waits another beat.

Albus?

ALBUS *still doesn't emerge.* SCORPIUS *treads water, he thinks and then he ducks back into the water.*

He emerges back up again. Now thoroughly panicked. He looks around.

Albus . . . ALBUS . . . ALBUS.

And there's a whisper in Parseltongue. Which travels fast around the audience.

He's coming. He's coming. He's coming.

DOLORES UMBRIDGE: Scorpius Malfoy. Get out of the lake. Get out of the lake. Right now.

She pulls him out of the water.

SCORPIUS: Miss. I need help. Please, Miss.

DOLORES UMBRIDGE: Miss? I'm Professor Umbridge, the headmistress of your school, I'm no "Miss."

SCORPIUS: You're the headmistress? But I . . .

DOLORES UMBRIDGE: I am the headmistress, and however important your family may be — it doesn't give you an excuse to dillydally, to mess about.

SCORPIUS: There's a boy in this lake. You need to get help. I'm looking for my friend, Miss. Professor. Headmaster. One of Hogwarts's students, Miss. I'm looking for Albus Potter.

DOLORES UMBRIDGE: Potter? Albus Potter? There's no such student. In fact, there hasn't been a Potter at Hogwarts for years — and that boy didn't turn out so well. Not so much rest in peace, Harry Potter, more rest in perpetual despair. Total troublemaker.

SCORPIUS: Harry Potter's dead?

Suddenly from around the auditorium, the feel of a breath of the wind. Some black robes arise around people. Black robes that become black shapes. That become dementors.

Flying dementors through the auditorium. These black deadly shapes, these black deadly forces. They are everything to be feared. And they suck the spirit from the room.

The wind continues. This is hell. And then, right from the back of the room, whispering around everyone.

Words said with an unmistakable voice. The voice of VOLDEMORT . . .

Haaarry Potttttter.

HARRY's dream has come to life.

DOLORES UMBRIDGE: Have you swallowed something funny in there? Become a Mudblood without any of us noticing? Harry Potter died over twenty years ago as part of that failed coup on the school — he was one of those Dumbledore terrorists we bravely overthrew at the Battle of Hogwarts. Now come along — I don't know what game you're playing but you're upsetting the dementors and entirely ruining Voldemort Day.

And the Parseltongue whispers grow louder and louder. Grow monstrously loud. And giant banners with snake symbols upon them descend over the stage.

SCORPIUS: Voldemort Day?

We cut to black.

HARRY POTTER AND THE CURSED CHILD

PART TWO

ACT THREE

ACT THREE, SCENE ONE

HOGWARTS, HEADMISTRESS'S OFFICE

SCORPIUS enters the office of DOLORES UMBRIDGE. He is dressed in darker, blacker robes. He has a pensive look on his face. He remains coiled and alert.

DOLORES UMBRIDGE: Scorpius. Thank you so much for coming to see me.

SCORPIUS: Headmistress.

DOLORES UMBRIDGE: Scorpius, I've thought for a long time that you have Head Boy potential, as you know. Pure-blooded, a natural leader, wonderfully athletic . . .

SCORPIUS: Athletic?

DOLORES UMBRIDGE: No need to be modest, Scorpius. I've seen you on the Quidditch pitch, there's rarely a Snitch you don't catch. You are a highly valued student. Valued by the faculty. Valued especially by me. I've positively glowed about you in dispatches to the Augurey. Our work together flushing out the more dilettante students has made this school a safer, purer place —

SCORPIUS: Has it?

There is the sound of a scream from off. SCORPIUS turns towards it. But he dismisses the thought. He must and he will control himself.

DOLORES UMBRIDGE: But in the three days since I found you in that lake on Voldemort Day, you've become . . . odder and odder. In particular, this sudden obsession with Harry Potter . . .

SCORPIUS: I don't . . .

DOLORES UMBRIDGE: Questioning everyone you can about the Battle of Hogwarts. How Potter died. Why Potter died. And this ludicrous fascination with Cedric Diggory. Scorpius, we've checked you for hexes and curses — there were none we can see — so I'm asking if there's anything I can do — to restore you to what you were . . .

SCORPIUS: No. No. Consider me restored. Temporary aberration. That's all.

DOLORES UMBRIDGE: So we can continue our work together?

SCORPIUS: We can.

She puts her hand to her heart, and touches her wrists together.

DOLORES UMBRIDGE: For Voldemort and Valor.

SCORPIUS *(trying to copy)*: For — um — yes.

ACT THREE, SCENE TWO

HOGWARTS, GROUNDS

KARL JENKINS: Hey, Scorpion King.

SCORPIUS is high-fived, it's painful, he takes it.

YANN FREDERICKS: We're still on, right, tomorrow night?

KARL JENKINS: Because we are ready to spill some proper Mudblood guts.

POLLY CHAPMAN: Scorpius.

POLLY CHAPMAN is standing on the stairs, SCORPIUS turns towards her, surprised to hear her say his name.

SCORPIUS: Polly Chapman?

POLLY CHAPMAN: Shall we cut to it? I know everyone is waiting to know who you're going to ask because, you know, you need to ask someone and I've been asked by three people already and I know I'm not alone in refusing them all. In case, you know, you were to ask me.

SCORPIUS: Right.

POLLY CHAPMAN: Which would be great. If you were interested. Which rumor is — you are. And I just want to make clear — at this moment — that I am also interested. And that isn't a rumor. That's a — f-a-c-t — fact.

SCORPIUS: That's um — great but — what are we talking about?

POLLY CHAPMAN: The Blood Ball, of course. Who you — the Scorpion King — are taking to the Blood Ball.

SCORPIUS: You — Polly Chapman — want me to take you to a — ball?

There is the sound of screaming behind him.

What is that screaming?

POLLY CHAPMAN: Mudbloods, of course. In the dungeons. Your idea, wasn't it? What's going on with you? Oh Potter, I've got blood on my shoes again . . .

She bends and carefully cleans the blood off her shoes.

Like the Augurey insists — the future is ours to make — so here I am, making a future — with you. For Voldemort and Valor.

SCORPIUS: For Voldemort it is.

POLLY walks on, SCORPIUS looks agonized after her. What is this world — and what is he within it?

ACT THREE, SCENE THREE

MINISTRY OF MAGIC, OFFICE OF THE HEAD OF MAGICAL LAW ENFORCEMENT

DRACO is impressive in a way we haven't seen. He has the smell of power about him. Flying down either side of the room are Augurey flags — with the bird emblazoned in a fascistic manner.

DRACO: You are late.

SCORPIUS: This is your office?

DRACO: You are late and unapologetic, maybe you are determined to compound the problem.

SCORPIUS: You're Head of Magical Law Enforcement?

DRACO: How dare you! How dare you embarrass me and keep me waiting and then not apologize for it!

SCORPIUS: Sorry.

DRACO: *Sir.*

SCORPIUS: Sorry, sir.

DRACO: I did not bring you up to be sloppy, Scorpius. I did not bring you up to humiliate me at Hogwarts.

SCORPIUS: Humiliate you, sir?

DRACO: Harry Potter, asking questions about Harry Potter, of all the embarrassing things. How dare you disgrace the Malfoy name.

SCORPIUS: Oh no. Are you responsible? No. No. You can't be.

DRACO: Scorpius . . .

SCORPIUS: The *Daily Prophet* today — three wizards blowing up bridges to see how many Muggles

they can kill with one blast — is that you?

DRACO: Be very careful.

SCORPIUS: The "Mudblood" death camps, the torture, the burning alive of those that oppose him. How much of that is you? Mum always told me that you were a better man than I could see, but this is what you really are, isn't it? A murderer, a torturer, a —

DRACO rises up and pulls SCORPIUS hard onto the table. The violence is surprising and deadly.

DRACO: Do not use her name in vain, Scorpius. Do not score points that way. She deserves better than that.

SCORPIUS says nothing, horrified and scared. DRACO reads this. He lets go of SCORPIUS's head. He doesn't like hurting his son.

And no, those idiots blasting Muggles, that's not my doing, though it'll be me the Augurey asks to bribe the Muggle Prime Minister with gold . . . Did your mother really say that of me?

SCORPIUS: She said that Grandfather didn't like her very much — opposed the match — thought she was too Muggle-loving — too weak — but that you defied him for her. She said it was the bravest thing she'd ever seen.

DRACO: She made being brave very easy, your mother.

SCORPIUS: But that was — another you.

He looks at his dad, who looks back with a frown.

I've done bad things, you've done worse. What have we become, Dad?

DRACO: We haven't become anything — we simply are as we are.

SCORPIUS: The Malfoys. The family you can always rely on to make the world a murkier place.

This hits home with DRACO. He looks carefully at SCORPIUS.

DRACO: This business at the school — what's inspired it?

SCORPIUS: I don't want to be who I am.

DRACO: And what's brought that on?

SCORPIUS desperately thinks for a way of describing his story.

SCORPIUS: I've seen myself in a different way.

DRACO: You know what I loved most about your mother? She could always help me find light in the darkness. She made the world — my world, anyway — less — what was the word you used

— "murky."

SCORPIUS: Did she?

DRACO studies his son.

DRACO: There's more of her in there than I thought.

Beat. He looks at SCORPIUS carefully.

Whatever you're doing — do it safely. I can't lose you too.

SCORPIUS: Yes. Sir.

DRACO looks at his son one last time — trying to understand his head.

DRACO: For Voldemort and Valor.

SCORPIUS looks at him and backs out of the room.

SCORPIUS: For Voldemort and Valor.

ACT THREE, SCENE FOUR

HOGWARTS, LIBRARY

SCORPIUS enters the library and starts desperately to look through books. He finds a history book.

SCORPIUS: How did Cedric become a Death Eater? What have I missed? Find me some — light in the darkness. Tell me your secrets. What have I missed?

CRAIG BOWKER JR.: Why are you here?

SCORPIUS turns to look at a rather desperate-looking CRAIG, his clothes tattered and worn.

SCORPIUS: Why can't I be here?

CRAIG BOWKER JR.: It's not ready yet. I'm working as fast as I can. But Professor Snape sets so much of it, and writing the essay in two different ways. I mean, I'm not complaining . . . Sorry.

SCORPIUS: Start again. From the beginning. What's not ready?

CRAIG BOWKER JR.: Your Potions homework. And I'm happy to do it — grateful even — and I know you hate homework and books and I never let you down, you know that.

SCORPIUS: I hate homework?

CRAIG BOWKER JR.: You're the Scorpion King. Of course you hate homework. What are you doing with *A History of Magic*? I could do that assignment too?

Pause. SCORPIUS looks at CRAIG a moment and then walks away. CRAIG exits.

After a moment SCORPIUS returns with a frown.

SCORPIUS: Did he say Snape?

ACT THREE, SCENE FIVE

HOGWARTS, POTIONS CLASSROOM

SCORPIUS runs into the Potions classroom, slamming back the door. SEVERUS SNAPE looks up at him.

SNAPE: Did no one teach you to knock, boy?

SCORPIUS looks up at SNAPE, slightly breathless, slightly unsure, slightly exultant.

SCORPIUS: Severus Snape. This is an honor.

SNAPE: Professor Snape will do fine. You may behave like a king at this school, Malfoy, but that doesn't make us all your subjects.

SCORPIUS: But you're the answer . . .

SNAPE: How very pleasant for me. If you've got something to say, boy, then please say it . . . If not, close the door on your way out.

SCORPIUS: I need your help.

SNAPE: I exist to serve.

SCORPIUS: I just don't know what help I — need. Are you still undercover now? Are you still working secretly for Dumbledore?

SNAPE: Dumbledore? Dumbledore's dead. And my work for him was public — I taught in his school.

SCORPIUS: No. That's not all you did. You watched the Death Eaters for him. You advised him. Everyone thought you'd murdered him — but it turned out you'd been supporting him. You saved the world.

SNAPE: These are very dangerous allegations, boy. And don't think the Malfoy name will prevent me inflicting punishment.

SCORPIUS: What if I was to tell you there was another world — another world in which Voldemort was defeated at the Battle of Hogwarts, in which Harry Potter and Dumbledore's Army won, how would you feel then . . .

SNAPE: I'd say that the rumors of Hogwarts's beloved Scorpion King losing his mind are well-founded.

SCORPIUS: There was a stolen Time-Turner. I stole a Time-Turner. With Albus. We tried to bring Cedric Diggory back from the dead, when he was dead. We tried to stop him winning the Triwizard Tournament. But by doing so we turned him into an almost different person entirely.

SNAPE: Harry Potter won that Triwizard Tournament.

SCORPIUS: He wasn't supposed to do it alone. Cedric was supposed to win it with him. But we humiliated him out of the tournament. And as a result of that humiliation he became a Death Eater. I can't work out what he did in the Battle of Hogwarts — whether he killed someone or — but he did something and it changed everything.

SNAPE: Cedric Diggory killed only one wizard and not a significant one — Neville Longbottom.

SCORPIUS: Oh, of course, that's it! Professor Longbottom was supposed to kill Nagini, Voldemort's snake. Nagini had to die before Voldemort could die. That's it! You've solved it! We destroyed Cedric, he killed Neville, Voldemort won the battle. Can you see? Can you see it?

SNAPE: I can see this is a Malfoy game. Get out before I alert your father and plunge you into deep trouble.

SCORPIUS thinks and then plays his final, desperate card.

SCORPIUS: You loved his mother. I don't remember everything. I know you loved his mother. Harry's mother. Lily. I know you spent years undercover. I know without you the war could never have been won. How would I know this if I hadn't seen the other world . . . ?

SNAPE says nothing, overwhelmed.

Only Dumbledore knew, am I right? And when you lost him you must have felt so alone. I know you're a good man. Harry Potter told his son you're a great man.

SNAPE looks at SCORPIUS — unsure what's going on. Is this a trick? He is quite seriously at a loss.

SNAPE: Harry Potter is dead.

SCORPIUS: Not in my world. He said you were the bravest man he'd ever met. He knew, you see — he knew your secret — what you did for Dumbledore. And he admired you for it — greatly. And that's why he named his son — my best friend — after you both. Albus Severus Potter.

SNAPE is stopped. He is deeply moved.

Please — for Lily, for the world, help me.

SNAPE thinks and then walks up to SCORPIUS, taking out his wand as he does. SCORPIUS steps back, scared. SNAPE fires his wand at the door.

SNAPE: Colloportus!

An invisible lock slams into place. SNAPE opens a hatch at the back of the classroom.

Well, come on, then . . .

SCORPIUS: Just a question, but where — exactly — are we going?

SNAPE: We've had to move many times. Everywhere we've settled they destroyed. This will take us to a room hidden in the roots of the Whomping Willow.

SCORPIUS: Okay, who's we?

SNAPE: Oh. You'll see.

ACT THREE, SCENE SIX

CAMPAIGN ROOM

SCORPIUS is pinned to the table by a magnificent-looking HERMIONE. Her clothes faded, her eyes blazing, she is full warrior now and it rather suits her.

HERMIONE: You make one more move and your brain will be a frog and your arms will be rubber.

SNAPE: Safe. He's safe. *(Beat.)* You know you never could listen. You were a terrible bore of a student and you're a terrible bore of — whatever you are.

HERMIONE: I was an excellent student.

SNAPE: You were moderate to average. He's on our side!

SCORPIUS: I am, Hermione.

HERMIONE looks at SCORPIUS, still very distrustful.

HERMIONE: Most people know me as Granger. And I don't believe a word you say, Malfoy —

SCORPIUS: It's all my fault. My fault. And Albus's.

HERMIONE: Albus? Albus Dumbledore? What's Albus Dumbledore got to do with this?

SNAPE: He doesn't mean Dumbledore. You may need to sit down.

RON runs in. His hair spiked. His clothes scruffy. He is slightly less good at the rebel look than HERMIONE is.

RON: Snape, a royal visit, and — *(he sees SCORPIUS and is immediately alarmed)* what's he doing here?

He fumbles out his wand.

I'm armed and — entirely dangerous and seriously advise you —

He realizes his wand is the wrong way around and turns it right.

To be very careful —

SNAPE: He's safe, Ron.

RON looks at HERMIONE, who nods.

RON: Thank Dumbledore for that.

ACT THREE, SCENE SEVEN

CAMPAIGN ROOM

HERMIONE is sitting studying the Time-Turner as RON tries to digest it all.

RON: So you're telling me that the whole of history rests on . . . Neville Longbottom? This is pretty wild.

HERMIONE: It's true, Ron.

RON: Right. And you're sure because . . .

HERMIONE: What he knows about Snape — about all of us — there's no way he could . . .

RON: Maybe he's a really good guesser?

SCORPIUS: I'm not. Can you help?

RON: We're the only ones that can. Dumbledore's Army has shrunk considerably since its peak. In fact, we're pretty much all that's left, but we've kept fighting on. Hiding in plain sight. Doing our best to tickle their nose hairs. Granger here is a wanted woman. I'm a wanted man.

SNAPE *(dryly)*: Less wanted.

HERMIONE: To be clear: In this other world . . . ? Before you meddled?

SCORPIUS: Voldemort is dead. Killed in the Battle of Hogwarts. Harry is Head of Magical Law Enforcement. You're Minister for Magic.

HERMIONE stops, surprised by this, she looks up with a smile.

HERMIONE: I'm Minister for Magic?

RON *(wanting to join the fun)*: Brilliant. What do I do?

SCORPIUS: You run Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes.

RON: Okay, so, she's Minister for Magic and I run a — joke shop?

SCORPIUS looks at RON's hurt face.

SCORPIUS: You're mostly focused on bringing up your kids.

RON: Great. I expect their mother is hot.

SCORPIUS *(blushing)*: Well . . . Um . . . Depends what you think of . . . The thing is, you two sort of have kids — together. A daughter and a son.

The two look up, astonished.

Married. In love. Everything. You were shocked the other time too. When you were Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher and Ron was married to Padma. You're *constantly* surprised by it.

HERMIONE and RON both look at each other and then look away. And then RON looks back. RON clears his throat repeatedly. With less conviction each time.

HERMIONE: Close your mouth when you're looking at me, Weasley.

RON does so. Though he remains discombobulated.

And — Snape? What does Snape do in this other world?

SNAPE: I'm dead, presumably.

He looks at SCORPIUS, whose face drops. SNAPE smiles thinly.

You were a little too surprised to see me. How?

SCORPIUS: Bravely.

SNAPE: Who?

SCORPIUS: Voldemort.

SNAPE: How very irritating.

There's a silence as SNAPE digests.

Still, there's glory in being taken down by the Dark Lord himself, I suppose.

HERMIONE: I'm sorry, Severus.

SNAPE looks at her, and then swallows the pain. He indicates RON with a flick of his head.

SNAPE: Well, at least I'm not married to him.

HERMIONE: Which spells did you use?

SCORPIUS: Expelliarmus in the first task and Engorgio in the second.

RON: Simple Shield Charms should set both of those right.

SNAPE: And then you left?

SCORPIUS: The Time-Turner took us back, yes. That's the thing — this Time-Turner, you only get five minutes in the past.

HERMIONE: And can you still only move in time, not space?

SCORPIUS: Yes, yes, it's — uh — you travel back in the same spot you stand in —

HERMIONE: Interesting.

SNAPE and HERMIONE both know what this means.

SNAPE: Then it's just me and the boy.

HERMIONE: No offense, Snape, but I'm not trusting this to anyone, it's too important.

SNAPE: Hermione, you're the most wanted rebel in the wizarding world. Doing this will require you to go outside. When was the last time you were outside?

HERMIONE: Not for a long time, but —

SNAPE: If you're found outside, the dementors will kiss you — they'll suck out your soul.

HERMIONE: Severus, I'm done with living off scraps, making failed attempts at coups. This is our chance to reset the world.

She nods at RON, who pulls down a map.

The first task of the tournament took place at the edge of the Forbidden Forest. We turn time here, get to the tournament, block the spell, and then return safely. With precision — it can be done and it won't require us to show our faces outside in our time at all. Then we'll turn time again, make our way to the lake, and reverse the second task.

SNAPE: You're risking everything —

HERMIONE: We get this right, Harry's alive, Voldemort's dead, and the Augurey is gone, for that no risk is too great. Though I am sorry what it will cost you.

SNAPE: Sometimes costs are made to be borne.

The two look at each other, SNAPE nods, HERMIONE nods back, SNAPE's face crumbles slightly.

I didn't just quote Dumbledore, did I?

HERMIONE *(with a smile)*: No, I'm pretty sure that's pure Severus Snape.

She turns to SCORPIUS, *she indicates the Time-Turner.*

Malfoy—

SCORPIUS *brings her the Time-Turner. She smiles at it, excited to use a Time-Turner again, excited to use it for this.*

Let's hope this works.

She takes the Time-Turner. It begins to vibrate, and then explodes into a storm of movement.

And there is a giant whoosh of light. A smash of noise.

And time stops. And then it turns over, thinks a bit, and begins spooling backwards, slow at first . . .

There is a bang and a flash and our gang disappear.

ACT THREE, SCENE EIGHT

EDGE OF THE FORBIDDEN FOREST, 1994

And we watch our scene from Part One replayed, but at the back of the stage rather than the front. We pick out ALBUS and SCORPIUS in their Durmstrang robes. And through it all we hear the "brilliant" (his words again, his words) LUDO BAGMAN.

SCORPIUS, HERMIONE, RON, and SNAPE watch out anxiously.

LUDO BAGMAN: And Cedric Diggory has entered the stage. And he seems ready. Scared but ready. He dodges this way. He dodges that. The girls swoon as he dives for cover. They cry as one: Don't damage our Diggory, Mr. Dragon! And Cedric skirts left and he dives right — and he readies his wand —

SNAPE: This is taking too long. The Time-Turner is spinning.

LUDO BAGMAN: What has this young, brave, handsome man got up his sleevies now?

As ALBUS attempts to summon CEDRIC's wand, HERMIONE blocks his spell. He looks at his wand — disconsolate, unsure why it hasn't worked.

And then the Time-Turner spins and they look at it and panic as they're pulled into it.

A dog — he's transfigured a stone into a dog — dog diggity, Cedric Diggory — you are a doggy dynamo.

ACT THREE, SCENE NINE

EDGE OF THE FORBIDDEN FOREST

They are returned from time, at the edge of the woods, and RON *is in a lot of pain.* SNAPE *looks around, immediately aware of the mess they're in.*

RON: Ow. Ow. Owwwwwww.

HERMIONE: Ron . . . Ron . . . What has it done to you?

SNAPE: Oh no. I knew it.

SCORPIUS: The Time-Turner did something to Albus too. The first time we went back.

RON: Useful — time to — ow — tell us.

SNAPE: We're aboveground. We need to move. Now.

HERMIONE: Ron, you can still walk, come on . . .

RON does stand up, shouting in pain. SNAPE raises his wand.

SCORPIUS: Did it work?

HERMIONE: We blocked the spell. Cedric kept his wand. Yes. It worked.

SNAPE: But we came back to the wrong place — we are outside. You are outside.

RON: We need to use the Time-Turner again — get out of here —

SNAPE: We need to find shelter. We're horribly exposed.

Suddenly from around the auditorium, the feel of the breath of an icy wind.

Some black robes arise around people. Black robes that become black shapes. That become dementors.

HERMIONE: Too late.

SNAPE: This is a disaster.

HERMIONE *(she realizes what she has to do)*: They're after me, not any of you. Ron. I love you and I always have. But the three of you need to run. Go. Now.

RON: What?

SCORPIUS: What?

RON: Can we talk about the love thing first?

HERMIONE: This is still Voldemort's world. And I am done with it. Reversing the next task will change everything.

SCORPIUS: But they'll kiss you. They'll suck out your soul.

HERMIONE: And then you'll change the past. And then they won't. Go. Now.

The dementors sense them. From all sides, screaming shapes descend.

SNAPE: Go. We go.

He pulls on SCORPIUS's arm. SCORPIUS reluctantly goes with him.

HERMIONE looks at RON.

HERMIONE: You're supposed to be going too.

RON: Well, they are after me a bit and I really am in quite a lot of pain. And, you know, I'd rather be here. Expecto —

As he reaches up to cast the spell, HERMIONE stops his arm.

HERMIONE: Let's keep them here and give the boy the best chance we can.

RON looks at her and then nods sadly.

A daughter.

RON: And a son. I liked that idea too.

He looks around — he knows his fate.

I'm scared.

HERMIONE: Kiss me.

RON thinks and then does. And then the two are yanked apart. And pinned to the ground. And we watch as a golden-whitish haze is pulled from their bodies. They have their souls

sucked from them. And it is terrifying.

SCORPIUS watches — helplessly.

SNAPE: Let's get down to the water. Walk. Don't run.

SNAPE looks at SCORPIUS.

Stay calm, Scorpius. They may be blind but they can sense your fear.

SCORPIUS looks at SNAPE.

SCORPIUS: They just sucked out their souls.

A dementor swoops down low over them and settles in front of SCORPIUS.

SNAPE: Think of something else, Scorpius. Occupy your thoughts.

SCORPIUS: I feel cold. I can't see. There's a fog inside me — around me.

SNAPE: You're a king, and I'm a professor. They'll only attack with good reason. Think about those you love, think about why you're doing this.

SCORPIUS: I can hear my mother. She wants me — my help — but she knows I can't — help.

SNAPE: Listen to me, Scorpius. Think about Albus. You're giving up your kingdom for Albus, right?

SCORPIUS is helpless. Consumed by all the dementor is making him feel.

One person. All it takes is one person. I couldn't save Harry for Lily. So now I give my allegiance to the cause she believed in. And it's possible — that along the way I started believing in it myself.

SCORPIUS smiles at SNAPE. He steps decisively away from the dementor.

SCORPIUS: The world changes and we change with it. I am better off in this world. But the world is not better. And I don't want that.

Suddenly DOLORES UMBRIDGE emerges in front of them.

DOLORES UMBRIDGE: Professor Snape!

SNAPE: Professor Umbridge.

DOLORES UMBRIDGE: Have you heard the news? We've caught that traitorous Mudblood Hermione Granger. She was just out here.

SNAPE: That's — fantastic.

UMBRIDGE is staring at SNAPE. He looks back.

DOLORES UMBRIDGE: With you. Granger was with you.

SNAPE: With me? You're mistaken.

DOLORES UMBRIDGE: With you and Scorpius Malfoy. A student I'm becoming increasingly concerned about.

SCORPIUS: Well . . .

SNAPE: Dolores, we're late for class, so if you'll excuse us . . .

DOLORES UMBRIDGE: If you're late for class, why are you not heading back to the school? Why are you heading to the lake?

There's a moment of pure silence. And then SNAPE does something hugely unusual — he smiles.

SNAPE: How long have you suspected?

UMBRIDGE rises off the ground. She opens her arms wide, full of Dark Magic. She takes out her wand.

DOLORES UMBRIDGE: Years. And I should have acted upon it far earlier.

SNAPE is faster with his wand.

SNAPE: Depulso!

UMBRIDGE is propelled backwards through the air.

She always was too grand for her own good. There's no turning back now.

The sky turns even blacker still around them.

Expecto Patronum!

SNAPE sends forward a Patronus, and it's a beautiful white shape of a doe.

SCORPIUS: A doe? Lily's Patronus.

SNAPE: Strange, isn't it? What comes from within.

Dementors start to appear all around them. SNAPE knows what this means.

You need to run. I will keep them at bay for as long as I can.

SCORPIUS: Thank you for being my light in the darkness.

SNAPE looks at him, every inch a hero, he softly smiles.

SNAPE: Tell Albus — tell Albus Severus — I'm proud he carries my name. Now go. Go.

The doe looks back at SCORPIUS, and then starts to run.

SCORPIUS thinks and then runs after the doe, and around him the world gets scarier. A bloodcurdling scream goes up at one side. He sees the lake and throws himself inside.

SNAPE readies himself.

SNAPE is pulled hard to the ground and then pushed high into the air as his soul is ripped from him. As the screams just seem to multiply.

The doe turns to him with beautiful eyes, and disappears.

There is a bang and a flash. And then silence. And then there's more silence.

It's so still, it's so peaceful, it's so perfectly tranquil.

And then — SCORPIUS ascends to the surface. Breathing deeply. He looks around himself. Breathing deep, panicked breaths. He looks up at the sky. The sky certainly seems — bluer than before.

And then ALBUS ascends after him. There's a silence. SCORPIUS just looks at ALBUS, disbelieving. Both boys breathe in and out.

ALBUS: Whoa!

SCORPIUS: Albus!

ALBUS: That was close! Did you see that Merman? The guy with the — and then the thing with the — whoa!

SCORPIUS: It's you.

ALBUS: It was weird though — I thought I saw Cedric start to expand — but then he sort of started shrinking again — and I looked at you and you had your wand out . . .

SCORPIUS: You have no idea how good it is to see you again.

ALBUS: You just saw me two minutes ago.

SCORPIUS hugs ALBUS in the water, a difficult task.

SCORPIUS: A lot has happened since then.

ALBUS: Careful. You're drowning me. What are you wearing?

SCORPIUS: What am I wearing? *(He pulls off his cloak.)* What are *you* wearing? Yes! You're in Slytherin.

ALBUS: Did it work? Did we do anything?

SCORPIUS: No. And it's brilliant.

ALBUS looks at him — disbelieving.

ALBUS: What? We failed.

SCORPIUS: Yes. YES. AND IT'S AMAZING.

He splashes hard in the water. ALBUS pulls himself out to the bank.

ALBUS: Scorpius. Have you been eating too many sweets again?

SCORPIUS: There you go, you see — all dry humor and Albus-y. I love it.

ALBUS: Now I'm starting to get worried . . .

HARRY enters and sprints to the side of the water. Followed quickly by DRACO, GINNY, and PROFESSOR McGONAGALL.

HARRY: Albus. Albus. Are you okay?

SCORPIUS *(overjoyed)*: Harry! It's Harry Potter! And Ginny. And Professor McGonagall. And Dad. My dad. Hi. Dad.

DRACO: Hello, Scorpius.

ALBUS: You're all here.

GINNY: And Myrtle told us everything.

ALBUS: What is going on?

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: You're the one who's just returned from time. Why don't you tell us?

SCORPIUS immediately registers what they know.

SCORPIUS: Oh no. Oh bother. Where is it?

ALBUS: Just returned from where?

SCORPIUS: I've lost it! I've lost the Time-Turner.

ALBUS *(looking at SCORPIUS, deeply annoyed)*: You've lost what?

HARRY: Time to cut the pretense, Albus.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: I think you've got some explaining to do.

ACT THREE, SCENE TEN

HOGWARTS, HEADMISTRESS'S OFFICE

DRACO, GINNY, and HARRY stand behind a contrite-looking SCORPIUS and ALBUS. PROFESSOR McGONAGALL is fuming.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: So to be clear — you illegally jumped off the Hogwarts Express, you invaded and stole from the Ministry of Magic, you took it upon yourself to change time, whereupon you disappeared two people —

ALBUS: I agree it doesn't sound good.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: And your response to disappearing Hugo and Rose Granger-Weasley was to go back in time again — and this time, instead of losing two people you lost a huge number of people and killed your father — and in doing so you resurrected the worst wizard the world has ever known and heralded in a new age of Dark Magic. *(Dry.)* You're correct, Mr. Potter, it doesn't sound good, does it? Are you aware how stupid you've been?

SCORPIUS: Yes, Professor.

ALBUS hesitates a moment. He looks at HARRY.

ALBUS: Yes.

HARRY: Professor, if I may —

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: You may not. What you choose to do as parents is your matter but this is my school, and these are my students, and I will choose what punishment they will face.

DRACO: Seems fair.

HARRY looks at GINNY, who shakes her head.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: I should expel you but *(with a look to HARRY)* all things considered — I think it might be safer for you to remain in my care. You are in detention for — well, you can consider yourself in detention for the rest of the year. Christmas is canceled for you. You can

forget visiting Hogsmeade ever again. And that's just the start . . .

Suddenly HERMIONE bursts in. All action and resolve.

HERMIONE: What did I miss?

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL *(fierce)*: It is considered polite to knock when entering a room, Hermione Granger, maybe you missed that.

HERMIONE realizes she's overstepped.

HERMIONE: Ah.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: If I could also give a detention to you, Minister, I would. Keeping hold of a Time-Turner, of all the stupid things!

HERMIONE: In my defense —

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: And in a bookcase. You kept it in a bookcase. It's almost laughable.

HERMIONE: Minerva. *(There is an intake of breath.)* Professor McGonagall —

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: Your children didn't exist!

HERMIONE has no reply to that.

This happened in my school, under my watch. After all that Dumbledore did, I couldn't live with myself . . .

HERMIONE: I know.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL *(composes herself for a moment)*: Your intentions to save Cedric were honorable, if misguided. And it does sound as if you were brave, Scorpius, and you, Albus, but the lesson even your father sometimes failed to heed is that bravery doesn't forgive stupidity. Always think. Think what's possible. A world controlled by Voldemort is —

SCORPIUS: A horrific world.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: You are so young. *(She looks at HARRY, DRACO, GINNY, and HERMIONE.)* You're all so young. You have no idea how dark the wizarding wars got. You were — reckless — with the world some people — some very dear friends of mine and yours — sacrificed a huge amount to create and sustain.

ALBUS: Yes, Professor.

SCORPIUS: Yes, Professor.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: Go on. Get out. The lot of you. And find me that Time-Turner.

ACT THREE, SCENE ELEVEN

HOGWARTS, SLYTHERIN DORMITORY

ALBUS is sitting in his room. HARRY enters and looks at his son — full of anger, but cautious to not let it spill.

HARRY: Thanks for letting me come up.

ALBUS turns, he nods at his dad. He's being cautious too.

No luck, as yet, with the Time-Turner searching. They're negotiating with the Merpeople to dredge the lake.

He sits down uncomfortably.

This is a nice room.

ALBUS: Green is a soothing color, isn't it? I mean Gryffindor rooms are all well and good but the trouble with red is — it is said to send you a little mad — not that I'm casting aspersions . . .

HARRY: Can you explain why you tried to do this?

ALBUS: I thought I could — change things. I thought Cedric — it's unfair.

HARRY: Of course it's unfair, Albus, don't you think I know that? I was there. I saw him die. But to do this . . . to risk all this . . .

ALBUS: I know.

HARRY *(failing to contain his anger)*: If you were trying to do as I did, you went the wrong way about it. I didn't volunteer for adventure, I was forced into it. You did something really reckless — something really stupid and dangerous — something that could have destroyed everything —

ALBUS: I know. Okay. I know.

Pause. ALBUS wipes away a tear, HARRY notices it and takes a breath. He pulls himself

back from the brink.

HARRY: Well, I was wrong too — to think Scorpius was Voldemort's son. He wasn't a black cloud.

ALBUS: No.

HARRY: And I've locked away the map. You won't see it again. Your mum left your room exactly as it was when you ran away — you know that? Wouldn't let me go in — wouldn't let anyone go in — you really scared her . . . And me.

ALBUS: Really scared you?

HARRY: Yes.

ALBUS: I thought Harry Potter wasn't afraid of anything?

HARRY: Is that how I make you feel?

ALBUS looks at his dad, trying to figure him out.

ALBUS: I don't think Scorpius said, but when we returned after failing to fix the first task, I was suddenly in Gryffindor House. Nothing was better between us then either — so — the fact that I'm in Slytherin — that's not the reason for our problems. It's not just about that.

HARRY: No. I know. It's not just about that.

HARRY looks at ALBUS.

Are you okay, Albus?

ALBUS: No.

HARRY: No. Nor me.

ACT THREE, SCENE TWELVE

DREAM, GODRIC'S HOLLOW, GRAVEYARD

YOUNG HARRY stands looking at a gravestone covered in bunches of flowers. He has a small bunch of flowers in his hand.

AUNT PETUNIA: Go on then, lay down your grotty little flowers and then let's go. I already hate this poxy little village, I don't know why I even had the thought — Godric's Hollow, Godless Hollow, more like, the place is clearly a hive of filth — go on, chop-chop.

He approaches the grave. He stands a moment more.

Now, Harry . . . I don't have time for this. Duddy has his Cubs tonight and you know he hates to be late.

YOUNG HARRY: Aunt Petunia. We're their last living relatives, right?

AUNT PETUNIA: Yes. You and I. Yes.

YOUNG HARRY: And — they weren't popular? You said they didn't have any friends?

AUNT PETUNIA: Lily tried — bless her — she tried — it wasn't her fault, but she repelled people — by her very nature. It was her intensity, it was her manner, it was her — way. And your father — obnoxious man — extraordinarily obnoxious. No friends. Neither of them.

YOUNG HARRY: So my question is — why are there so many flowers? Why are there flowers all over their grave?

AUNT PETUNIA looks around, she sees all the flowers as if for the first time and it moves her hugely. She approaches and then sits by her sister's grave, trying hard to fight the emotions as they come to her but succumbing all the same.

AUNT PETUNIA: Oh. Yes. Well, I suppose there are a — few. Must have blown over from the other graves. Or someone's playing a trick. Yes, I think that's most likely, some young rapscallion with too much time on his hands has gone around collecting flowers from all the other graves and deposited them here —

YOUNG HARRY: But they're all marked with their names . . . "Lily and James, what you did, we will never forget," "Lily and James, your sacrifice . . ."

VOLDEMORT: I smell guilt, there is a stench of guilt upon the air.

AUNT PETUNIA *(to YOUNG HARRY)*: Get away. Get away from there.

She pulls him back. VOLDEMORT's hand rises into the air above the Potters' gravestone, the rest of him rises after. We don't see his face but his body provides a jagged, horrific shape.

I knew it. This place is dangerous. The sooner we leave Godric's Hollow the better.

YOUNG HARRY is pulled from the stage, but turns to face VOLDEMORT.

VOLDEMORT: Do you still see with my eyes, Harry Potter?

YOUNG HARRY exits, disturbed, as ALBUS bursts from within VOLDEMORT's cloak. He reaches out a desperate hand towards his dad.

ALBUS: Dad . . . Dad . . .

There are some words spoken in Parseltongue.

He's coming. He's coming. He's coming.

And then a scream.

And then, right from the back of the room, whispering around everyone.

Words said with an unmistakable voice. The voice of VOLDEMORT . . .

Haaarry Pottttter.

ACT THREE, SCENE THIRTEEN

HARRY AND GINNY POTTER'S HOUSE, KITCHEN

HARRY is in a horrible state. Petrified by what he thinks his dreams are telling him.

GINNY: Harry? Harry? What is it? You were screaming . . .

HARRY: They haven't stopped. The dreams.

GINNY: They weren't likely to stop immediately. It's been a stressful time and —

HARRY: But I was never in Godric's Hollow with Petunia. This doesn't —

GINNY: Harry, you're really scaring me.

HARRY: He's still here, Ginny.

GINNY: Who's still here?

HARRY: Voldemort. I saw Voldemort and Albus.

GINNY: And Albus . . . ?

HARRY: He said — Voldemort said — "I smell guilt, there is a stench of guilt upon the air." He was talking to me.

HARRY looks at her. He touches his scar. Her face falls.

GINNY: Harry, is Albus still in danger?

HARRY's face grows white.

HARRY: I think we all are.

ACT THREE, SCENE FOURTEEN

HOGWARTS, SLYTHERIN DORMITORY

SCORPIUS leans ominously over ALBUS's headboard.

SCORPIUS: Albus . . . Psst . . . Albus.

ALBUS doesn't wake.

ALBUS!

ALBUS wakes with a shock. SCORPIUS laughs.

ALBUS: Pleasant. That's a pleasant and not scary way to wake up.

SCORPIUS: You know it's the strangest of things, but ever since being in the scariest place imaginable I'm pretty much good with fear. I am — Scorpius the Dreadless. I am — Malfoy the Unanxious.

ALBUS: Good.

SCORPIUS: I mean, normally, being in lockdown, being in constant detention, it'd break me, but now — what's the worst they can do? Bring back Moldy Voldy and have him torture me? Nope.

ALBUS: You're scary when you're in a good mood, you know that?

SCORPIUS: When Rose came up to me today in Potions and called me Bread Head I almost hugged her. No, there's no almost about it, I actually tried to hug her, and then she kicked me in the shin.

ALBUS: I'm not sure being fearless is going to be good for your health.

SCORPIUS looks at ALBUS, his face grows more contemplative.

SCORPIUS: You don't know how good it is to be back here, Albus. I hated it there.

ALBUS: Apart from the Polly Chapman fancying you bits.

SCORPIUS: Cedric was a different person entirely — dark, dangerous. My dad — doing anything they wanted him to. And me? I discovered another Scorpius, you know? Entitled, angry, mean — people were frightened of me. It feels like we were all tested and we all — failed.

ALBUS: But you changed things. You had a chance and you changed time back. Changed yourself back.

SCORPIUS: Only because I knew what I should be.

ALBUS digests this.

ALBUS: Do you think I've been tested too? I have, haven't I?

SCORPIUS: No. Not yet.

ALBUS: You're wrong. The stupid thing wasn't going back once — anyone can make that mistake — the stupid thing was being arrogant enough to go back twice.

SCORPIUS: We both went back, Albus.

ALBUS: And why was I so determined to do this? Cedric? Really? No. I had something to prove. My dad's right — he didn't volunteer for adventure — me, this, it's all my fault—and if it wasn't for you everything could have gone Dark.

SCORPIUS: But it didn't. And you're to thank for that as much as me. When the dementors were — inside my head — Severus Snape told me to think of you. You may not have been there, Albus, but you were fighting — fighting alongside me.

ALBUS nods. Touched by this.

And saving Cedric — that wasn't such a bad idea — not in my head, anyway — though, you know, right — that we definitely can't try again.

ALBUS: Yes. I do. I do know that.

SCORPIUS: Good. Then you can help me destroy this.

SCORPIUS reveals the Time-Turner to ALBUS.

ALBUS: I'm pretty sure you told everyone that was on the bottom of a lake.

SCORPIUS: Turns out Malfoy the Unanxious is a pretty good liar.

ALBUS: Scorpius . . . We should tell someone about this . . .

SCORPIUS: Who? The Ministry kept it before, do you really trust them not to keep it again? Only you and I have experienced how dangerous this is, that means you and I have to destroy it. No one can do what we did, Albus. No one. No, *(slightly grandly)* it's time that time-turning became a thing of the past.

ALBUS: You're quite proud of that phrase, aren't you?

SCORPIUS: Been working on it all day.

ACT THREE, SCENE FIFTEEN

HOGWARTS, SLYTHERIN DORMITORY

HARRY and GINNY move quickly through the dormitory. CRAIG BOWKER JR. trails after them.

CRAIG BOWKER JR.: Can I repeat again? This is against the rules and it's the middle of the night.

HARRY: I need to find my son.

CRAIG BOWKER JR.: I know who you are, Mr. Potter, but even you must understand that it's against school covenant for parents or professors to enter a House quarters without express permission from . . .

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL charges in behind them.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: Please don't be tiresome, Craig.

HARRY: You got our message? Good.

CRAIG BOWKER JR. *(shocked)*: Headmistress. I'm — I was just —

HARRY pulls open a bed-curtain.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: He's gone?

HARRY: Yes.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: And young Malfoy?

GINNY pulls open another.

GINNY: Oh no.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: Then let's turn this school upside down. Craig, we've work to do . . .

GINNY and HARRY stay, looking at the bed.

GINNY: Haven't we been here before?

HARRY: Something feels even worse this time.

GINNY looks at her husband, full of fear.

GINNY: You spoke to him earlier?

HARRY: Yes.

GINNY: You came to his dorm and talked to him?

HARRY: You know I did.

GINNY: What did you say to our son, Harry?

HARRY can hear the accusation in her voice.

HARRY: I tried to be honest like you said — I didn't say anything.

GINNY: And you controlled yourself? How heated did it get?

HARRY: . . . I don't think I . . . You think I've scared him away again?

GINNY: I can forgive you for one mistake, Harry, maybe even two, but the more mistakes you make, the harder to forgive you it becomes.

ACT THREE, SCENE SIXTEEN

HOGWARTS, OWLERY

SCORPIUS and ALBUS emerge onto a roof bathed in silver light. There's soft hooting all around them.

SCORPIUS: So I think a simple Confringo.

ALBUS: Definitely not. For something like this you need Expulso.

SCORPIUS: Expulso? Expulso and we'll be clearing bits of Time-Turner from this owlery for days.

ALBUS: Bombarda?

SCORPIUS: And wake up everyone in Hogwarts? Maybe Stupefy. They were originally destroyed using Stupefy . . .

ALBUS: Exactly, it's been done before — let's do something new, something fun.

SCORPIUS: Fun? Look, many wizards overlook the importance of choosing the right spell, but this really matters. I think it's a much-underestimated part of modern witchcraft.

DELPHI: "A much-underestimated part of modern witchcraft" — you two are the greatest, you know that?

SCORPIUS looks up, surprised to see DELPHI has emerged behind them.

SCORPIUS: Wow. You're . . . um . . . What are you doing here?

ALBUS: It felt important to send an owl — let her know what we're doing, you know?

SCORPIUS looks at his friend accusingly.

This concerns her too.

SCORPIUS thinks, and then nods, accepting this.

DELPHI: What concerns me? What's this about?

ALBUS gets out the Time-Turner.

ALBUS: We need to destroy the Time-Turner. The things Scorpius saw after the second task . . . I'm so sorry. We can't risk going back again. We can't save your cousin.

DELPHI looks at it and then at them both.

DELPHI: Your owl said so little . . .

ALBUS: Imagine the worst possible world, and then double it. People being tortured, dementors everywhere, a despotic Voldemort, my dad dead, me never born, the world surrounded by Dark Magic — we just, we can't allow that to happen.

DELPHI hesitates. And then her face breaks.

DELPHI: Voldemort ruled? He was alive?

SCORPIUS: He ruled everything. It was terrible.

DELPHI: Because of what we did?

SCORPIUS: Humiliating Cedric turned him into a very angry young man, and then he became a Death Eater and — and — it all went wrong. Really wrong.

DELPHI looks at SCORPIUS's face carefully. Her face sinks.

DELPHI: A Death Eater?

SCORPIUS: And a murderer. He killed Professor Longbottom.

DELPHI: Then — of course — we need to destroy it.

ALBUS: You understand?

DELPHI: I'll go further than that — I'll say Cedric would have understood. We'll destroy it together, and then we'll go to my uncle. Explain the situation.

ALBUS: Thank you.

DELPHI smiles at them sadly, and then takes the Time-Turner. She looks at it and her expression changes slightly.

Oh, nice mark.

DELPHI: What?

DELPHI's cloak has loosened. An Augurey tattoo is visible on the back of her neck.

ALBUS: On your back. I hadn't noticed it before. The wings. Is that what the Muggles call a tattoo?

DELPHI: Oh. Yes. Well, it's an Augurey.

SCORPIUS: An Augurey?

DELPHI: Haven't you met them in Care of Magical Creatures? They're sinister-looking black birds that cry when rain's coming. Wizards used to believe that the Augurey's cry foretold death. When I was growing up my guardian kept one in a cage.

SCORPIUS: Your . . . guardian?

DELPHI looks at SCORPIUS, now she has the Time-Turner she's enjoying the game of this.

DELPHI: She used to say it was crying because it could see I was going to come to a sticky end. She didn't like me much. Euphemia Rowle . . . she only took me in for the gold.

ALBUS: Why would you want a tattoo of her bird, then?

DELPHI: It reminds me that the future is mine to make.

ALBUS: Cool. I might get an Augurey tattoo.

SCORPIUS: The Rowles were pretty extreme Death Eaters.

A thousand thoughts whir inside SCORPIUS's head.

ALBUS: Come on, let's get destroying . . . Confringo? Stupefy? Bombarda? Which would you use?

SCORPIUS: Give it back. Give us back the Time-Turner.

DELPHI: What?

ALBUS: Scorpius? What are you doing?

SCORPIUS: I don't believe you ever were ill. Why didn't you come to Hogwarts? Why are you here now?

DELPHI: I'm trying to bring my cousin back!

SCORPIUS: They called you the Augurey. In — the other world — they called you the Augurey.

A slow smile grows on DELPHI's face.

DELPHI: The Augurey? I rather like that.

ALBUS: Delphi?

She's too quick. Leveling her wand, she repels SCORPIUS, and she is far stronger. SCORPIUS tries to keep her back, but she quickly overpowers him.

DELPHI: Fulgari!

SCORPIUS's arms are bound in vicious, luminous cords.

SCORPIUS: Albus. Run!

ALBUS looks around, bewildered. And then starts to run.

DELPHI: Fulgari!

ALBUS is propelled to the floor, his hands tied by the same brutal binding.

And that is the first spell I've had to use on you. I thought I'd have to use plenty more. But you're far easier to control than Amos — children, particularly male children, are so naturally pliant, aren't they? Now, let's sort this mess out once and for all . . .

ALBUS: But why? But what? But who are you?

DELPHI: Albus. I am the new past.

She pulls ALBUS's wand from him and snaps it.

I am the new future.

She pulls SCORPIUS's wand from him and snaps it.

I am the answer this world has been looking for.

ACT THREE, SCENE SEVENTEEN

MINISTRY OF MAGIC, HERMIONE'S OFFICE

RON is sitting on HERMIONE's desk eating porridge.

RON: I can't get over it, really. The fact that in some realities we aren't even, you know, married.

HERMIONE: Ron, whatever this is, I've got ten minutes until the goblins show up to talk security at Gringotts —

RON: I mean, we've been together so long — and married for so long — I mean, *so* long —

HERMIONE: If this is your way of saying you want a marital break, Ron, then, to be clear, I will skewer you with this quill.

RON: Shut up. Will you shut up for once? I want to do one of those marriage renewal things I've read about. Marriage renewal. What do you think?

HERMIONE *(melting slightly)*: You want to marry me again?

RON: Well, we were only young when we did it the first time and I got very drunk and — well, to be honest, I can't remember much of it and . . . The truth is — I love you, Hermione Granger, and whatever time says — I'd like the opportunity to say so in front of lots of other people. Again. Sober.

She looks at him, she smiles, she pulls him to her, she kisses him.

HERMIONE: You're sweet.

RON: And you taste of toffee . . .

HERMIONE laughs. HARRY, GINNY, and DRACO walk in on them as they move to kiss again. They spring apart.

HERMIONE: Harry, Ginny, and — I, uh — Draco — how lovely to see you —

HARRY: The dreams. They've started again, well, they haven't stopped.

GINNY: And Albus is missing. Again.

DRACO: Scorpius too. We've had McGonagall check the entire school. They're gone.

HERMIONE: I'll get the Aurors summoned immediately, I'll —

RON: No, you won't, it's all fine. Albus — I saw him last night. It's all good.

DRACO: Where?

They all turn to look at RON, he's briefly disconcerted but batters on.

RON: I was having a couple of firewhiskies with Neville in Hogsmeade — as you do — setting the world to rights — as we do — and we were coming back — quite late, very late, and trying to work out which Floo I could use because when you've had a drink sometimes you don't want to use the tight ones — or the turny ones or —

GINNY: Ron, if you could get to the point before we all strangle you?

RON: He hasn't run away — he's having a quiet moment — he's got himself an older girlfriend —

HARRY: An older girlfriend?

RON: And a cracking one at that — gorgeous silver hair. Saw them on the roof together, near the Owlery with Scorpius playing the gooseberry. Nice to see my love potion being used well, I thought.

HARRY has a thought.

HARRY: Her hair — was it silver and blue?

RON: That's it — silver, blue — yup.

HARRY: He's talking about Delphi Diggory. Niece of — Amos Diggory.

GINNY: This is about Cedric again?

HARRY says nothing, thinking fast. HERMIONE looks around the room, concerned, and then shouts out of the door.

HERMIONE: Ethel! Cancel the goblins.

ACT THREE, SCENE EIGHTEEN

ST. OSWALD'S HOME FOR OLD WITCHES AND WIZARDS, AMOS'S ROOM

HARRY walks in, wand outstretched, with DRACO.

HARRY: Where are they?

AMOS: Harry Potter, and what can I do for you, sir? And Draco Malfoy. I am blessed.

HARRY: I know how you've used my son.

AMOS: I've used your son? No. You, sir — you used my beautiful son.

DRACO: Tell us — now — where are Albus and Scorpius? Or face the profoundest consequences.

AMOS: But why would I know where they are?

DRACO: Don't play the senility card with us, old man. We know you've been sending him owls.

AMOS: I've done nothing of the kind.

HARRY: Amos, you're not too old for Azkaban. They were last seen on the Hogwarts tower with your niece when they disappeared.

AMOS: I have no idea what you are . . . *(He stops, a beat, confused.)* My niece?

HARRY: There are no depths to which you won't sink, are there — yes, your niece, are you denying she was there under your express instructions?

AMOS: Yes, I am — I don't have a niece.

This stops HARRY.

DRACO: Yes, you do, a nurse, works here. Your niece . . . Delphini Diggory.

AMOS: I know I don't have a niece because I never had any brothers and sisters. And nor did my wife.

DRACO: We need to find out who she is — now.

ACT THREE, SCENE NINETEEN

HOGWARTS, QUIDDITCH PITCH

We open on DELPHI, enjoying every second of her changed identity. Where there was discomfort and insecurity, now there's just power.

ALBUS: What are we doing on the Quidditch pitch?

DELPHI says nothing.

SCORPIUS: The Triwizard Tournament. The third task. The maze. This is where the maze was. We're going back for Cedric.

DELPHI: Yes, it is time to spare the spare once and for all. We will go back for Cedric and in doing so we will resurrect the world you saw, Scorpius . . .

SCORPIUS: Hell. You want to resurrect hell?

DELPHI: I want a return to pure and strong magic. I want to rebirth the Dark.

SCORPIUS: You want Voldemort's return?

DELPHI: The one true ruler of the wizarding world. He will return. Now, you've ensured the first two tasks are a little clogged up with magic — there are at least two visits from the future in both of them and I will not risk being revealed or distracted. The third task is clean, so let's start there, shall we?

ALBUS: We won't stop him — whatever you force us to do — we know he needs to win the tournament with my dad.

DELPHI: I don't just want you to stop him. I want you to humiliate him. He needs to fly out of that maze naked on a broomstick made of purple feather dusters. Humiliation got you there before and it'll get us there again. And the prophecy will be fulfilled.

SCORPIUS: Wasn't aware that there was a prophecy, what prophecy?

DELPHI: You have seen the world as it should be, Scorpius, and today we're going to ensure its return.

ALBUS: We won't. We won't obey you. Whoever you are. Whatever you want us to do.

DELPHI: Of course you will.

ALBUS: You'll have to use Imperio. You'll have to control me.

DELPHI: No. To fulfill the prophecy, this has to be you, not a puppet of you. You have to be the one to humiliate Cedric, so Imperio just won't do — I'll have to force you by other means.

She takes out her wand. She points it at ALBUS, who sticks his chin out.

ALBUS: Do your worst.

DELPHI looks at him. And then turns her wand on SCORPIUS.

DELPHI: I will.

ALBUS: No!

DELPHI: Yes, as I thought — this seems to frighten you more.

SCORPIUS: Albus, whatever she does to me — we can't let her —

DELPHI: Crucio!

SCORPIUS yells out in pain.

ALBUS: I will . . .

DELPHI *(laughing)*: What? What on earth do you think you can do? A wizardwide disappointment? A sore on your family name? A spare? You want to stop me hurting your only friend? Then do what you're told.

She looks at ALBUS, his eyes stay resistant.

No? Crucio!

ALBUS: Stop. Please.

CRAIG runs in, full of energy.

CRAIG BOWKER JR.: Scorpius? Albus? Everyone's looking for you —

ALBUS: Craig. Get away. Get help!

CRAIG BOWKER JR.: What's happening?

DELPHI: Avada Kedavra!

DELPHI sends a blast of green light across the stage — CRAIG is propelled backwards by it — and is immediately killed.

There's a silence. A silence that seems to last for a long time.

Did you not understand? These are not childish games we are playing here. You are useful to me, your friends are not.

ALBUS and SCORPIUS look at CRAIG's body — their minds in hell.

It took me a long time to discover your weakness, Albus Potter. I thought it was pride, I thought it was the need to impress your father, but then I realized your weakness was the same as your father's: friendship. You will do exactly as you're told, otherwise Scorpius will die, just like that *spare* did.

She looks at them both.

Voldemort will return and the Augurey will sit at his side. Just as it was prophesized. "When spares are spared, when time is turned, when unseen children murder their fathers: Then will the Dark Lord return."

She smiles. She pulls SCORPIUS viciously towards her.

Cedric is the spare, and Albus —

She pulls ALBUS viciously towards her.

— the unseen child who will kill his father by rewriting time and so return the Dark Lord.

The Time-Turner starts rotating. She pulls their hands to it.

Now!

And there is a giant whoosh of light. A smash of noise.

And time stops. And then it turns over, thinks a bit, and begins spooling backwards, slow at first . . .

And then it speeds up.

And then there's a sucking noise. And a BANG.

ACT THREE, SCENE TWENTY

TRIWIZARD TOURNAMENT, MAZE, 1995

The maze is a spiral of hedges that don't stop moving. DELPHI *walks determinedly through it. Behind her she drags* ALBUS *and* SCORPIUS*. Their arms bound, their legs reluctantly moving.*

LUDO BAGMAN: Ladies and gentlemen — boys and girls — I give you — the greatest — the fabulous — the one — and the only TRIWIZARD TOURNAMENT.

There's a loud cheer. DELPHI *turns left.*

If you're from Hogwarts. Give me a cheer.

There's a loud cheer.

If you're from Durmstrang — give me a cheer.

There's a loud cheer.

AND IF YOU'RE FROM BEAUXBATONS GIVE ME A CHEER.

There's a fulsome cheer.

DELPHI *and the boys are forced to move as a hedge closes upon them.*

The French, finally showing us what they're capable of there. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you — the final of the Triwizard tasks. A maze of mysteries, a disease of uncontrollable darkness, for this maze — it lives. It lives.

VIKTOR KRUM *passes across the stage, moving through the maze.*

And why risk this living nightmare? Because inside this maze is a Cup — and not just any Cup — yes, the Triwizard trophy stands within this vegetation.

DELPHI: Where is he? Where is Cedric?

A hedge almost dissects ALBUS *and* SCORPIUS*.*

SCORPIUS: The hedges want to kill us too? This gets better and better.

DELPHI: You will keep up or face the consequences.

LUDO BAGMAN: The perils are plentiful, but the prizes are palpable. Who will fight their way through? Who will fall at the final hurdle? What heroes do we have within our midst? Only time will tell, ladies and gentlemen, only time will tell.

They move through the maze, SCORPIUS and ALBUS being compelled by DELPHI. As she moves ahead, the boys have a chance to talk.

SCORPIUS: Albus, we need to do something.

ALBUS: I know, but what? She has snapped our wands, we're bound, and she's threatening to kill you.

SCORPIUS: I'm ready to die if it'll stop Voldemort returning.

ALBUS: Are you?

SCORPIUS: You won't have to mourn me for long, she'll kill me and quickly kill you too.

ALBUS *(desperate)*: The flaw in the Time-Turner, the five-minute rule. We do all we can to run down the clock.

SCORPIUS: It won't work.

As another hedge changes direction, DELPHI pulls ALBUS and SCORPIUS in after her. They continue through this maze of despair.

LUDO BAGMAN: Now let me remind you of the current standings! Tied in first place — Mr. Cedric Diggory and Mr. Harry Potter. In second place — Mr. Viktor Krum! And in third place — *sacré bleu*, Miss Fleur Delacour.

Suddenly, ALBUS and SCORPIUS emerge from behind a hedge, they're running.

ALBUS: Where did she go?

SCORPIUS: Does it matter? Which way do you think?

DELPHI rises up after them. She's flying, and without a broom.

DELPHI: You poor creatures.

She throws the boys to the ground.

Thinking you can escape me.

ALBUS *(astonished)*: You're not — even on a broom.

DELPHI: Brooms — such unwieldy, unnecessary objects. Three minutes gone. We have two minutes left. And you will do what you're told.

SCORPIUS: No. We won't.

DELPHI: You think you can fight me?

SCORPIUS: No. But we can defy you. If we lay down our lives to do so.

DELPHI: The prophecy must be fulfilled. We will fulfill it.

SCORPIUS: Prophecies can be broken.

DELPHI: You're mistaken, child, prophecies are the future.

SCORPIUS: But if the prophecy is inevitable why are we here trying to influence it? Your actions contradict your thoughts — you're dragging us through this maze because you believe this prophecy needs to be enabled — and by that logic prophecies can also be broken — prevented.

DELPHI: You talk too much, child. Crucio!

SCORPIUS is racked with pain.

ALBUS: Scorpius!

SCORPIUS: You wanted a test, Albus, this is it, and we're going to pass it.

ALBUS looks at SCORPIUS, finally aware what he has to do. He nods.

DELPHI: Then you will die.

ALBUS *(full of strength)*: Yes. We will. And we'll do so gladly knowing it's stopped you.

DELPHI rises up — full of fury.

DELPHI: We don't have time for this. Cru —

MYSTERIOUS VOICE: Expelliarmus!

Bang. DELPHI's wand is pulled away from her. SCORPIUS looks on in astonishment.

Brachiabindo!

And DELPHI is bound. SCORPIUS and ALBUS then turn as one and stare in astonishment at where the bolt came from: a young, good-looking lad of seventeen or so, CEDRIC.

CEDRIC: Come no further.

SCORPIUS: But you're . . .

CEDRIC: Cedric Diggory. I heard screaming, I had to come. Name yourselves, beasts. I can fight you.

ALBUS wheels around, astonished.

ALBUS: Cedric?

SCORPIUS: You saved us.

CEDRIC: Are you also a task? An obstacle? Speak. Do I have to defeat you too?

There's a silence.

SCORPIUS: No. You just have to free us. That's the task.

CEDRIC thinks, trying to work out whether it's a trap, and then waves his wand.

CEDRIC: Emancipare! Emancipare!

The boys are freed.

And now I can go on? Finish the maze?

The boys look at CEDRIC — they are heartbroken.

ALBUS: I'm afraid you have to finish the maze.

CEDRIC: Then I shall.

CEDRIC walks confidently away. ALBUS looks after him — desperate to say something, unsure what to say.

ALBUS: Cedric —

CEDRIC turns towards him.

Your dad loves you very much.

CEDRIC: What?

Behind them, DELPHI's body creeps into movement. She crawls along the ground.

ALBUS: Just thought you should know that.

CEDRIC: Okay. Um. Thank you.

CEDRIC looks at ALBUS a moment more, and then walks on. DELPHI pulls out the Time-Turner from within her robes.

SCORPIUS: Albus.

ALBUS: No. Wait . . .

SCORPIUS: The Time-Turner is spinning . . . Look at what she's doing . . . She can't leave us behind.

ALBUS and SCORPIUS both scramble to grab part of the Time-Turner.

And there is a giant whoosh of light. A smash of noise.

And time stops. And then it turns over, thinks a bit, and begins spooling backwards, slow at first . . .

And then it speeds up.

Albus . . .

ALBUS: What have we done?

SCORPIUS: We had to go with the Time-Turner, we had to try to stop her.

DELPHI: Stop me? How do you think you've stopped me? I am done with this. You may have destroyed my chances of using Cedric to darken the world but maybe you're right, Scorpius — maybe prophecies can be prevented, maybe prophecies can be broken. What is undoubtedly true is: I'm done with trying to use you annoying, incompetent creatures for anything. No more wasting precious seconds on either of you. Time to try something new.

She crushes the Time-Turner. It explodes in a thousand pieces.

DELPHI ascends again into the air. She laughs in delight as she sets off hard away.

The boys try to chase her, but they've not the slightest chance. She flies, they run.

ALBUS: No . . . No . . . You can't . . .

SCORPIUS turns back and tries to pick up the Time-Turner pieces.

The Time-Turner? It's destroyed?

SCORPIUS: Utterly. We're stuck here. In time. Wherever in time we are. Whatever it is she's planning to do.

ALBUS: Hogwarts looks the same.

SCORPIUS: Yes. And we can't be seen here. Let's get out of here before we're spotted.

ALBUS: We need to stop her, Scorpius.

SCORPIUS: I know we do — but how?

ACT THREE, SCENE TWENTY-ONE

ST. OSWALD'S HOME FOR OLD WITCHES AND WIZARDS, DELPHI'S ROOM

HARRY, HERMIONE, RON, DRACO, and GINNY look around a simple oak-paneled room.

HARRY: It must have been a Confundus Charm she used on him. Used on them all. She faked being a nurse, she faked being his niece.

HERMIONE: I've just checked in with the Ministry — but there's no record of her. She's a shadow.

DRACO: Specialis Revelio!

Everyone turns to look at DRACO.

Well, it was worth a try, what are you waiting for? We know nothing, so we just have to hope this room reveals something.

GINNY: Where can she have hidden anything? It's quite a spartan room.

RON: These panels, these panels must conceal something.

DRACO: Or the bed does.

DRACO starts examining the bed, GINNY a lamp, as the rest start examining the wooden wall panels.

RON *(shouting as he hammers on the walls)*: What you hiding? What you got?

HERMIONE: Maybe we should all stop for a moment and have a think about what —

GINNY unscrews a chimney from an oil lamp. There's a breathing-out noise. And then hissing words. They all turn towards it.

What was that?

HARRY: That's — I'm not supposed to be understanding — that's Parseltongue.

HERMIONE: And what does it say?

HARRY: How do I . . . ? I haven't been able to understand Parseltongue since Voldemort died.

HERMIONE: And nor has your scar hurt.

HARRY looks at HERMIONE.

HARRY: It says "Welcome, Augurey." I think I need to tell it to open . . .

DRACO: Then do it.

HARRY shuts his eyes. He speaks in Parseltongue.

The room transforms around them, becoming darker and more desperate. A writhing mass of painted snakes emerges on all the walls.

And on them, written in fluorescent paint, a prophecy.

What is this?

RON: "When spares are spared, when time is turned, when unseen children murder their fathers: Then will the Dark Lord return."

GINNY: A prophecy. A new prophecy.

HERMIONE: Cedric — Cedric was called a spare.

RON: When time is turned — she has that Time-Turner, doesn't she?

Their faces sink.

HERMIONE: She must do.

RON: But why does she need Scorpius or Albus?

HARRY: Because I'm a parent — who hasn't seen his child. Hasn't understood his child.

DRACO: Who is she? To be so obsessed with all this?

GINNY: I think I've got the answer to that.

They all turn to her. She points up . . . Their collective faces sink further and fill with fear.

Words are revealed on all the walls of the auditorium — dangerous words, horrible words.

"I will rebirth the Dark. I will bring my father back."

RON: No. She can't . . .

HERMIONE: How is it even — possible?

DRACO: Voldemort had a daughter?

They look up, terrified. GINNY takes HARRY's hand.

HARRY: No, no, no. Not that. Anything but that.

Cut to black.

ACT FOUR

ACT FOUR, SCENE ONE

MINISTRY OF MAGIC, GRAND MEETING ROOM

Wizards and witches from all over cram into the grand meeting room. HERMIONE *walks onto a hastily made stage. She raises her hand for silence. Silence falls. She's surprised at the lack of effort it took. She looks around herself.*

HERMIONE: Thank you. I'm so pleased so many of you were able to make my — second — Extraordinary General Meeting. I've got some things to say — I ask that we deal with questions — and there will be a lot of questions — after I speak.

As many of you know, a body has been found at Hogwarts. His name was Craig Bowker. He was a good boy. We have no firm information who was responsible for the act but yesterday we searched St. Oswald's. A room there revealed two things — one, a prophecy that promised — the return of darkness — two, written on the ceiling, a proclamation — that the Dark Lord had a — that Voldemort had a child.

The news reverberates around the room.

We don't know the full details. We're only just investigating — questioning those with a Death Eater connection . . . And as yet no record has been found either of the child or of the prophecy — but, it does look like there's some truth to it. This child was kept hidden from the wizarding world, and now she's — well now she's . . .

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: She? A daughter? He had a daughter?

HERMIONE: Yes. A daughter.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: And is she now in custody?

HARRY: Professor, she did ask for no questions.

HERMIONE: It's fine, Harry. No, Professor, that's where this gets worse. I'm afraid we've no means of taking her into custody. Or indeed, stopping her doing anything. She's out of our reach.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: We can't — look for her?

HERMIONE: We have good reason to believe — she's hidden herself — in time.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: Of all the reckless stupid things, you kept the Time-Turner even now?

HERMIONE: Professor, I assure you —

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: Shame on you, Hermione Granger.

HERMIONE flinches in the face of the anger.

HARRY: No, she doesn't deserve that. You have a right to be angry. You all do. But this is not all Hermione's fault. We don't know how the witch got hold of the Time-Turner. Whether my son gave it to her.

GINNY: Whether *our* son gave it her. Or whether it was stolen from him.

GINNY joins HARRY on the stage.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: Your solidarity is admirable, but it doesn't make your negligence negligible.

DRACO: Then it's a negligence I too should face.

DRACO walks up to the stage and stands beside GINNY. This is almost a Spartacus moment. There are gasps.

Hermione and Harry have done nothing wrong but try and protect us all. If they're guilty then I am too.

HERMIONE looks across at her cohort — moved. RON joins them on the stage.

RON: Just to say — I didn't know about much of it so can't take responsibility — and I'm pretty sure my kids had nothing to do with it — but if this lot are standing up here then so am I.

GINNY: No one can know where they are — whether they're together or apart. I trust that our sons will be doing all they can to stop her, but . . .

HERMIONE: We haven't given up. We've gone to the giants. The trolls. Everyone we can find. The Aurors are out flying, searching, talking to those who know secrets, following those who won't reveal secrets.

HARRY: But there is one truth we can't escape: That somewhere in our past a witch is trying to rewrite everything we ever knew — and all we can do is wait — wait for the moment she either succeeds or fails.

PROFESSOR McGONAGALL: And if she succeeds?

HARRY: Then — just like that — most of the people in this room will be gone. We'll no longer exist and Voldemort will rule again.

ACT FOUR, SCENE TWO

SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS, AVIEMORE TRAIN STATION, 1981

ALBUS and SCORPIUS are looking at a STATIONMASTER, apprehensively.

ALBUS: One of us should talk to him, don't you think?

SCORPIUS: Hello, Mr. Stationmaster. Mr. Muggle. Question: Did you see a flying witch passing here? And by the way, what year is it? We just ran away from Hogwarts because we were frightened of upsetting things, but this is okay?

ALBUS: You know what annoys me most of all? Dad will think we did it deliberately.

SCORPIUS: Albus. Really? I mean, really really? We're — trapped — lost — in time — probably permanently — and you're worrying what your dad might think about it? I will never understand the two of you.

ALBUS: There's a lot to understand. Dad's pretty complicated.

SCORPIUS: And you're not? Not to question your taste in women, but you fancied . . . well . . .

They both know who he's talking about.

ALBUS: I did, didn't I? I mean, what she did to Craig . . .

SCORPIUS: Let's not think about that. Let's focus on the fact that we have no wands, no brooms, no means of returning to our time. All we have is our wits and — no, that's all, our wits — and we have to stop her.

STATIONMASTER *(in very strong Scots)*: Ye ken th' auld reekie train is running late, boys?

SCORPIUS: Sorry?

STATIONMASTER: If you're waiting oan th' auld reekie train, you'll need tae ken it's running late. Train wirks oan th' line. It's a' oan th' amended time buird.

He looks at them, they look back bewildered. He frowns and hands them an amended

timetable. He points to the right bit of it.

Late.

ALBUS takes it and examines it. His face changes as he takes in enormous information. SCORPIUS just stares at the STATIONMASTER.

ALBUS: I know where she is.

SCORPIUS: You understood that?

ALBUS: Look at the date. On the timetable.

SCORPIUS leans in and reads.

SCORPIUS: The 30th October, 1981. Day before Hallows' Eve, thirty-nine years ago. But — why is she? Oh.

SCORPIUS's face falls as he realizes.

ALBUS: The death of my grandparents. The attack on my dad as a baby . . . The moment when Voldemort's curse rebounded on himself. She's not trying to bring about her prophecy — she's trying to prevent the big one.

SCORPIUS: The big one?

ALBUS: "The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches . . ."

SCORPIUS joins in.

SCORPIUS and ALBUS: ". . . born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies . . ."

SCORPIUS's face falls with every word.

SCORPIUS: It's my fault. I told her that prophecies can be broken — I told her the whole logic of prophecies is questionable —

ALBUS: In twenty-four hours' time Voldemort curses himself trying to kill the baby Harry Potter. Delphi is trying to prevent that curse. She's going to kill Harry herself. We need to get to Godric's Hollow. Now.

ACT FOUR, SCENE THREE

GODRIC'S HOLLOW, 1981

ALBUS and SCORPIUS walk through the center of Godric's Hollow and it's a bustling, beautiful little village.

SCORPIUS: Well, there's no visible signs of attack that I can see . . .

ALBUS: This is Godric's Hollow?

SCORPIUS: Your dad's never taken you?

ALBUS: No, he tried to a few times but I refused.

SCORPIUS: Well, there's no time for a tour — we have a murderous witch to save the world from — but regard: The Church, St. Jerome's . . .

As he indicates a church becomes visible.

ALBUS: It's magnificent.

SCORPIUS: And St. Jerome's graveyard is supposedly magnificently haunted, *(he points in another direction)* and that's where the statue of Harry and his parents will be —

ALBUS: My dad has a statue?

SCORPIUS: Oh. Not yet. But he will. Hopefully. And this — this house is where Bathilda Bagshot lived, lives . . .

ALBUS: The Bathilda Bagshot? *A History of Magic* Bathilda Bagshot?

SCORPIUS: The very same. Oh my, that's her. Wow. Squeak. My geekness is a-quivering.

ALBUS: Scorpius!

SCORPIUS: And here it is —

ALBUS: The home of James, Lily, and Harry Potter . . .

A young, attractive couple leave a house with a baby in a pushchair. ALBUS moves towards them, SCORPIUS pulls him back.

SCORPIUS: They can't see you, Albus, it might damage time, and we're not doing that — not this time.

ALBUS: But this means, she hasn't . . . We've made it . . . She hasn't . . .

SCORPIUS: So what do we do now? Get ready to fight her? Because she's pretty . . . Fierce.

ALBUS: Yes. We haven't really thought this one through, have we? What do we do now? How do we protect my dad?

ACT FOUR, SCENE FOUR

MINISTRY OF MAGIC, HARRY'S OFFICE

HARRY is hurriedly going through paperwork.

DUMBLEDORE: Good evening, Harry.

A beat. HARRY looks up at the portrait of DUMBLEDORE, his face passive.

HARRY: Professor Dumbledore, in my office, I'm honored. I must be where the action is tonight?

DUMBLEDORE: What are you doing?

HARRY: Going through papers, seeing if I've missed anything I shouldn't have. Marshaling forces to fight in the limited way we can fight. Knowing that the battle is being raged far away from us. What else can I do?

Pause. DUMBLEDORE says nothing.

Where have you been, Dumbledore?

DUMBLEDORE: I'm here now.

HARRY: Here just as the battle is lost. Or are you denying that Voldemort is going to return.

DUMBLEDORE: It is — possible.

HARRY: Go. Leave. I don't want you here, I don't need you. You were absent every time it really counted. I fought him three times without you. I'll face him again, if needs be — alone.

DUMBLEDORE: Harry, don't you think I wanted to fight him on your behalf? I would have spared you if I could —

HARRY: "Love blinds us"? Do you even know what that means? Do you even know how bad that advice was? My son is — my son is fighting battles for us just as I had to for you. And I have proved as bad a father to him as you were to me. Leaving him in places he felt unloved — growing in him resentments he'll take years to understand —

DUMBLEDORE: If you're referring to Privet Drive, then —

HARRY: Years — *years* I spent there alone, without knowing what I was, or why I was there, without knowing that anybody cared!

DUMBLEDORE: I — did not wish to become attached to you —

HARRY: Protecting yourself, even then!

DUMBLEDORE: No. I was protecting you. I did not want to hurt you . . .

DUMBLEDORE attempts to reach out of the portrait — but he can't. He begins to cry but tries to hide it.

But I had to meet you in the end . . . eleven years old, and you were so brave. So good. You walked uncomplainingly along the path that had been laid at your feet. Of course I loved you . . . and I knew that it would happen all over again . . . that where I loved, I would cause irreparable damage. I am no fit person to love . . . I have never loved without causing harm.

A beat.

HARRY: You would have hurt me less if you had told me this then.

DUMBLEDORE *(openly weeping now)*: I was blind. That is what love does. I couldn't see that you needed to hear that this closed-up, tricky, dangerous old man . . . loved you.

A pause. The two men are overcome with emotion.

HARRY: It isn't true that I never complained.

DUMBLEDORE: Harry, there is never a perfect answer in this messy, emotional world. Perfection is beyond the reach of humankind, beyond the reach of magic. In every shining moment of happiness is that drop of poison: the knowledge that pain will come again. Be honest to those you love, show your pain. To suffer is as human as to breathe.

HARRY: You said that to me once before.

DUMBLEDORE: It is all I have to offer you tonight.

He begins to walk away.

HARRY: Don't go!

DUMBLEDORE: Those that we love never truly leave us, Harry. There are things that death cannot touch. Paint . . . and memory . . . and love.

HARRY: I loved you too, Dumbledore.

DUMBLEDORE: I know.

He is gone. And HARRY is alone. DRACO enters.

DRACO: Did you know that in this other reality — the reality Scorpius saw into — I was Head of Magical Law Enforcement? Maybe this room will be mine soon enough. Are you okay?

HARRY is consumed in his grief.

HARRY: Come in — I'll give you the tour.

DRACO walks hesitantly inside the room. He looks around distastefully.

DRACO: The thing is, though — never really fancied being a Ministry man. Even as a child. My dad, it's all he ever wanted — me, no.

HARRY: What did you want to do?

DRACO: Quidditch. But I wasn't good enough. Mainly I wanted to be happy.

HARRY nods. DRACO looks at him a second more.

Sorry, I'm not very good at small talk, do you mind if we skip on to the serious business?

HARRY: Of course. What — serious — business?

Beat.

DRACO: Do you think Theodore Nott had the only Time-Turner?

HARRY: What?

DRACO: The Time-Turner the Ministry seized was a prototype. Made of inexpensive metal. It does the job — sure. But only being able to go back in time for five minutes — that's a serious flaw — it isn't something you'd sell to true collectors of Dark Magic.

HARRY realizes what DRACO is saying.

HARRY: He was working for you?

DRACO: No. My father. He liked owning things that no one else had. The Ministry's Time-Turners — thanks to Croaker — were always a little vanilla for him. He wanted the ability to go back further than an hour, he wanted the ability to travel back years. He'd never have used it. Secretly I think he preferred a world without Voldemort. But yes, the Time-Turner was built for him.

HARRY: And did you keep it?

DRACO reveals the Time-Turner.

DRACO: No five-minute problem, and it gleams like gold, just the way the Malfoys like it. You're smiling.

HARRY: Hermione Granger. It was the reason she kept the first, the fear that there might be a second. Hanging on to this, you could have been sent to Azkaban.

DRACO: Consider the alternative — consider if people had known that I had the ability to travel in time. Consider the rumor that would have been given increased — credence.

HARRY looks at DRACO, understanding him perfectly.

HARRY: Scorpius.

DRACO: We were capable of having children but Astoria was frail. A blood malediction, a serious one. An ancestor was cursed . . . it showed up in her. You know how these things can resurface after generations . . .

HARRY: I'm sorry, Draco.

DRACO: I didn't want to risk her health, I said it didn't matter whether the Malfoy line died with me — whatever my father said. But Astoria — she didn't want a baby for the Malfoy name, for pureblood or glory, but for us. Our child, Scorpius, was born . . . it was the best day of both our lives, although it weakened Astoria considerably. We hid ourselves away, the three of us. I wanted to conserve her strength . . . and so the rumors started.

HARRY: I can't imagine what that was like.

DRACO: Astoria always knew that she was not destined for old age. She wanted me to have somebody when she left, because . . . it is exceptionally lonely, being Draco Malfoy. I will always be suspected. There is no escaping the past. I never realized, though, that by hiding him away from this gossiping, judgmental world, I ensured that my son would emerge shrouded in worse suspicion than I ever endured.

HARRY: Love blinds. We have both tried to give our sons, not what they needed, but what we needed. We've been so busy trying to rewrite our own pasts, we've blighted their present.

DRACO: Which is why you need this. I have been holding on to it, barely resisting using it, even though I would sell my soul for another minute with Astoria.

HARRY: Oh, Draco . . . we can't. We can't use it.

DRACO looks up at HARRY, and for the first time — at the bottom of this dreadful pit — they look at each other as friends.

DRACO: We have to find them — if it takes centuries, we must find our sons —

HARRY: We have no idea where they are or when they are. Searching in time when you've no idea where in time to search, that's a fool's errand. No, love won't do it and nor will a Time-Turner, I'm afraid. It's up to our sons now — they're the only ones who can save us.

ACT FOUR, SCENE FIVE

GODRIC'S HOLLOW, OUTSIDE JAMES AND LILY POTTER'S HOUSE, 1981

ALBUS: We tell my granddad and grandma?

SCORPIUS: That they'll never get to see their son grow up?

ALBUS: She's strong enough — I know she is — you saw her.

SCORPIUS: She looked wonderful, Albus. And if I were you I'd be desperate to talk to her. But she needs to be able to beg Voldemort for Harry's life, she needs to think he might die, and you're the worst spoiler in the world that didn't turn out to be true . . .

ALBUS: Dumbledore. Dumbledore's alive. We get Dumbledore involved. We do what you did with Snape —

SCORPIUS: Can we risk him knowing your dad survives? That he has kids?

ALBUS: He's Dumbledore! He can cope with anything!

SCORPIUS: Albus, there have been about a hundred books written on what Dumbledore knew, how he knew it or why he did what he did. But what's undoubtedly true — what he did — he needs to do — and I'm not going to risk messing with it. I was able to ask for help because I was in an alternate reality. We aren't. We're in the past. We can't fix time only to create more problems — if our adventures have taught us anything, they've taught us that. The dangers of talking to anyone — infecting time — are too great.

ALBUS: So we need to — talk to the future. We need to send Dad a message.

SCORPIUS: But we don't have an owl that can fly through time. And he doesn't have a Time-Turner.

ALBUS: We get a message to Dad, he'll find a way to get back here. Even if he has to build a Time-Turner himself.

SCORPIUS: We send a memory — like a Pensieve — stand over him and send a message, hope he reaches for the memory at exactly the right moment. I mean, it's unlikely, but . . . Stand over

the baby — and just repeatedly shout HELP. HELP. HELP. I mean, it might traumatize the baby slightly.

ALBUS: Only slightly.

SCORPIUS: A bit of trauma now is nothing compared to what's happening . . . and maybe when he then thinks — later — he might remember the faces of us as we — shouted —

ALBUS: Help.

SCORPIUS looks at ALBUS.

SCORPIUS: You're right. It's a terrible idea.

ALBUS: It's one of your worst ideas ever.

SCORPIUS: Got it! We deliver it ourselves — we wait forty years — we deliver it —

ALBUS: Not a chance — once Delphi has set time the way she wants she'll send armies to try and find us — kill us —

SCORPIUS: So we hide in a hole?

ALBUS: As pleasurable as it will be to hide in a hole with you for the next forty years . . . they'll find us. And we'll die and time will be stuck in the wrong position. No. We need something we can control, something we know he'll get at exactly the right time. We need a —

SCORPIUS: There's nothing. Still, if I had to choose a companion to be at the return of eternal darkness with, I'd choose you.

ALBUS: No offense, but I'd choose someone massive and really good at magic.

LILY exits the house with BABY HARRY in a pram, she carefully puts a blanket on him.

His blanket. She's wrapping him in his blanket.

SCORPIUS: Well, it is a moderately cold day.

ALBUS: He always said — it's the only thing he had from her. Look at the love with which she's put it on him — I think he'd like to know about that — I wish I could tell him.

SCORPIUS: And I wish I could tell my dad — well, I'm not sure what. I think I'd like to tell him that I'm occasionally capable of more bravery than he might think I am.

ALBUS has a thought.

ALBUS: Scorpius — my dad still has that blanket.

SCORPIUS: That won't work. If we write a message on it now, even really small, he'll read it too soon. Time will be spoilt.

ALBUS: What do you know about love potions? What's the ingredient they all contain?

SCORPIUS: Amongst other things, pearl dust.

ALBUS: Pearl dust is a relatively rare ingredient, isn't it?

SCORPIUS: Mainly because it's pretty expensive. What's this about, Albus?

ALBUS: Dad and I had a fight on the day before I went to school.

SCORPIUS: This I am aware of. I believe it kind of got us into this mess.

ALBUS: I threw the blanket across the room. It collided with the love potion that Uncle Ron gave me as a joke.

SCORPIUS: He's a funny guy.

ALBUS: The potion spilt and the blanket was covered in it and I happen to know for a fact Mum hasn't let Dad touch that room since I left it.

SCORPIUS: So?

ALBUS: So it's coming up to Hallows' Eve in their time as well as ours — and he told me he always finds that blanket, he needs to be with it on Hallows' Eve — it was the last thing his mum gave him — so he will look for it and when he finds it . . .

SCORPIUS: No. Still not getting you.

ALBUS: What reacts with pearl dust?

SCORPIUS: Well, it is said that if tincture of Demiguise and pearl dust meet . . . they burn.

ALBUS: And is tincture of *(he's unsure how to say the word)* Demiguise visible to the naked eye?

SCORPIUS: No.

ALBUS: So if we were to get that blanket and write on it in tincture of Demiguise, then . . .

SCORPIUS *(eureka)*: Nothing would react to it until it came into contact with the love potion. In your room. In the present. By Dumbledore, I love it.

ALBUS: We just need to work out where to find some . . . Demiguises.

SCORPIUS: You know, rumor has it Bathilda Bagshot never saw the point in witches and wizards locking their doors.

The door swings open.

Rumor was right. Time to steal some wands and get potioning.

ACT FOUR, SCENE SIX

HARRY AND GINNY POTTER'S HOUSE, ALBUS'S ROOM

HARRY is sitting on ALBUS's bed. GINNY enters. She looks at him.

GINNY: Surprised to find you here.

HARRY: Don't worry, I haven't touched anything. Your shrine is preserved. *(He winces.)* Sorry. Bad choice of words.

GINNY says nothing, HARRY looks up at her.

You know I've had some pretty terrible Hallows' Eves — but this is undoubtedly at least the — second worst.

GINNY: I was wrong — to blame you. I always accuse you of jumping to things and it was me who — Albus went missing and I assumed it was your fault. I'm sorry I did that.

HARRY: You don't think this is my fault?

GINNY: Harry, he was kidnapped by a powerful Dark witch, how can that be your fault?

HARRY: I chased him away. I chased him to her.

GINNY: Can we not treat this as if the battle is already lost?

GINNY nods. HARRY starts to cry.

HARRY: I'm sorry, Gin . . .

GINNY: Are you not listening to me? I'm sorry too.

HARRY: I shouldn't have survived — it was my destiny to die — even Dumbledore thought so — and yet I lived. I beat Voldemort. All these people — all these people — my parents, Fred, the Fallen Fifty — and it's me that gets to live? How is that? All this damage — and it's my fault.

GINNY: They were killed by Voldemort.

HARRY: But if I'd stopped him sooner? All that blood on my hands. And now our son has been taken too —

GINNY: He's not dead. Do you hear me, Harry? He's not dead.

She takes HARRY in her arms. There is a big pause filled with pure unhappiness.

HARRY: The Boy Who Lived. How many people have to die for the Boy Who Lived?

HARRY sways a moment, unsure. Then he notices the blanket. He walks towards it.

This blanket is all I have, you know . . . of that Hallows' Eve. This is all I have to remember them. And whilst —

He picks up the blanket. He discovers it has holes in it. He looks at it, dismayed.

This has got holes in it. Ron's idiotic love potion has burnt through it, right through it. Look at this. It's ruined. Ruined.

He opens up the blanket. He sees writing burnt through it. He's surprised.

What?

GINNY: Harry, it has — something — written —

On another part of the stage, ALBUS and SCORPIUS appear.

ALBUS: "Dad . . ."

SCORPIUS: We're starting with "Dad"?

ALBUS: So he'll know it's from me.

SCORPIUS: Harry is his name. We should start with "Harry."

ALBUS *(firm)*: We're starting with "Dad."

HARRY: "Dad," does it say, "Dad"? It's not that distinct . . .

SCORPIUS: "Dad, HELP."

GINNY: "Hello"? Does that say "Hello"? And then . . . "Good."

HARRY: "Dad Hello Good Hello"? No. This is . . . a strange joke.

ALBUS: "Dad. Help. Godric's Hollow."

GINNY: Give me that. My eyesight is better than yours. Yes. "Dad Hello Good" — that's not "Hello" again — that's "Hallow" or "Hollow"? And then some numbers — these are clearer — "3 — 1 — 1 — 0 — 8 — 1." Is this one of those Muggle telephone numbers? Or a grid reference

or a . . .

HARRY looks up, several thoughts smashing through his brain at once.

HARRY: No. It's a date. 31st October, 1981. The date my parents were killed.

GINNY looks at HARRY, and then back at the blanket.

GINNY: That doesn't say "Hello." It says "Help."

HARRY: "Dad. Help. Godric's Hollow. 31/10/81." It's a message. Clever boy left me a message.

HARRY kisses GINNY hard.

GINNY: Albus wrote this?

HARRY: And he's told me where they are and when they are and now we know where she is, we know where we can fight her.

He kisses her hard again.

GINNY: We haven't got them back again yet.

HARRY: I'll send an owl to Hermione. You send one to Draco. Tell them to meet us at Godric's with the Time-Turner.

GINNY: And it is "us," okay? Don't even think about going back without me, Harry.

HARRY: Of course you're coming. We have a chance, Ginny, and by Dumbledore — that's all that we need — a chance.

ACT FOUR, SCENE SEVEN

GODRIC'S HOLLOW

RON, HERMIONE, DRACO, HARRY, and GINNY walk through a present-day Godric's Hollow. A busy market town (it's expanded over the years).

HERMIONE: Godric's Hollow. It must be twenty years . . .

GINNY: Is it just me or are there more Muggles about . . .

HERMIONE: It's become quite popular as a weekend break.

DRACO: I can see why — look at the thatched roofs. And is that a farmers' market?

HERMIONE approaches HARRY — who is looking around himself, overwhelmed by all that he's seeing.

HERMIONE: You remember when we were last here? This feels just like old times.

RON: Old times with a few unwelcome ponytails added to the mix.

DRACO knows a barb when he hears one.

DRACO: Can I just say —

RON: Malfoy, you may be all chummy chummy with Harry, and you may have produced a relatively nice child, but you've said some very unfair things to and about my wife . . .

HERMIONE: And your wife doesn't need you fighting her battles for her.

HERMIONE looks witheringly at RON. RON takes the hit.

RON: Fine. But if you say one thing about her or me . . .

DRACO: You'll do what, Weasley?

HERMIONE: He'll hug you. Because we're all on the same team, aren't we, Ron?

RON *(hesitating in the face of her unwavering gaze)*: Fine. I, um, I think you've got really nice hair. Draco.

HERMIONE: Thank you, husband. Now this seems a good spot. Let's do this.

DRACO takes out the Time-Turner — it begins spinning wildly as the others take their places around it.

And there is a giant whoosh of light. A smash of noise.

And time stops. And then it turns over, thinks a bit, and begins spooling backwards, slow at first . . .

And then it speeds up.

They look around themselves.

RON: So? Has it worked?

ACT FOUR, SCENE EIGHT

GODRIC'S HOLLOW, A SHED, 1981

ALBUS looks up, amazed to see GINNY and then HARRY, and then he takes in the rest of the happy band (RON, DRACO, and HERMIONE).

ALBUS: MUM?

HARRY: Albus Severus Potter. Are we pleased to see you.

ALBUS runs and throws himself into GINNY's arms. GINNY receives him, delighted.

ALBUS: You got our note . . . ?

GINNY: We got your note.

SCORPIUS trots up to his dad.

DRACO: We can hug too if you like . . .

SCORPIUS looks at his dad, unsure for a moment. And then they sort of half hug in a very awkward way. DRACO smiles.

RON: Now, where's this Delphi?

SCORPIUS: You know about Delphi?

ALBUS: She's here — she's trying to kill you, we think. Before Voldemort curses himself she's going to kill you and so break the prophecy and . . .

HERMIONE: Yes, we thought that might be it too. Do you know where specifically she is now?

SCORPIUS: She's disappeared. How did you — how did you, without the Time-Turner —

HARRY *(interrupting)*: That's a long and complicated story, Scorpius. And we don't have time for it.

DRACO smiles at HARRY gratefully.

HERMIONE: Harry's right. Time is of the essence. We need to get people into position. Now, Godric's Hollow is not a large place but she could be coming from any direction. So we need somewhere that gives us good views of the town — that allows for multiple and clear observation points — and that will, most importantly, keep us hidden, because we cannot risk being seen.

They all frown, thinking.

I'd say St. Jerome's Church ticks all those boxes, wouldn't you?

ACT FOUR, SCENE NINE

GODRIC'S HOLLOW, ST. JEROME'S CHURCH, SANCTUARY, 1981

ALBUS is sleeping in a pew. GINNY watches him carefully. HARRY is looking out the opposite window.

HARRY: No. Nothing. Why isn't she here?

GINNY: We're together, your mum and dad are alive — we can turn time, Harry, we can't speed it up. She'll come when she's ready, and we'll be ready for her.

She looks at ALBUS's sleeping form.

Or some of us will be.

HARRY: Poor kid thought he had to save the world.

GINNY: Poor kid has saved the world. That blanket was masterful. I mean, he also almost destroyed the world, but probably best not to focus on that bit.

HARRY: You think he's okay?

GINNY: He's getting there, it just might take him a bit of time — and you a bit of time too.

HARRY smiles. She looks back at ALBUS. HARRY does too.

You know, after I'd opened the Chamber of Secrets — after Voldemort had bewitched me with that terrible diary and I'd almost destroyed everything —

HARRY: I remember.

GINNY: After I came out of hospital — everyone ignored me, shut me out — other than, that is, the boy who had everything — who came across the Gryffindor common room and challenged me to a game of Exploding Snap. People think they know all there is to know about you, but the best bits of you are — have always been — heroic in really quiet ways. My point is — after this is over, just remember if you could that sometimes people — but particularly children —

just want someone to play Exploding Snap with.

HARRY: You think that's what we're missing — Exploding Snap?

GINNY: No. But the love I felt from you that day — I'm not sure Albus feels that.

HARRY: I'd do anything for him.

GINNY: Harry, you'd do anything for anybody. You were pretty happy to sacrifice yourself for the world. He needs to feel specific love. It'll make him stronger, and you stronger too.

HARRY: You know, it wasn't until we thought Albus had gone that I truly understood what my mother was able to do for me. A countercharm so powerful that it was able to repel the spell of death.

GINNY: And the only spell Voldemort couldn't understand — love.

HARRY: I do love him specifically, Ginny.

GINNY: I know, but he needs to feel it.

HARRY: I'm lucky to have you, aren't I?

GINNY: Extremely. And I'd be delighted to discuss just how lucky at another time. But for now — let's focus on stopping Delphi.

HARRY: We are running out of time.

A thought occurs to GINNY.

GINNY: Unless — Harry, has anyone thought — why has she picked now? Today?

HARRY: Because this is the day that everything changed . . .

GINNY: Right now you're over a year old, am I right?

HARRY: A year and three months.

GINNY: That's a year and three months she could have killed you in. Even now, she's been in Godric's Hollow for twenty-four hours. What's she waiting for?

HARRY: I'm still not entirely following —

GINNY: What if she's not waiting for you — she's waiting for him . . . to stop him.

HARRY: What?

GINNY: Delphi's picked tonight because he's here — because her father is coming. She wants to meet him. Be with him, the father she loves. Voldemort's problems started when he attacked you. If he hadn't done that . . .

HARRY: He'd have only got more powerful — the darkness would only have got darker.

GINNY: The best way to break the prophecy is not to kill Harry Potter, it's to stop Voldemort doing anything at all.

ACT FOUR, SCENE TEN

GODRIC'S HOLLOW, ST. JEROME'S CHURCH, 1981

The group are gathered and full of confusion.

RON: So let me get this right — we're fighting to protect Voldemort?

ALBUS: Voldemort killing my grandparents. Voldemort trying to kill my dad?

HERMIONE: Of course, Ginny. Delphi's not trying to kill Harry — she's stopping Voldemort trying to kill Harry. Brilliant.

DRACO: So — we just wait? Until Voldemort turns up?

ALBUS: Does she know when he does turn up? Hasn't she come here twenty-four hours early because she isn't sure when he'll arrive and in what direction? The history books — correct me if I'm wrong, Scorpius — show nothing about when and how he arrived in Godric's Hollow?

SCORPIUS and HERMIONE: You're not wrong.

RON: Blimey! There are two of them!

DRACO: So how can we use this to our advantage?

ALBUS: Do you know what I'm really good at?

HARRY: There's plenty you're good at, Albus.

ALBUS: Polyjuicing. And I think Bathilda Bagshot may have all the ingredients for Polyjuice in her basement. We can Polyjuice into Voldemort and bring her to us.

RON: To use Polyjuice you need a bit of someone. We don't have a bit of Voldemort.

HERMIONE: But I like the concept, a pretend mouse for her cat.

HARRY: How close can we get through Transfiguration?

HERMIONE: We know what he looks like. We've got some excellent wizards and witches here.

GINNY: You want to transfigure into Voldemort?

ALBUS: It's the only way.

HERMIONE: It is, isn't it?

RON steps forward bravely.

RON: Then I would like to — I think I should be him. I mean, it won't be — exactly nice being Voldemort — but without wishing to blow my own trumpet — I am probably the most chilled out of all of us and . . . so maybe transfiguring into him — into the Dark Lord — will do less damage to me than — any of you more — intense — people.

HARRY steps away, introspective.

HERMIONE: Who are you calling intense?

DRACO: I'd also like to volunteer. I think being Voldemort requires precision — no offense, Ron — and a knowledge of Dark Magic and —

HERMIONE: And I'd like to volunteer too. As Minister for Magic I think it's my responsibility and right.

SCORPIUS: Maybe we should draw lots —

DRACO: You're not volunteering, Scorpius.

ALBUS: Actually —

GINNY: No, no way. I think you're all mad. I know what that voice is like inside your head — I won't have it in mine again —

HARRY: And anyway — it has to be me.

Everyone turns to HARRY.

DRACO: What?

HARRY: For this plan to work she has to believe it's him, without hesitation. She'll use Parseltongue — and I *knew* there was a reason why I still have that ability. But more than that, I — know what it is to feel — like him. I know what it is to *be* him. It has to be me.

RON: Rubbish. Beautifully put but beautiful rubbish. No way are you going to —

HERMIONE: I'm afraid you're right, my old friend.

RON: Hermione, you're wrong, Voldemort is not something to be — Harry should not —

GINNY: And I hate to agree with my brother, but —

RON: He could get stuck — as Voldemort — forever.

HERMIONE: So could any of us. Your concerns are valid, but . . .

HARRY: Hang on, Hermione. Gin.

GINNY and HARRY make eye contact.

I won't do it if you don't want me to. But it feels like the only way to me, am I wrong?

GINNY thinks a moment and then softly nods. HARRY's face hardens.

GINNY: You're right.

HARRY: Then let's do this.

DRACO: Don't we need to discuss the route you're taking — the —

HARRY: She's watching for him — she'll come to me.

DRACO: And then what? When she's with you. May I remind you this is a very powerful witch.

RON: Easy. He gets her in here. We zap her together.

DRACO: "Zap her"?

HERMIONE looks around the room.

HERMIONE: We'll hide behind these doors. If you can get her to this point, Harry *(she indicates the point where the light from the rose window hits the floor)*, then we come out and make sure she has no chance to escape.

RON *(with a look to DRACO)*: And then we'll *zap* her.

HERMIONE: Harry, last chance, are you sure you can do this?

HARRY: Yes, I can do this.

DRACO: No, there's too many what-ifs — too many things that can go wrong — the Transfiguration could not hold, she could see through it — if she escapes us now there's no telling the damage she can do — we need time to properly plan, to —

ALBUS: Draco, trust my dad. He won't let us down.

HARRY looks at ALBUS — moved.

HERMIONE: Wands.

Everyone withdraws their wands. HARRY clasps his.

There's a light that builds — that overwhelms . . .

The Transfiguration is slow and monstrous.

And the form of VOLDEMORT *emerges from* HARRY.

And it's horrendous.

He turns.

He looks around at his friends and family.

They look back — aghast.

RON: Bloody hell.

HARRY/VOLDEMORT: It worked, then?

GINNY *(gravely)*: Yes. It worked.

ACT FOUR, SCENE ELEVEN

GODRIC'S HOLLOW, ST. JEROME'S CHURCH, 1981

RON, HERMIONE, DRACO, SCORPIUS, and ALBUS stand at the window, looking out. GINNY can't look. She sits further back.

ALBUS notices his mum sitting apart. He walks over to her.

ALBUS: It's going to be okay, you know that, Mum?

GINNY: I know it is. Or I hope I do. I just — don't want to see him like that. The man I love shrouded in the man I hate.

ALBUS sits beside his mum.

ALBUS: I liked her, Mum, you know that? I really liked her. Delphi. And she was — Voldemort's daughter?

GINNY: That's what they're good at, Albus — catching innocents in their web.

ALBUS: This is all my fault.

GINNY takes ALBUS in her arms.

GINNY: How funny. Your dad seems to think it's all his. Strange pair that you are.

SCORPIUS: That's her. That's her. She's seen him.

HERMIONE: Positions. Everybody. And remember, don't come out until he's got her in the light — we've one shot at this, we don't want to mess it up.

They all move fast.

DRACO: Hermione Granger, I'm being bossed around by Hermione Granger. *(She turns towards him. He smiles.)* And I'm mildly enjoying it.

SCORPIUS: Dad . . .

They scatter. They hide behind two major doors.

HARRY/VOLDEMORT reenters the church. He walks a few paces and then he turns.

HARRY/VOLDEMORT: Whichever witch or wizard is following me, I assure you, you will regret it.

DELPHI emerges behind him. She is compelled to him. This is her father and this is the moment she's waited for her entire life.

DELPHI: Lord Voldemort. It is me. I am following you.

HARRY/VOLDEMORT: I do not know you. Leave me.

She breathes deeply.

DELPHI: I am your daughter.

HARRY/VOLDEMORT: If you were my daughter, I'd know of you.

DELPHI looks at him imploringly.

DELPHI: I am from the future. The child of Bellatrix Lestrange and you. I was born in Malfoy Manor before the Battle of Hogwarts. A battle you are going to lose. I have come to save you.

HARRY/VOLDEMORT turns. She meets his eyes.

It was Rodolphus Lestrange, Bellatrix's loyal husband, who on return from Azkaban told me who I was and revealed the prophecy he thought I was destined to fulfill. I am your daughter, sir.

HARRY/VOLDEMORT: I am familiar with Bellatrix and there are certain similarities in your face — though you haven't inherited the best of her. But without proof . . .

DELPHI speaks intently in Parseltongue.

HARRY/VOLDEMORT laughs viciously.

That's your proof?

DELPHI effortlessly rises into the air. HARRY/VOLDEMORT steps back — amazed.

DELPHI: I am the Augurey to your Dark Lord, and I am ready to give all that I have to serve you.

HARRY/VOLDEMORT *(trying not to show his shock)*: You learnt — flight — from — me?

DELPHI: I have tried to follow the path you set.

HARRY/VOLDEMORT: I have never met a witch or a wizard who's attempted to be my equal before.

DELPHI: Do not mistake — I would not claim to be worthy of you, Lord. But I have devoted my life

to being a child you could be proud of.

HARRY/VOLDEMORT *(interrupting)*: I see what you are, and I see what you could be. Daughter.

She looks at him, desperately moved.

DELPHI: Father?

HARRY/VOLDEMORT: Together, the power we could wield.

DELPHI: Father . . .

HARRY/VOLDEMORT: Come here, in the light, so I may examine what my blood made.

DELPHI: Your mission is a mistake. Attacking Harry Potter is a mistake. He will destroy you.

HARRY/VOLDEMORT's hand turns into HARRY's hand. He looks at it, astonished and dismayed, and then quickly pulls it inside his sleeve.

HARRY/VOLDEMORT: He is a baby.

DELPHI: He has his mother's love. Your spell will rebound, destroying you and making him too powerful and you too weak. You will recover to spend the next seventeen years consumed in a battle with him — a battle you will lose.

HARRY/VOLDEMORT's hair begins to sprout, he feels it, he attempts to cover it. He pulls his hood over his head.

HARRY/VOLDEMORT: Then I won't attack him. You are right.

DELPHI: Father?

HARRY/VOLDEMORT shrinks down — he is now more HARRY than VOLDEMORT. He turns his back to DELPHI.

Father?

HARRY *(trying desperately to still sound like Voldemort)*: Your plan is a good one. The fight is off. You have served me well, now come here into the light so I may examine you.

DELPHI sees a door slightly sway open and then be pulled shut. She frowns at it, thinking rapidly, her suspicion growing.

DELPHI: Father . . .

She tries to get a glimpse of his face again — there is almost a dance happening here.

You are not Lord Voldemort.

DELPHI unleashes a bolt from her hand. HARRY matches her.

Incendio!

HARRY: Incendio!

The bolts meet in a beautiful explosion in the middle of the room.

And with her other hand DELPHI *sends bolts to both doors as they try to open them.*

DELPHI: Potter. Colloportus!

HARRY looks at the doors, dismayed.

What? Thought your friends were going to join you, did you?

HERMIONE *(from off)*: Harry . . . Harry . . .

GINNY *(from off)*: She's sealed the doors from your side.

HARRY: Fine. I'll deal with you alone.

He moves to attack her again. But she is far stronger. HARRY's wand ascends upwards towards her. He is disarmed. He is helpless.

How did you . . . ? What are you?

DELPHI: I've watched you for a long time, Harry Potter. I know you better than my father did.

HARRY: You think you've learnt my weaknesses?

DELPHI: I've studied to be worthy of him! Yes, even though he is the supreme wizard of all time, he will be proud of me. Expulso!

HARRY rolls away as the floor explodes behind him. He crawls frantically under a church pew, trying to work out how he can fight her.

Are you crawling away from me? Harry Potter. Hero of the wizarding world. Crawling away like a rat. Wingardium Leviosa!

The church pew ascends into the air.

The question is whether it's worth my time to kill you — knowing that as soon as I stop my father your destruction will be assured. How to decide? Oh, I'm bored, I'll kill you.

She sends the pew down hard upon him. It smashes as he rolls desperately away.

ALBUS emerges from a grate on the floor. Neither notice.

Avada —

ALBUS: Dad . . .

HARRY: Albus! No!

DELPHI: Two of you? Choices, choices. I think I'll kill the boy first. Avada Kedavra!

She fires the Killing Curse at ALBUS — but HARRY throws him out of the way. The bolt smashes into the ground.

He fires a bolt back.

You think you're stronger than me?

HARRY: No. I'm not.

They fire bolts mercilessly at each other as ALBUS rolls quickly away and slams a spell into one door and then another.

But we are.

ALBUS opens both doors with his wand.

ALBUS: Alohomora! Alohomora!

HARRY: I've never fought alone, you see. And I never will.

And HERMIONE, RON, GINNY, and DRACO emerge from the doors, and fire up their spells at DELPHI, who screams out in exasperation. This is titanic. But she can't fight them all.

There are a series of bangs — and then, overwhelmed, DELPHI tumbles to the floor.

DELPHI: No . . . No . . .

HERMIONE: Brachiabindo!

She's bound.

HARRY advances towards DELPHI. He doesn't take his eyes off her. All the others stay back.

HARRY: Albus, are you okay?

ALBUS: Yes, Dad, I'm okay.

HARRY still doesn't take his eyes off DELPHI. He's still scared of her.

HARRY: Ginny, has he been injured? I need to know he's safe . . .

GINNY: He insisted. He was the only one small enough to crawl through the grate. I tried to stop him.

HARRY: Just tell me he's okay.

ALBUS: I'm fine, Dad. I promise.

HARRY keeps advancing towards DELPHI.

HARRY: A lot of people have tried to hurt me — but my son! You dare hurt my son!

DELPHI: I only wanted to know my father.

These words take HARRY by surprise.

HARRY: You can't remake your life. You'll always be an orphan. That never leaves you.

DELPHI: Just let me — see him.

HARRY: I can't and I won't.

DELPHI *(truly pitiful)*: Then kill me.

HARRY thinks a moment.

HARRY: I can't do that either.

ALBUS: What? Dad? She's dangerous.

HARRY: No, Albus . . .

ALBUS: But she's a murderer — I've seen her murder —

HARRY turns and looks at his son and then at GINNY.

HARRY: Yes. Albus, she's a murderer, and we're not.

HERMIONE: We have to be better than them.

RON: Yeah, it's annoying but it's what we learnt.

DELPHI: Take my mind. Take my memory. Make me forget who I am.

RON: No. We'll take you back to our time.

HERMIONE: And you'll go to Azkaban. Same as your mother.

DRACO: Where you'll rot.

HARRY hears a noise. A hissing noise.

And then there is a noise like death — a noise like nothing else we've heard before.

Haaarry Pottttter . . .

SCORPIUS: What's that?

HARRY: No. No. Not yet.

ALBUS: What?

RON: Voldemort.

DELPHI: Father?

HERMIONE: Now? Here?

DELPHI: Father!

DRACO: Silencio! *(DELPHI is gagged.)* Wingardium Leviosa! *(She is sent upwards and away.)*

HARRY: He's coming. He's coming right now.

VOLDEMORT comes through the back of the stage, and across it, and walks down into the auditorium. He brings death with him. And everyone knows it.

ACT FOUR, SCENE TWELVE

GODRIC'S HOLLOW, 1981

HARRY looks after VOLDEMORT helplessly.

HARRY: Voldemort is going to kill my mum and dad — and there's nothing I can do to stop him.

DRACO: That's not true.

SCORPIUS: Dad, now is not the time . . .

ALBUS: There is something you could do — to stop him. But you won't.

DRACO: That's heroic.

GINNY takes HARRY's hand.

GINNY: You don't have to watch, Harry. We can go home.

HARRY: I'm letting it happen . . . Of course I have to watch.

HERMIONE: Then we'll all witness it.

RON: We'll all watch.

We hear unfamiliar voices . . .

JAMES *(from off)*: Lily, take Harry and go! It's him! Go! Run! I'll hold him off . . .

There is a blast, and then a laugh.

You keep away, you understand — you keep away.

VOLDEMORT *(from off)*: Avada Kedavra!

HARRY flinches as green light flashes around the auditorium.

ALBUS takes his hand. HARRY grasps hold of it. He needs it.

ALBUS: He did everything he could.

GINNY rises beside him and takes HARRY's other hand. He leans into them, they're holding him up now.

HARRY: That's my mum, at the window. I can see my mother, she looks beautiful.

There's the sound of banging as doors are blasted off.

LILY *(from off)*: Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry . . .

VOLDEMORT *(from off)*: Stand aside, you silly girl . . . Stand aside, now . . .

LILY *(from off)*: Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead . . .

VOLDEMORT *(from off)*: This is my last warning —

LILY *(from off)*: Not Harry! Please . . . Have mercy . . . have mercy . . . Not my son! Please — I'll do anything.

VOLDEMORT *(from off)*: Avada Kedavra!

And it's like lightning passes through HARRY's body. He's sent to the floor, a pure mess of grief.

And a noise like a shrunken scream descends and ascends around us.

And we just watch.

And slowly what was there is no longer there.

And the stage transforms and rotates.

And HARRY and his family and his friends are rotated off and away.

ACT FOUR, SCENE THIRTEEN

GODRIC'S HOLLOW, INSIDE JAMES AND LILY POTTER'S HOUSE, 1981

And we're in the ruins of a house. A house that has undergone a vicious attack.

HAGRID *walks through the ruins.*

HAGRID: James?

He looks about himself.

Lily?

He walks slowly, unwilling to see too much too soon. He is entirely overwhelmed.

And then he sees them, and he stops, and he says nothing.

Oh. Oh. That's not — that's not — I weren't — They told me, but — I were hoping for better . . .

He looks at them and bows his head. He mutters a few words, and then he takes some crumpled flowers from his deep pockets and lays them on the floor.

I'm sorry, they told me, he told me, Dumbledore told me, I can't wait with yeh. Them Muggles are coming, yeh see, with their flashing blues and they won't 'preciate a big lummox like me, would they?

He lets out a sob.

Hard though it is to leave yeh.

I want yeh to know — yeh won't be forgotten — not by me — not by anyfolk.

And then he hears a sound — the sound of a baby snuffling. HAGRID *turns towards it, walking with more intensity now.*

He looks down and stands over the crib. Which seems to radiate light.

Well. Hello. Yeh must be Harry.
Hello, Harry Potter.
I'm Rubeus Hagrid.
And I'm gonna be yer friend whether yeh like it or not.
'Cos yeh've had it tough, not that yeh know it yet.
An' yer gonna need friends.
Now yeh best come with me, don't yeh think?

As flashing blue lights fill the room giving it an almost ethereal glow — he lifts BABY HARRY gently into his arms.

And then — without looking back — he strides away through the house.

And we descend into soft black.

ACT FOUR, SCENE FOURTEEN

HOGWARTS, CLASSROOM

SCORPIUS and ALBUS run into a room, full of excitement. They slam the door after themselves.

SCORPIUS: I can't quite believe I did that.

ALBUS: I can't quite believe you did that either.

SCORPIUS: Rose Granger-Weasley. I asked out Rose Granger-Weasley.

ALBUS: And she said no.

SCORPIUS: But I asked her. I planted the acorn. The acorn that will grow into our eventual marriage.

ALBUS: You are aware that you're an utter fantasist.

SCORPIUS: And I'd agree with you — only Polly Chapman did ask me to the school ball . . .

ALBUS: In an alternate reality where you were significantly — really significantly more popular — a different girl asked you out — and that means —

SCORPIUS: And yes, logic would dictate I should be pursuing Polly — or allowing her to pursue me — she's a notorious beauty, after all — but a Rose is a Rose.

ALBUS: You know logic would dictate that you're a freak? Rose hates you.

SCORPIUS: Correction, she used to hate me, but did you see the look in her eyes when I asked? That wasn't hate, that was pity.

ALBUS: And pity's good?

SCORPIUS: Pity is a start, my friend, a foundation on which to build a palace — a palace of love.

ALBUS: I honestly thought I'd be the first of us to get a girlfriend.

SCORPIUS: Oh, you will, undoubtedly, probably that new smoky-eyed Potions professor — she's old

enough for you, right?

ALBUS: I don't have a thing about older women!

SCORPIUS: And you've got time — a lot of time — to seduce her. Because Rose is going to take years to persuade.

ALBUS: I admire your confidence.

ROSE comes past them on the stairs. She looks at them both.

ROSE: Hi.

Neither boy knows quite how to reply — she looks at SCORPIUS.

This is only going to be weird if you let it be weird.

SCORPIUS: Received and entirely understood.

ROSE: Okay. "Scorpion King."

She walks off with a smile on her face. SCORPIUS and ALBUS look at each other. ALBUS grins and punches SCORPIUS on the arm.

ALBUS: Maybe you're right — pity is a start.

SCORPIUS: Are you heading to Quidditch? Slytherin are playing Hufflepuff — it's a big one —

ALBUS: I thought we hated Quidditch?

SCORPIUS: People can change. Besides, I've been practicing. I think I might make the team eventually. Come on.

ALBUS: I can't. My dad's arranged to come up —

SCORPIUS: He's taking time away from the Ministry?

ALBUS: He wants to go on a walk — something to show me — share with me — something.

SCORPIUS: A walk?

ALBUS: I know, I think it's a bonding thing or something similarly vomit-inducing. Still, you know, I think I'll go.

SCORPIUS reaches in and hugs ALBUS.

What's this? I thought we decided we don't hug.

SCORPIUS: I wasn't sure. Whether we should. In this new version of us — I had in my head.

ALBUS: Better ask Rose if it's the right thing to do.

SCORPIUS: Ha! Yeah. Right.

The two boys dislocate and grin at each other.

ALBUS: I'll see you at dinner.

ACT FOUR, SCENE FIFTEEN

A BEAUTIFUL HILL

HARRY and ALBUS walk up a hill on a beautiful summer's day. They say nothing, enjoying the sun on their faces as they climb.

HARRY: So are you ready?

ALBUS: For what?

HARRY: Well, there's the fourth-year exams — and then the fifth year — big year — in my fifth year I did —

He looks at ALBUS. He smiles. He talks quickly.

I did a lot of stuff. Some of it good. Some of it bad. A lot of it quite confusing.

ALBUS: Good to know.

HARRY smiles.

I got to watch them — you know — for a bit — your mum and dad. They were — you had fun together. Your dad used to love to do this smoke ring thing with you where you . . . well, you couldn't stop giggling.

HARRY: Yes?

ALBUS: I think you'd have liked them. And I think me, Lily, and James would have liked them too.

HARRY nods. There's a slightly uncomfortable silence. Both are trying to reach each other here, both are failing.

HARRY: You know, I thought I'd lost him — Voldemort — I thought I'd lost him — and then my scar started hurting again and I had dreams of him and I could even speak Parseltongue again and I started to feel like I'd not changed at all — that he'd never let me go —

ALBUS: And had he?

HARRY: The part of me that was Voldemort died a long time ago, but it wasn't enough to be physically rid of him — I had to be mentally rid of him. And that — is a lot to learn for a forty-year-old man.

He looks at ALBUS.

That thing I said to you — it was unforgivable, and I can't ask you to forget it but I can hope we move past it. I'm going to try to be a better dad for you, Albus. I am going to try and—be honest with you and . . .

ALBUS: Dad, you don't need to —

HARRY: You told me you don't think I'm scared of anything, and that — I mean, I'm scared of everything. I mean, I'm afraid of the dark, did you know that?

ALBUS: Harry Potter is afraid of the dark?

HARRY: I don't like small spaces and — I've never told anyone this, but I don't much like — *(he hesitates before saying it)* pigeons.

ALBUS: You don't like pigeons?

HARRY *(he scrunches up his face)*: Nasty, pecky, dirty things. They give me the creeps.

ALBUS: But pigeons are harmless!

HARRY: I know. But the thing that scares me most, Albus Severus Potter, is being a dad to you. Because I'm operating without wires here. Most people at least have a dad to base themselves on — and either try to be or try not to be. I've got nothing — or very little. So I'm learning, okay? And I'm going to try with everything I've got — to be a good dad for you.

ALBUS: And I'll try and be a better son. I know I'm not James, Dad, I'll never be like you two —

HARRY: James is nothing like me.

ALBUS: Isn't he?

HARRY: Everything comes easy for James. My childhood was a constant struggle.

ALBUS: So was mine. So you're saying — am I — like you?

HARRY smiles at ALBUS.

HARRY: Actually you're more like your mum — bold, fierce, funny — which I like — which I think makes you a pretty great son.

ALBUS: I almost destroyed the world.

HARRY: Delphi wasn't going anywhere, Albus — you brought her out into the light and you found a way for us to fight her. You may not see it now, but you saved us.

ALBUS: But shouldn't I have done better?

HARRY: You don't think I ask myself the same questions?

ALBUS *(stomach sinking further, he knows this is not what his dad would do)*: And then — when we caught her — I wanted to kill her.

HARRY: You'd watched her murder Craig, you were angry, Albus, and that's okay. And you wouldn't have done it.

ALBUS: How do you know that? Maybe that's my Slytherin side. Maybe that's what the Sorting Hat saw in me.

HARRY: I don't understand your head, Albus — actually, you know what, you're a teenager, I shouldn't be able to understand your head, but I do understand your heart. I didn't — for a long time — but thanks to this — "escapade" — I know what you got in there. Slytherin, Gryffindor, whatever label you've been given — I know — *know* — that heart is a good one — yeah, whether you like it or not, you're on your way to being some wizard.

ALBUS: Oh I'm not going to be a wizard, I'm going into pigeon racing. I'm quite excited about it.

HARRY grins.

HARRY: Those names you have — they shouldn't be a burden. Albus Dumbledore had his trials too, you know — and Severus Snape, well, you know all about him —

ALBUS: They were good men.

HARRY: They were great men, with huge flaws, and you know what — those flaws almost made them greater.

ALBUS looks around himself.

ALBUS: Dad? Why are we here?

HARRY: This is where I often come.

ALBUS: But this is a graveyard . . .

HARRY: And here is Cedric's grave.

ALBUS: Dad?

HARRY: The boy who was killed — Craig Bowker — how well did you know him?

ALBUS: Not well enough.

HARRY: I didn't know Cedric well enough either. He could have played Quidditch for England. Or been a brilliant Auror. He could have been anything. And Amos is right — he was stolen. So I come here. Just to say sorry. When I can.

ALBUS: That's a — good thing to do.

ALBUS joins his dad in front of CEDRIC's grave. HARRY smiles at his son and looks up at the sky.

HARRY: I think it's going to be a nice day.

He touches his son's shoulder. And the two of them — just slightly — melt together.

ALBUS *(smiles)*: So do I.

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

Harry Potter and the Cursed Child Parts One and Two was first produced by Sonia Friedman Productions, Colin Callender, and Harry Potter Theatrical Productions. It premiered at the Palace Theatre in London, England, on July 30, 2016, with the following cast (in alphabetical order):

CRAIG BOWKER JR
Jeremy Ang Jones

MOANING MYRTLE, LILY POTTER SR
Annabel Baldwin

UNCLE VERNON, SEVERUS SNAPE, LORD VOLDEMORT
Paul Bentall

SCORPIUS MALFOY
Anthony Boyle

ALBUS POTTER
Sam Clemmett

HERMIONE GRANGER
Noma Dumezweni

POLLY CHAPMAN
Claudia Grant

HAGRID, SORTING HAT
Chris Jarman

YANN FREDERICKS
James Le Lacheur

AUNT PETUNIA, MADAM HOOCH, DOLORES UMBRIDGE
Helena Lymbery

AMOS DIGGORY, ALBUS DUMBLEDORE
Barry McCarthy

TROLLEY WITCH, PROFESSOR MCGONAGALL
Sandy McDade

STATIONMASTER
Adam McNamara

GINNY POTTER
Poppy Miller

CEDRIC DIGGORY, JAMES POTTER JR., JAMES POTTER SR
Tom Milligan

DUDLEY DURSLEY, KARL JENKINS, VIKTOR KRUM
Jack North

HARRY POTTER
Jamie Parker

DRACO MALFOY
Alex Price

BANE
Nuno Silva

ROSE GRANGER-WEASLEY, YOUNG HERMIONE
Cherrelle Skeete

DELPHI DIGGORY
Esther Smith

RON WEASLEY
Paul Thornley

YOUNG HARRY POTTER
Rudi Goodman, Alfred Jones, Bili Keogh, Ewan Rutherford, Nathaniel Smith, Dylan Standen

LILY POTTER JR
Zoe Brough, Cristina Fray, Christiana Hutchings

OTHER ROLES PLAYED BY
Nicola Alexis, Jeremy Ang Jones, Rosemary Annabella, Jack Bennett, Paul Bentall, Morag Cross, Claudia Grant, James Howard, Lowri James, Chris Jarman, Martin Johnston, James Le Lacheur, Helena Lymbery, Barry McCarthy, Andrew McDonald, Adam McNamara, Tom Milligan, Jack North, Stuart Ramsey, Nuno Silva, Cherrelle Skeete

SWINGS
Helen Aluko, Morag Cross, Chipo Kureya, Tom Mackley, Joshua Wyatt

MOVEMENT CAPTAIN
Nuno Silva

ASSISTANT MOVEMENT CAPTAIN
Jack North

VOICE CAPTAIN
Morag Cross

PRODUCTION CREDITS

ORIGINAL STORY
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Jack Thorne

DIRECTOR
John Tiffany

MOVEMENT DIRECTOR
Steven Hoggett

SET DESIGNER
Christine Jones

COSTUME DESIGNER
Katrina Lindsay

COMPOSER & ARRANGER
Imogen Heap

LIGHTING DESIGNER
Neil Austin

SOUND DESIGNER
Gareth Fry

ILLUSIONS & MAGIC
Jamie Harrison

MUSIC SUPERVISOR & ARRANGER
Martin Lowe

CASTING DIRECTOR
Julia Horan CDG

PRODUCTION MANAGER
Gary Beestone

PRODUCTION STAGE MANAGER
Sam Hunter

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR
Des Kennedy

ASSOCIATE MOVEMENT DIRECTOR

Neil Bettles

ASSOCIATE SET DESIGNER
Brett J. Banakis

ASSOCIATE SOUND DESIGNER
Pete Malkin

ILLUSIONS & MAGIC ASSOCIATE
Chris Fisher

CASTING ASSOCIATE
Lotte Hines

ASSISTANT LIGHTING DESIGNER
Adam King

COSTUME DESIGN SUPERVISOR
Sabine Lemaître

HAIR, WIGS & MAKE-UP
Carole Hancock

PROPS SUPERVISORS
Lisa Buckley, Mary Halliday

MUSIC EDITOR
Phij Adams

MUSIC PRODUCTION
Imogen Heap

SPECIAL EFFECTS
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VIDEO DESIGN
Finn Ross, Ash Woodward

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Daniele Lydon

VOICE COACH
Richard Ryder

COMPANY STAGE MANAGER
Richard Clayton

STAGE MANAGER
Jordan Noble-Davies

DEPUTY STAGE MANAGER
Jenefer Tait

ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGERS
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Alice Townes

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Charlotte Briscoe, Jacob Fessey, Cassie Murphie

HEAD OF SOUND
Chris Reid

DEPUTY HEAD OF SOUND
Rowena Edwards

SOUND NO. 3
Laura Caplin

SFX OPERATOR
Callum Donaldson

HEAD OF AUTOMATION
Josh Peters

DEPUTY HEAD OF AUTOMATION
Jamie Lawrence

AUTOMATION NO. 3
Jamie Robson

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David Treanor

PERFORMER FLYING TECHNICIAN
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CHAPERONES
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BIOGRAPHIES OF THE ORIGINAL STORY TEAM

J.K. ROWLING

is the author of the seven Harry Potter novels, which have sold over 450 million copies and have been translated into 79 languages, and three companion books originally published for charity. She is also the author of *The Casual Vacancy*, a novel for adults published in 2012, and, under the pseudonym of Robert Galbraith, is the author of the Cormoran Strike crime series. J.K. Rowling is making her screenwriting debut and is a producer on the film *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, a further extension of the wizarding world, due for release in November 2016.

JOHN TIFFANY

directed the stage adaptation of *Once* for which he was the recipient of multiple awards both in the West End and on Broadway. As Associate Director of the Royal Court, his work includes *The Twits*, *Hope*, and *The Pass*. He was the director of *Let the Right One In* for the National Theatre of Scotland, which transferred to the Royal Court, West End, and St. Ann's Warehouse. His other work for the National Theatre of Scotland includes *Macbeth* (also Broadway), *Enquirer*, *The Missing*, *Peter Pan*, *The House of Bernarda Alba*, *Transform Caithness: Hunter, Be Near Me*, *Nobody Will Ever Forgive Us*, *The Bacchae*, *Black Watch*, for which he won the Olivier and Critics Circle Best Director Awards, *Elizabeth Gordon Quinn*, and *Home: Glasgow*. Other recent credits include *The Glass Menagerie* at American Repertory Theatre and on Broadway and *The Ambassador* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Tiffany was Associate Director of the National Theatre of Scotland from 2005 to 2012, and was a Radcliffe Fellow at Harvard University in the 2010–2011 academic year.

JACK THORNE

writes for theater, film, television, and radio. His theater credits include *Hope* and *Let the Right One In*, both directed by John Tiffany, *The Solid Life of Sugar Water* for the Graeae Theatre Company and the National Theatre, *Bunny* for the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, *Stacy* for the Trafalgar Studios, and *2nd May 1997* and *When You Cure Me* for the Bush. His adaptations include *The Physicists* for the Donmar Warehouse and *Stuart: A Life Backwards* for HighTide. On film his credits include *War Book*, *A Long Way Down*, and *The Scouting Book for Boys*. For television his credits include

The Last Panthers, *Don't Take My Baby*, *This Is England*, *The Fades*, *Glue*, *Cast-Offs*, and *National Treasure*. He won 2016 BAFTAs for Best Mini-Series (*This Is England '90*) and Best Single Drama (*Don't Take My Baby*), and in 2012 won Best Drama Series (*The Fades*) and Best Mini-Series (*This Is England '88*).

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